

The Reading and Writing Centre

your centre for expert advice and professional learning
in child and adolescent reading and writing disorders

Sight words

A sight word is any word that is instantly and easily recognised from memory whether it is phonically regular or irregular.

High frequency words

High frequency words occur often in both spoken and written language. They can be regular or irregular in spelling. High frequency words are often selected for sight word instruction as they support students' early self-confidence and self-perception as a reader (Apel, Henbest, and Masterson 2019).

Mental graphemic representations

Mental graphemic representations are formed by the connections made between phonological, orthographic and semantic knowledge as new words are decoded (Masterton and Apel 2019). This process is called orthographic mapping. Repeated decoding of words enables them to be committed to memory as a mental graphemic representation (a sight word).

Sight word vocabulary

A sight word vocabulary is the bank of words we are able to automatically read without decoding. Sight word vocabulary is NOT based on visual memory or visual skills. Becoming a reader with a large repertoire of sight words requires knowledge of phonemic segmentation, letter-sound correspondences, and spelling patterns (Kim, Apel and Al Otaiba 2013).

Teaching sight words

Teaching of mental graphemic representations should be aligned with synthetic phonics instruction (phonemic and orthographic blending, segmenting and manipulating) and should provide opportunities for authentic reading and writing practice. Research indicates that using whole word memorisation of sight words is an inefficient and ineffective way to teach reading for both beginning and struggling readers (Catts, McIlbraith, Bridges and Nelson 2017).

