

## High Frequency Word Assessment

### Purpose:

The purpose of this assessment is to determine the number of high-frequency words that students know. LaBerge and Samuels (2006) calls this automatic recognition of high frequency words part of *automaticity*. He states that when these words are instantly recognized, the short term memory is not overloaded and is freed to focus on comprehension of what is going on in the story. Therefore, this assessment can be used throughout the year to record students' growth in automatic word recognition. Ehri (1998) found students eventually *encapsulate* the letters of word into a bonded unit that is recognized immediately. For assessment purposes, the words are read out of context and in isolation, because they should be instantly recognizable as encapsulated units by students. If a student has to stop and "tap out" or "say the sounds of each letter in the word" before saying it correctly, this should be noted.

### Directions:

The following is a list of recommended starting points by grade level:

- Kindergarten winter and spring start with List A
- Grade 1 fall start with List A and move on to List B, C, and D when ready
- Grade 2 fall start with List B and move on to List C and D when ready. Try List A if List B is too hard.

Place the list of words on the table in front of the student. If a student cannot recognize at least 5 words in a row on a list or misses 8 in total on a list, ask him/her to read the previous list.

As the year progresses and a student masters all words on a list, you have the option of asking him/her to read the list for the next grade level.

### Scoring:

A student must read the word correctly to score a point. Self-corrections are counted as correct. Record all attempts at a word, and analyze them to note the features in a word a student notices.

Remember, a student can often remember a word in isolation, but cannot read that same word s/he sees it in text or writes the word. We need to identify the situation in which the student knows words. Of course we hope that s/he reads words in isolation, reads it in context, writes it in isolation, and writes it in context. Only then will a student achieve the *automaticity* with words that will contribute to comprehension and fluency. By examining the student's performance on the Spelling Assessment, the Text Reading Subtest, and your own observations during the various balanced literacy components in your classroom, you can notice if the child reads the words in context, writes them in isolation, or writes them in context.

Ehri, L.C. (1998). Grapheme-phoneme knowledge is essential for learning to read words in English. In J.L. Metsala & L. C. Ehri (Eds.), *Word Recognition in beginning literacy*. Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.

Samuels, S. J. (2006). Toward a model of reading fluency. In: S. Jay Samuels and A.E. Farstrup (Eds.).  
 What research has to say about fluency instruction. Newark, DE: International Reading Association, Pp.  
 24-46.

**Benchmarks for the High Frequency Word Assessment**

| Grade        | Rating | September | November | March   | June     |
|--------------|--------|-----------|----------|---------|----------|
| Kindergarten | 1      | Below 1   | Below 3  | Below 5 | Below 20 |
|              | 2      | 1         | 3        | 5       | 20       |
|              | 3      | 2         | 7        | 10      | 25       |
|              | 4      | 4         | 10       | 25      | 35       |

| Grade       | Rating | September | November | March    | June     |
|-------------|--------|-----------|----------|----------|----------|
| First Grade | 1      | Below 15  | Below 25 | Below 35 | Below 90 |
|             | 2      | 15        | 25       | 35       | 90       |
|             | 3      | 25        | 35       | 90       | 125      |
|             | 4      | 20        | 50       | 125      | 140      |

| Grade  | Rating | September | November  | March     | June      |
|--------|--------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|
| Second | 1      | Below 90  | Below 125 | Below 140 | Below 155 |
|        | 2      | 90        | 125       | 140       | 155       |
|        | 3      | 125       | 140       | 155       | 175       |
|        | 4      | 140       | 155       | 175       | 200       |

## **High Frequency Word Assessment: Implications for Instruction**

Pikulski (1997) states, “Indeed, fluent word identification appears to be a prerequisite for comprehending text. If a reader must slowly analyze many of the words in a text, memory and attention needed for comprehension are drained by word analysis.” (p. 2) Therefore, we must consider what teaching implications will best serve student’s learning and transfer of automatic recognition of high frequency words.

### **Learning of High Frequency Words on Auto-pilot: Freedom for the Teacher**

Instant recognition of words, especially high-frequency words, develops best when students read large amounts of text, particularly text that is relatively easy for the reader (Cunningham, 1995; Allington, 2000). This meets the criterion of providing a great deal of reading that facilitates enough practice reading HF words that a student can achieve the automatic recognition of high frequency words.

1. Students who are beginning to learn high frequency words and strugglers having difficulty building a set of known words often do not know how to look at the distinctive features in words. The same principles and practices that were used in teaching unknown letters can be used to teach high frequency words to mastery. Particularly, Marie Clay’s (1985) three ways of remembering is critical to developing automatic word recognition of high frequency words.
  - a. Seeing unknown word in print (Printing the word on a card)
  - b. Talking about what the unknown word looks like
    - (1). Spell the word saying the names of the letters in sequence.
    - (2). Talk about tall and short letters in the word (e.g. “and” has two short letters and one tall letter).
    - (3). Name the letter that comes first in an unknown word; the second letter; the last letter; the middle letters.
  - c. Learning the unknown word using movement
    - (1). Write the unknown word in various ways saying the word (NOT spelling the word) as it is written.
      - (a). Saying the word while it is written allows students to make letter/sound matches when appropriate.
      - (b). Saying the word when it is written allows students to notice irregularities in letter sound matches. Writing “find” while saying it lets the student know that even though the little word “in” appears in the word, it does not have the sound of “in.”
    - (2). In fact, over learning and massed practice are necessary for a student to master unknown information. Therefore, asking students to do the following will aid learning:
      1. Write the unknown word once saying the word as it is written. Ask what letter sound matches the student identified.

