

Time to sharpen your pencils, new written test will break spelling bee ties

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In this May 28, 2015, file photo, Vanya Shivashankar, 13 (left), of Olathe, Kansas, and Gokul Venkatachalam, 14, of St. Louis, Missouri, hold up the trophy as co-champions after winning the finals of the Scripps National Spelling Bee in Oxon Hill, Maryland. Photo from AP Images

WASHINGTON, D.C. — There have been a few too many ties at The Scripps National Spelling Bee. So they are adding a new wrinkle to make sure there is only one champion instead of two.

This year, the top spellers will take a written tiebreaker test before they begin spelling words in the broadcast where the winner is finally chosen. The results will be revealed only if two or three spellers get through the final rounds safely. The speller with the highest score would then be declared the champion. Only if the top spellers get exactly the same score will the competition end in a tie.

The bee has ended in a tie three years running. Last year's bee was the most surprising. The bee made the final rounds more than twice as long, with harder words, and two spellers still ended up holding the winner's trophy.

Written Test Will Be Off Camera

This year the top 10 or so spellers who make it to the final evening will have the written test added to their busy schedules. It will be taken in a small room away from the cameras, with 12 spelling words and 12 vocabulary words. The test will be similar to one that spellers must ace to get into the top 50 — except more difficult. Spellers' results will be sealed in envelopes that are opened only if necessary. It means there could be a dramatic new end to the competition.

The new rules were shared with spellers and announced Tuesday by Scripps. Bee organizers made the change after considering feedback from spellers, advertisers, fans and ESPN. ESPN is the network that televises the competition from a convention center outside Washington, the venue they use every year. This year's bee will be May 30-June 1.

Paige Kimble, the bee's executive director, told the Associated Press on Monday that things have changed in recent years. Many now believe that since the spellers are getting so much better, the contest needs to be harder, she says.

Tejas Muthusamy, who'll be competing in the bee for the fourth and final time this year, told AP he likes the idea of the tiebreaker test, but he's not sure others will.

"I actually perform better on tests than on stage. For me specifically, the rule change is really good," Tejas said. "If I end up tied with someone else, I'll still have a good chance of winning."

Ties Are A Fairly New Phenomenon

Before 1998, the bee had no formal rules for how to declare co-champions, and the only previous tie was in 1962. It wasn't until 2014 that it happened again, but no changes were made following that result.

In 2015, though, Vanya Shivashankar and Gokul Venkatachalam – experienced spellers and pre-bee favorites – shared the title after plowing through the final words with ease. They are two of the many Indian-American kids who've come to dominate the bee over the past two decades.

The top spellers — who can compete through 8th grade — have been studying Greek and Latin roots so much, they can spell almost anything. To keep up, the contest organizers have to dig deeper into the dictionary every year.

Is A Test A Behind-Closed-Doors Approach?

Mirle Shivashankar is the father of Vanya and her older sister, also a bee champion. He said he doesn't like the idea of the winner being determined behind closed doors.

"If that ever were to happen, that might not be the best scenario," Shivashankar said. "But I'm hoping, and I'm confident that the bee is going to be able to get a sole winner this year without having to use the tiebreaker."

Last year, the bee stopped using a list of 25 "championship words" and instead declared that the top three spellers would have to go through 25 "championship rounds," meaning up to 75 words could be used. Bee judges were also given the authority to adjust the difficulty of those words in the middle of the competition. Those rules remain in place.

Quiz

- 1 Read the selection from the section "Written Test Will Be Off Camera."

"I actually perform better on tests than on stage. For me specifically, the rule change is really good," Tejas said. "If I end up tied with someone else, I'll still have a good chance of winning."

Which of the following can be inferred from this selection?

- (A) Some spellers might have an advantage over others with the new rules.
- (B) All spellers are excited about Scripps' new rule change for its spelling bees.
- (C) The new rule change could make the spelling bee less exciting than in the past.
- (D) Younger spellers might have a larger advantage than older spellers under the new rules.

- 2 Read the paragraph from the section "Is A Test A Behind-Closed-Doors Approach?"

Mirle Shivashankar is the father of Vanya and her older sister, also a bee champion. He said he doesn't like the idea of the winner being determined behind closed doors.

Which idea is BEST supported by the paragraph above?

- (A) The new spelling bee rules will prevent ties from happening.
- (B) The new spelling bee rules will make the winner more obvious.
- (C) The new spelling bee rules are controversial for some people.
- (D) The new spelling bee rules will make the competition more fair.

- 3 Which of the following statements BEST represents Paige Kimble's approach toward the recent spelling bee ties?

- (A) She understands that spellers are frustrated and wants to simplify the words.
- (B) She realizes that spellers have gotten better in recent years and that rule changes are needed.
- (C) She thinks that any changes would actually undermine the competition process.
- (D) She wants to make it more difficult for spellers by making a written test.

- 4 How does the article develop the idea that the recent ties at the Scripps spelling bee are problematic?
- (A) by explaining the new rules in detail and analyzing how the rules will give some contestants an advantage
 - (B) by detailing how Scripps dealt with the issue of ties in the past, and by interviewing current contestants to get their opinions
 - (C) by exploring the troubled history of the spelling bee, and weighing the pros and cons of the new rule change
 - (D) by providing statements from officials at Scripps and providing evidence that the new rule changes will be successful.