

HIGH FREQUENCY WORDS (ARE NOT SIGHT WORDS!)

High frequency words are the most common words in our language; they are essential words as they are needed to make up even the simplest of sentences. High frequency word lists are composed of words that can be decoded (phonics) and a few that have been termed as 'sight words' because they contain more complex spellings which are not phonically decodable. For that reason, it is important that we help students learn the 'tricky' or complex parts of the words.

One of the problems with is that schools tend to confuse 'High frequency' with 'Sight Words.' Schools still use the 100- 300 High Frequency wordlists to test for reading and spelling; teachers test all their class and then send these words home to be learned by sight and therefore many dyslexic children spend years failing to learn and retain them.

We tend to think that there are so many irregular words however, 'only 4% of words are truly irregular and may be learned mainly 'by sight.'* There are a number of High Frequency Word lists that have been produced over time, for example: Dolch, Oxford, Magic and Fry Wordlists. * *IDA fact sheet Louisa Cook Moats, Ed.D*

WHY IS IT SO IMPORTANT TO LEARN THE HIGH FREQUENCY WORD

Looking at Fry's High Frequency word list of the first 32 high frequency words

The following 12 words make up, on average, 1/4 of all children's reading material:

a and he I in is of that the to was

The following 20 words and the 12 above make up, on average, 1/3 of their material reading:

all as are at be but for had have him his not
on one said so they we with you

WHY SHOULDN'T WE LEARN THESE WORDS BY SIGHT?

High Frequency words were never meant to be learned by sight: The new Oxford Wordlist includes the 500 most frequently used words by children in their first three years of school. Here's the first 100 high frequency words from the Oxford list:

www.oxfordwordlist.com/pages/

I	for	gold	because	played
A	fun	her	best	scarecrow
The	me	made	cake	so
and	mum	once	came	some
he	said	one	car	Sunday
was	be	out	computer	teacher
to	going	robber	didn't	time
my	got	were	dog	until
it	wanted	birthday	dollar	upon
on	at	dad	forest	weekend
in	but	house	getting	alive
is	his	next	good	angry
went	home	off	grade	ball
there	like	ran	have	being
you	of	they	having	bought
had	Saturday	Up	love	boy
am	then	want	mad	bread
day	with	when	no	brother
she	are	all	note	brother's
we	from	An	our	buttons

Many schools provide on a spelling list for students to learn by sight and then be tested the following week. To learn and retain words such as **Saturday** and **birthday** visually requires a visual sequential memory of 8 digits; people aren't expected to have that memory span until they are at least 13 years of age and those with visual sequential memory weakness will have a reduced span. Most importantly 'Saturday' and 'birthday' are totally decodable, they should not be learnt by sight!

TEACHING HIGH FREQUENCY WORDS TO READ AND SPELL

As far as the High frequency words are concerned; they should be taught in a way that links up with your phonics program to build a student's reading and spelling skills together. Students who have been taught phonically will automatically implement their knowledge when they come across a word they don't know.

Where possible, we should be teaching High Frequency words according to their complexity to link with the phonics program so that initially the list would include:

an, am, at, it, in, if, up, us

Next cvc words would be included e.g.

man	bed	did	dog	but
dad	get	big	not	fun

Working through your phonics program would lead to including High frequency words with initial and final consonant blends, consonant digraphs, -ck rule etc

Phonic Books has produced a 'Phonic High Frequency Word' chart of the first 300 words sorted phonically, which allows teachers to take a group of words with common spellings and use them as a spelling list, dictation or other spelling activities. The charts are free to download with UK and USA versions.

<https://www.phonicbooks.co.uk/advice-and-resources/free-teaching-resources/phonics-high-frequency-word-chart/>



As with all words that we want students to learn to read automatically, students will need many opportunities to see, read and write words accurately and with supervision before they can retain them. 'As words are learned, exercises to build fluency, such as word and

sentence dictations, are helpful. 'Having students keep a list of their own particular "spelling demons" for reference supports the development of proofreading ability and aids mastery of the spelling of those challenging words.'* *The International Dyslexia Association. Factsheet Spelling.

Introduce the HF words in families where possible as part of your phonics program; with the children seeing them, saying them, making them and writing them.

Resources to support you in teaching High Frequency words including decodable and sight words

Some helpful ones are:

- This website makes word shapes, wordsearches with your words and also generates handwriting sheets: www.atozteacherstuff.com
- Twinkl or Sparklebox have numerous activities and games
- A new model for teaching High Frequency Words, Reading Rockets
<https://www.readingrockets.org/article/new-model-teaching-high-frequency-words>

Suggestions for Reinforcing High Frequency Words

The students in your class will be learning these words at different rates so you may need to adapt some of these ideas and games.

