

Considerations for Sight Word Instruction

How much instructional time? Which words?

The terms for types of words, *sight*, *irregular*, *exception*, and *high frequency*, can be confusing and are commonly used to mean different things.

The *Saxon Phonics and Spelling* program defines *sight words* as “common words that do not follow the phonics rules.” *Saxon* defines *high frequency words* as “those words found most often in written text”. For the purposes of this discussion we’ll further define *high frequency words* as those 108 most commonly occurring words that account for 50% of all words encountered in primary and secondary school texts (Zeno, et.al. 1995).

Words that are included on *Saxon Sight Word* lists were selected because they are either 1) phonetically irregular, or 2) they appear in the *Saxon Decodable Books*. *High-frequency words* that follow phonics rules are *not* included on *Saxon Sight Word* lists.

All 108 *high frequency words* are taught in *Saxon K* and/or *Saxon 1* as follows:

- The 35 *phonetically irregular* words are taught as *sight words* (see attached chart).
- The 73 *phonetically regular* words are introduced in kindergarten and/or first grade when children are taught the applicable phonics rule or pattern. For example, the words “*made*” and “*make*” are introduced in *Saxon 1, lesson 41* as children are learning “*a consonant e*”.

There are some important considerations surrounding *sight word* instruction:

- Children have a natural tendency to memorize words as a whole. Think about how quickly your own children learned to recognize *McDonald’s* signs. A primary goal of early reading instruction involves encouraging children to move beyond this natural tendency. Instead, they need to develop the ability to *decode* words effortlessly.
- Most of the *Saxon 1 Sight Words* are included because they appear in the *Saxon Decodable Books*. Therefore, it makes sense that students should be familiar with them before the applicable *Saxon Decodable Book* is introduced. It does not mean that the memorization of each word is paramount. Remediation efforts are better utilized to reinforce *decoding* concepts.
- To ensure that children focus on *decoding*, the amount of time spent teaching K-2 children to *memorize* whole words involve a small portion of instructional time.
- When parent or other volunteers are available to work with students one-on-one, the most beneficial use of this time would involve practice with decodable, connected text. Assigning volunteers to focus on *sight word* memorization is discouraged.

In summary, the *Saxon Sight Word* and *High Frequency Word* lists serve different purposes. Students need to be familiar with words on both lists and automaticity with these words is an important end goal. However, the main goal of reading instruction needs to be in helping children become proficient at *decoding* words rapidly and effortlessly.