

## Making sense of sight words and high frequency words

On a near daily basis we get calls from parents confused about sight words. Why does their child struggle to remember them? Are they important? Why are some decodable words also sight words? Are sight and high frequency words the same thing? Let's shed some light on how to tackle these troublesome words.

The term 'sight word' suggests that we want students to learn the words by rote memorisation. We don't. This method of learning words is often ineffective and demoralising for students with learning difficulties.



For our discussion today we will be using the term 'sight word'. However, this does not mean we encourage students to learn sight words by rote memorisation. We will discuss alternative methods for achieving quick and accurate recognition of sight words in our 'strategies' section.

### Is there a difference between sight words and high frequency words?

Yes!

**Sight words** are defined by our ability to recognise them. A sight word can be recognised instantly and with little cognitive effort. Sight words are usually tricky words that students are likely to encounter when they are reading. For example, a child might learn the word 'some' by sight (o-e represents short 'u').

**High frequency words** are defined by how often they appear in a text. Some high frequency words are regular and can be easily decoded – 'at', 'and', 'sit'. Some high frequency words are irregular and can't be easily decoded – could (oul represents 'oo' like in book), said (ai represents short 'e').

### Are sight words important to learn?

Having a bank of quickly recognised sight words helps students to develop reading fluency, improve comprehension and build confidence. However, the approach that we take for Dyslexic students must be multisensory, repetitious and gradual. Learning sight words is always most effective alongside a synthetic phonics program. Eventually the goal of reading instruction is for all words to be recognised by sight to achieve fluency and optimum comprehension.

### How many sight words should I introduce at one time?

When a child with learning difficulties is sent home with a list of 20 new sight words to memorise, chances are, they won't have much success. Exactly how many words should be introduced will depend on each child, their needs and abilities. As a starting point, we recommend that you introduce 1-3 sight words for your child to master. Again, sight words should always be taught

alongside a structured synthetic phonics program. Introducing a small number of sight words allows for early success which in turn gives your student the motivation to keep going.

### Should students memorise sight words that are decodable?

No. Sight words that can be learned as part of a structured synthetic phonics program should always be decoded and not memorised. Sometimes a student will come across a word that is decodable, but they haven't yet learned the phonic code to read it.

For example, 'her' is easily decodable when we learn about r-controlled vowels and the 'er' sound. However, students will likely come across the word 'her' before they learn about r-controlled vowels. We recommend discussing the 'er' sound with your student early rather than asking them to commit the whole word to memory.

### Strategies for learning sight words

- **Talk about the regular parts of the sight word and highlight or underline the tricky or irregular part.** For example, take the word said. The first (s) and last (d) sound in said are regular. The middle sound (ai) is irregular. Rather than trying to memorise the whole word explain to your student that we only need to remember the irregular part 'ai'.
- **Use a mnemonic to help remember the spelling.** Students can tap into their creative side and make their own memorable mnemonics or search for one they like online. [Naughty Words](#) by Leslie Keast-Patch also offers a variety of memorable mnemonics for 30 sight words.

### Said – Small Ants In Danger

- **Visualise the word.** Show your student the word, ask them to take a picture in their mind, what letter comes first? What letter comes last? What vowels are in the word?
- **Multisensory practise** – air writing, write in sand, finger writing on the back, tracing letters while they say the word.
- **Teach the history behind words that can't be decoded.** When children can make sense of why a word is spelled so strangely it helps them commit it to memory. For example, we could explain that the 'w' in 'two' used to be pronounced but over time became silent. We keep the silent 'w' to show its history and relationship to words like 'twice', 'twin' and 'twenty' to name a few! For more information check out this article about the history of the [silent 'w'](#).
- **Practise with a Rapid Word Recognition Chart (RWRC).** An RWRC has 5 rows with 6 sight words that have an irregular spelling. Each word appears in a different order on each row. Students review their practise words and are then timed for 1 minute as they read the words aloud. Students record and try to beat their own best score. This activity only takes a couple of minutes including the review and timed practise! For more information about RWRC's and reading fluency take a look at this [article](#) by Dr Nancy Mather and Dr Sam Goldstein.

Speak with a Speld Qld Education Advisor to find out more

(07) 3391 7900

