A New Model for Teaching High-Frequency Words

By: Linda Farrell, Michael Hunter, Tina Osenga

Integrating high-frequency words into phonics lessons allows students to make sense of spelling patterns for these words. To do this, high-frequency words need to be categorized according to whether they are spelled entirely regularly or not. This article describes how to "rethink" teaching of high-frequency words.

Related

Heart Word Magic
Routine for Teaching Heart Words

We have visited many schools to observe intervention lessons and core reading instruction. For years we have been struck that even schools embracing research-based reading instruction teach high-frequency words through rote memorization. It is as if the high-frequency words are a special set of words that need to be memorized and can't be learned using sound–symbol relationships.

A number of years ago, a teacher we respect enormously asked for help because many of her Tier 2 students and all of her Tier 3 students in first and second grades were failing to learn high-frequency words, even though they were progressing in their phonics lessons. We observed her teaching the digraph **th** to a group of four Tier 3 first grade students. This lesson was in April. Her students had learned to read CVC words and this was their first lesson with digraphs. The high-frequency words the students were responsible for knowing in this lesson were the color words: *blue*, *red*, *yellow*, *orange*, *purple*, and *green*. None of the four students could spell more than two of the words accurately. All four students had difficulty reading those words when they were mixed into lists with other high-frequency words. (Indeed, they were having difficulty reading all the high-frequency words in the lists.)

These students could read words that followed spelling patterns they had learned and practiced, but they struggled learning words that made no sense to them from a sound–spelling viewpoint. We suggested that the students learn high-frequency words according to spelling patterns, and not according to frequency number or theme.

Together with the teacher, we organized the high frequency words to fit into the phonics lessons so that the words were tied to spelling patterns students were learning. First, we focused on identifying decodable high frequency words such as *but, him,* and *yes* and integrating them into phonics lessons instead of teaching them as words that had to be memorized. Next, we identified irregularly spelled high frequency words such as *said, you,* and *from*. These words have two or three letter sounds students knew and only one or two letters that had to be memorized. We integrated 2 or 3 of these words into a phonics lessons, and students learned to identify the letters spelled as expected and to learn "by heart" the letters not spelled as expected.

With this approach, students had an easier time learning to read the word *said* because they knew that only the letters **ai** are an unexpected spelling. Students also soon stopped confusing was and saw because they learned to think about the first sound before reading or spelling those words. The teacher told us that she, her students, and their parents were thrilled that they were no longer "banging their heads against the wall" going over and over the words as students tried to memorize how to read or spell high-frequency words with little success.

Current practices

High-frequency words are often referred to as "sight words", a term that usually reflects the practice of learning the words through memorization. These words might be on the Dolch List, Fry Instant Words, or selected from stories in the reading program. Common practice often includes sending these "sight words" home for students to study and memorize, or drilling with flash cards in school. Students may start with word #1 and progress through the words in the order of frequency. Some teachers, like our friend above, group the words in categories, such as numbers or colors, whenever possible. In essence, high-frequency word instruction is often fully divorced from phonics instruction. While this method works for many students, it is an abysmal failure with others.

Overview of suggested restructuring

Integrating high-frequency words into phonics lessons allows students to make sense of spelling patterns for these words. To do this, high-frequency words need to be categorized according to whether they are spelled entirely regularly or not. Restructuring the way high-frequency words are taught makes reading and spelling the words more accessible to all students. The rest of this article describes how to "rethink" teaching of high-frequency words and fit them into phonics lessons.

Teach 10–15 "sight words" before phonics instruction begins

Many kindergarten students are expected to learn 20 to 50, or even more, high-frequency words during the year. The words are introduced and practiced in class and students are asked to study them at home. Learning these "sight words" often starts before formal phonics instruction begins.

Children do need to know about 10–15 very-high-frequency words when they start phonics instruction. However, these words can be carefully selected so that they are the "essential words" that are not decodable when the short vowel patterns VC and CVC are taught. Words such as *at, can,* and *had* are easier for students to learn using phonics than by simply memorizing them.

We recommend teaching 10–15 pre-reading high frequency words only after students know all the letter names, but before they start phonics instruction. (Students who have not learned their letter names inevitable struggle to learn words that have letters they cannot identify.) Teaching students to read the ten words in Table 1 as "sight words" even before they begin phonics instruction is unlikely to overburden even "at risk" students. These ten words can be used to write decodable sentences when phonics instruction begins. The words in Table 1 are suggestions only, and teachers may revise or add words based on their reading materials and their students. For example, the words *are* and *said* are often added.

