

A Study Concerning the Folly of Teaching the Dolch Basic Sight Vocabulary

**In which we will prove that it is unnecessary and undesirable
to teach any sight-words with whole-word memorization
techniques to beginning reading students**

**Using Samuel L. Blumenfeld's
Alpha-Phonics (2005) Program as Our
Intensive Phonics Standard of Comparison**

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Recommendations Concerning Teaching Sight-Words

I suggest that all teachers in America immediately **quit** teaching the Dolch Basic Sight Vocabulary with whole word memorization for the following reasons:

1. It **creates a blockage** against seeing words phonetically. Once the sight-word habit is established, it becomes difficult to develop a good phonics reflex for accurate and fluent reading and spelling.
2. It is **totally unnecessary** since the vast majority of the words will be learned naturally in their spelling-family as the students learn to read and spell with Blumenfeld's Alpha-Phonics. This is the focus of this study.
3. Student who read by sight-words and context guessing are **severely limited** when it comes to building vocabulary independently from general reading because they cannot get to the sounds of the words without the teacher telling them the pronunciation of the words.
4. There is **no need to waste valuable instructional time** to teach 220 Dolch Basic Sight Vocabulary when we could be teaching 3,033 separate words in *Blumenfeld's Alpha-Phonics* words in even less time.
5. The reading ability of students taught to read with *Blumenfeld's Alpha-Phonics* is **significantly higher** than students trained in Dolch sight-vocabulary memorization.
6. I have established, through years of teaching *Blumenfeld's Alpha-Phonics*, that it can be completed in regular first- and second-grade public school classrooms, small remedial reading groups, and individual tutoring **within a single school year**.

WARNING: Attempts to balance literacy by teaching sight-words first simply make it more difficult for student to learn to read phonetically later. Mini-lessons, a common core of Guided Reading instruction, are no substitute for systematic, sequential, intensive phonics instruction.

Further Recommendation: The *Miller Word Identification Assessment* that was developed by Mr. Edward Miller can measure the damage inflicted by the sight-vocabulary method of teaching reading. Copies can be downloaded for free, noncommercial use from my website: www.donpotter.net.

The following study starts with a list of the Dolch List Basic Sight Vocabulary and Nouns. Numbers over the words indicates the lessons where the words are taught in *Blumenfeld's Alpha-Phonics*. The next chart shows the distribution of the Dolch List Basic Sight Vocabulary in *Alpha-Phonics* Lesson Skill Levels Sequence (Levels of Word Processing Difficulty). The study is rounded out with some statistics.

Dolch Pre-primer Service Words (40 words)

1 7 FR7 19 116 8 103 112 FR9 (71) 93 107 51 91 34 19 19 19 56
a, and, away, big, blue, can, come, down, find, for, funny, go, help, here, I, in, is, it, jump,
119 109 73 87 98 23 103 77 16 27 75 87 21 87 108 108 27 34
little, look, make, me, my, not, one, play, red, run, said, see, the, three, to, two, up, we,
91 Level 9 34
where, yellow, you

Dolch Primer Service Words (52 words)

40 1 34/73 1 72 87 58 112 27 73 19 108 89 112 16 109 34/73 34/87
all, am, are, at, ate, be, black, brown, but, came, did, do, eat, four, get, good, have, he,
FR7/8 99 49 117 107 112 23 112 112 89 93 9 99 83 77 34/87 107
into, like, must, new, no, now, on, our, out, please, pretty, ran, ride, saw, say, she, so,
109 21 91 34/77 21 108 FR6 43 1 16 43 31 99 108 19
soon, that, there, they, this, too, under, want, was, well, went, what, white, who, will,
21 16
with, yes

Dolch 1st Grade Service Words (41 words)

57 75 1 93 1 49 98 111 FR10 98 61 99 41 5 2 45 19
after, again, an, any, as, ask, by, could, every, fly, from, give, giving, had, has, her, him,
19 112 49 106 16 99 77 23 107 55 110 FR9 27 112 103 67 75
his, how, just, know, let, live, may, of, old, once, open, over, put, round, some, stop, take,
121 21 21 108 50 34/91 31
thank, them, then, think, walk, were, when

