

## Phonics And Sight Word Exercises

At this time in the great debate about the best way to teach reading, both sides, those who advocate the teaching of phonics and those who stress teaching sight words, have admitted that they need each other. Those who believe that you need to know the sounds of the letters and be able to sound out words have admitted that there are quite a few words that aren't spelled phonetically and should be learned as sight words. The word "who" is a good example of this, because if sounded out it would be pronounced "woe" or "woo." It's also evident that learning all words as sight words is untenable, therefore, sight word advocates admit that phonics also has a role to play in learning to read.

### Sight words

Pre-literate students need to learn both phonics and some sight words. It's generally accepted as true that among the most common words there are many exceptions to phonics rules. Over 40% of the 100 most common words have irregular spellings. However, that percentage goes down very quickly so that less than about 10% of the most common 1000 words have irregular spellings. What does this mean for those teaching pre-literate students to read? It means that 100 to 200 of the most common words need to be learned as sight words since they are so often irregular.

We have included flash cards to teach sight recognition of the 210 most common words, in addition to the words needed to teach time, money, the calendar, and how to fill out forms. Work with a limited number of flash cards when you begin. When the students are able to easily identify most of the words in the first group, add more. Once they can identify those words, have them practice saying the word and spelling the word. Example: "This word is 'the'. It is spelled t-h-e."

It helps to try, where possible, to put these words into context. Though clearly, at the beginning level, it is hard to explain many of the structure words like "the," "of," etc. Using the flash cards to make real sentences is possible. Many of the words can be combined to make questions. Examples of questions that can be made from the flash cards included are:

What is her name?  
Where is he from?  
What do they like?  
What did they make?  
Where did you go?  
Who did you see?

Once students have learned to read and spell these words, you can mix up the flash cards and read individual words aloud for a dictation, or combine the words into questions for a dictation. You can also have students work with the flash cards to form their own questions. They can then copy those questions in their notebooks and write their own answers.

Refer to the “Flash Card Exercises” for more specific examples of how to teach sight words.

## **Phonics**

As noted above, some phonics rules need to be taught. Begin with the sounds of the letters. Using the alphabet flash cards, you can review the names of the letters and the most common sound each letter represents. It is best to teach short vowel sounds first, but it is certainly possible to teach a pair of short and long sounds for each vowel. Have students separate the alphabet flash cards into vowels and consonants. They can then try to make words by combining letters. It’s important to teach the idea that all words must have at least one vowel. Example: CAT is word but CDT is not.

Using the flash cards, show letter combinations and ask students to decide if it is or isn’t a word.

NOTE: There is still some disagreement among educators about the use of nonsense words to teach phonics. As noted above, many of the most common words are irregular according to phonics rules and, to find words that fit phonics rules and patterns, it is necessary to use words that are uncommon. The exercises here all use actual words, but some of these words are not common and some are not easy to explain to students with limited English. It is important to remember that the focus here is to teach the connections between sounds and letters more than vocabulary, and sometimes a teacher has to say, “I’m sorry, but I can’t explain that word now.”

The phonics exercises included here begin by teaching consonant sounds, because they are more consistent than vowel sounds. Each exercise starts with a set of 6 words.

Example: Write the following words on the board where students can see them.

pad bad

pack back

pan ban

Read the words to the students and have them listen and repeat. Then point to the

words and have students practice reading the words off the board.

When students can read the words comfortably, give them an exercise sheet with the “short a” vowel. The exercise sheets have the middle vowel already written.

Example:

“Short a” vowel sheet

1. \_\_\_ a \_\_\_
2. \_\_\_ a \_\_\_
3. \_\_\_ a \_\_\_
4. \_\_\_ a \_\_\_
5. \_\_\_ a \_\_\_
6. \_\_\_ a \_\_\_

Read the practice words in the following order as a dictation:

1. bad
2. ban
3. pan
4. pack
5. back
6. pad

Have students fill in the initial and final consonants needed to complete the word. Students can do this as an individual or paired exercise. If students are working in pairs, one student can write the initial consonant and one student can write the final consonants.

There are several exercises for each vowel sheet, which lead students through a variety of consonant sounds using short vowels. There are also some vowel sheets that focus on long vowel sounds. Unlike the short vowel sounds, long vowel sounds in English can have variable spellings, e.g. “heel” and “heal.” Sometimes the vowel sheet with the final “e” already filled in should be used, and other times using the vowel sheet with a single vowel will be necessary because of the variable spelling. The last group of exercises focuses on the distinction between short and long vowels.

Example: Write the following words on the board where students can see them.

mat    mate

hat    hate

rat    rate

When students can read the words comfortably, give them an exercise sheet with the “a” vowel. The exercise sheets have the middle vowel already written.

Example:

“a” vowel sheet for short and long vowels

1. \_\_\_\_ a \_\_\_\_ \_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_ a \_\_\_\_ \_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_ a \_\_\_\_ \_\_\_\_
4. \_\_\_\_ a \_\_\_\_ \_\_\_\_
5. \_\_\_\_ a \_\_\_\_ \_\_\_\_
6. \_\_\_\_ a \_\_\_\_ \_\_\_\_

Read the practice words in the following order as a dictation.

1. mate
2. hate
3. rat
4. mat
5. rate
6. hat

Have students fill in the letters to complete the word. Students must decide if the word ends in a consonant or if it ends in a consonant and a vowel. Some of the blanks will not be filled in.

For vowel sheet masters, refer to the “Student Vowel Sheets” file. For a variety of word sets and dictations for use with each vowel sheet, refer to the “Phonics Word Sets” file. These files can be downloaded and printed out as needed.