

# Creating Dyslexia: It's as Easy as Pie

By Samuel L. Blumenfeld

A few years ago, I had a demonstration of how easy it is to turn a perfectly normal child into a budding dyslexic. A father, in his early forties, brought his five-year-old kindergartner to me for an evaluation. The boy had had ear infections, which the parents thought might interfere with his learning to read. He had some difficulty distinguishing *m*'s from *n*'s and his teacher said that the boy wasn't catching on. Previously, the parents had signed a statement that they would make sure that the child did the homework assigned by the teacher.

The boy's pediatrician recommended that the child be core evaluated. At a core evaluation, teachers, counselors, and psychologists discuss what's wrong with the child with the parents. Then they recommend an individualized learning program. The father had heard about me and wanted my advice about the need or desirability of a core evaluation. Having served as a teacher in a private school for children with learning behavioral problems, I had taken part in several core evaluations and was familiar with the process. But I wanted to meet the child and judge for myself whether or not he needed any kind of core evaluation.

The five-year-old turned out to be very friendly and from all appearance perfectly normal. First, I wanted to see if he could learn to read by intensive phonics. He was able to recite the alphabet, but he had not learned the letter sounds, and his ability to identify all of the letters required more work on his part. This was quite normal for a five-year-old.

But I wanted to demonstrate to his father that the boy was quite capable of learning to read by phonics. So I turned to Lesson One in my *Alpha-Phonics* book, and I explained to the youngster that the letter *a* stood for the short *a* sound, which I then articulated quite distinctly. I asked the boy to repeat the sound, which he did. Then I pointed to the letter *m* and told the boy that the letter *m* stood for the "mmm" sound. And the boy was able to repeat the "mmm" with no problem. I then demonstrated that when we put the short "a" together with the "mmm" we get the word *am*.

I then introduced the letter *n* and its sound, "nnn". The boy repeated the sound quite nicely. I then joined the short "a" with the "nnn" to create the word *an*. The boy repeated the word. I told him to listen to me, and I said, "I have *an* apple." He got the message. Meanwhile, through all of this he sat on his dad's lap and was smiling happily. I went through the rest of the consonants in the lesson: *s*, *t*, and *x*, showed him how the words *as*, *at*, and *ax* were compounded of two sounds, articulated the sounds, and had him repeat them and demonstrated their use in short sentences. I asked him if he knew what an *ax* was. He did.

The purpose of the lesson was to show the father that his son was quite capable of learning to read by phonics, emphasizing that it would have to be done with much patience and repetition. Repetition and the use of flashcards were needed to produce automaticity. I was sure that his pronunciation would improve as he learned to read phonetically and that his very minor problem with *m* and would clear up, as he became a reader.

The father showed me the papers his son had brought home from school. The math papers were simple counting exercises. There was also an exercise in categorization. One exercise, which was supposed to test the youngster's ability to follow directions, was somewhat confusing and got the child a failing grade in the exercise. This upset the father.

But what really perked my interest was the Dolch list of basic sight words that the child was supposed to memorize. The teacher had given the child this list of ninety words that were supposed to be memorized with the help of the parent – five words per week, from January to June.

The first week's words were: *a, the, yellow, black, zero*. Second week's words: *and, away, big, blue, can*. Third week: *come, down, find, for, funny*. Fourth week: *go, help, here, I, in*. And so on. Now the child had hardly learned the alphabet and was not aware that letters stand for sounds. So why was he being given this arbitrary list of words to memorize by sight? Most of the words were perfectly regular in spelling and could be have easily been learned in the context of a phonics reading program.

E. W. Dolch was a professor of education in the early 1920s who composed a list of the most frequently used words used in English. It was thought that if children learned several hundred of these words by sight, that is, by whole-word recognition, before they even knew the alphabet or the letter sounds, they would have a jumping ahead start in learning to read. But what Dolch did not realize is that once the children began automatically to look at English printed words as whole configurations, like Chinese characters, the child would develop a holistic reflex or habit that would then become a block against seeing our alphabetic words in their phonetic structure. And that block would cause the symptoms of what is known as dyslexia.

You might ask, what is a reflex? A reflex is a quick, automatic, habitual response to stimuli. There are two sorts of reflexes, unlearned (unconditioned) and learned (conditioned). An unlearned reflex is innately physical, such as an automatic reaction of our eyes when we enter a dark tunnel. The response is automatic and thus unlearned. A learned reflex is the kind we develop through habitual use, for example, learning to drive. When we see a red light ahead, we automatically apply our foot to the brake pedal. We do this without thinking, while in the middle of a conversation or listening to the radio. That's a learned reflex. A learned reflex is not easy to unlearn. For example, an American who rents a car in England, where people drive on the left side of the road, must suppress his right-drive reflex if he is to avoid a head-on collision. In that case, the American driver can no longer rely on his normal reflexes and must think about every move he makes while driving.

