

7

Fluency through Phrasing

High-Frequency Words

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What Is It?

While the English language consists of hundreds of thousands of words, some of these words appear more frequently than others in the texts that we read. Several lists of high-frequency words have been compiled, most notably the Fry Instant Word List (see www.uen.org/k-2educator/word_lists.shtml#frywords). According to Fry (1980; Rasinski & Padak, 2007), the first 100 instant words, such as *the*, *of*, *and*, *a*, *to*, and *in*, are used in up to half of all written material; the top 300 words comprise approximately 65% of all written text (Vacca et al., 2012).

A limited amount of practice in reading these words in isolation can be helpful to students for several reasons. The ability to recognize commonly used words by sight helps to improve reading fluency. Students are able to identify words quickly, efficiently, and accurately, thereby reducing the need to labor over common words as they read. Moreover, some high-frequency words, such as *the*, *is*, and *are*, cannot be sounded with phonic rules; they *must* be learned by sight. Additionally, while many high-frequency words do not carry meaning when read in isolation, these function words—such as articles, conjunctions, pronouns, verbs of being, and prepositions—do help to convey the meaning of connected text. Several strategies, including word banks (Bear, Invernizzi, Templeton, & Johnson, 2011), word walls (Cunningham, 2012), environmental print, and language-experience strategies have been shown to have beneficial effects on students' word recognition skills.

Although learning high-frequency words in isolation can help students to recognize these common sight words, such instruction can also have the drawback of reinforcing the concept that reading is simply about recognizing individual words,

rather than about deriving meaning from a text (Rasinski, 2010). Gaining fluency practice by repeated reading of high-frequency words in the context of short phrases that contain those words helps to place high-frequency word study in meaningful contexts. High-frequency phrase reading also teaches students that, along with reading accurately, and at an appropriate pace, fluent reading means reading smoothly and in meaningful phrases that are marked with appropriate expression. This chapter explains how to introduce high-frequency words and high-frequency word phrases to your students. It will suggest a variety of strategies, for both the lower elementary and upper elementary levels, to help students to build fluency by learning high-frequency words and word phrases.

How Do I Do It?

Many students who struggle to achieve fluency may need help in learning high-frequency words. Students should learn the words gradually and have multiple opportunities over time to engage with the high-frequency words in order to build fluency. Using high-frequency word phrases can help to facilitate this. The 300 words on Fry's list should be mastered during the early elementary grades. We recommend that teachers focus on just a few phrases per week so that students can have time to practice the high-frequency phrases through repeated reading and apply them with real texts (Rasinski, 2010). Below are some examples of phrases and short sentences using some of the words on Fry's Instant Word List First Instant 100 Words list. In each phrase or sentence, the high-frequency word is **bolded**:

by the sea	the people
part of the time	from my house
all day long	with his dad
It may fall down .	This is my cat.
Look down .	Where did they go ?

Here are some basic steps for familiarizing your students with these high-frequency word phrases:

- List five phrases on a white board or chart. Ask your students to listen as you read the phrases aloud to them.
- ◆ Practice reading the phrases chorally with your students several times a day. This only takes a few seconds and can be used as a warm-up activity, as part of a transition to a new activity, or at the beginning or end of the day.
- ◆ Have the students read the phrases on their own.
- ◆ Read a story or text passage that contains the high-frequency words or phrases that are your focus of study for the week. The very nature of high-frequency words means that just about any text your students read will contain high-frequency

words and phrases. Ask the students to listen as the passage is read aloud fluently. Then encourage students to use the repeated reading technique so that they can read the passage fluently too.

- ◆ Encourage students and parents to engage in home literacy activities with the high-frequency word phrases. Simple games, such as word or phrase bingo or matching games like concentration, and even flash cards for quick practice can help to reinforce fluent reading practice.

Extensions

High-frequency word phrase activities can be adapted for a variety of learner levels. Below are some ideas for both lower elementary learners and upper elementary learners.

Lower Elementary Learners

- ◆ *High-frequency words personal “playlists.”* As an easy way to differentiate instruction, students can create their own reference book using the high-frequency word or word phrases with which they need the most practice. As students accumulate additions to their playlist, pictures and sentences can be added to accompany their word and phrase lists. As an extension activity, students can swap playlists to gain additional exposure and fluency practice. For enrichment, students can create sentences or stories using their playlist phrases and playlist words.
- ◆ *Word, Word, Bird.* Similar to Duck, Duck, Goose, this is a fluency version of the game that incorporates high-frequency word and phrase reading practice. An easy fluency activity, teachers write targeted words on individual index cards, replacing the word with a picture of a bird on a few. Sitting in a circle, all students randomly select a card from the stack held by the teacher. Their cards will either contain a high-frequency word or phrase or a picture of a bird. Keeping their cards face down in their laps, one student is selected as the “goose” and must work his or her way around the circle, reading the words as each student flips their card over. When the “goose” reaches a “bird” card, the chase occurs and the students pursue each other around the circle in a manner similar to the traditional game, with one student taking a seat and picking a new card from the stack and the other becoming the “goose” and starting the game over again.
- ◆ *Word dice.* Use four large foam boxes as “dice” from a board game. Label each of the sides with words or phrases specifically selected as high-frequency targets for the class. Be sure that one die includes words that can act as the subject of a sentence and another die contains verbs or verb phrases. In pairs or in small groups, have students take turns rolling the dice and reading the words and phrases aloud. An enrichment activity can include students creating sentences from the words or phrases on the dice. Another option is to write complete sentences on the sides of

two of the dice and replace key words with blanks. Encourage students to roll the dice and complete the sentences they roll using the words from the two remaining dice. If the sentence doesn't make sense, they must roll again or generate their own answer that allows for sentence completion.

