

The agony of defeat: Nerve-racking spelling bee puts students to the test



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By [Roger Phillips](#)
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STOCKTON - If you look up "brontophobia" in the dictionary, you will learn that it means "a persistent fear of thunder."

But to 10-year-old Vivek Vanga, "brontophobia" meant something completely different Wednesday afternoon.

Vivek spelled the word correctly, which meant that even though he later misspelled his final word, he still was crowned champion of the fourth- through sixth-grade San Joaquin County Spelling Bee at the county Office of Education.

Vivek, a fifth-grader at Jefferson Elementary in Tracy, was crowned champion because he spelled only one word wrong all day - dysphonia (the medical term for disorders of the voice). Everyone else erred at least twice.

Of brontophobia, Vivek said, "I thought the second 'o' was an 'a.'"

As he contemplated the spelling of brontophobia, Vivek said, "My head became all hot. My blood was rushing. It became really hard to speak because of the pressure."

He decided to go with a second "o" rather than the "a." "It turned out to be right," Vivek said. "It was a lucky guess."

The runner-up to Vivek was Jack Gobel, a student at Vinewood Elementary in Lodi.

Their successes vaulted Vivek and Jack to the state bee. They won't have to travel far. The fourth- to sixth-grade bee will be April 21 at the county office.

In the seventh- through ninth-grade bee, Julie Fukunaga of Elkhorn Elementary in Lodi was the champion, and Hannah Nakahara of Delta Charter School in Tracy finished second. They will travel to Marin County for the seventh- through ninth-grade state bee May 12. Fukunaga, an eighth-grader, won the seventh- through ninth-grade bee for the second year.

Before the fourth- to sixth-grade bee, county Superintendent of Education Mick Founts addressed the 15 competitors and told them that regardless of who won, there would be no losers.

Founts' words seemed especially prescient (not one of the words in the bee) in the seventh round, when spellers were tripped up by words such as "pellucidity," "contumelious" and "presbyopia." If you don't know the definitions of those words, look them up. That's why they publish dictionaries.

As for Vivek, a year ago he couldn't even spell his way out of the school bee and into the county event. One year later, he's the county champion.

"Maybe I tried a little harder," he said, groping to explain his improvement.

Vivek said he plans to study spelling one hour a day in the months leading up to the state bee. "He has a natural flair with the language," said Madhu Vanga, Vivek's beaming father. "He doesn't practice too much. He's an award-winning student. He's never gotten less than an A."

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