That learning to read involves the development of conditioned reflexes is well-known by the professor of reading, especially when teaching a child to read by the sight method. Professor Walter Dearborn of Harvard, wrote in 1940:

The principle which we have used to explain the acquisition of a sight vocabulary is, of course, the one suggested by Pavlov's well known-experiments on the conditioned response. This is as it should be. The basic process involved in conditioning and in learning to read is the same.

In order to obtain the best results from the use of the conditioning technique, the substitute stimulus must either immediately preceded, or occur simultaneously with, the adequate stimulus. As we have explained before, the substitute stimulus in the case of learning to read is the word seen and the adequate stimulus is the word heard. (*School and Society*, 10/19/40, p. 368)

And so, it was well-understood by the professors of reading that in learning to read, it as necessary to develop automaticity, a reflex. But the correct reflex to develop is a phonetic reflex, which is acquired by learning the letter sound and being drilled sufficiently in the consonant-vowel combinations, so that the child learns to see the phonetic structure of a word and can automatically sound out the word by articulating each syllabic unit. In other words, the child automatically associates the letters with the sounds. When that phonetic reflex is developed, reading becomes easy, fluent, and enjoyable.

But the development of a holistic reflex, as described by Professor Dearborn, creates an obstacle to the development of the phonetic reflex. It is this conflict, or collision, of reflexes that causes dyslexia. Undoubtedly, the professors of reading were well-aware that this conflict would develop, for they were acquainted with Pavlov's experiments in artificially creating behavioral

disorganization by creating a conflict of reflexes. All of this was well expounded in a book written by one of Pavlov's colleagues, Alexander Luria, *The Nature of Human Conflict, An Objective Study of Disorganization and Control of Human Behavior*, published in 1932. It had been translated from the Russian by W. Horsley Gantt, an American psychologist who had spent the years 1922 to 1929 working in Professor Pavlov's laboratories in the Soviet Union. In his preface to the book, Dr. Luria wrote:

The researches described here are the result of the experimental psychological investigations at the State Institute of Experimental Psychology, Moscow, during the period of 1923-1930. The chief problems of the author were an objective and materialistic description of the mechanisms lying at the basic of the disorganization of human behavior and an experimental approach to the laws of its regulation.... To accomplish this, it was necessary to create artificially affects and models of experimental neurosis which made possible an analysis of the laws lying at the basis of the disintegration behavior. (p. xi)

In describing the results of the experiments, Luria wrote:

Pavlov obtained very definite affective "breaks," an acute disorganization of behavior, each time that the conditioned reflexes collided, when the animal was unable to react to two mutually exclusive tendencies, or was incapable of adequately responding to any imperative problem. (p. 12)

Luria wrote further:

We are not the first of those who have artificially created disorganization of human behavior. A large number of facts pertaining to this problem have been contributed to by contemporary psychologists, as well as by psychologists.

I. P. Pavlov was the first investigator who, with the help of exceedingly bold workers, succeeded experimentally in creating neuroses with experimental animals. Working with conditioned reflexes in dogs, Pavlov came to the conclusion that every time an elaborated reflex came into conflict with the unconditioned reflex, the behavior of the dog markedly changed...

The most successful attempts to produce experimental conflict psychologically are seen in the experiments of M. Ach. He formed some fairly complicated habits, and when he had obtained a stable, preservative tendency, he brought this into collision with another tendency determined by new stimuli or instruction....

K. Lewin, in our opinion, has been one of the most prominent psychologists to elucidate this question of the artificial production of affect, and of experimental disorganization of behavior. The mention of his procedure – the introduction of an emotional setting into the experience of a human, the interest of the subject in the experiment – helping him to obtain an artificial disruption of the affect of considerable strength....

Here the fundamental conception of Lewin is very close to ours." (pp. 206-7)

Who was the K. Lewin? He was the very same Kurt Lewin who came to the United States in 1933, founded the Research Center for Group dynamics at MIT (which later moved to the University of Michigan), and invented "sensitivity training." Shortly before his death in 1947, Lewin founded the National Training Laboratory, which established its campus at Bethel, Maine, under the sponsorship of the National Educational Association. There, teachers were instructed in the techniques of sensitivity training and how to become effective change agents.

