



**Research-Based Curriculum**

# **My Words**

**A Child's First Independent  
Reading Experience**

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## What Is Reading?

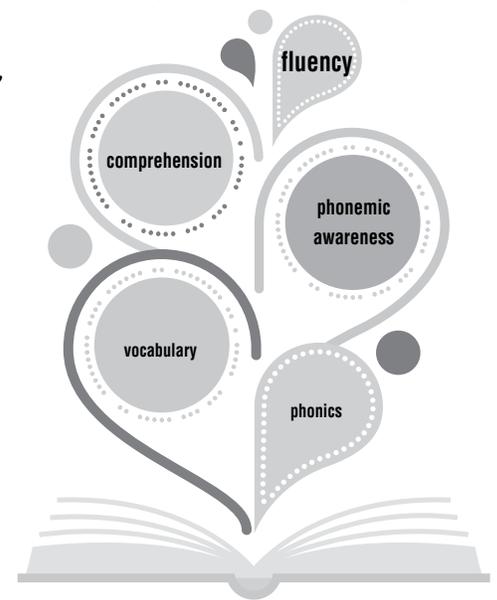
Reading is a complex process that involves word recognition, comprehension, and fluency. Early reading requires students to hear, identify, and manipulate sounds in words (phonemic awareness), to connect letters in printed words to sounds and words in spoken English (phonics), to connect those words to meaning (vocabulary and comprehension), and to read with appropriate speed, accuracy, and expression (fluency). When students acquire these skills, they are able to read and access books to learn about their world.

### Theory into Practice

The lessons in the *My Words* curriculum include the following elements that promote early literacy:

- teaching useful words that young students will likely encounter
- teaching words that are conceptually related to others
- teaching words that relate to students' background knowledge
- introducing nonfiction to emergent readers
- introducing independent reading to students who cannot yet decode
- generating an enthusiasm for and an interest in words

### Components of Reading



## Balanced Literacy Instruction for Early Readers

The diverse learning styles and needs of students are met through the balanced literacy model of instruction. With this approach, students will see and hear modeled reading, will be active participants in the reading process through shared reading and guided reading, will have ample time for self-selected independent reading, and will examine phonics and reading strategies closely through word study. Balanced Literacy provides time for students to read alone, to be read to, and to read to and with others. These important components work together, resulting in independent readers who choose to read and discover the adventures of literacy, thereby developing positive dispositions toward reading and confidence as readers.

### Word Study

Word study involves moving emergent readers across the range of skills from alphabetic knowledge to reading decodable text. Once students have a grasp of word recognition, print awareness, alphabetic principle, and phonemic awareness, instruction can begin in the four essential processes of word study. These are: alphabetic knowledge, regular word reading, irregular word mastery, and reading decodable text (Vaughn and Linan-Thompson 2007). Classroom implementation of word study involves small groups of learners completing consistent, sequenced learning experiences.

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## Theory into Practice

The *My Words* cards can be used to sort high-frequency words by letter, sound, or spelling pattern to support word study instruction.

## Modeled Reading

Texts for modeled reading are usually chosen based on the interests of the students and content related to classroom study. Typically, the first reading is done without interruption to model fluency, promote comprehension, and increase enjoyment of reading. Discussion is guided through levels of questioning that promote analysis, critical thinking, and comprehension. Repeated readings are used to highlight story elements, concepts of print, and phonics strategies.

## Shared Reading

Shared reading involves gathering students together to read a text. This experience was developed to replicate the lap-story experience, where a student feels connected to literature and to an adult as they read together. It is an opportunity for teachers to demonstrate early reading concepts while engaging students in the reading process. Teachers guide students to use left to right sweeping motions to focus on the print being read, to respond to the text, and to read chorally. The books should be engaging and offer predictable, repetitive text so students can anticipate the meaning and join in reading. Specific early literacy skills, such as rhyming words, beginning sounds, concepts of print, letter/sound connections, and high-frequency word recognition, are emphasized as teachers capitalize on “teachable moments.” Putting these skills in the context of meaningful print from any engaging text allows for greater connection of the skills to the meaning-making process of reading (Button and Johnson 1997).