2. Write it again saying the letter patterns (e.g. Student writes the “a” in “and” and says “short letter”; writes the “n” and says “short letter”; writes the “d” and says “tall letter.”
  3. Write the word again saying the name of each letter.
2. Reading text in which the student can be 96% accurate or above is critical to building a rich vocabulary of instantly recognized high frequency words.
- a. Students who are just beginning to read should have many books (7-10) at their independent reading level in their “reading baggie.” This assures that they will have enough material to get the practice necessary.
  - b. Students in very beginning books (Levels A-D) may be reading their books by repeating the patterned text they memorized, paying little attention to the words they are reading. Therefore, it is important to do the following:
    - (1). Assure that these students are pointing under the words. This allows them to notice the high frequency words in the sentence.
    - (2). Teach students to locate word wall words in a text before they read a page. This makes them aware of “islands of certainty” that they know how to read. They then can focus on thinking about what is going on in the story and the illustrations to help them with the more difficult words.
    - (3). After a student reads a book correctly, ask him/her to locate known word wall words in the book. After s/he gets the idea of locating known words, s/he can do this alone or with a partner.
  - c. Students reading at higher levels should be keeping a reading log, and should be reinforced for accumulating and maintaining a high amount of time reading.
3. Harris & Hodges (1995) define both word recognition and word identification as "the process of determining the pronunciation and some degree of meaning of an unknown word" (pp. 282-283). For words that are in a reader's meaning vocabulary, unlocking the pronunciation leads to the word's meaning.
- a. If a printed word is not in a reader's meaning vocabulary, word-identification skills may allow access to the word's pronunciation, but not its meaning.
  - b. Activities described above allow students to develop automatic recognition of high frequency words, but students must also have some idea of the word's meaning or function. Without some understanding of the word, they cannot use the words to comprehend text. Therefore, we as teachers must allow time to teach the meaning or function of high frequency words.
    - (1). Tierney and Mosenthal (1982) call high frequency words the wharf and woof that holds our language together. Some of these words do not have meaning alone, but take on meaning in the context of a sentence (e.g. where, here). Other words merely have a function (e.g. “the” is a noun marker). Some categories of high frequency words that must be taught for automatic recognition and for identifying their meaning or function follow:

#### I REFERENCE

A. Personals (He, him, they, them, theirs, it, its, etc.)

Three young businessmen had lunch together. THEY ended up drinking too much.

B. Demonstrative (this, these, that, those, here, there, then)

Dr. Forbes drove two miles out of town to see Mrs. Jones. Two days later, he drove  
THERE again.

C. Comparatives (same, equal, better, more, identically, so)

John sold three tires for the price of one. Jack asked him, "Won't you give me the SAME  
deal?"

## II. Substitution/Ellipsis

A. Substitution—This type of cohesive tie places one item with another.  
My razor is dull. I need a new ONE.

B. Ellipsis—The tie omits an item that is assumed.

I can only remember the names of 48 states. I need to name TWO MORE. (Hint: two more what?)

## III. LEXICAL COHESION

A. Reiteration—s with reference establishes a relationship of identity with the presupposed item. In being reiterative, a word (tie) need not be identical to the presupposed item.

Dick and I did the climb to Window Rock.' The ASCENT was easy.

B. Collocation—The association of lexical items that regularly co-occur across expanses of sentences. Consider the following cohesive chaining of words that can be related in a story about Sunday morning.

Newsstand, Sunday Newspaper, funnies, read, dad cooks breakfast, church, relaxation.

Expanding the associative potential of collocational items emphasizes the semantic power of a shared lexical environment independent of text structure.

IV. CONJUNCTION (and, but, so, next, etc.) – Conjunctions that create an instance of semantic connection in which the conjunctive item receives a cohesive emphasis that characterizes the relationship between the two sentences.

He is cheap sometimes. BUT, he can be generous when he wants to.

They'll be back at 10 o'clock. SO come over early.

The following contractions can establish various kinds of ties.

1. Additive (and, nor, furthermore, by the way, thus, in the same way)
  2. Adversative connectives (yet, but, however in fact, on the other hand, rather, in any case)
  3. Causal Connectives (so, because, it follows)
  4. Temporal Connectives (finally, then, meanwhile, to sum up)
- (Tierney and Mosenthal, 1982, Pp. 69-78.)

Remember, being able to arrive at the pronunciation of a printed word constitutes word identification in the most minimal sense; however, if the reader is unable to attach meaning to the word, then he or she has not read the word, since reading must end in meaning construction.

Allington, R. (2000). *What Really Matters for Struggling Readers*. New York: Allyn and Bacon.

Cunningham, Patricia M. (1995). *Phonics They Use: Words for Reading and Writing*. New York: HarperCollins.

Harris, Theodore & Hodges, R. (1995). *The Literacy Dictionary: The Vocabulary of Reading and Writing*. Newark, DE: International Reading Association.

Tierney, R. and P. Mosenthal. (1982). Discourse Comprehension and Production: Analyzing Text Structure and Cohesion. In: Langer, J. & Smith-Burke, M.T. (Eds.). *Reader Meets Author: Bridging the Gap*. Newark, DE: International Reading Association. Pp. 55-103.

National Reading Panel (NRP). (2001). (A complete copy of the NRP report can be read, downloaded, or ordered at no cost from the NRP website at [www.nationalreadingpanel.org](http://www.nationalreadingpanel.org)).

Pikulski, John J. (1997) *Teaching Word-Identification Skills and Strategies: A Balanced Approach*. <http://www.eduplace.com/rdg/res/teach/>