And so we know from the experiments conducted by Pavlov and Luria in the Soviet Union in the 1920s and '30s that the psychologists had developed the means of to artificially create behavioral disorganization. I submit that the symptoms of dyslexia developed in perfectly normal, physically healthy school children are the result of a collision of reflexes that occurs as the child advanced to the second and third grades.

This is how it works. The child is given a sight vocabulary to memorize before he has acquired any phonetic knowledge of our writing system. Subsequently he develops a holistic reflex, that is, the habit of looking at each word as a total configuration and being absorbed at finding that configuration to remind the reader of what the word is. (Note: Ach "*formed some fairly complicated habits, and when he had obtained a stable, perseverative tendency, he brought this into collision with another tendency determined by new stimuli or instruction.*")

Many, if not most, children can memorize the shapes of several hundred sight words with significant visual associations. But when the child reaches the second and third grade where the number of words to be learned taxes the memory beyond its capacity, the child experiences a learning breakdown somewhat akin to a nervous break down. When the child is then taught some phonics, some letter sounds, ("new stimuli or instruction") as a means of assisting the sight process, the child experiences a conflict or collision of reflexes and develops dyslexia ("disorganization of behavior"), the inability to see the phonetic structure of our words, the inability to automatically decode a word. The holistic reflex is simply too strong and the phonetic information too insufficient to overcome the holistic reflex, which then creates a block against seeing our alphabet words in their phonetic components.

Unless a child is drilled in the letter sounds and can automatically articulate consonant-vowel syllabic combinations, that child will not develop a strong enough phonetic reflex to overcome the holistic reflex and the blockage (cognitive disorganization) it creates. The way, of course, to avoid this problem is to teach the child intensive, systematic phonics first before requiring the child to read whole words.

By teaching this five-year-old child a sight vocabulary before he could master the letter sounds, he was being put on the road to dyslexia. This is particularly harmful because the child's brain at that early age is still in the process of organizing its patterns of thinking, its cerebral habits, habits that are very difficult to unlearn later in life. That accounts for the great difficulty dyslexics as they grow older and their thinking patterns become more firmly established. It is possible that the brain can be permanently deformed by early development of thinking patterns based on faulty teaching methods.

Today, millions of American children are being taught to memorize sight words before they even know the alphabet, let alone the letter sounds. Commercial programs sold in supermarkets and bookstores are mostly based on the notion that learning a sight vocabulary is the first step to learning to read. Actually, it is the first step toward becoming a dyslexic. Many parents think they are doing their preschool children a service by purchasing books with audiotapes that permit their children to learn the words in the books by sight while listening to the tapes. They are simply preparing their children to become reading or learning disabled by the time they enter first grade.

Thus, you can see how easy it is to cause dyslexia. Simply have your child memorize a sight vocabulary and develop a holistic reflex. That's all there is to it. That professors of education have perfected the process indicates that they know how it works and what its results in. That is why parents are never warned about teaching their children sight vocabularies. It's a vital part of the dumbing down process that underlies curriculum development in our education system and is supported by professional associations, journals, publishers federal programs and funding, and the establishment as a whole.

There are exceptions, of course, and they are the individuals inside and outside the establishment who have been fighting the “system” for years and causing the so-called “reading wars.” Recent reports inform us that the reading war is over and the contending parties have reached a compromise: phonics will be taught with whole language. But what is not clear is how the new pro-phonics policy will be implemented in the schools. The proponents of whole language have always contended that they do teach phonics. That statement is supposed to satisfy most parents. But what they don’t explain is that the kind of incidental phonics they teach does not help the child develop the crucial phonetic reflex.

If the child is simply given phonetic information in the context of whole language, that information will not become a reflex. And therefore the child will be reluctant to use that information because it will not be automatic and will require work and will slow down the reading process.

This was proven to me by my own tutoring experience. Some years ago, when a friend of mine enrolled his daughter in public school, I warned him about the possibility that she would become reading disabled because of the teaching methods in today’s schools. So he permitted me to start tutoring her in *Alpha-Phonics*. But she was one of these headstrong children who will obey a teacher in school but raise a fuss at being tutored by a family friend. So the tutoring was rather haphazard. In addition, the father had an abiding faith in the public school.