## Theory into Practice

The *My Words* lessons include activities to support early literacy skills before, during, and after reading, including discussion questions that prompt students to respond to and connect to the text.

## Guided Reading

Teachers select and introduce small groups to short leveled books to begin the guided-reading process. Teachers “interact with students briefly as appropriate while reading, guide the discussion, make teaching points after reading, and engage students in targeted word work to help them learn more about how words work” (Fountas and Pinnell 2012, 271). Students are actively engaged in decoding strategies while focusing on the meaning of the text. Deep understanding is achieved through meaningful discussions and extension activities related to the text during these small-group times (Fountas and Pinnell 2012).

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## Independent Reading

Students are given time to read self-selected books independently. It is imperative that teachers not require students to finish other tasks before they can participate in independent reading. Best practices with independent reading require the teacher to be present to scaffold learning while reading. Teachers guide students in selecting appropriate books and understanding what they have read. Emergent readers will need the teacher's presence even more as they seek out books that interest them from the class library. Emergent readers are encouraged to determine meaning from the context of the illustrations while approximating reading depending on their level of reading development. Allowing time for discussions about the text is an important part of independent reading. According to Moss (2016), "Conversations can contribute to critical thinking, metacognition, and argument construction," all of which promote deeper understanding of meaningful text.

### Theory into Practice

*My Words* books are designed to create independent reading experiences for young learners. Once a book has been taught using the corresponding lesson, many students will be able to read the other book in the pair independently!

## High-Frequency Words

High-frequency words are the words that occur most frequently in written and spoken sentences. These words do not necessarily follow the rules of phonics and should be read with automaticity to save time and mental attention for other reading tasks. They are often critical connectors within phrases and sentences—*all, of, was, to* (Fry and Kress 2006). Providing early learners with extensive opportunities to read engaging stories that use these words is the most effective way to promote their learning. With frequent exposure, students will learn these words and read them with increased fluency and speed.

### Fry Words

Edward Fry (1925–2010) was a professor, researcher, and prolific author on topics related to learning to read. His research led him to publish lists of the most frequently used words in the English language—the New Instant Word List in 1957 and an updated version in 1980. Fry asserted that beginning readers should master a basic sight vocabulary of common words and a high-frequency vocabulary. Today, his Instant Word List, known as the "Fry 100," "Fry 300," "Fry 600," or "Fry 1000," is used extensively by teachers for literacy instruction to help young readers build a sight word vocabulary of frequently encountered words (Farrell, Osenga, and Hunter 2013).

#### Fry Facts:

- The first 10 words of the New Instant Word List make up 25 percent of the words in print.
- The first 100 words represent approximately 50 percent of words in print.

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## Fry 100 Instant Word List

the	of	and	a	to	in	is	you	that	it	he	was
for	on	are	as	with	his	they	I	at	be	this	have
from	or	one	had	by	words	but	not	what	all	were	we
when	your	can	said	there	use	an	each	which	she	do	how
their	if	will	up	other	about	out	many	then	them	these	so
some	her	would	make	like	him	into	into	time	has	look	two
more	write	go	see	number	no	way	could	people	my	than	first
water	been	called	who	am	sit	now	find	long	down	day	did
get	come	made	may	part							

## High Frequency Word Instruction

The terms *high-frequency words* and *sight words* are very similar and are used to describe groups of words that often overlap. High-frequency words are the most commonly encountered words in reading. Ehri (2005) defines sight words as any word that can be automatically recognized. Sight words often do not follow regular spelling or phonics patterns. These words are traditionally taught with tools such as flash cards that encourage memorization of the words as whole units. *My Words* books focus on the 100 most frequently used high-frequency words according to Edward Fry's hallmark Instant Word List. More than half of the words on the list also appear in Edward Dolch's list of sight words.

