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## The AYRES SPELLING SCALE: A Ready Made Literacy Scale

A MEASURING SCALE FOR ABILITY IN SPELLING, by Leonard Porter Ayres

First published in 1915 by the Russell Sage Foundation; Currently (1986) by Mott Media, Inc., Milford MI, ISBN 0-88062-039-0

One of the most elegant and carefully standardized tests available in the domain of literacy is the 1915 Ayres Spelling Scale, republished in 1986 thanks to the efforts of Geraldine E. Rodgers, of Lyndhurst, New Jersey, to whom this writer is much indebted for information on this, the McCall-Crabbs reading material, and the Rice Education Management references.

Ayres was first and foremost a statistician, and the elegance and simplicity of this scale illustrate the adage, "Simplicity is the ultimate sophistication." Though the scale is easy to apply and use, it is not necessarily simple to understand the theory and design techniques embodied. It is worth the time to study. The scale consists of 1000 of the highest-frequency English words arranged in measured increments of ascending order of difficulty, and normed by grade levels, at 50th through 99th percentiles, from second through eighth grade. A copy of the Scale Heading is shown in Figure 1. The letters are the headings for each word list out of the 1000 words. The administering and scoring of a 20-word sample drawn from any one of the lists, when matched for percent and grade, will give the exact spelling grade level of any 2nd - 8th-grade student (as long as he scores at least 50%!). Ayres apparently believed that scores less than 50% were not worthy of charting!

The normative data was obtained through tests on 70,000 children in 84 cities across the U.S. Quoting from Rodgers bibliographic notes, "It furnishes statistical proof, in contrast to today, that in 1915 virtually 100 percent of city children, including Blacks and foreign-born, could read at least simple material... and few children were more than two years behind the proper grade level for their age."

Rodgers provides an interesting example of the use of the scale to rate present day spelling by a comparison with results from tests on 30,000 second graders in 1954. A 90- word list from the Follett Spelling Program was published with percentage-correct data from the Iowa Spelling Scale (State University of Iowa) in 1955. Of the 90 Follett test words for second graders, 67 were also on the 1915 Ayres List. The following lists show the 1954 Iowa percent-correct scores on words which were also in the Ayres lettered columns. At the top of each list is the percent-correct of 1915 second graders.

Ayres	.	.	.	.
"C"	"D"	"E"	"F"	"G"
96%	94%	92%	88%	84%
Iowa	.	.	.	.
see 98%	the 83%	up 73%	like 52%	come 79%
can 69%	.	but 46%	of 38%	had 50%
run 51%	.	your 36%	him 41%	play 61%
.	.	.	out 46%	let 28%
.	.	.	.	are 34%
.	.	.	.	say 30%

Comparison of 1915 Ayres vs 1954 Iowa-Follett spelling norms, continued;

Ayres	.	.	.	.
"H"	"I"	"J"	"K"	"L"
79%	73%	66%	58%	50%
Iowa	.	.	.	.
for 47%	foot 12%	room 35%	first 8%	fell 12%
led 11%	cut 20%	with 17%	they 39%	stop 39%
get 42%	give 19%	made 14%	sent 5%	wish 5%
some 38%	told 19%	rest 4%	could 3%	right 4%
has 28%	got 27%	want 21%	where 12%	.
stand 8%	put 31%	from 12%	.	.
bring 9%	sick 10%	fill 16%	.	.
that 30%	back 39%	fine 10%	.	.
how 38%	take 16%	here 41%	.	.
was 49%	gave 21%	down 36%	.	.
eat 41%	very 19%	read 16%	.	.
.	white 19%	.	.	.
.	far 37%	.	.	.

From Rodgers analysis: "Note that, out of the ninety 2nd-grade words in the 1954 Follett- Iowa scale, the only words spelled with 50% or greater accuracy were "see," "can," "run," "the," "up," "like," "come," "had," and "play," in contrast to other words from the 1915 scale running from 50% accuracy to 96%. Those nine top words in the 1954 scale are obviously the basal-reader (and whole-language) high-frequency words drilled into the visual memories of the children by endless repetitions of inane sentences about Dick and Jane."

Those nine words include non-phonetic words like "come," and "the," and long-vowel-sound combinations like "see," "like," and "play." But those 1954 children did less than 50% on some easy and regular 3-letter words that any phonics-trained first grader can do with ease: but, him, let, for, led, get, has, and cut. Differences that reduce the precision of this comparison are the fact that the Ayres scale is derived from testing mid-second grade while the Follett-Iowa numbers are for beginning second grade. But that is balanced by the fact that Ayres scores represent dictated & written spelling, whereas the Follett-Iowa is believed to be from multiple-choice testing.

The Ayres Spelling Scale is a ready-made literacy scale that can be easily applied in a language curriculum to provide reliable data on written English language acquisition.

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Note from Donald Potter  
Internet Publisher for Leonard P. Ayres'  
*A Measuring Scale for Ability in Spelling.*  
July 21, 2004

Thanks to Mr. Richardson for giving me permission to reprint this excellent article on the [donpotter.net](http://donpotter.net) web site.

Readers of Mr. Richardson's article will want to study Leonard P. Ayres' *A Measuring Scale for Ability in Spelling* which is now available for FREE download on the Education Page of the [donpotter.net](http://donpotter.net) web site. I have also published a highly informative "Introduction" to Ayres *Spelling Scale* written by Geraldine Rodgers.

Users of the Mott edition of Ayres' *Spelling Scale* should be aware that the preface attributed to Geraldine Rodgers is incorrect in places. Miss. Rodgers writes, "The preface attributed to me was only an adaptation of material I sent Mott Media and was not written by me, and that adaptation is factually wrong in places." (The *History of Reading: From Teaching by "Sounds" to Teaching by "Meaning."* [AuthorHouse.com](http://AuthorHouse.com), 2004, p. 1792.).