Dolch 2nd Grade Service Words (46 words)

117 113 FR7 87 FR9 49 Level 9 98 40 107 FR7 104 49 FR10
always, around, because, been, before, best, both, buy, call, cold, does, don't, fast, first,
99 112 74 Level 8 87 FR2 72 93 23 76 27 89 100 41 19 87
five, found, gave, goes, green, its, made, many, off, or, pull, read, right, sing, sit, sleep,
16 79 91 103 Level 4 27 115 93 29 31 98 29 118 111 125
tell, their, these, those, upon, us, use, very, wash, which, why, wish, work, would, write,
112
your

Dolch 3rd Grade Service Words (41 words)

114 45 58 93 89 27 103 83 60 79 40 85 27 23 106
about, better, bring, carry, clean, cut, done, draw, drink, eight, fall, far, full, got, grow,
107 23 118 76 87 FR 102 100 41 57 Level 8 115 107 106 19
hold, hot, hurt, if, keep, kind, laugh, light, long, much, myself, never, only, own, pick,
FR7 29 106 19 65 85 16 118 FR9 98 85
seven, shall, show, six, small, start, ten, today, together, try, warm

Dolch Nouns (95 words)

119 93 11 40 89 16 16 118 118 105 23 114 89 113
apple, baby, back, ball, bear, bed, bell, bird, birthday, boat, box, boy, bread, brother,
73 85 8 75 FR5 FR8 127 105 Level 9 112 77 23 23 109
cake, car, cat, chair, chicken, children, Christmas, coat, corn, cow, day, dog, doll, door,
FR2 16 91 FR6 Level 7 85 87 99 29 109 112 73 118 118
duck, egg, eye, farm, farmer, father, feet, fire, fish, floor, flower, game, garden, girl,
Level 10 62 112 7 89 19 103 FR9 112 16 45 2 16
good-bye, grass, ground, hand, head, hill, home, horse, house, kitty, leg, letter, man, men,
50 93 93 FR8 73 49 100 FR9 FR7 121 19 38 75
milk, money, morning, mother, name, nest, night, paper, party, picture, pig, rabbit, rain,
41 38 Level 10 109 87 87 Level 9 45 106 41 Level 10 67
ring, robin, Santa Claus, school, seed, sheep, shoe, sister, snow, song, squirrel, stick,
87 27 119 FR6 99 23 114 87 53 114 77 43 FR8 109
street, sun, table, thing, time, top, toy, tree, watch, water, way, wind, window, wood

Explanation

Underlined words are **not** in the *Blumenfeld's Alpha-Phonics Workbook*.

The numbers over the words are the lessons where the word is first taught or encountered.

“FR” stands for *First Readers*. The number is the number of the First Reader where the word is first used. The *First Reader* numbers correspond to the Level numbers.

Words like “or” are in parenthesis (or) to show that the words was introduce in *Alpha-Phonics*, but not with its spelling family. This is very rare.

“Into” is not in *Alpha-Phonics*. Both “in” and “to” are, so it should be introduced after “to.”

“Thank” is not used till Lesson 121, but the th and ank are introduced by Lesson 46.

“Think” is not used till Lesson 108, but it could have been introduced in Lesson 46.

“If” was not used till Lesson 76, but could have been introduce in Lesson 19. We put it under Level 2 in this study.

Edward W. Dolch, “A Basic Sight Vocabulary,” *The Elementary School Journal*, (February, 1936), pp. 358-59. This list consists of 220 words common to readers when Dolch wrote his study, not including nouns. Although this list was generated 40 years ago, these words account for more than 50% of the words found in textbooks today (Blevins). Pace articles by Miss Geraldine Rodgers on the “high frequency word effect” to see how the sight-word system works in actual practice, and articles by Ray Laurita on the psychology of the whole-word method. There is also an article by Dr. Pat Groff on sight-words on my website.