Nevertheless, he was concerned enough to go to the school and insist that his child be taught to read by phonics. So she was put into some sort of “Superkid” class where she was given a little more phonics than in the normal class but not enough to create a phonetic reflex. In that class she was taught to “take risks” and “guess,” and her dad thought that this was an excellent technique. He refused to believe that this standard whole-language methodology would create problems. In any case, his daughter wanted to be right and refused to guess, but she was told to guess and that whatever she blurted out would be okay. Meanwhile, the child developed the whole-word habit, proving that you can mess around with a little phonics here and a little phonics there, but it’s no substitute for intensive, systematic phonics.

She is now in the third grade and hates to read. Getting her to read is like pulling teeth. Recently I asked to help her with her reading homework. She is a typical sight reader who makes lots of errors but will not sound out anything because it is too much work. So she makes a fuss when being told to sound out a word. She told me that her teacher said that sounding out is not the best way to read, and since she is still being encouraged to guess at words and skip words, why bother with sounding out at all?

I imagine that there are a lot of parents like my friend who simply assume that the teachers know what they are doing and tend to accept whatever explanations they are given to questions about their children’s learning problems. The fact that there are four million children on Ritalin in American schools indicates that parents in general have confidence in their children’s educators and are willing to accept whatever they are told by the “experts.”

All of which means that only those parents who are concerned enough, informed enough, and willing enough to do what has to be done to save their children from being dumbed down or turned into dyslexics, will know enough to bypass the government schools and provide their children with an education that makes sense. The spectacular growth of the homeschool movement is an indication that more and more parents are doing just that.

## **Information on Pavlov's Experiments In Conditioned Reflexes and Artificially Induced Neurosis**

1. *The Nature of Human Conflicts or Emotion Conflict and Will: An Objective Study of Disorganization and Control of Human Behavior* (1932) by A. R. Luria.

<https://www.marxists.org/archive/luria/works/1932/nature-conflicts/luria-conflicts.pdf>

<http://digitalcommons.hsc.unt.edu/hmedbks/35/>

2. *Conditioned Reflexes: An Investigation of the Physiological Activity of the Cerebral Cortex* (1926) by I. P. Pavlov.

<http://s-f-walker.org.uk/pubsebooks/pdfs/Conditioned-Reflexes-Pavlov.pdf>

3. *Pavlov and His School: The Theory of Conditioned Reflexes.*

<https://archive.org/details/in.ernet.dli.2015.158241/page/n9/mode/2up>

4. *Battle for the Mind: The Psychology of Conversion and Brain-Washing* (1958). A readable account of Pavlov's work.

<https://archive.org/details/BattleForTheMind-Sargant/page/n3/mode/2up>

5. *Pavlov: A Biography* by B. P. Babkin (1947)

<https://archive.org/details/PAVLOVABiography/page/n1/mode/2up>

6. "Frustration and Reading Problems" (1972) by Raymon Laurita

<http://donpotter.net/pdf/frustration-laurita.pdf>

7. *Ivan P. Pavlov: Toward a Scientific Psychology and Psychiatry* by Harry K. Wells (1956)

<https://archive.org/details/pavlovtowardsscientificpsychologypsychiatry/page/n1/mode/2up>

7. "Reversals a Response to Frustration" (1971) Raymond Laurita.

<http://donpotter.net/pdf/reversals-a-response-to-fru.pdf>

8. "Can Dyslexia Be Artificially Induced in School? Yes, Says Researcher Edward Miller (1992) by Samuel L. Blumenfeld. Mr. Miller developed his theory of artificially induced whole-word dyslexia after reading Mr. Blumenfeld's essay, *NEA Trojan Horse in America Education* where Mr. Blumenfeld mentioned Pavlov and Luria's research.

[http://donpotter.net/pdf/miller\\_blumenfeld\\_dyslexia .pdf](http://donpotter.net/pdf/miller_blumenfeld_dyslexia .pdf)

9. "Reduced Recidivism and Increased Employment Opportunity through Research-Based Reading Instruction" (1993) by Michael S. Brunner. This paper was later developed into a book, *Retarding America: The Imprisonment of Potential*. Mr. Brunner once told me he made use of Raymond Laurita's work. This is a very sobering assessment that unfortunately has not been heeded by the educational establishment.

<http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED361646.pdf>

10. Dr. Linnea C. Ehri wrote in “Systematic Phonics Instruction: Findings of the National Reading Panel,”

...when phonics instruction is introduced after students have already acquired some reading skill, it may be more difficult to step in and influence how they read, because it requires changing students’ habits. For example, to improve their accuracy, students may need to suppress the habit of guessing words based on context and minimal letter cues, to slow down, and to examine spellings of words more fully when they read them. Findings suggest that using phonics instruction to remediate reading problems may be harder than using phonics at the earliest point to prevent reading difficulties.

