

Sight words by grade, Pre-K to Grade 3

All 220 Dolch words, grouped by the grade they are usually taught in — plus how to teach them in a way that sticks, and how many a child is expected to know by when.

Reference · the Dolch lists (Edward W. Dolch, 1936/1948)

Sight words are the words a child should recognise instantly, without sounding out. They matter for two reasons: they make up a huge share of everything written — the 220 words below are somewhere between **50% and 75% of the words in most children's books** — and many of them cannot be sounded out reliably anyway. *Said, come, once, of* do not behave.

The lists below are Edward Dolch's, compiled in the 1930s and 40s. They are still the lists most American classrooms send home.

The lists

Pre-primer — Pre-K and early Kindergarten · 40 words

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

Primer — Kindergarten · 52 words

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

First grade — Grade 1 · 41 words

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

Second grade — Grade 2 · 46 words

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

Third grade — Grade 3 · 41 words

about better bring carry clean cut done draw drink eight fall far full got grow

hold hot hurt if keep kind laugh light long much myself never only own pick
seven shall show six small start ten today together try warm

How many by when? Roughly: 20–50 by the end of Kindergarten, around 100 by the end of Grade 1, most of the 220 by the end of Grade 2. These are rough on purpose — the spread between normal children is wide, and the order matters less than the practice.

Dolch nouns

Dolch also compiled 95 common nouns — *apple, baby, ball, bear, bed, bell, bird, birthday, boat, box...* — which are usually taught alongside, but are less important. They are concrete, picture-able and easy to sound out, which is exactly why they matter less than the 220 above.

How to actually teach them

Not with flashcards alone

Flashcards drill recognition of a word in isolation. The job is recognising it **inside a sentence**, at speed, while also doing everything else reading requires. Children who are fluent on flashcards and stuck in books are extremely common, and the flashcards caused it.

Use cards to introduce, then move to text as fast as possible.

Five or six at a time

More than that and none of them stick. Add new ones only when the current set is instant — not "right eventually", **instant**.

Say what the word means

The, of, was are not meaningful on their own, which is exactly why children find them slippery. Put each one straight into a sentence they would actually say.

Spot them in real books

Pick one word and hunt it through a page they are already reading. This connects the list to the point of the list, which is the step most sight word practice skips.

Keep the old ones in the mix

A word learned in September goes stale by November without being seen. Shuffle previous sets back in.

Where sight words fit in learning to read

Sight words are one of three things happening at once, and the balance matters:

1. **Phonics** — sounding words out. This is the engine. Most words, including many on these lists, can be partly or fully decoded, and children taught to decode read far better long-term than children taught to memorise shapes.
2. **Sight words** — instant recognition of the high-frequency words, so attention is free for meaning rather than spent on *the*.
3. **Fluency** — putting it together: reading in phrases, with expression, at a pace that sounds like talking.

The common mistake is treating sight words as the whole programme. They are the lubricant, not the engine.

A child who knows every word on this list and still reads word by word does not need more sight words. They need fluency practice — repeated reading of short passages, out loud, until it sounds like speech.

What to do when a word will not stick

- **Check it is actually irregular.** Many "sight words" are perfectly decodable — *and, can, him, stop*. If it can be sounded out, teach it that way instead; it will stick far better.
- **Look at the tricky part only.** In *said*, the *s* and *d* behave. It is the *ai* that does not. Point at the part that is lying.
- **Write it, do not just read it.** Writing a word forces attention to every letter in order.
- **Let it go for a fortnight.** Some words land later. Grinding away at one word teaches a child that reading is a thing they are bad at, which costs more than the word is worth.

Next

- Reading milestones by age — what else should be happening at each stage, preschool to Grade 3
- Reading fluency norms — the words-per-minute benchmarks schools measure against
- Words per minute calculator — where your reader sits today

Free chart from myfluentreader.com — reading fluency benchmarks, a words-per-minute calculator and the full sight-word lists, free and without signing up.