

High-Frequency Words

High-frequency words, often times referred to as sight words, are words that students encounter frequently in reading and writing. It is critical that readers and writers develop automatic recognition of these words. Comprehension begins to break down when students focus on trying to decode or sound out individual words. Learning to recognize high-frequency words by sight is critical to developing fluency in reading.

Some high-frequency words do not follow regular phonetic rules. They do not follow easy spelling patterns. For example, the words *cave*, *Dave*, *save*, *wave*, and *gave* follow the vowel-consonant-silent e pattern but the word *have* does not. Asking students to "sound out" words such as these may cause increased frustration for struggling readers. In order for students to remember words and for them to become automatic, they need many opportunities to experience and manipulate them.

Much of the English language has been adapted from other languages during its development. One sixth of English words survived from old English and almost all of those words are high-frequency words. High-frequency words are often classified in one of three groups. They may be

- non-phonetic words—those needing to be recognized by sight because they can't be sounded out (e.g., *was*, *through*).
- frequently occurring words—those needing to be recognized easily because they occur so often.
- high-interest words—those recognized by sight because they have special interest and/or emotional overtones for a child (e.g., *mom*, *dad*, *love*, *birthday*, *McDonald's*, *Target*, *dinosaur*, etc.).

When students have a thorough understanding and mastery of high-frequency or sight words, independent reading typically improves because this knowledge

- enables students to use context clues,
- increases students fluency and ease of reading,
- enables students to read greater amounts of material and for longer periods of time, and
- allows students to focus on comprehension of a text rather than on the decoding of individual words.