<http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED479646.pdf>

11. “Is Dyslexia Scientifically Confirmed? Or is it caused by the ineffective teaching of reading?” by Dr. Patrick Groff.

“People who have had effective reading instruction concentrate more blood flow into the language area of their brains when reading than do those who receive ineffective instruction says eminent neurologist Fred Baughman. Ineffectively taught persons, in a desperate struggle to recognize written words, dissipate their neural energy, i.e., their blood flow, to other areas of the brain when they read. Thus inept teaching is likely the cause of the diffused blood flow observed in dyslexic subjects of the 2001 study, rather than genetic brain disorders.”

[http://donpotter.net/pdf/groff\\_dyslexia.pdf](http://donpotter.net/pdf/groff_dyslexia.pdf)

## Note from Internet Publisher: Donald L. Potter

October 21, 2015

I retyped this chapter from Samuel L. Blumenfeld's *Revolution Via Education*. Sam published the book on the Chalcedon Foundation website on May 5, 2011. You can read the whole book at the following URL.

<http://chalcedon.edu/research/books/revolution-via-education-2/>

I am republishing this in a single document format in order to reach a wider audience.

I have adding an Appendix with links to relevant Internet resources for people who wish to do further researching into learned conditions reflexes and how conflicts between established conditioned reflexes can cause disorganization and artificially induced neuroses.

Perhaps time reaction studies such as those used by Keith Stanovich might be a fruitful source of investigation into artificially induced whole-word dyslexia. A survey of Stanovich's work can be found in his book, *Progress in Understanding Reading*. The Miller MWIA uses timed responses to groups of words as a factor in determining if a student has whole-word dyslexia.

Stanislas Dehaene's contention that Whole Language instruction only delays the development of the Letter Box seem weak to me. Sam's theory would argue for something more substantial and grievous than a mere delay.

Relationship of good handwriting development, especially cursive needs to be investigated.

I believe that something as simple as teaching students to identify letters by name fluently can have an immense impact of final reading outcomes. This is best done by having the students learn to write the alphabet fluently from memory in kindergarten. Sam taught that there were two phases to learning to read with the alphabet: The Letter Naming Phase and The Letter Sound Phase. I agree with that.

Note Sam's clear understanding of incidental phonics versus intensive, systematic phonics first. It is important to note both the *nature* (intensive) and *timing* (early) of the phonics instruction.

Hopefully this short chapter by Mr. Blumenfeld will encourage young researchers to further test and further develop his theory. I will be delighted to offer my experience teaching reading to beginning and remedial students and giving Mr. Miller's assessment to hundreds of students with artificially induced whole-word dyslexia.

Just yesterday (10/2/15), I got a new kindergarten-tutoring student. She does not know the alphabet, yet is required to memorize a list of sight-words each week. I told the mother not to teach the words if she wants her daughter to become a good reader. I hate contradicting teachers, but for the child's sake, the truth must be told. I am teaching her *Reading Made Easy with Blend Phonics for First Grade* by Hazel Loring. She will develop a phonetic reflex with me and become a great reader by the end of the school year. Her school is doing a **great disservice** to the child and parent in teaching the sight-words and developing the whole-word reflex which conflicts with the phonetic reflex necessary if a child is to become a superior reader. The practice of teaching sight words is not benign.

Sam wrote: "E. W. Dolch was a professor of education in the early 1920s who composed a list of the most frequently used words used in English." To be more precise, Dolch simply compared popular lists of words used in reading programs that time and compiled a composite list of the most used words in those programs. Leonard P. Ayres did do a study of the 1000 most use words in written English, which is still highly regarded. Dolch's list included what he called "service words." They are basically "function words" necessary to create sentence frames. There are no nouns included, although Dolch did create a list of high frequency nouns. Remember that when Dolch talked about high frequency he was referring to contemporary school readers viewed as a corpus.

For convenience, I have included the Dolch List words at the end of this document. Other Lists, such as the Fry's, are so close that they serve the same basic diabolical purpose.

Here it is October 8, 2021, and all the local schools continue to require all first-grade teachers to teach sight words (Fry sight words) by whole word memorization. Last year, I had three first graders who did not know the alphabet or letter sounds, but were required to memorize sight words with their parents timing them every evening for homework. Last week, I got a new first grader from a local school who does not know the alphabet letter name or how to write the letters legibly from a to z, **yet** she had a list of Fry sight words to memorize. I have no idea when this gross malpractice will ever end.

