

# HIGH-FREQUENCY WORDS: SOME WAYS TO TEACH AND HELP STUDENTS PRACTICE AND LEARN THEM

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## ABSTRACT

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*This is a practical article for teachers in the primary grades and for other teachers and reading specialists whose students experience difficulty responding automatically to high-frequency words. In this article, we will begin by providing some helpful information about vocabulary and high-frequency words in particular. You will learn why high-frequency words are critical if students are to become efficient and effective readers. Then we will turn our attention to the heart of the article: providing numerous ways to teach and help students practice and learn high-frequency words. Finally, we will provide you with two word lists, some phrases, and sentences that you can use to help teach, practice, and reinforce the words.*

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Words are important. They stimulate the student's experience and background so meaning can be constructed from print. There are a large number of words in the English language. Estimates range from 600,000 to over a million words. It is doubtful that anyone knows all these words. Various word count studies suggest that proficient readers like you are able to recognize 50,000 or so words at sight. You know most of these words automatically; you rarely have to sound them out or use affixes like prefixes and suffixes to identify them. You also know that some words occur more frequently than other words.

Beginning readers and struggling readers know a very small percentage of the 50,000 words that are known by proficient readers like you. But here's the good news: because some words occur more frequently than others, we can make some choices of words to teach. For example, there are a mere thirteen words that account for approximately 25% of all the words in school texts and the materials adults read (Johns & Lenski, 2019). In the sentence you just read, ten of the 25 words are among these 13 words (40%). Before you think we created this sentence to buttress our argument (we didn't), check out some other reading materials in your classroom. Sometimes the 13 words will account for less than 25% of the words, and sometimes the 13 words will account for more than 25% of the words. On average, however, these 13 words will account for approximately 25% of the words in all sorts of reading material. We know you want to know what the words are, but we first want to share another valuable piece of information.

A list of 100-200 high-frequency words will make up over 50% of the words in school texts. Those 13 words are among these words. It therefore makes great sense to ensure that beginning readers learn these 13 words at sight. That gives them automaticity with about 25% of the words they meet in their reading. Another 100-200 high-frequency words, if known automatically by students, will enable them to know more than half the words they encounter in their reading.

Here are the magic 13: a, and, for, he, in, is, it, of, that, the, to, was, you. At the end of this article, we have included two other important word lists: Revised Dolch List (226 words) and List of High-Frequency Nouns (46 words). You may have other lists you prefer to use like the Fry list and the original Dolch List. The Revised Dolch List (RDL) is statistically better than the original Dolch list, but you should feel confident with any high-frequency word list you use in your teaching and practice activities.

## THE IMPORTANCE OF HIGH-FREQUENCY WORDS

If you want students to become efficient and effective readers, you need to ensure that students master these words by the end of third grade. By mastery, we mean that they recognize these words automatically (by sight). We recommend teaching the 13 words to mastery along with another dozen of the most-frequently occurring words (i.e., on, as, are, they, with, be, his, at, or, from, had, I) to kindergarten students. Continue teaching more of the words from the Revised Dolch List in first and second grade and ensure mastery by third grade. For readers who struggle in the upper grades, assess their knowledge of the high-frequency words and help students learn the words by sight (automatically). You want all students to know the words by sight. Now, here's the payoff: If students are able to recognize these words by sight, they will know half or more of the words they encounter in their reading. The words are a necessary, but insufficient condition, for efficient reading. Students will also need to learn many words beyond these couple hundred so they can recognize most of the words in their reading. Learning several thousand more words will require plenty of reading in high-success texts along with systematic instruction. But students who know a core of 200 or so high-frequency words by sight will possess a solid foundation for reading.

Now let's focus on some of the things you can do to help your students learn high-frequency words so they become known at sight. We'll begin with several teaching strategies.

## DIRECT TEACHING STRATEGIES

### EXPLICIT INSTRUCTION

1. Select a high-frequency word, or several words, that students should learn to read by sight.
2. Write the word(s) on the board.
3. Model for the students: touch the word, say the word, and spell the word as each letter is touched.
4. Have students write the word on a 4"x 6" card using assorted colored markers, pencils or crayons.
5. Have students demonstrate the procedure you modeled. Students touch the word, say the word, and spell the word touching each letter as it is said. This activity may be done independently or in pairs.
6. Students may pass cards. Each time cards are passed, students touch, say, and spell each word while continuing to touch each letter. Repeat.

7. Use these cards during a read aloud. Every time their word is read, have students put up the word.
8. Give students a story, poem, or created passage that uses the sight word many times. Have the students highlight or circle the word. This text may be read to the students while they are following along, or they may read independently.
9. Students may cut the word into letters, placing them in an envelope that has the word written on the envelope by the student. Ask the student to build the word to practice arranging the letters throughout the day.
10. Write many sentences with a blank space for the sight word on chart paper located around the room. Have students write the word in the sentence, read the sentence silently, and then read the sentence aloud.