The Blumenfeld's Alpha-Phonics Reading System consists of “The *Alpha-Phonics Workbook*,” ten Alpha-Phonics Card Decks, and ten decodable *First Readers*. The “Workbook” is the heart of the system of 128 progressive lessons in intensive phonics, reading, spelling, and cursive handwriting. (Note: The word “Workbook” is not a school workbook in the traditional sense, but rather a phonics textbook in big print from which the students can be taught the phonics patterns for reading and spelling. The handwriting is done on separate handwriting paper.)

The Dolch Sight Vocabulary List in the Light of Intensive Phonics

(Samuel L. Blumenfeld takes on Edward W. Dolch)

Indisputable Proof that Sight-Vocabulary
Memorization is Totally Unnecessary

By Donald L. Potter
December 12, 2010

**Level 1: Lessons 1 – 14. Phonics Skills: short *ă*, single letter
consonants, ck, qu**

Dolch Words: a, and, can, am, at, was, an, as, had, has, ran, [back](#),
[cat](#), [hand](#), [man](#)

Level 2: Lessons 15 – 28. Phonics Skills: *ă, ě, ĭ, ō, ŭ, ph, th*

Dolch Words: big, in, is, if, it, not, red, run, the, but, did, get, on,
that, this, well, will, him, his, let, of, put, full, pull, them, then, off,
sit, tell, up, us, cut, got, hot, pick, six, ten, yes, [its](#), [duck](#), [bed](#), [bell](#),
[box](#), [dog](#), [doll](#), [egg](#), [hill](#), [leg](#), [men](#), [pig](#), [sun](#), [top](#).

**Level 3: Lessons 29 – 37. Phonics Skills: Consonant digraphs: sh, ch
wh; to be, to have, contractions.**

Dolch Words: I, you, are, have, he, she, what, were, when, wash,
which, wish, shall, [fish](#).

**Level 4: Lessons 38 – 39. Phonics Skills: Two-Syllable, short vowel
words.**

Dolch Words: [robin](#), [rabbit](#), [upon](#)

**Level 5: Lessons 40 – 49. Phonics Skills: al, all, Consonant blends: ng,
ing, Final Consonant Blends**

Dolch Words: all, must, want, went, ask, just, best, her, call, fast,
sing, better, fall, long, [giving](#), [ball](#), [letter](#), [nest](#), [ring](#), [sister](#), [song](#),
[wind](#), [chicken](#)

Level 6: Lessons 50 – 71. Phonics Skills: More final consonant blends, 2-Syllable words w/consonant blends; Initial Consonant Blends
Dolch Words: for, help, jump, once, stop, walk, bring, drink, black, small, after, much, from, under, grass, milk, stick, watch, thing.

Level 7: Lessons 72 – 86. Phonics Skills: Long ā spellings, au/aw, ar.
Dolch Words: make, play, said, ate, saw, say, again, may, came, made, take, gave, or, draw, eight, start, far, warm, away, because, does, cake, car, chair, day, father, game, name, rain, way, farmer, farmer.

Level 8: Lessons 87 – 100. Phonics Skills: Long vowel ē and Long ī spellings. Sentences
Dolch Words: funny, here, look, me, be, see, three, where, eat, head, like, please, pretty, ride, there, white, fly, give, live, been, by, buy, five, green, any, read, light, never, only, own, show, right, sleep, these, very, why, carry, clean, keep, my, try, myself, baby, bear, bread, eye, feet, fire, money, morning, seed, sheep, street, time, tree, night, mother, window, children, kitty.

Level 9: Lessons 101 – 117. Phonics Skills: ough, gh=f, Long vowel ō spellings, long and short oo, ow, ou; oy, oi; Long vowel ū spellings.
Dolch Words: blue, come, down, go, to, do, two, don't, brown, four, good, new, no, now, our, out, so, those, soon, floor, flower, too, who, could, how, know, old, open, found, round, some, think, always, around, cold, would, your, about, grow, hold, laugh, done, find, every, over, before, together, yellow, both, goes, boat, boy, brother, coat, cow, door, ground, school, snow, toy, water, wood, home, house, picture, table, horse, paper, party, good-bye, shoe, corn.