## **Blumenfeld's Alpha-Phonics Challenge**

Issued by Donald L. Potter

on October 9, 2021

I would like to offer a *Blumenfeld's Alpha-Phonics Challenge*. I challenge any school or school district to teach Mr. Blumenfeld's intensive phonics first method to their first-grade classes for one year and compare the students' reading, writing, and spelling abilities with the former year, observing the following requirements:

1. No student will be required to memorize sight words (Dolch, Fry, or other).
2. Every student will learn to recite the alphabet in ABC order.
3. Every student will learn to write the alphabet from memory in ABC order legibly and speedily.
4. Every student will learn to write any letter of the alphabet from dictation in random order.
5. Every student will be taught to sound out all the words in *Alpha-Phonics* from lesson to lesson
6. Every student will write **all** the words and sentences in *Alpha-Phonics* in a journal for practice writing, reading and spelling.
7. Every student will practice reading Mr. Blumenfeld's *First Readers* (decodable readers) to develop decoding automatic and rapid word identification.

Requiring the students to listen to Mr. Potter's *Self-Tutor* audio instruction is highly recommended, but not required for the Challenge.

Here is a link to my Lesson Plans for 1999-2000, which can be used as a template for developing similar lesson plans based on the school's academic calendar.

<http://donpotter.net/pdf/alpha-phonicslessonplans.pdf>

## General Articles on Sight Words

1. “Sight Words are the Humpty-Dumpty of Education” by Dr Patrick Groff

[http://donpotter.net/pdf/groff\\_sight\\_words-1975.pdf](http://donpotter.net/pdf/groff_sight_words-1975.pdf)

2. A Critical Examination of the Sight Word Method by Raymond Laurita

[http://donpotter.net/pdf/laurita\\_critical\\_exam.pdf](http://donpotter.net/pdf/laurita_critical_exam.pdf)

3. Basic Sight Vocabulary – A Help or a Hindrance by Raymond Laurita

[http://donpotter.net/pdf/basicightsightvocabulary\\_laurit.pdf](http://donpotter.net/pdf/basicightsightvocabulary_laurit.pdf)

4. “A Proposal for a Phonics-First Framework for the Diagnosis and Teaching of Educational Factors” by Donald L. Potter. This is a work-in-progress. It a personal attempt to elucidate the issues.

[http://donpotter.net/pdf/dangers\\_of\\_sight\\_words.pdf](http://donpotter.net/pdf/dangers_of_sight_words.pdf)

5. Elizabeth’s Brown’s webpage: “On Sight Words.” A great resource on sight words taught w/o phonics.

<http://www.thephonicspage.org/On%20Reading/sightwords.html>

6. “Comparing the Dolch and Fry High Frequency Word lists” by Linda Farrell, Tina Osenga, & Michael Hunter.

<http://www.readsters.com/wp-content/uploads/ComparingDolchAndFryLists.pdf>

7. “A New Model for Teaching High Frequency Words by Linda Farrell, Tina Osenga, & Michael Hunter.”

<http://www.readsters.com/wp-content/uploads/NewModelForTeachingHFWords.pdf>

8. The good phonics-first alternative to sight words is *Reading Made Easy with Blend Phonics for First Grade* by Hazel Loring available for free or purchase from [www.blendphonics.org](http://www.blendphonics.org).

9. In 2021 I published a special **self-teaching** edition of Mr. Blumenfeld’s *Alpha-Phonics*, in which converted the column format to numbered rows to make it easier for students to follow my audio instruction. The audio instruction is available for free, making it easy for parents, tutors, or teachers wanting the best in phonics instruction for beginning or remedial reading.

<http://donpotter.net/don-potter-tutoring.html>

Mr. Potter last edited this document on 10/25/15, 7/22/2017, 4/8/2019, 10/9/2021.

## The Dolch Basic Sight Vocabulary: Grammatical Categories

**Conjunctions:** and as because but if or

**Prepositions:** about after at by down for from in into of on over to under upon

**Pronouns:** he her him his I it its me my myself our she that them these they this those us we what which who you your

**Adverbs:** again always around away before far fast first here how just much never no not now off once only out so soon then there today together too up very well when where why yes.

**Adjectives:** a all an any best better big black blue both brown clean cold eight every five four full funny good green hot kind light little long many new old one own pretty red right round seven six small some ten the three two warm white yellow

**Verbs:** *am are ask ate be been bring buy call came can carry come could cut did do does done don't draw drink eat fall find fly found gave get give go goes going got grow had has have help hold hurt is jump keep know laugh let like live look made make may must open pick play please pull put ran read ride run said saw say see shall show sing sit sleep start stop take tell thank think try use walk want was wash went were will wish work would write*

Note: Verbs can be classified as Full Verbs, *Modal Verbs* and *Auxiliary Verbs*. Modals and Auxiliaries are “function words.”

