

Sight Words and Orthographic Mapping:

A Free Practice Tool That Reinforces Your Phonics Instruction

Read the Full Article Here:

<https://www.modelteaching.com/education-articles/reading-ela-instruction/sight-words-and-orthographic-mapping>

Introduction

High-Frequency Words, Sight Words, and Orthographic Mapping

You have likely heard these terms in your classroom, and understanding them is important to understanding science-backed reading methods that can support your students. First, a high-frequency word is a word that appears often in printed text. The [Dolch and Fry lists](#) are two popular lists of words, and the 300 most common words account for nearly 3/4ths of all the words found in a typical text in school. A sight word is often related to a high-frequency word. Sight words are words that a reader recognizes instantly without requiring any conscious effort to sound out the word. For example, an adult will easily recognize the word "photosynthesis" without having to break the word down into parts and sound it out. He or she has seen it and sounded it out enough times that the word is stored in memory and can be recalled. Often, sight words are also high-frequency words simply because the nature of quickly recalling words tends to happen when an individual sees those words all the time!

But how do those high-frequency words turn into sight words? Contrary to what you might think, it is not simply memorization. Words become learned and mastered automatically over time, and known by sight, through a process called "[orthographic mapping](#)".

Orthographic mapping is how individuals make connections between the graphemes (the written letter(s) that represent a sound) in a word's spelling and the phonemes (the actual single sounds) in its pronunciation, and it ties both of those to the word's meaning. These connections form through consistent practice, sounding out words and linking what they look like to how they sound, eventually allowing individuals to retrieve them by sight.

In other words, students should not master sight words through blanket memorization, but through consistent practice using phonics skills to sound out words enough times that word recognition eventually becomes automatic.

You might be wondering, "Why does this matter? Can't students just continuously sound out words each time they read? Why the need for enough practice that students recognize

words by sight?" [Automaticity](#) helps explain this. Simply stated, when students read and are able to automatically know a word and its meaning, they recognize it instantly in a text; their brain is free to focus on comprehending the text, since less "brain power" is being used for sounding out words and understanding their meaning.

Moving from Decoding into Storage of "Sight Words"

Decoding Words

Phonological decoding, our "sounding a word out," means that students are mastering the orthographic knowledge of each word that will later support them in being able to instantly recognize that word. The more a student successfully decodes a word, [the greater the opportunity for that word to be stored](#) as instantly recognizable in reading. We also know that sight word storage depends on [phonemic awareness](#). For students who do not have [strong letter-sound knowledge](#) yet, they are more likely to confuse a word like "was" or "saw"; however, for those students who do have strong letter-sound knowledge and can properly practice decoding words, they are more likely to retain those similar-looking words more easily. Most high-frequency words that students encounter are decodable in some way. Most [words classified as irregular](#) are irregular in only one grapheme. For example, in the word "said", the s and d letters behave normally, so it's only the "ai" spelling that is the irregular component of the word. This means most high-frequency words are decodable.

Turning Decoding into Storage

Once students begin to actually decode a word and practice, storage of that word happens quite quickly. Research points to somewhere between 4 and 6 practice trials for first graders to master a word after practicing decoding, though the number varies by word and by student. In other words, words that are decodable by students are stored efficiently. If students have weaker foundational skills when attempting to decode a word, they simply need more practice in order to properly store that word. Even in words that are considered irregular, while some research recommends teaching high-frequency words [more holistically and using things like flashcards and word walls](#) to help, other research favors teaching students the [letter-sound structure in irregular words](#) too. Direct comparisons of the two approaches are still few, and the ones that do exist promote drawing student attention to the letter-sound structure.

So what's the practical takeaway from these ideas? If you teach the letter-sound structure of high-frequency words and then allow students to practice decoding words, students will store those words more easily, and they will thus become sight words. Practicing words in isolation is only a small support strategy for your students, but most of their decoding and

reading practice will happen within the text. Naturally, as students practice decoding words and see the same words over and over again in the texts and books they read, their sight words aptitude will increase. Using a sight words practice app, like the one you will learn about next, is a small, occasional supplement to the rigorous reading instruction and practice students should be receiving in the classroom.

The Model Teaching Sight Words App

The Model Teaching Sight Words app was designed as a simple tool for students to receive supplemental practice alongside their rigorous reading instruction in the classroom. The app is designed to be used after and alongside phonics instruction so that students can practice reading high-frequency words on their own until they are naturally recognized by sight. Not only does this app allow for simple practice, where a student can listen to the word being spoken aloud, but you can also design specific custom quizzes and worksheets specific to the words you'd like students to practice.