Level 10: Lessons 118 – 128. Phonics Skills: er/ir/or/ur/ear, -le, ph-f, ci/ti/etc, mb, silent h, wr, st-s/ft-f, ch-k/ps-s, y = ĭ
Dolch Words: little, thank, write, today, apple, use, work, first, kind, bird, birthday, Christmas, garden, girl, squirrel, Santa Claus.

Key to Dolch Word Distribution in Blumenfeld's Alpha-Phonics

Word in black font are Dolch sight-vocabulary Service words (220 words) that are taught in *Blumenfeld's Alpha-Phonics Workbook*

Words in blue font are Dolch sight-vocabulary Nouns (95 words) that are taught in *Blumenfeld's Alpha-Phonics Workbook (2005)*.

Underlined words in black or blue are words that are NOT taught in the *Alpha-Phonics Workbook*, but are encountered in the *Alpha-Phonics First Reader* for that level.

Underlined words in green are Dolch service words that are not in *Blumenfeld's Alpha-Phonics Workbook* or *Blumenfeld's First Readers*. They are grouped with in their proper spelling-family to show that they are decodable.

Underlined words in purple are Dolch nouns that are not in *Blumenfeld's Alpha-Phonics Workbook* or *First Readers*. They are grouped with their proper spelling families.

Statistics

Dolch Service Word List (220 words) Statistics

Eighteen Dolch sight-vocabulary services words are not taught in *Blumenfeld's Alpha-Phonics Workbook*. The words are: away, find, yellow, under, every, giving, over, because, before, both, first, goes, its, upon, kind, myself, seven, together. Approximately 95% of the Dolch sight-vocabulary service words are taught in the *Alpha-Phonics Workbook*.

Of these 18 service words missing from *Blumenfeld's Alpha-Phonics Workbook*, the following 14 are found in *Blumenfeld's First Readers*: away, find, into, under, every, over, because, before, does, first, its, kind, seven, together – leaving only 4 missing. An impressive 98% of the services words are taught in the *Blumenfeld's Alpha-Phonics System*.

Dolch Noun List (95 words) Statistics

Seventeen Dolch List Nouns are missing from *Blumenfeld's Alpha-Phonics*: chicken, children, corn, duck, farm, farmer, goodbye, horse, kitty, mother, party, paper, Santa Clause, shoe, squirrel, thing, window. 85% of the nouns are taught in *Blumenfeld's Alpha-Phonics Workbook*.

Of these 17 Dolch nouns missing from *Blumenfeld's Alpha-Phonics Workbook*, the following 10 nouns are found in the *First Readers*: chicken, children, duck, farm, horse, mother, paper, party, thing, window - leaving only 7 missing. An impressive 93% of the nouns are taught in the *Blumenfeld's Alpha-Phonics System*.

Note from Internet Publisher: Donald L. Potter

December 16, 2010

Since 1994 I have been teaching Samuel L. Blumenfeld's *Alpha-Phonics* to children of all ages. I was puzzled that in the public schools and all over the Internet people are pushing sight-vocabulary instruction. Sam has written extensively against sight-vocabulary instruction. He believes that it causes a form of reading disability, which has all the characteristics of dyslexia. Sam and I have noticed that when students learn to read words phonetically their dyslexia symptoms mysteriously vanish. This is especially true when his program is taught with spelling and cursive handwriting.