- ◆ *Word prints in the sand.* As a more tactile approach, fill a shoebox or cookie tray with sand and encourage students to leave “footprints” by tracing high frequency words or phrases using their fingers. Have the students repeat each word or phrase aloud as they trace it. With a simple shake of the box, the slate is wiped clean and the students can start the process over. This game can also be played with personal white boards, on an iPad with a drawing application, or on a class-size white board.

Upper Elementary Learners

- ◆ Have students create sentences containing high-frequency words or phrases on a dry erase board; then remove one of the words. In a game of Round Robin, have students swap sentences with partners identifying the missing high-frequency word or phrase that is needed to complete the sentence.
- ◆ *High-Frequency Dance Party.* Create high-frequency phrase cards and assign specific movements to each phrase. Have students perform the corresponding “dance” for each card, progressively getting faster and faster until students are dancing their way through the list.
- ◆ *Guess My Word or Phrase.* Have students place a card with a high-frequency word or phrase card on their forehead and then guess the word or phrase based on clues provided by their peers. The information given to aid student guessing can range from context clues and words that rhyme to connections to the text from which the word or phrase was taken.

Example

Incorporating high-frequency word and phrase lists into fluency instruction can be relatively easy when adapted as part of the daily classroom routine. Miss Coreen, a first-grade teacher, found that read-aloud time, poetry sharing, and even author's chair where students shared their own writing, provided opportunities to practice high-frequency word and phrase reading. As an independent activity, Miss Coreen created a high-frequency word puzzle based on the words her class had been learning, using software found at <http://puzzlemaker.discoveryeducation.com/Word-SearchSetupForm.asp>. Form 7.1 shows one puzzle she created from some of the words on Fry's Instant Word List.

Upper elementary teacher Ms. Yost found that her fourth graders who struggled with fluency benefited from lessons that combined fluency with comprehension instruction. Form 7.2 shows how Ms. Yost used familiar nursery rhymes to help students identify the high-frequency words and phrases needed to complete each story

so that it made sense. Once students selected the appropriate words and phrases to complete each text, they practiced reading the text aloud, and even recorded their personal narration of the stories. Once completed, they shared the recordings with their first-grade buddies in Miss Coreen’s classroom listening center. Ms. Yost plans to use simple editing software or a website such as *www.voicethread.com* to have her students combine their oral reading with visual illustrations so that their story renditions can be both watched and listened to by each class, supporting the fluency development of all students.

Your Turn

Often, “reading rate,” or the number of words a student can read per minute, becomes an overemphasized component of fluency programs and assessments. Students try to read as many words as possible in a minute. Although it is important for students to identify high-frequency words and phrases automatically so that automaticity in word recognition and an appropriate reading rate can be achieved, “prosody”—reading with expression and intonation so that oral reading sounds like natural speech—is all too often a neglected focus of fluency instruction. One of the purposes of oral reading prosody is to assist readers in parsing text into meaningful phrases or other text chunks.

Many of the high-frequency word and phrase strategies discussed in this chapter can be adapted in order to support students in developing prosody as part of fluency building. To encourage students to extend their fluency practice and to focus on prosodic reading, Fry and Rasinski (2007) suggest the following:

- ◆ To familiarize students with the important role that punctuation plays in guiding them toward fluent reading, have the students read high-frequency word phrases within the context of sentences, paying particular attention to how the punctuation of each sentence influences how their voice sounds as they read.
- ◆ When reading aloud, the way in which words are chunked affects the meaning of what is communicated. Students who struggle with fluency often call out words one by one, paying little attention to how the words might make sense when grouped together. Have students practice chunking words so that they can better understand how word phrases enhance fluency and text meaning. For example, the sentence below has been broken into chunks two different ways. When read aloud, the first example makes unusual sense; the second is more conventional in its meaning:

I like chocolate chicken / and corn.

I like chocolate / chicken / and corn.

- ◆ To help students develop prosody, discuss with them the importance of stress and pitch. Tell them to read a list of phrases like they are robots, and then have them

read the same phrases while placing stress on a word they wish to emphasize in the phrase. Next have them read the phrases again using a higher or lower pitch in their voice to change the meaning of what is being read.

Conclusion

Effective instructional practice calls for a balance between working with the words and phrases in both isolation and in context to reaffirm word meaning and sentence placement. The games and strategies presented in this chapter allow students to practice reading high-frequency words and high-frequency phrases in order to build fluency. Incorporating both isolated and integrated high-frequency word and high-frequency phrase instruction can support students as they build both fluency and comprehension skills in their reading and writing of authentic texts.

References

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