

## Sight Words You Can See

Sight words are the most frequently used words in print, making up 50-75% of the words on the page in most books, magazines, and newspapers. Without learning to recognize these words quickly and automatically by sight, we would need to spend much more time and energy sounding out every word we came upon, making reading an exhausting and frustrating task!

The typical approach to teaching students sight words is rote drill, using the sight words as flash cards for students to simply memorize. For some students, this technique is sufficient. For others, especially those with poor phonics skills, visual processing problems, or short term memory weaknesses, it is an impossibly difficult challenge.

The Sight Words You Can See program was designed with those struggling students in mind. In the early 1990's, students were making dramatic improvements in their phonemic awareness and phonics skills through the use of the Lively Letters program, typically coming out of their short term intervention services testing out well above grade level in phonetic decoding (sounding out words). Unfortunately, their reading successes were not as dramatic when reading books that were not phonetically controlled, those filled with sight words that didn't follow the rules of phonics. Words such as "want," "was," "to," and "what" were not phonetically decodable and even students with great phonics skills were still struggling in their classrooms.

Sight words can typically be partially decoded phonetically, so a strong phonics base does greatly help students to read parts of the words, but there needed to be a way for students to remember the irregular spelling patterns of these tricky words. They needed a way to link the way a word is printed to the way it should be pronounced, and even better, to its meaning.

In 1994, Penny Castagnozzi began developing a very unique approach to teaching sight words. Seeing how well students responded to the mnemonic cues in the Lively Letters program, she began drawing mnemonic cues in and around the most difficult sight words from the Dolch sight word list – those abstract words that are phonetically irregular or have infrequent spelling patterns. The mnemonic cues link all three aspects of the sight words – the way they're spelled, the way they're pronounced, and their meanings. The line drawings are just enough to elicit the humorous mnemonic cues without distracting the students from the letter patterns in the sight words.

Sight Words You Can See was published in 1996, and has since been used successfully to develop students' sight word banks, improving oral reading fluency and allowing students to concentrate less on decoding words and more on reading comprehension vocabulary. Having a more expansive sight word bank also makes reading easier and more enjoyable for students, making them more likely to continue developing all of their reading skills! One of the extra benefits of learning sight words through the Sight Words You Can See program is the ease with which students learn to also spell these most frequently misspelled words! For this reason, many schools are including this program as part of their regular spelling curriculum.

It is recommended that Sight Words You Can See be used after a student has developed a strong phonics base, as it is important to know the rules of phonics to understand how some words don't follow those rules. Depending on a student's learning strengths and weaknesses, it could take anywhere from a few weeks to several months to go through all of the sight words in this

program. Some teachers, tutors, and parents use the program every day for twenty minutes, while others choose to teach a set of twelve words each week or two.

Both the personal-sized and classroom-sized sets of the Sight Words You Can See program contain everything necessary for implementation, including 7 sets of twelve color-coded cards with mnemonic picture cues, 7 sets of twelve plain word cards without mnemonics, and an instruction manual. The instruction manual includes pre- and post-tests, explicit instructions, a checklist for progress monitoring, sheets to practice the sight words in lists and sentences, and reproducible dialogue boxes for presentation of the sight word stories. There are 84 words covered by the program, but considering word families (for “all” there is “ball, hall, mall, tall...”) and the number of words that contain the sight words (for “right” there is “rightful, righteous, fright, frighten, frightening, bright, brighter...”) the number of words a student will more easily recognize is increased exponentially.

Below is an example of how one of the sight words might be introduced in this program, linking the spelling, pronunciation, and meaning of the word “who.” The reason that “who” is a challenging word for students is that, if they know the open syllable rule (Open Syllable Rule - In a word or syllable ending with the vowel, the vowel typically says its name, not its short vowel sound. Examples are “go, he, she.”) students want to read this word as “whoa.” This program uses a story, imagery, and a picture cue to tie those aspects to the meaning of the word in context.

“This word looks like it should say ‘whoa,’ because it ends with that vowel. Look at the ‘o’ at the end of that word, though. That’s an owl, and one day he was all alone in the woods and he heard a big noise over there! (pointing away) He said, ‘**Whoa!** Whooooo is that? **Who?**’ We also learned that our question words begin with ‘wh’, and that’s why the word begins with ‘wh.’ He’s asking ‘Who?’”