Audio on every word. Orthographic mapping requires that the reader already knows the word's pronunciation, so the spelling has something to connect with. The app allows for every word to play aloud, meaning a student can practice independently and still ensure he or she is correctly pronouncing the word.

Flashcards. Students can choose which words to practice, using a flashcard method that lets them check pronunciation using the audio feature.

Quizzes. Two-way quizzes are provided with look-alike answer choices to prevent students from guessing and to help them focus on properly reading the words they practice. Students can hear the word and select the spelling, or see the word and select the correct audio.

Word wall. A feature that lets you display a selection of words in presentation mode.

Grade bands and custom builds. If you need something specific, you can hand-pick the words you want and build your own practice that works best for your students.

Worksheets. Provides you with printable flashcards or word trace options to use in your classroom.

In your classroom, you can plan to teach proper decoding strategies as students practice various words. You likely will be doing this daily in your reading lessons. Then, provide sight words lists to students as a way to practice the decoding strategies from their lessons. After students practice, consider having students read those same words in connected text so that they are practicing within sentences.

Considerations and Model Teaching Recommendations

Keep the following limits in mind as you plan to use this sight words app with your students.

The evidence that word practice builds automaticity is separate from the evidence that phonics builds decoding. Your [systematic phonics instruction](#) remains the primary method for helping your students master reading, with this app simply building some speed for students to recognize words that have been previously mastered through decoding.

Be mindful of students who are not yet ready to practice sight words. For example, students who do not yet have enough grapheme-phoneme knowledge will likely be unable to retain words learned through a list or flashcard method.

Keep app sessions [short and frequent](#). About five minutes in a day, three to five times a week, works better than one long session, for example. Because this practice is a complement to your regular instruction, it can be kept short and focused.

Use your own judgment on grouping and pacing. The app breaks down words loosely into grade bands of pre-primer, primer, first, second, and third grade, but you should evaluate your own students to determine which words require practice.

Getting Started

The Model Teaching Sight Words App is available at apps.modelteaching.com/sight-words. You can use it in four ways:

- Flashcards
- Quizzes
- Word Wall
- Printable, Customized Worksheets

The app covers high-frequency words across five grade bands, including pre-primer, primer, first, second, and third grade, and every word plays aloud so students can check their own pronunciation. It is free to use, customizable, and requires no account, so you can start with a small set of words you have already taught and send the same link home this week.

References

Colenbrander, Danielle, et al. "Teaching children to read irregular words: A comparison of three instructional methods." *Scientific Studies of Reading* 26.6 (2022): 545-564.

Ehri, Linnea C. "Orthographic mapping in the acquisition of sight word reading, spelling memory, and vocabulary learning." *Scientific studies of reading* 18.1 (2014): 5-21.

Ehri, L. C. (2020). The science of learning to read words: A case for systematic phonics instruction. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 55(S1), S45-S60. <https://doi.org/10.1002/rrq.334>

Ehri, Linnea C. "The science of learning to read words: A case for systematic phonics instruction." *Reading research quarterly* 55 (2020): S45-S60.

Farrell, Linda, Michael Hunter, and Tina Osenga. "A new model for teaching high frequency words." *Reading Rockets* (2019).

Foorman, Barbara, et al. "Foundational Skills to Support Reading for Understanding in Kindergarten through 3rd Grade. Educator's Practice Guide. NCEE 2016-4008." *What works clearinghouse* (2016).

Miles, Katharine Pace, Denise Eide, and Janee'R. Butler. "The regularity of high-frequency words (sight words): Teacher phonetic knowledge is key." *Reading Psychology* 45.8 (2024): 832-852.

Perfetti, Charles. "Reading ability: Lexical quality to comprehension." *Scientific studies of reading* 11.4 (2007): 357-383.

Reitsma, Pieter. "Printed word learning in beginning readers." *Journal of experimental child psychology* 36.2 (1983): 321-339.

Share, David L. "Phonological recoding and self-teaching: Sine qua non of reading acquisition." *Cognition* 55.2 (1995): 151-218.

Steady, Laura M., et al. "Sight word acquisition in first grade students at risk for reading disabilities: an item-level exploration of the number of exposures required for mastery: Steady LM et al." *Annals of dyslexia* 70.2 (2020): 259-274.