To teach these ten pre-reading sight words, we recommend introducing one word at a time. Teaching these words in the order listed can minimize confusion for students. For example, *the* and *a* are unlikely to be confused, as are *I* and *to*. However, *to* and *of* are widely separated on the table because both are two-letter words with the letter **o**, and **t** and **f** have similar formations.

As we recommended above, the words in Table 1 should not be taught or practiced until a student knows all the letter names.

Students can demonstrate they know these words in a number of ways, including (1) finding the word in a list or row of other words, (2) finding the word in a text, (3) reading the word from a card, and (4) spelling the word.

If students know letter sounds and can identify the first sound in a word, the following words can be tied to beginning letter sounds because the initial sound is spelled as expected: *to*, *and*, *was*, *you*, *for*, *is*. The word *I* is easily recognized by students who know their letter names. On the other hand, the words *the*, *a*, and *of* cannot be tied to known letter sounds.

Teaching a "ditty" to help students learn *the, a,* and *of* works for many students. Teachers have had success teaching students to sing the ditties below. It is important that students have the word in front of them when they say the ditty. They should point to the word when they say it in the ditty, and point to the letters when they say them in the ditty.

- **The**: I can say 'thee' or I can say 'thuh', but I always spell it 't' 'h' 'e'
- **A:** I can say 'ā' or I can say 'uh', but I always spell it with the letter 'a'
- **Of** is hard to spell, but not for me. I love to spell of. 'o' 'f' of, 'o' 'f' of, 'o' 'f' of

Table 1: 10 Sight Words for Pre-Readers to Learn

Word	Dolch Frequency Rank	Fry Frequency Rank
the	1	1
a	5	4
I	6	20
to	2	5
and	3	3
was	11	12
for	16	13
you	7	8
is	22	7
of	9	2

Dolch words are from: Dolch, E. W. (1936). A basic sight vocabulary. *The Elementary School Journal*, 36(6), 456-460.

Dolch Rankings were found on lists at K12 Reader and Mrs. Perkins Dolch Words.

Fry words and rankings are from: Fry, E., & Kress, J.K. (2006). *The Reading Teacher's Book of Lists*. Jossey-Bass: San Francisco.

Flash Words and Heart Words defined

For instructional purposes, high-frequency words can be divided into two categories: those that are phonetically decodable and those with irregular spellings. We call high-frequency words that are regularly spelled and thus decodable "Flash Words".

Although their spelling patterns are easily decoded, Flash Words are used so frequently in reading and writing that students need to be able to read and spell them "in a flash". Examples of Flash Words at the cvc level are can, not, and did. Irregularly spelled words are called "Heart Words" because some part of the word will have to be "learned by heart." Heart Words are also used so frequently that they need to be read and spelled automatically. Examples of Heart Words are: *said*, *are*, and *where*.

Words on any high-frequency word list can easily be categorized into Flash Words and Heart Words. However, be cautioned that a word may change categories. For example, early in a phonics scope and sequence, *see* may be a Heart Word because the long e spelling patterns haven't been taught. When students learn that **ee** spells long e, *see* becomes a Flash Word. Further, many of the Heart Words can be categorized into words with similar spellings. This article categorizes words on the Dolch List of 220 High Frequency Words (Dolch 220 List)[1]. The method we use to categorize words on the Dolch 220 List works with any high-frequency word list.

Flash Words

One hundred and thirty-eight words (63%) on the Dolch 220 List are decodable when all regular spelling patterns are considered. Tables 2A, 2B, and 2C show the 138 decodable words categorized by spelling patterns. These tables can help teachers determine when to introduce the words during phonics lessons. Table 2A may be most useful for teachers of beginning reading because it lists the 60 one-syllable decodable words with the short vowel spelling pattern.