Including high-frequency words in early literacy instruction promotes automaticity with commonly encountered words. Automaticity builds fluency in independent reading and leads to higher comprehension. When students recognize high-frequency words by sight, they avoid expending mental energy to decode these words using phonics strategies, which may affect fluency.

## Concepts of Print

Students should understand concepts of print before focusing on high-frequency words. The alphabetic principle and concept of words should be acquired before beginning to recite high-frequency words. Without understanding these concepts, the systematic nature of words would not be evident to students (Duke and Mesmer 2016).

### Theory into Practice

*My Words* books provide experiences with whole books in order to develop a foundation in concepts of print.

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## Connections between Words

Relating new information to previous knowledge allows students to “connect the dots” cognitively and promotes lasting learning (Campbell and Campbell 2009). Connecting high-frequency words to phonics, graphemes, or meaningful context is effective practice as opposed to relying on rote memorization alone (Farrell, Osenga, and Hunter 2013).

Group words according to similarities in spelling and phonetics rather than by rank on high-frequency word lists. If a student already knows the beginning sound of *t*, then attention can be given to the high-frequency word *to*. If students have already learned *my*, they can connect to the word *by* because of the similar pattern (Duke and Mesmer 2016). Demonstrate how to make connections from a known word to an unknown word. High-frequency words can be sorted according to common patterns and then introduced according to the curriculum scope and sequence (Miles, Rubin, and Gonzalez-Frey 2017).

### Theory into Practice

*My Words* activities prompt students to sort high-frequency words and attend to patterns and similarities.

## Meaningful Context

Motivation to read and engagement are both essential elements of successful reading. Reader interest has been shown to be the more powerful factor for comprehension and recall (Johnson and Blair 2003).

### Theory into Practice

Engaging books, such as *My Words* books, provide contact with high-frequency words in the context of memorable content and engaging photos. This approach to teaching high-frequency words increases students’ engagement and motivation to read.

## Differentiation of High-Frequency Word Instruction

Because students develop at varying rates and reading is a complex cognitive and physical process that requires attention to multiple tasks at once, no single approach to instruction will work for every student. Differentiation involves making adjustments in group size, modality, practice, rate, or learning environment to meet the needs of each learner.

Consider the following for successful differentiation of high-frequency word instruction for all learners:

**Group size:** Use small-group instruction to introduce and practice high-frequency words. Learners have time to interact with the teacher and peers while the teacher has opportunities for formative assessment.

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**Modality:** Use a multisensory approach to teaching high-frequency words. Young students learn best through hands-on, active experiences using multiple senses.

**Practice:** Extend time for guided and independent practice. The activities should be set up for self-selection by students and for individual pacing and differentiated in level of independence and variety. Additional opportunities for pronouncing new words will increase students' ability to recognize the words.

**Rate:** Adjust the rate at which new words are introduced. Students can spend more or less time practicing one set of words before new words are introduced.

## Cultural Responsiveness

Whether teaching in a very diverse school setting or with a homogenous population, cultural responsiveness is important, especially as it applies to increasing academic literacy for all students (Hollie 2018). Culturally responsive teachers validate and affirm (VA) cultural and linguistic behaviors of all students. They also build and bridge (BB) students' behaviors to successfully meet expectations of mainstream school culture (Hollie 2018). Effective teachers use a variety of methods to increase the probability of reaching all students, no matter their race, gender, age, economic level, religion, orientation, or ethnic identity (Delpit 1995; Hammond 2015). Keep the following questions in mind when planning instruction:

- Is the activity validating and affirming cultural behaviors of the students? If so, which behaviors in particular?
- Is the activity building and bridging students' cultural behaviors to school cultural behaviors? If so, which behaviors in particular?
- Is there a balance of activities throughout the lesson that both validate and affirm (VA) as well as build and bridge (BB)?

## Assessing Early Readers

Assessment is the process of collecting information about a student's learning and development. Authentic assessment is used to inform instruction, determine individual learner goals, and guide instructional planning. The assessment process also serves to identify any special needs of learners and is used to report these conclusions to other adults (Strickland and Riley-Ayers 2006).