*A Basic Sight Vocabulary of 220 Word, Comprising All Words, Except Nouns Common to the Word List of International Kindergarten Union, The Gates List, and Wheeler Howell List*<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Edward W. Dolch, “A Basic Sight Vocabulary,” *The Elementary School Journal* (February, 1936), pp. 458-59.

## The Dolch Basic Sight Vocabulary: Grade Level in Order of Frequency

**Pre-Primer:** the to and a I you it in said for up look is go we little down can see not one my me big come blue red where jump away here help make yellow two play run find three funny

**Primer:** he was that she on they but at with all there out be have am do did what so get like this will yes went are now no came ride into good want too pretty four saw well ran brown eat who new must black white soon our ate say under please

**First Grade:** of his had him her some as then could when where them ask an over just from any how know put take every old by after think let going walk again may stop fly round give once open has live thank

**Second Grade:** would very your its around don't right green their call sleep five wash or before been off cold tell work first goes write always made gave us buy those use fast pull both sit which read why found because best upon these sing wish many

**Third Grade:** if long about six never seven eight today myself much keep try start bring drink only better hold warm full done light pick hurt cut kind fall carry small own show hot far draw clean grow together shall laugh

### Dolch Nouns (95 words)

apple, baby, back, ball, bear, bed, bell, bird, birthday, boat, box, boy, bread, brother, cake, car, cat, chair, chicken, children, Christmas, coat, corn, cow, day, dog, doll, door, duck, egg, eye, farm, farmer, father, feet, fire, fish, floor, flower, game, garden, girl, good-bye, grass, ground, hand, head, hill, home, horse, house, kitty, leg, letter, man, men, milk, money, morning, mother, name, nest, night, paper, party, picture, pig, rabbit, rain, ring, robin, Santa Claus, school, seed, sheep, shoe, sister, snow, song, squirrel, stick, street, sun, table, thing, time, top, toy, tree, watch, water, way, wind, window, wood.

The Dolch Nouns are included for convenience. They rarely, as far as I know, enter into discussions about sight-words. Most discussion centers on the 220 Service Words. It is the service words that provide the structural framework (grammatical slots that students learn to fill using syntactic, and semantic context clues) for guessing. This explains why words like *a* and *the* are constantly misread since they often fill the same noun-determiner slot in sentences.

Here is a first rate study of the Dolch List by Jerry L. Johns and Jean E. Higdon, "Another Look at the Dolch List." *Journal of Reading Behavior* 1972-1973.

Here is an earlier study by Jerry L. Johns, "The Dolch Basic Word List - Then and Now" (1970 – 1971). He concludes that the Dolch List is still valid. Interestingly he says, "The child who gains recognition of these 220 basic sight words should acquire confidence in his reading and be better equipped to use **context** in unlocking unknown words." I call that guessing!

## Diane McGuinness on Sight Words

“Sight words were originally defined as words which such irregular spellings that they had to be memorized “by sight.” Later memorizing *all* words by sight became the major mode of learning to read, especially “look-say.” Phonics programs and most reading textbooks also advocate teaching a large group of “sight words.” Here, the rational shifts to the “getting started” theory. Children should learn sight words, it is claimed, because they can start reading “right away,” and this is motivating. Thus, sight words are taught prior to learning the alphabet code or concurrently with learning the code. *Teaching sight words this way can have profoundly negative consequences on the child’s fragile understanding of the alphabet principle.*” (*Why Our Children Can’t Read*, McGuinness, 268)

“Teachers all over the world teach “sight words” based on lists like this one. This is very scary, because if authors of textbooks don’t know the code, then teachers can’t learn the code, and if teachers don’t know the code, then the children can’t learn the code. If children can’t learn the code, the child can’t learn to read or spell.” (*Why Our Children Can’t Read*, McGuinness, 262f)

“Most reading programs produced by major publishing houses include a large list of sight words, many using “regular” spellings. It is a bad idea to teach sight words to children learning *any* language system. But there is more at stake. Teaching whole words by sight promotes a faulty decoding strategy. This happens because memorizing whole words seems logical and is relatively easy initially, leading to a false sense of security. But a whole-word strategy will inevitably collapse, depending on the child’s vocabulary and visual-memory skills. Meanwhile, this strategy can harden into a habit that can be difficult to break.” (Diane McGuinness, *Early Reading Instruction*, 57, 58).