Table 2A: Flash Words (Decodable Words)

60 One-Syllable Words with Short Vowel Spelling Patterns

(Numbers in parentheses are the Dolch frequency ranking)

VC	CVC	Digraphs	Blends	Words Ending in NG and N
(Sorted by vowel spelling)	(Sorted by vowel spelling)	(Sorted by digraph)	(Sorted by ending blends, then beginning blends)	(Sorted by ending letters)
at (21)	had (20) hot (203)	that (14)	and (3)	sing (213)
am (37)	can (42) but (19)	with (23)	just (78)	bring (155)
an (72)	ran (111) run (163)	then (38)	must (149)	long (167)
it (8)	him (22) cut (188)	them (52)	fast (182)	thank (216)

VC	CVC	Digraphs	Blends	Words Ending in NG and N
in (10)	did (45) get (51)	this (55)	best (210)	think (110)
if (65)	will* (59) yes (60)	much (142)	went (62)	drink (159)
on (17)	big (61) red (80)	pick (185)	ask (70)	
off* (132)	six (120) well* (109)	wish (217)	its (75)	
up (24)	sit (191) let (112)	when (44)	jump (98)	
us (169)	not (49) tell (141)	which (192)	help (113)	
	got (93) ten (153)		stop (131)	
			black (151)	

*Students easily understand that two consonants at the end of a word spell one sound.

[1]The source for words on the Dolch 220 List is: Dolch, E. W. (1936). A basic sight vocabulary. *The Elementary School Journal*, 36(6), 456-460. Tables in this article show frequency rankings for words on the Dolch 220 list. Rankings for words on the Dolch 220 List can be found in many places, but we did not find a primary source that can be attributable to Dr. Dolch.

Rankings were retrieved on March 15, 2013, from [K12 Reader](#) and [Mrs. Perkins Dolch Words](#).

Flash Words that can be taught with spellings students know will vary at any given time, depending on which phonics patterns students have been taught. For example, the words had, am, and can will be decodable when students have learned short a and vc and cvc spelling patterns. That, when, pick, and much will be decodable after students learn digraphs and can read words with digraphs. The words just, went, black, and ask will be decodable when students learn to read words with blends.

Flash Words should be introduced when they fit into the phonics pattern being taught, which is different from teaching them based on their frequency of use. Flash Words are different from other decodable words only because of their frequency. They are called Flash Words because students will need lots of practice to read and spell these words "in a Flash". These are called "Flash Words" instead of "sight words" because students do not have to memorize any part of Flash Words. They can use their knowledge of phonics patterns to read and spell the words.

Flash Words with advanced vowels to teach with early phonics instruction

Table 2B shows 60 one-syllable words with more advanced vowel spelling patterns. A few of these are so frequent that they will need to be taught when students are still learning the short vowel spelling patterns (VC and CVC) during phonics lessons.

Table 2B: Flash Words (Decodable Words)

60 One-Syllable Words With R-Controlled, Long, and Other Vowel Spellings

(Numbers in parentheses are the Dolch Frequency Ranking)

r-Controlled Vowels	CV Long Vowel	VCe (silent e)	Vowel Teams with Long Vowel Sounds	Vowel Teams with Other Vowel Sounds
(Sorted by vowel spelling)	(Sorted by vowel spelling)	(Sorted by vowel spelling)	(Sorted by vowel sound, then vowel spelling)	(Sorted by vowel sound, then vowel spelling)
for* (16)	I* (6)	came (69)	play (127)	out* (31)
or* (123)	he* (4)	take (94)	may (130)	round (140)
start (150)	she* (15)	make (114)	say* (183)	found (200)
far (205)	be* (33)	made (162)	see* (48)	down* (40)
her* (28)	we* (36)	gave (164)	green (99)	now* (66)
first (146)	me* (58)	ate (177)	sleep (116)	how* (88)
hurt (186)	go* (35)	like (53)	keep (143)	brown (117)
	so* (47)	ride (76)	three (170)	look (26)
	no* (68)	five (119)	eat (125)	good (82)
	my* (56)	white (152)	read (197)	new (148)
	by* (103)		clean (208)	soon (161)
	fly (138)		right (90)	draw (207)

r-Controlled Vowels	CV Long Vowel	VCe (silent e)	Vowel Teams with Long Vowel Sounds	Vowel Teams with Other Vowel Sounds
	try* (147)		light (184)	saw* (106)
	why (198)		own (199)	
			show (202)	
			grow (209)	

* Many programs teach these words as Heart Words when students are still learning to read words with short vowels.

Traditionally, many words in Table 2B would be taught as "sight words" and not included as part of phonics lessons. These words might be introduced as they are encountered in a story, or they might be taught in order. For example, *he* would be taught as high frequency word #4, then *she* taught as high frequency word #12, with *we* (#26), *be* (#33), and *me* (#58), following later.

