



What are High Frequency Words?

High frequency words; you may have heard the term, but not know what they really are. High frequency words are a group of very common words that efficient readers recognize instantly and automatically. The list includes many of the small, connective words such as of, and, and there. The exact number of words designated as high frequency words varies according to which list is being used, but the consensus is that there are between three and five hundred of them. These words make up sixty to seventy percent of most reading tasks. If a reader has mastered these words, he or she can read nearly any basic material.

High frequency words often form the core words that are used in elementary school classrooms. The texts may differ slightly in the order of high frequency word presentation, but the words offered at each grade level are essentially the same. If a student can learn these words, he or she will be able to read most of what is offered in early grades.

In order to read efficiently, students must learn these high frequency words very, very well. Most academic tasks are learned to the mastery level, where the student can respond to the material on tests after the assessment is over. The highest level of learning is the level of automaticity. This is the level of learning where responses are automatic and nearly reflexive. Students only achieve this retrieval automatically. High frequency words must be mastered to this level. Readers must be able to look at these simple words and simply know them without a lot of thought.

As a group, high frequency words do not lend themselves to phonic analysis. Since they cannot be sounded out like most words, readers must memorize them. If a student tries to apply phonic analysis to many of these words, he or she will quickly become frustrated. Being able to read these words builds confidence and reading efficiency.