### LEARNING THROUGH REPETITION

1. Select words from the Revised Dolch List (RDL) - perhaps the first three words from each column of the RDL (18 words). This list is at the end of the article. Ask the student to read the words and note the words missed. If the student does not recognize the word automatically, ask them to “skip” that word and move to the next. The intent is to determine which words the student does not recognize by sight.
2. Create flash cards from the words that the student did not recognize by sight. You may also include the words that the student displayed hesitancy with (words may be printed on cardstock and cut out or you may write the words on index cards). As a guide, if a student recognizes a word within one second or less, the student is given credit for the word. For the first session, choose three to five words to teach.
3. Present each card to the student, saying the word as it is presented and then placed in front of the student. Once the student recognizes the words, move them around until automaticity is achieved.
4. Begin the next session by reviewing the words learned in the previous session. When the student demonstrates automaticity, continue with the next three to five words missed on the RDL using the same procedure as in step three. To keep words separated, put the words that have been learned and reviewed in the envelope with newly learned words and words missed clipped outside the envelope.
5. In each session, begin by reviewing the newly learned three to five words first, then add them to the known words and have the student review all the words for strengthened automaticity. Unknown words are taken out each time and kept clipped on the outside of the envelope with the newly learned words. Continue these steps until all the words are recognized automatically.
6. After the student has learned the whole set, continue to review and practice the words until the student can automatically recognize each word three times in a row. This may be done with flash cards that the student or you can turn over once the prior word is said. Cards may be sent home for continued practice and review.

7. Retest the student on the RDL to check for mastery. Do this by displaying the words in another print form. Any words missed may be added to the new set of sight words.
8. You can also create and place the words in short phrases or sentences (see phrases and sentences at the end of this article) to help promote transfer to context.

### SEE/HEAR/WRITE/CHANT

1. Choose three to five words. Write one word on the board. Say the word as you point to the word. Have the students write the word on an index card. Then have students chant the word.
2. After students chant the word, they can spell the word again as an individual or group chant. Have fun and let the students clap or tap their foot to the spelling chant. Repeat the chanting of the word followed by the spelling of the word several times.
3. Repeat steps one and two for the targeted three to five words. After all words have been practiced, write a word on the board and see if students can continue the chant of saying and spelling without hesitation. Repeat this process so students can begin to get a rhythm to the practice. This activity can be done as students stand for a movement break multiple times during the day to practice after the initial teaching of the words (steps 1 & 2).

### PRACTICE

Research has found that sight word intervention games are highly effective when used for sight word achievement (Gibbon, Duffield, Hoffman, & Wageman, 2017). Below are some ideas that are easy and fun to include for practice activities.

1. Word Walls. Create word walls so students have the words always accessible. As you use the words daily during instruction, take the time to ask them to find the word within the word wall lists.

Cunningham (2017) offers the following word activity suggestions:

- Easy Rhyming. Have students create lists of the word wall words that rhyme. Students can make word wall booklets of these words.
- Easy Endings. Students can add endings such as *s*, *ed*, *ing*, and *er* to words to create more words.
- Read My Mind. You or a student may choose a word on the word wall. That word can be written on a piece of paper without anyone seeing it. Give the students five clues to see if they can “read” your or the student’s mind.

Example:

It’s one of our Word Wall words.

It has three letters.

It begins with o.

It is the opposite of young.

It is missing from this sentence. Today I am seven years \_\_\_\_\_.

2. Word Families. Have students create word families on chart paper. Students should say the words after they have created the list(s) for additional practice. Some examples of word families can be found below.

- at: cat, sat, chat, mat, flat, pat, vat, bat, rat, that
- ad: had, sad, glad, tad, pad,
- an: man, can, tan, ran, fan
- and: hand, band, sand, land,
- ee: three, bee, knee, tree, see, flee, tee

3. Read pattern books. Encourage students to read books to increase automaticity and build confidence.

4. Create phrases or sentence strips that contain high-frequency words for students to practice. See example phrases and sentences at the end of this article.

5. Word Search. Create your own word search using a list of high-frequency words. Depending on the age and capability of the student, have him or her create the word search for the group. Be sure your word searches go from left to right only. One free resource for creating word searches can be found at this site:

<https://worksheets.theteacherscorner.net/make-your-own/word-search/>



6. Sign It (Sherman, 2011). Use the following website to see what the word looks like in sign language: <https://www.handspeak.com/word/>

This is a great way for students to teach others as they become familiar with the written word as well as the word in sign language.

