

DEVELOPING SIGHT WORD RECOGNITION AND VOCABULARY

Texts written in English are made up of many of the same words. These words are called *high-frequency words* because they appear so often. Sometimes these words can be tricky for beginners because their spelling patterns may not follow typical English phonics rules. Sometimes these words are also referred to as Dolch words, after Edward William Dolch, who compiled a list of English high-frequency words.

Another common term for these words is *sight words*. A sight word is any word that a reader can recognize upon sight without having to use decoding skills. In other words, sight words are any words that a reader can identify automatically without having to sound it out. The goal is for students to become fluent enough readers that all high-frequency words become sight words.

To build beginner-level students' early literacy skills, it can be very helpful to explicitly teach high-frequency words. However, teaching the words on their own does not prove to be very effective. Instead, students must see the words frequently and in context. This can be accomplished by having students read books, interact with a daily message, write in dialogue journals, play games, post word walls, and share writing.

This week's Teacher's Corner will focus on where to find lists of high-frequency words, how to assess what students know, and how to track students' development in fluency. In the coming weeks, additional strategies will be presented to support students' sight word recognition as well as other skills.

FINDING HIGH-FREQUENCY WORD LISTS AND ASSESSMENTS

Lists of high-frequency words can be found in many places online. One great resource is a free site called [Mrs. Perkins](#) that offers word lists, PowerPoint presentations, flash cards, and even a book and a story that contain all of the words that are considered to be high-frequency words in English. Additionally, the blog [Make, Take, Teach](#) offers [a free printable set](#) of lists, checklists,

and graphs to use for assessment and monitoring progress. Of course, searching online will turn up many more useful, free resources.

Regularly assessing students' recognition of high-frequency words is a great way to evaluate their development of fluency. It is suggested that at the beginning of a school year or course, each student be assessed to find out which words he or she already knows and which words he or she will need to learn. This assessment should be repeated occasionally throughout the course as the student learns more words. Some teachers assess monthly or quarterly, but others may assess more or less frequently depending on each student's individual needs. Suggestions for how to assess students are provided below.

ASSESSING HIGH-FREQUENCY WORD RECOGNITION

Time: 5-20 minutes per student

Goals:

- To determine which high-frequency words students can recognize automatically and which words still need to be mastered.
- To help teachers decide which high-frequency words to focus on during instruction.

Materials:

- a printed list of high-frequency words for each student
- one additional copy of the word list(s)
- a blank sheet of paper
- a clipboard if available
- a pencil

Preparation:

1. Print or photocopy a list (or a set of lists) of high-frequency words for each student in your class. The materials mentioned in the section above are excellent resources to use

for this activity, but any list of high-frequency words will also work. However, it is essential that the words are organized from simple to more difficult.

2. Label each copy of the list with one student's name. Each student should have a copy of the list with his or her name. If there are multiple sheets of paper, staple them together so that each student has a packet containing all of the words. This list or packet will be referred to as the *Student Tracker*.
3. Prepare an additional list or packet for students to read from during the assessment. This list or packet will be referred to as the *Assessment List*.
4. Decide on a time that you will be able to assess students individually. You can assess a student while other students are working independently on an assignment. Creating an assessment schedule may be helpful.

Procedure:

1. Gather the Student Trackers, the Assessment List, the blank sheet of paper, and a pencil.
2. Call a student individually over to a quiet area of the classroom.
3. On your clipboard, place the student's Tracker. Put the Assessment List in front of the student. Be sure to present the simplest words first, so that the difficulty of the assessment increases gradually. If the student skips words or feels overwhelmed, it can help to use the blank sheet of paper to cover a portion of the list and reveal one row of words at a time.
4. Ask the student to read the words from the list out loud to you. As you listen, check off the words the student reads correctly on the Student Tracker. Leave the word unchecked on the Student Tracker if the student is unable to read it correctly.
5. Continue for as long as the student is successfully reading words. Stop the assessment after a student misses 8 words in a row.

USING THE INFORMATION FROM HIGH-FREQUENCY WORD ASSESSMENTS

The data provided by high-frequency word assessments is very useful both in terms of individual students and a whole class. Giving assessments regularly can show teachers which words each student is able to recognize by sight and which ones they still need to encounter or study more.

By looking at the data for a class as a whole, teachers can find out which words the majority of the class still needs to work on and plan instruction accordingly.

WAYS TO PRACTICE HIGH-FREQUENCY WORDS AND DEVELOP VOCABULARY

Often, high-frequency words are introduced out of context and students are expected to memorize them in isolation. However, providing students multiple exposures to these words in authentic contexts helps them to learn these words better.

Children's literature is a great way to expose students to high-frequency words. One great strategy to support sight word recognition is to display and read text aloud to your class. It can also be helpful to give students time to read independently or to listen to recorded books while tracking text.

Flash cards are also great for practicing the words, but the cards should have more than just the high-frequency word itself. Flash cards are more effective when they provide context by including an illustration, a sentence containing the word, or a definition (if applicable) on the back of the card.

Next week in the Teacher's Corner, we will present how to use a daily message to help students practice decoding and interact with high-frequency words. Week 4 will discuss how shared writing can be used to develop beginner-level students' early literacy skills.