

One Hundred Essential Sight Words

Wayne Otto and Cathy Stallard

Sight word lists have been used since before 20 BC and have changed forms many times. Today sight word lists are numerous and are widely and variously used. They differ in terms of source, intended purpose and/or audience, and criteria for including specific words. Despite these differences, there is much agreement that they do reflect the most basic words in our language and that there is a high degree of commonality among them. This report identified the one hundred sight words which appeared in sixteen major sight word lists.

Sight words have been used for over two centuries as tools for teaching reading. In the nineteenth century sight words were used mainly in beginning reading instruction. Today sight words are used as instructional aids in teaching reading to audiences ranging from preschool children to adults.

Sight word lists are created from frequency counts of words that occur in printed materials and in the oral and/or written samples of children's and/or adults' communication. Some lists include only the base form of frequently occurring words while other lists include all words regardless of their form. Some lists include while others exclude numerals, proper nouns, abbreviations, alphabet letters, onomatopoeic words, compound words, and/or affixes. Despite the variance in origin, in the specific purposes for which they are intended and in the criteria employed to select the words in the first place, there is much overlap among lists. The work reported here was an attempt to demonstrate the overlap by identifying the words common to sixteen major sight word lists. The outcome is a list of one hundred words that can be accepted as *essential* sight words with some confidence.

Sight words are used in a variety of ways in teaching reading. Being high frequency words, teachers can use them with con-

247 *Otto & Stallard : One Hundred Essential Sight Words*

confidence that the words will appear in printed materials and that learners will have meanings to associate with them. Most important, then, well selected sight words can be used early in instruction to put the focus on deriving meaning from printed material. Also important is the fact that sight words can serve as a basis for early word attack instruction. If, for example, words with soft *c* and *ng* (e.g., *city*, *thing*) were added to the one hundred words reported here, all of the vowel sounds as well as the major initial and final consonants would be represented. Thus the words on the list can provide a meaningful context for teaching word attack skills.

The most essential criterion of quality for a sight word list is the demonstrated high frequency of the words listed.

Procedures for Identifying One Hundred Essential Sight Words

Sixteen sight word lists were selected and compared. The lists (a) were judged to be in common use today by a panel of six reading specialists, (b) were derived from the frequency counts of oral usage, general samples of written words, or words used in basal readers, (c) represent selections from a range of sources from preschool to adult, and (d) range in date of collection from 1928 to 1973. All of the lists are published¹ and are readily available. The lists are:

1. *A Basic Word List From Basal Readers*. This list includes 100 pre-primer, 225 primer, 455 first-reader, 1,101 second reader, and 1,916 third-reader words common to five 1950 basal series (Stone and Bartschi, 1963).

2. *Dale's List of 3,000 Familiar Words*. Although this list represents only 2,946 words, it is commonly labeled *Dale's List of 3,000 Familiar Words*. Words included on the list were known by eighty percent of the children in a sample of fourth graders (Dale and Chall, 1948).

3. *Dolch 220 Basic Sight Vocabulary*. This list is a combination of the 193 words common to the *International Kindergarten Union Vocabulary List* (Horn, 1928); *Gates Primary Word List* (Gates, 1935); *The Wheeler-Howell First Grade Vocabulary List* (1920, as cited in Dunn and Laffey, 1969); and Dolch's twenty-seven self-selected words.

Two of the lists used to generate the Dolch list were included in this study as independent lists (Dolch, 1955).

4. *Durr's 188 Frequency List*. This list was derived from a computerized analysis of 80 library books frequently chosen by elementary children. The words were selected from a 105,280-word sample (Durr, 1973).

5. *Ernest Horn's Vocabulary of Adult Writings*. This list includes the 1,187 most frequently recurring words in the "Letter to Editor" sections of adult magazines and newspapers (Horn, E., 1926).

6. *Fry's 300 Instant Sight Words*. This list is composed of 100 frequently used first-grade words, 100 frequently used second-grade words, and 100 frequently used third-grade words (Fry, 1960).

7. *Gates Primary Reading Vocabulary*. This list of 1,811 words is presented in three 500-word groups. The groups are presented in order of highest frequency. Children's vocabularies and samples from basal readers were used in the initial frequency count (Gates, 1935).

8. *Great Atlantic and Pacific Sight Word List*. This list includes the 500 most frequently occurring words in selections from 215 reading materials of third-grade readability. An 840,875-word corpus was the basis for the list (Otto and Chester, 1972).

9. *Harris-Jacobson 333 Core Vocabulary for First Grade*. This list is from a computerized analysis of 4,500,000 words from fourteen elementary content field textbooks. If a word appeared in at least three series it was included on the core vocabulary list (Harris and Jacobson, 1973-1974).

10. *Horn Kindergarten List of the Most Frequently Spoken Words of Preschool Children*. This list was taken from a frequency ranking of most commonly spoken words of children, three to six years of age (Horn, 1926, as reported in Fitzgerald, 1963).

11. *Johnson's Basic Vocabulary List*. The 244 words on this list are the words from the Kucera and Francis, *A Computational Analysis of Present-Day American English*, list of words frequently spoken by a random sample of young children (Johnson, D., 1971).