7. Write sight words everywhere using items like those that follow.
  - Sidewalk chalk – Take students outside and let them write around the playground.
  - Magnets – Use magnetic letters to form words on baking sheets. If you have the opportunity to have magnetic painted walls, these are a great way to allow students to manipulate letters and form words.
  - Sand – Pour sand in a tray and let students write the words with their finger.
  - Play dough – Form sight words with play dough.
8. Treasure Hunt. Hide high-frequency words around room. Write words on index cards, fun post-its or cut outs for more fun. Have students go on a treasure hunt. The student cannot collect the word unless he or she can say the word.
9. Pick a Stick. Write words on popsicle sticks or craft sticks. The words may be used in a variety of different ways. One is to call students up to pick a stick throughout the day. If they get the word correct, they may win a point toward something you decide. At the end of the day or week, they may earn extra free time or reading time!
10. Memory Game. You may use the same stack of word pairs as used for Go Fish (see #12). The cards are laid face-down on the floor. The students take turns flipping two cards over and say them as they try to remember where previously flipped words are. The student who has the most matches at the end wins the game.
11. Sight Word Bingo, Create Bingo cards with a few sight words or sight word phrases (i.e., on the tree, in the tree). Randomly read aloud sight words, marking (or placing a small item) on each square with the matching sight word.
12. Go Fish. Write high-frequency words twice on index cards or cardstock and shuffle them like a deck of cards. Have a pair of students takes turns to see if another player has a sight word that matches one in his or her hand. If there is not a match, the student draws a card from the deck. Any pair of matching words gets stacked in a pile. After the first student has no cards, players count up their matches. The player with the most matches wins the game.

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***Word Lists, Phrases, and Sentences***

*The four resource pages that follow can be used for both teaching and practice activities.*

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## Revised Dolch List

a	could	he	might	same	told
about	cut	heard	more	saw	too
across	did	help	most	say	took
after	didn't	her	much	see	toward
again	do	here	must	she	try
all	does	high	my	short	turn
always	done	him	near	should	two
am	don't	his	need	show	under
an	down	hold	never	six	up
and	draw	hot	next	small	upon
another	eat	how	new	so	us
any	enough	I	no	some	use
are	even	I'm	not	soon	very
around	every	if	now	start	walk
as	far	in	of	still	want
ask	fast	into	off	stop	warm
at	find	is	oh	take	was
away	first	it	old	tell	we
be	five	its	on	ten	well
because	for	just	once	than	went
been	found	keep	one	that	were
before	four	kind	only	the	what
began	from	know	open	their	when
best	full	last	or	them	where
better	gave	leave	other	then	which
big	get	left	our	there	while
black	give	let	out	these	white
blue	go	light	over	they	who
both	going	like	own	think	why
bring	gone	little	play	this	will
but	good	long	put	those	with
by	got	look	ran	thought	work
call	green	made	read	three	would
came	grow	make	red	through	yes
can	had	many	right	to	yet
close	hard	may	round	today	you
cold	has	me	run	together	your
come	have	mean	said		

The rationale and research for this list are described in Johns, J.L. (1981). The development of the revised Dolch list. *Illinois School Research and Development*, 17(3), 15–24.

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## High-Frequency Nouns

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air	group	people
back	hand	place
book	head	road
boy	home	room
car	house	school
children	man	side
city	men	table
day	money	thing
dog	morning	time
door	mother	top
eye	Mr.	town
face	Mrs.	tree
father	name	water
feet	night	way
friend	nothing	year
girl		

The development of this list is described in Johns, J.L. (1975). Dolch list of common nouns—A comparison. *The Reading Teacher*, 28(6), 538–540.

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## Phrases with High-Frequency Nouns

through the air	give some money
back again	in the morning
saw the book	with my mother
boy can play	Mr. Green
car went fast	Mrs. White
small children	your name
the big city	every night
a long day	nothing better
their old dog	many good people
open the door	the only place
close one eye	a long road
see your face	my own room
with my father	his new school
two feet	by my side
one good friend	under the table
a small girl	which small thing
four in a group	how much time
in your hand	over the top
on her head	through some town
going home	up in the tree
around the house	in the warm water
an old man	one way to go
two mean men	every year

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## Sentences with High-Frequency Nouns

The air is cold.

Can you bring it back?

Mr. Green read a book.

The boy ran away.

A car is going fast.

The children read.

The city is big.

Another day went by.

The dog can play.

Close the door.

Keep one eye open.

I see your face.

Ask your father.

Put those on your feet.

Who is your friend?

This girl can draw.

The group went to town.

He can hold her hand.

Put that on your head.

Let us go home.

I like our little house.

That man is Mr. Black.

Some men left town.

Do you have any money?

I get up in the morning.

My mother is short.

Mr. Black is going home.

Mrs. Green read this book.

What is your name?

I read at night.

Nothing can stop you.

The people sit at the table.

Which place will you go?

The car is in the road.

I have my own room.

She is going to school.

Come over by my side.

The dog is under the table.

Which thing do you have?

How much time is left?

Look at the top of the tree.

I'm going to town.

Can he go up the tree?

Turn off the water.

Which way did he go?

Every year I grow.

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