Under the new model, words with asterisks in Table 2B are still introduced when short vowels are being taught. The difference in the new model is that these words are grouped together by vowel spelling pattern to make it easier for students to remember the words. Instead of teaching *he* in isolation as a word to be memorized, we teach *he, be, we, me,* and *she* together (as shown in the CV column in Table 2b) and point out that the letter **e** spells the long e sound. *Go, no,* and *so* can be taught together, as can *my, by,* and *why.*

Students will learn words more easily when grouped together by similar spelling than by memorizing words one at a time as whole units. If the curriculum requires a Flash Word to be taught before the vowel pattern has been introduced, teachers can refer to Table 2B to find words that can be grouped together.

Flash Words with two and three syllables

Table 2C shows 16 Flash Words with two syllables and one Flash Word with three syllables. We recommend teaching these words after students have learned to read two-syllable words in phonics instruction. If these words must be introduced earlier, students will learn them more easily if the teacher breaks the words into syllables and shows any known letter sounds in each syllable. This way students learn to read each syllable and blend the syllables into a word, instead of having to memorize the whole word.

Table 2C: Flash Words (Decodable Words)

17 Two-Syllable Words and 1 Three-Syllable Word

(Numbers in parentheses are the Dolch Frequency Ranking)

CVC	"A" Spells Schwa in First Syllable	Short Vowels and r-Controlled Vowels	Short Vowel and Long Vowel	All Other Two-Syllable Words	Three-Syllable Word
seven* (134)	about* (84)	after (108)	myself (139)	little (39)	every** (96)
upon (211)	around* (85)	never (133)	open* (165)	over (73)	
	away* (101)	better (172)	funny (175)	going (115)	
		under (196)		yellow 118)	
				before (124)	

* These words have a schwa sound in the first or second syllable.

** This word is often pronounced with two syllables, especially in conversation.

Heart Words

The Dolch 220 List has 82 Heart Words (37%) that are shown on Tables 3A and 3B. Heart Words have Heart Letters, which are the irregularly spelled part of the word. For example, **o** is the Heart Letter in the words to and do.

Some of the Dolch Heart Words with similar spelling patterns can be grouped together, even though the spelling patterns are not regular. Table 3A (on the next page) shows 45 Heart Words grouped according to similar spelling patterns. The table also lists twelve words not on the Dolch List. These twelve words have similar spelling patterns to the Dolch words listed, and the words are likely to be words already in young students' vocabularies. For example, *could* and *would* are Dolch words. We recommend adding *should* when could and would are taught, even though it is not on the Dolch 220 List.

The groups of words in Table 3A can be added to any phonics or spelling lesson, with the Heart Letters pointed out. For example, the words *his, is, as,* and *has* can all be taught as vc and cvc words in which the letter **s** is the Heart Letter because it spells the sound /z/.

59 Words Grouped by Similar Spelling Patterns
45 Words from the Dolch List and 14 Not on the Dolch List

(Numbers in Parentheses Are the Dolch Frequency Ranking)
(Diamond [♦] indicates word is not on the Dolch List, but it fits the spelling pattern)

Unusual Spelling Pattern	High-Frequency Words
s at the end of the word spells /z/	his (13), is (27), as (32), has (166)
v is followed by **e** because no English word ends in **v**	have (34), give (144), live (206)
o-e spells short u /ŭ/	some (30), come (64), done (180)
o spells /ōō/ (as in boot)	to (2), do (41), into (77)
rhyming words spelled with the same last four letters	there (29), where (95)
s spells /z/ in a vce word	those (179), these (212)
all spells /ŏll/	all (25), call (167), fall (193), small (195), ball ♦
oul spells /ŏŏ/ (as in cook)	could (43), would (57), should ♦
e at the end is after a phonetic r-controlled spelling	were (50), are (63)
vcc and cvcc words with **o** spelling long o /ō/	old (102), cold (136), hold (173), both (190)
cvcc words with i spelling long i /ī/	find (167), kind (189), mind ♦
words similar in meaning and spelling	one (54), once (160)
a after **w** sometimes spells short o /ŏ/	want (86), wash (201), watch ♦
ue spells /ōō/ as in boot	blue (79), glue ♦, clue ♦, true ♦
u spells /ŏŏ/ (as in cook)	put (91), full (178), pull (187), push ♦
rhyming words with silent **l**	walk (121), talk ♦
rhyming words - the letter **a** spells short i or short e (depending on dialect)	any (83), many (218)
oo at the end of a word spells /ōō/ (as in boot)	too (92), boo ♦, moo ♦
or spells /er/	work (145), word ♦, world ♦
uy spells long i /ī/	buy (174), guy ♦

Teaching Heart Words

Table 3B shows 37 Heart Words not easily grouped by spelling patterns. Most of the words are more difficult for spelling than for reading.

