

Last Names

Last names are also known as surnames or family names. People have not always had a last name. In ancient times, people usually had just one name.

Because the U.S. was settled by immigrants from around the world, there is a wide variety of surnames from different countries. You may know someone named Nguyen, which is Vietnamese, or Garcia, which is Spanish, or Schneider, which is German.

Family surnames in the U.S. may change over the years. Many immigrants to the United States came through Ellis Island in New York when they arrived. They spoke little English and often the officials at Ellis Island did not speak the immigrant's native language. The officials would spell the immigrant's last name as it sounded to them on the paperwork, so the immigrant's name would officially become the name that the official wrote down. For example, Tsevat, as it was spelled in Russia, would become Sevatt upon arrival in the U.S.

There were also times in the past when families changed their last names on purpose. For example, during World War II, when the U.S. was at war with Germany, many American families with a German last name changed the spelling of their name to the English spelling. People named Weiss, which means white in German, became White. Other families named Schmidt became Smith.

Sometimes families had not learned to read or write very well, so some members of the family might spell their last name differently than other family members. A Dixon in Nebraska may be related to a Dickson in Kansas because somewhere in the family's history an ancestor changed the spelling of the name.

See if you can think of a different way to spell the following names:

Lewis _____

Bieber _____

Allen _____

Now see if you can think of five different ways to spell your own last name.

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____