Assessment is categorized as formative or summative. Formative assessment is implemented throughout the learning process, while summative assessment occurs at the end of an instructional lesson or unit. Formative assessment is used for monitoring progress, adjusting instruction, and providing immediate feedback to teachers and learners through multiple, repeated events (IRA 2013).

Summative assessment documents performance after formative assessment has been used to monitor progress. Summative assessment is most often formal in nature and usually a curriculum-focused or teacher-created test (Hanover Research 2014).

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## Early Readers

Assessment of early readers should be an active, dynamic process that changes to meet the learners' needs and capitalizes on their interests. This is in contrast to a one-dimensional, paper-and-pencil approach. Young learners perform at higher levels when the tasks are at appropriate developmental levels, represent active learning, and fit the context of the instruction and classroom environment.

## Multiple Methods

Using multiple sources of data for individual learners will yield more accurate reflections of the learners' progress and potential development (NCTE 2013). Valid use of the data is an important element of assessment. Work samples from the entire class can be examined to determine goals for instruction and to determine small groups based on progress and performance level. Work samples of individual learners can be used to determine patterns of growth and should be consulted periodically (NCTE 2013).

To assess comprehension of a text, multiple methods should be used to create a full picture of a student's understanding. Using oral retellings of familiar texts provides opportunities to assess understanding of main ideas and sequences (Hanover Research 2014).

## Mastery of High-Frequency Words

To assess early readers' mastery of high-frequency words, data should be collected from a variety of sources and methods:

### 1. Isolated Word Tests

Flash cards or student-friendly word lists can be used to prompt students to read the high-frequency words in isolation. Teachers record the rate of accuracy until mastery is achieved. These instruments are commonly created with the curriculum goals in mind and are effective ways to collect data on multiple skills at once.

### 2. Running Records

This style of assessment can be documented during read-alouds to determine sight word mastery.

### 3. Observations

The teacher takes notes throughout the day to gain perspective on a learner's progress. A balance of spontaneous and intentional observations is optimal. Students should be observed in individual practice in learning centers, small groups, and whole groups to achieve an accurate account of development. Students perform at a higher level when the task is reflective of their interests rather than contrived for assessment purposes only. Notes can be written on index cards, labels, sticky notes, or teacher-created observation forms.

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#### 4. Portfolios

Organized work samples are meant to reflect a balanced, accurate picture of progress. This approach allows the learner to be involved by choosing the best examples of their work to be represented in the portfolio. Work samples should be added systematically and can include writing samples, audio/video of reading, and photographs of projects.

Assessment in early childhood classrooms considers the student’s developmental level in all learning domains and moves forward from that point. To assess mastery of high-frequency words, first determine a baseline of knowledge by checking for understanding of the alphabetic principle, concepts of print, and whether any high-frequency words have been mastered. Determining the baseline serves as a beginning point of instruction.

#### **Theory into Practice**

The *My Words* recording tools can be used to document students’ baseline mastery of 100 high-frequency words and to record increasing mastery during formal checkpoints throughout the year.

Although checklists, informal observations, and work samples can be used for formative assessment on a daily or weekly basis, formal or diagnostic assessments should be conducted only periodically—usually once a semester or at the beginning, middle, and end of the school year. These formal assessments can be used to determine if a student is thriving under the current curriculum or if changes are necessary to meet the student’s needs.

### **Theory into Practice**

The *My Words* curriculum is a program designed to bring the joy of shared and independent reading to emergent readers. The books contain two to ten high-frequency words (including sight words) each, coupled with rebus pictures to create sentences and phrases. High-interest photographs and clever text make the books attractive to young students and older emergent readers. The high-frequency words have been grouped into meaningful common phrases, fostering engagement and memory. The books provide reading experiences that can help students develop vocabulary, comprehension, and fluency skills while learning to recognize high-frequency words.

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