As with all Heart Words, these words can also be incorporated into phonics instruction when students learn to read the regularly spelled letters a word. For example, when students know the digraph **th**, they and their can be introduced. The digraph **th** in both these Heart Words is a regular spelling for the sound /th/. The Heart Letters are **ey** in *they* and **eir** in *their*. Similarly, the Heart Letter in the word *what* is **a**, and the Heart Letter in the word *from* is **o**.

Table 3B: Heart Words

37 Words that Do Not Fit into Spelling Patterns

(Numbers in parentheses are the Dolch Frequency Ranking)

the (1)	very (71)	here (105)	does (154)	use (181)
a (5)	yours (74)	two (122)	goes (156)	carry (194)
of (9)	from (81)	again (126)	write (157)	because (204)
you (7)	don't (87)	who (128)	always (158)	together (214)
was (11)	know (89)	been (129)	only (168)	please (215)
said (12)	pretty (97)	eight (135)	our (171)	shall (219)
they (18)	four (100)	today (137)	warm (176)	laugh (220)
what (46)	their (104)			
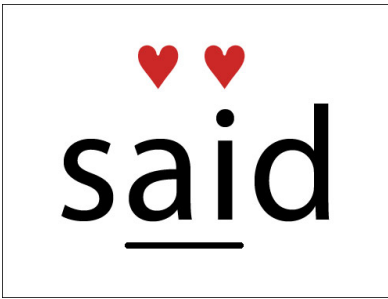
Students enjoy drawing a heart above Heart Letters, and the hearts help them remember the irregular spellings.

For example, in the word *said*, the hearts would go above **ai** because those letters are an unexpected spelling for short e (/ĕ/). A student's practice card for the word *said* is shown at the right.

Implementing the new model

In order to implement the new phonics-based model for teaching high-frequency words, teachers will need to fit high-frequency words into phonics instruction. To do this, generally a committee of three or four kindergarten and first grade teachers organizes their lists of high-frequency words according to Heart Words and Flash Words by spelling patterns. Next they determine when and how high-frequency words fit into the phonics scope and sequence. These same teachers provide professional development to show other teachers how to implement the new model.

Sometimes a coordinated effort to change the way high-frequency words are taught is not an option, and teachers are able to only partially implement the suggestions in this article. These teachers continue to introduce the words as determined by their curriculum. However, they tell students whether the "sight word" is a Flash Word or a Heart Word, and they introduce the words by teaching letter–sound relationships as outlined in this article. Further, teachers introduce words with similar spelling patterns whenever possible. For example, if only the word would is scheduled to be introduced, they also teach *could* and *should*, which fit the spelling pattern. Finally, these teachers do not hold students accountable for high frequency words that are beyond the spelling patterns that have been taught in phonics lessons.

The new model allows a different approach for working with students who have difficulty learning high-frequency words. For example, students working on short vowel patterns may confuse her and here, which are often introduced early as part of the "sight word" list. A teacher who recognizes the source of this confusion would not expect students to continue trying to memorize the two words. Instead, the teacher would include her as part of instruction on r-controlled vowels and include *here* when silent **e** is taught. Students will be less likely to misread or misspell these words when they understand the relation of the spelling **er** to the sound /er/ and the spelling **ere** to the sound /ēr/.

Traditionally, students would have continued struggling with and failing to memorize these easily confused words. With the new model, those students are not held accountable for accurately reading and spelling the words until they can understand and use the sound–spelling correspondences. All teachers using this approach say that students learn to spell and read the words much more easily than with the traditional approach.

About the authors

Linda Farrell and **Michael Hunter** are founding partners of [Readsters, LLC](#). They provide professional development and write curriculum to support excellent reading instruction to students of all ages. Their favorite work is in the classroom where they can model effective reading instruction and coach teachers. Their most unusual work so far has been helping develop early reading instruction for children in Africa who are learning to read in 12 different mother tongue languages that Linda and Michael don't even speak.

Tina Osenga was a founding partner at Readsters, and she is now retired.

Linda Farrell, Michael Hunter, Tina Osenga (2019)

Reprints

Related Topics

[About Reading](#)
[Curriculum and Instruction](#)
[Phonics and Decoding](#)
[Spelling and Word Study](#)
[Struggling Readers](#)
"You may have tangible wealth untold. Caskets of jewels and coffers of gold. Richer than I you can never be — I had a mother who read to me." — Strickland Gillilan