“On the other hand, we know that time spent memorizing sight words can cause a negative outcome by promoting a strategy of “whole word guessing.” This is where children decode the first letter phonemically and guess the rest of the word based on its length and shape. This strategy is highly predictive of reading failure. It is well known that programs that emphasize (sight word, context-based guessing, part-word analysis, phonemic decoding) strongly affect the child’s decoding strategy, and that this strategy quickly becomes entrenched.” (Diane McGuinness, *Early Reading Instruction*, 114, 115)

“Boronat and Logan (1997) showed convincingly that what you pay attention to is automatically encoded by the brain and automatically cued in memory. As they put it, “What one pays attention to acts as a retrieval cue that draws associations out of memory.” what you ignore, even though it is physically adjacent to what you are looking at, is not encoded at all. The more a child focuses on the wrong patterns and combinations of letter sequences in words, the more automatic (habitual) it becomes.” (Diane McGuinness, *Early Reading Instruction*, 115)

In the Observational studies, time spent memorizing sight words was negatively and weakly correlated with reading scores for the kindergartners, but was negatively and strongly correlated for the older children (6 to 8 years). A sight-word strategy begins to overload between 7 and 8 years. I found that children who adopt a whole-word strategy by the end of first grade had not improved their performance when they were followed up in third grade. These children often made the same decoding errors in the same words that they had made two years earlier, and they were uniformly the worst readers in the class. (Diane McGuinness, *Early Reading Instruction*, 115)

# Observations on Sight Words

From Wiley Blevins, *Phonics from A to Z*,  
Scholastic, NY, 1998. p. 97

Only 13 words (**a, and, for, he is, in, it, of, that, the, to, was, you**) account for more than 25% of the words in print. Although the Dolch Basic Sight Vocabulary was generated more than 40 years ago (1936), these words account for more than 50% of the words found in textbooks today (Johns, 1980).

Knowledge of high-frequency words is necessary for fluent reading. Although many high-frequency words carry little meaning, they affect the flow and coherence of text. Many of these words are considered “irregular” because they stray from the commonly taught sound-spelling relationships. Research shows that readers store these “irregular” words (Gough and Walsh, 1991; Treiman and Baron, 1981; Lovett, 1987) in their lexical memory the same way they store so-called regular words. That is, readers have to pay attention to each letter and the pattern of letters in a word and associate these with the sounds they represent (Ehri, 1992) Therefore, instruction should focus attention on each letter and/or letter pattern.

However, children don’t learn “irregular” words as easily or as quickly as they do “regular” words. Early readers commonly confuse the high-frequency words *of, for, and from*; the reversible words *on/no* and *was/saw*; and words with *th* and *w* such as *there, them, what, were, their, then, what, where, this, these, went, will, that, this, when, and with* (Cunningham, 1995). Therefore, children need to be taught irregular words with explicit instruction.

**Observation on Blevins:** The designation of words as regular and irregular is relative, rather than absolute. There are several popular lists of sight words, and no two lists are alike. The degree of irregularity depends on the phonetic system being used for comparison. The basic difference between Fry and Dolch is that the Fry list includes nouns. The Fry list would be more similar to the Ayres Spelling Scale list than the Dolch list. I notice that lot of schools are posting the Fry words: Monkey See Monkey Do! Don Potter

## Fry 1<sup>st</sup> Grade Fluency Folder

<https://literacytransformations.files.wordpress.com/2016/09/1st-g-eng-ff.pdf>

As a perfect example of the harmful practice of teaching sight words to beginning reading students. These are the the exact lists that all my current first tutoring students from two large West Texas school districts are bring home each week for their parents to practice with them. The difference between the Fry and Dolch lists have to do with grammatical categories included. The Dolch list is made up entirely of service words (function words) that serve to define the grammatical structure of sentences and allow students to make maximum use of syntax to assist them in guessing words in grammatical context. There are no nouns in the Dolch list. The Fry list also has these service words by virtue of the fact that they are all high frequency, but Fry also included high frequency nouns. The negative impact of teaching kids to memorize these words is the same with both lists. We maintain that the best way to teach so-called sight words is with their spelling families: as, has, [was] so the kids focus on the regularities of the language, but also master irregularities, without resorting to any whole word memorization sans phonics. I very much dislike contradicting my tutoring students’ teachers, but I simply cannot recommend that parents participate in any practice that has the high potential of reducing their reading and spelling ability. (Oct. 9, 2021)

Don Potter