12. *Johnson's Core Vocabulary for Elementary Grades*. The 200 words selected for this list were those appearing in five or more of the basal reader series Johnson surveyed (Johnson, G. R., 1962).
13. *McKee-Fitzgerald List of Child-Letter Writings*. This list ranks the 2,836 words most frequently used by children in their own informal writings (Fitzgerald, 1963).
14. *Newman and Bailey Speaking Vocabulary of Preschool Children*. The compilation of eight preschool oral word-frequency counts is represented in this list with the dates of collection ranging from 1928-1971 (Newman and Bailey, 1973).
15. *Rinsland's Basic Vocabulary of Elementary School Children*. A list of 14,571 words used by children in formal school writing, grades one through eight, is represented in this list (Rinsland, 1945).
16. *Thorndike-Lorge Reading Vocabulary*. This is a list of 10,000 words representing a frequency count of children's and adults' reading materials (Thorndike and Lorge, 1944).

The sixteen lists vary in length so the shortest list—the *Durr 188 Frequency Count*—was established as the criterion for comparison and only the 188 most frequent words from eleven lists arranged by frequency were considered. All of the words in four lists not arranged by frequency were considered. The words in Table I appeared on all sixteen lists.

Some salient observations from the process of identifying these basic words follow: (1) Words that occur frequently in children's speech also tend to be frequent in adults' speech. (2) Most of the words used frequently in modern basal readers were used in earlier basal readers. (3) The core words from adult writing are also the core words in children's writing.

1. The only exception to this standard was the unpublished Newman and Bailey *Speaking Vocabulary of Preschool Children*. The study was presented at the American Educational Research Association conference, 1973. The authors will make it available on request and they project a publication in the future. The analysis of two million spoken words was considered valuable to this study.

Table I. One Hundred Essential Sight Words

a	down	it	out	three
about	for	just	over	to
after	from	know	put	too
again	get	like	right	two
all	go	little	said	up
an	good	look	saw	us
and	got	made	say	want
any	had	make	see	was
are	has	me	she	we
at	have	my	so	went
away	he	new	some	were
be	her	no	take	what
big	here	not	that	when
but	him	now	the	where
by	his	of	them	who
came	how	off	then	will
come	I	old	there	with
could	if	on	they	would
did	in	one	think	you
do	is	our	this	your

REFERENCES

- Dale, E., and Chall, Jeanne S. A formula for predicting readability. *Educ. Res. Bull.* (Ohio State University), Jan. 21 to Feb. 17, 1948, 27, 11-20, 37-54.
- Dolch, W. *Methods in reading*. Champaign, Illinois: Garrard Press, 1955.
- Dunn, Mary K., and Laffey, J. L. *Research on reading: Word lists*. ERIC/CRIER Reading Review Series, Bibliography No. 18, 2, September, 1969.
- Durr, W. K. Computer study of high frequency words in popular trade juveniles. *The Rdg. Tchr.*, 1973, 27(1), 37-42.
- Fitzgerald, J. A. An integrating basic communication vocabulary. *Elem. Engl.*, 1963, 40, 283-289.
- Fry, E. B. Three hundred instant words. *Elem. Engl.*, 1960, 37, 39-42.
- Gates, A. I. *A reading vocabulary for the primary grades, Revised and enlarged*. New York: Bureau of Publications, Teachers College, Columbia University, 1935.
- Harris, A. J., and Jacobson, M. D. Basic vocabulary for beginning reading. *The Rdg. Tchr.*, 1973, 26(4), 392-395.
- Horn, E. A basic written vocabulary. *University of Iowa Monographs in Education, First Series, 4*. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1926.
- Horn, Madeline D. *A study of the vocabulary of children before entering the first grade*. Washington, D.C.: International Kindergarten Union, 1928.

- Johnson, D. A basic vocabulary for beginning reading. *Elem. Schl. J.*, 1971, 72(1), 29-34.
- Johnson, G. R. A core vocabulary study in the elementary grades. *Elem. Engl.*, 1962, 39, 470-473.
- McKee, P., and Fitzgerald, J. A. Child-written vocabulary. Unpublished thesis, as cited in Fitzgerald, J. A., An integrating basic communication vocabulary, *Elem. Engl.*, 1963, 40, 283-289.
- Newman, M. A., and Bailey, B. E. A compilation of preschool children's word frequency counts. Paper presented at American Educational Research Association annual meeting, New Orleans, 1973.
- Otto, W., and Chester, R. Sight words for beginning readers. *J. Educ. Res.*, 1972, 65(10), 435-443.
- Rinsland, H. D. *A basic vocabulary of elementary-school children*. New York: MacMillan Company, 1945.
- Stone, D. R., and Bartschi, V. A basic word list from basal readers. *Elem. Engl.*, 1963, 40, 420-427.
- Thorndike, E. L., and Lorge, I. *The teacher's word book of 30,000 words*. New York: Bureau of Publications, Teachers College, Columbia University, 1944.