- ✓ Make sure students read text containing high-frequency words every day. Almost all text contains these words, and the most rewarding reading will obviously come from books students can read easily.
- ✓ Create a word wall of high-frequency words. Add new words to the wall as they are introduced. The walls can be structured so that they start with the first 12 words and then increase in difficulty. It may be helpful to create your word wall from these versatile, movable flashcards.
- ✓ Allow students to write the words as often as possible. They may practice individual words or write high-frequency word sentences
- ✓ Keep a checklist of high-frequency words. When working individually with a student; once they have memorised a word, meaning he or she can read it without decoding or write it without seeing the word, check the word off, and move on to the next word.

Sight Vocabulary from first 350 Oxford High Frequency Words

Looking at the first 350 Oxford High Frequency words (there are more but realistically they aren't really that High Frequency after 350!). I took out all of the decodable words and there remained just 71 words which could be described as complex or 'tricky' words because all of them have one letter or letter combination that is irregular. These are often the words that children find difficult or hard to retain.

Dealing with 'Tricky' Words

I have used the term 'Tricky' even though many of these words are mainly or partly decodable. There continues to be much debate amongst experts about these words, what to call them and how to teach them that it can be incredibly confusing for teachers to know which method is best.

It is not advisable to ask children to remember whole words by 'sight.' We know that children can learn and retain some words by sight but they can't learn them all in this way.

Ideally, we would teach these tricky words strictly within the program's phonic progression for example; schools would teach 'and' when covering vcc words and 'the' when digraph 'th' is introduced. The fact is that 'and' and 'the' appear in the simplest of books including decodable reading schemes. Beginner readers, therefore, may need to know a few of these words to read their scheme books but haven't been taught the sounds.

Most explicit, systematic phonics programs suggest a few words at each level which contain harder spellings than those taught so far. It is advisable that teaching of sight words should always happen in the context of systematic, explicit phonics teaching and not as a separate spelling list.

Always point out the decodable parts of these words and if relevant, teach these words in families, for example; normally one 'e' at the end of a word after a consonant does not sound therefore teach irregular words like *she*, *be*, *me* and *we* together. Words such as 'build' only have one letter that makes it slightly irregular the rest of the word is decodable therefore we should highlight or underline the 'u' to emphasise it.

Sight words may initially appear to have some phonic regularities when introduced and these should be highlighted for the students. For example, 'was' begins with /w/ and often when an 'a' follows 'w' it sounds /ɔ̃/; want, watch, wander. In addition, there are several words where 's' makes the sound /z/ for example 'was,' 'boys,' 'music,' 'nose.'

Effective Methods for Learning complex ‘Tricky’ Spellings

The Following is a method for teaching groups or a class:

Teacher: Here’s a word which is not spelt exactly as it sound. It has a tricky bit

Here is the first word: *friend*

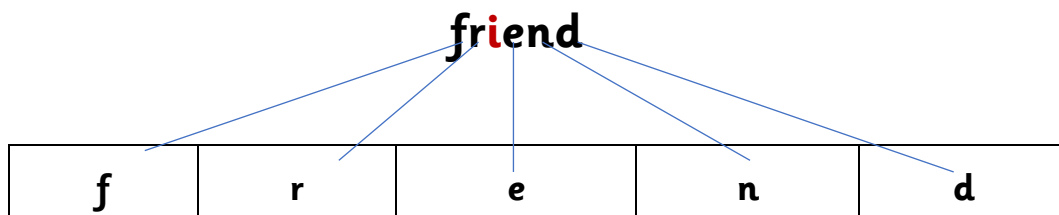
Count how many sounds you can hear, count on your fingers:

Let’s find the tricky bit, here is the word ‘friend’ (write on the board) what is the first sound that you can hear in friend? (As the students give you the sound, put a sound button underneath it

Once they have sounded the word ask them to look at the letters and the sound buttons and tell you which letter is the tricky one?

Reinforce the fact that i is the only letter that is tricky. You could also point out that ‘end’ comes at the end.

Using sound boxes to first map the number of sounds and then mapping to the word will help highlight the complex part of the word.



The following are Additional Methods for Learning to spell a sight word an individual student might be finding particularly difficult:

1. Always point out the decodable parts first
2. Look for the same letter pattern as known word
3. Teach mnemonics for words that they find particularly difficult- e.g. **T**om **H**ates **E**gg **Y**olks for *they* or for remembering more complex words: my **R**eally **R**ude **S**ister **S**ings to remember the two r’s and two s’s in *embarrass*.
4. Point out small words in big words, e.g. ear in hear
5. Pronounce the word as you spell it- Wed-nes-day
6. Colour in words within words *friend*
7. Spray some shaving cream onto a tray and ask the children to say the letters of a word as they write. Often recommended by OTs for students with dysgraphia*

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