



## High Frequency Word Guidance

**What is a “sight” word?** “A word that is instantly and effortlessly recalled from memory, regardless of whether it is phonetically regular or irregular.” (Kilpatrick, 2016). For the reader of this page, “pneumonia” may be a sight word, while “sphenopalatine” might not be. If you had to sound out “sphenopalatine” to decode it, it’s not a sight word for you -- yet. Instead, you were using the phonological route to turn the graphemes into phonemes, and then syllables. If you read it enough times, “sphenopalatine” may become a sight word for you. In sum, a sight word is a word that has been orthographically mapped: a reader can effortlessly decode the word. (By the way, “sphenopalatine” has to do with the bones at the base of your cranium!)

**What is a high frequency word?** A word that occurs frequently according to the American Heritage Word Frequency Books. These words can be perfectly decodable for the student (i.e. “at”). Sometimes, they are taught to students well before the student has learned the phonics pattern present in the word. For example, “like” is a high-frequency word that is decodable *if the student has learned VCe*. According to the Heritage Word Frequency Books, the five most frequent words in English are: #1 - the #2- of #3- and #4- a #5 - to. To the right, you can compare the frequency ranks of the Dolch and Fry lists. (Table credit to Readsters, 2013).

Table 1  
10 Sight Words for  
Pre-Readers to Learn

Word	Frequency Rank	
	Dolch	Fry
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	27	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 the websites [www.k12reader.com](http://www.k12reader.com) and [www.mrsperkins.com](http://www.mrsperkins.com).

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

**What is an irregular word?** A word that is not regularly spelled. 50% of the English language is completely decodable (i.e. “cat” and “atlantic”). 36% more are decodable except for one sound (i.e. the /z/ sound in “was,” the /u/ sound in “the,” and the silent /t/ sound in “debt”). Only 4% of English words are truly irregular (i.e. “eye”).

**What is a sight word list?** Usually, a sight word list is actually a high-frequency list. For example, both Fry and Dolch lists are often referred to as “sight word” lists, but they are actually high frequency word lists. “Red words” (Orton Gillingham’s term), “Puzzle words” (Montessori’s term), and “Trick words” (Wilson’s term) are also high-frequency words.

**Why is it important to teach some of these words?** Students need practice decoding in connected texts. Unfortunately, texts cannot be written without using at least *some* of these high-frequency words. In a beginning level text, almost 80% of the words can be high-frequency. High frequency words become a smaller and smaller proportion of connected texts as texts get harder (think of a Level A text’s proportion of high-frequency words in comparison to *The Odyssey*.)

**How do you teach sight words?** First, a nit-picky point about language: You cannot actually select and teach a sight word. You can teach high-frequency and irregular words to *become a sight word for that student*.

*Check for understanding: Why can you not select a “sight word” to teach?*



**Okay, okay. So, how do you teach high-frequency words?**

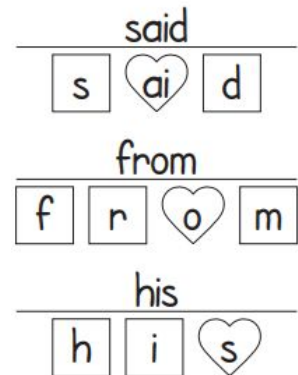
Research would suggest that memorizing high-frequency words “using visual memory and rote approaches is not recommended” (Duke & Mesmer, 2019). Instead, the following recommendations align with research:

- Teach alongside foundational skills. A student needs to know concept-of-word and the majority of letter-sounds before learning a high-frequency word.
- Encourage the student to use letter-sound knowledge to read the word, and then explicitly teach the unrecognizable or irregular part.
  - For example, for the word “his,” teach the student to decode the word. If they say the word phonetically, teach that in this particular word, “s” says /z/.
- Teach grouped words together (go, so, no)
- Practice in decodable books

Recommendations from Duke & Mesmer (2019), Castles, Rastle, and Nation (2018), and Ehri (2005).

**How do we teach high-frequency words at the Clinic?**

A recent, popular way to teach high-frequency words is *free* Heart Work Magic, by Really Great Reading. It builds off the concept of encouraging students to use the letter-sound knowledge to read the word, and then teaching the unrecognizable or irregular part. For example, in the example to the right, the student is encouraged to decode said, and then learn the unrecognizable or irregular “heart part.” The “heart part” of “said” is the “ai” vowel team, as most students have not learned that vowel team can spell the short /e/ sound. The student needs to learn the “ai” by heart. In “from,” three of the letters are decodable, and the student only needs to learn by heart that the “o” makes the short /u/ sound. All videos of word introductions can be found free here: <https://www.reallygreatreading.com/heart-word-magic>



**Research highlight:**

Teachers sometimes worry about teaching high frequency words after phonics instruction because it may teach the child to read “whole-word.” Thankfully, Castles, Rastle, and Nation (2018) analyzed studies of sight word instruction and found: “...children who received an intensive period of sight word instruction immediately after an intensive period of phonics instruction showed no deterioration in their alphabetic decoding ability and, in fact, continued to show improvements.”