

The Do's and Don'ts of Sight Words



Step into any English speaking, early year's classroom and you can pretty much be assured of one thing, children are being given copious lists of 'sight words' to memorise or learn by heart. Until quite recently, it seems that this practice has received very little opposition.

Well I'm here to tell you that science is telling us a different story.

There is a better way to teach sight words and you may be surprised to learn that **all** words should be taught this way.

For those of you who have already begun your journey into the 'science of reading', you may have discovered that there is a real shift away from traditional whole word memorisation to a process called **orthographic mapping**. To understand this, we need to understand how the brain learns to read. I have added a great youtube clip on the podcast page from Neuroscientist / Educator / Author, Jarred Cooney Horvath who explains the different areas of the brain and how we store words. He also unpacks the research done by Dr Bruce McCandliss and his team.

In short, he reveals the science behind the most effective way to learn sight words, or all words to be precise. To begin the process, phonetic knowledge is used to break words down into their letter sound relationships (*decoding*). Many of us know this and are doing this in our classrooms but it's the next crucial step

that is often overlooked. Known as '**orthographic mapping**', this is the process by which our brains take the segmented parts of the word by putting them back together to form a whole word (*encoding*). It is this process that enables learners to access vast numbers of whole words as they use their knowledge of sounds or smaller word parts, already stored in long term memory, to quickly build them into words they have not yet encountered. Whilst it may look like a fluent reader has memorized thousands of 'whole words', science has shown that all good readers are decoding and encoding words at a rapid pace and poor readers struggle at one or more of the stages of the decoding and encoding process. With this knowledge, we can pinpoint where some of our most vulnerable learners are struggling, very early in their reading journeys. This is good news!

The brain should not be processing words as whole units - this is an inefficient and ineffective way to store words and explains why so many children struggle to learn new words once repetitive text and picture clues are gone. Without gaining a cumulative knowledge of the spelling patterns linked to the 44 speech sounds and strong phonemic awareness skills, many children are left floundering, without any effective strategies for decoding unknown words.

So let's look at the 'Dos and Don'ts of teaching Sight Words'

Ok, let's start with the do's.

Do's



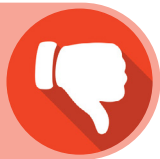
- 1 Have an intentional order** - Order your sight words starting with easily decodable words. Then group words with similar spelling patterns. For example, grouping words like 'no', 'so' and 'go' together will help students connect the letter 'o' with the long /o/ sound in those words.
- 2 Explicit 'Sound to Print' teaching of sight words** - Be sure to explicitly teach the phoneme/grapheme composition of sight words. For example when teaching the word 'was', we explicitly teach that the letter 'a' is making an /o/ sound and the letter 's' is making a /z/ sound. As with many sight words, children are encountering an irregular spelling pattern much earlier than we would typically teach those spelling graphemes. To assist our little learners we use our TLC eCode emoji visual prompts. In the word was, we would use the octopus emoji above the letter 'a' to prompt the children that in this word the 'a' is saying /o/ and we would use the zebra emoji above the 's' to prompt the children that the 's' is making a /z/ sound. Our TLC program teaches children to phoneme map words so they can make these connections.
- 3 Keep it manageable and achievable** for students by introducing one small list at a time. I recommend 6-10 words at a time. This helps keep the cognitive load manageable. It also makes it more likely for kids to improve and feel confident about sight words which in turn gives them the motivation to keep practicing.

- 4 **Connect home and school** - The child will get a double dose of practice—something struggling readers need. It also helps kids stay focused on a single set of words at a time, which can build confidence and increase chances for success. Inform your parents of the way to teach sight words. I would send the link of Jarred's youtube to them to help them to understand the process of how the brain learns words. Whole word vs Phonics: <https://youtu.be/c7UZP3irj3I>
- 5 **Create a space** to display the words so that students can refer to it for reading and writing practice. You can use this display for games, activities and sound detective work (as many sight words have irregular spelling patterns that students love to discover)
- 6 **Multi sensory learning** - Research shows that students, especially ones with dyslexia, learn best when they engage many senses. In the freebie today you'll get a list of multisensory activities that students can engage in both at home and in the classroom.
- 7 **Warm up drills** - Rather than a whole class drill of sight words, I suggest doing a small warm up drill at the start of a guided practise lesson, this way you are able to differentiate based on the levelled groups you're working with and what words may appear in the decodable reader you're using. Make sure you mix up the order of words if you're doing a drill style revision. This way students are encouraged to 'read' the word rather than memorize words by their order in the drill.
- 8 **Provide brief but frequent opportunities to learn and practise sight words**
Incorporate those multisensory activities and games into your program as well as reading them in decodable texts.

I also recommend introducing sight words once we know that students have good phonemic awareness and some letter/sound correspondences. They should be at the students' pace...some students will fly, so don't limit them by only giving them the first 100 because that's what the curriculum says. Keep going and extend those students. Some students will need more time to store words in their long term memory using orthographic mapping. Allowing them to do this at a slower pace will help them feel like they are achieving success. This is really important. That's why we have broken the TLC words up in lists and levels. When students do sight word activities, their list words are available and the activities are generic enough to cater for the diversity of learners. Ensure you have this differentiated approach in your classroom.

And now for the Don'ts:

Don'ts



- 1 Don't introduce sight words too early** - Students need to have good oral language, strong phonological and phonemic awareness skills and basic sound/letter knowledge before the introduction of traditional sight word learning.
- 2 Don't encourage Whole Word memorisation** - Cognitive science proves that this is not an effective method.
- 3 Don't constantly expose words in the same order** as rote learning in order will not transfer into reading in context and is therefore a waste of time. This method is often used with spelling lists and the weekly spelling test. It can actually hinder the learning process.

4

Don't presume that sight words will just be learned without explicit teaching

Obviously the decodable ones will be picked up faster but words with irregular spellings need to be explicitly taught, broken down and explained. This can be done in a small group context with students of similar needs.

Link spoken about in podcast...

Is my child learning to read?

<https://youtu.be/Lxx7hs0qdKQ?list=TLPQMDYxMDIwMjB3mjFBbwpvgQ>'The

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