This love affair, which the reading establishment seems to have with the Dolch Basic Sight Vocabulary, is very mysterious. I have argued against the use of sight-words most of my career in education. For several years now, I have taught *Blumenfeld's Alpha-Phonics* to first and second-grade tutoring students at my school and in private tutoring. Many of these students have received heavy sight-word instruction before coming to me. **I believe that it was that instruction that created their reading problems.** I have tried to talk to the student's teachers, all of whom were trained in the *Guided Reading* (and *Leveled Literacy Intervention*) method of teaching reading with mini-lessons. These lessons emphasize sight-words and a little hit and miss phonics instruction selected at random from beginning readers (Leveled Readers) that emphasize guessing the meaning of words from a base of memorized sight-words, context, and picture clues. The teachers are oblivious to the possibility that their sight-vocabulary instruction could be causing the very problems for which the children are being referred to me for reading tutoring.

Leaving the complicated theoretical aspects of the subject for a later date, the purpose of this study is to determine whether it is necessary to teach a sight-vocabulary to beginning readers with whole-word memorization (look-say). When I ask teachers why they teach the Dolch sight-vocabulary list, they inevitably tell me that it is necessary because the words are too irregular to teach with phonics and that instant recognition of these high frequency words without phonics or sounding out will enable to student to develop higher fluency and comprehension. I maintain that these contentions are pure myths. To the contrary, I believe that it is **completely unnecessary** and **highly counterproductive** to teach a sight-word vocabulary **previous to** and **independent of** intensive phonics-first.

This study proves conclusively that students who learn to read with intensive phonics do learn to read and spell the Dolch sight-vocabulary. The difference is in HOW they learn to do it: accurately with phonics instead of inaccurately with whole-word memorization.

Please visit my "Samuel L. Blumenfeld Reading Clinic" page on my www.donpotter.net. There you will find supplemental material for teaching *Blumenfeld's Alpha-Phonics* as well as essays that Mr. Blumenfeld published during his long and distinguished career in education.

I recently published the *First Readers* as a single volume anthology: *First Reader's Anthology*.

This study would apply equally to the *Fry Instant Words* or any other similar list of high frequency words.

This document was last revised, February 10, 2011, 2/7/13, 1/23/21, 9/9/21.

You can download *Alpha-Phonics Workbook* and *Alpha-Phonics Instruction Manual*.

http://donpotter.net/pdf/alpha_phonics.pdf

http://donpotter.net/pdf/alpha_phonics_im.pdf

The Dolch Basic Sight Vocabulary: Alphabetical Order

a about after again all always am an and any are around as ask at ate away be because been before best better big black blue both bring brown but buy by call came can carry clean cold come could cut did do does done don't down draw drink eat eight every fall far fast find first five fly for found four from full funny gave get give go goes going good got green grow had has have he help her here him his hold hot how hurt I if in into is it its jump just keep kind know laugh let light like little live long look made make many may me much must my myself never new no not now of off old on once one only open or our out over own pick play please pretty pull put ran read red ride right round run said saw say see seven shall she show sing sit six sleep small so some soon start stop take tell ten thank that the their them then there these they think this those three to today together too try two under up upon us use very walk want warm was wash we well went were what when where which white who why will wish with work would write yellow yes you your

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 List¹

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

Further Thoughts on the Dolch Basic Sight Vocabulary

Notice carefully that the Dolch List Vocabulary was originally published in grammatical categories. It was not published in alphabetical or grade level order. I do not know who classified the words into grade levels. I believe that Dolch used grammatical words to further the cause of the look-and-say method. Choosing words of high grammatical functionality provided the students with the words necessary for syntactical guessing from the context.

The theory behind the sight-vocabulary (look-and-say) method of teaching is built on the fact that most of the words in any running texts will be made up mostly of a relatively small common core of frequently repeated words. Leonard Ayres established that fact with his 1914 *Measuring Scale for Ability in Spelling*. This is called the “high frequency word effect” and is what makes the guessing method work. It was assumed the first order of business in teaching reading would be to enable student to identify these words instantly without phonetics analysis. It was assumed that phonetic analysis of any kind would slow down the identification of the words and perhaps leads to mindless word calling – and diminished comprehension. That’s the theory. I consider it defective.

Raymond Laurita wrote a penetrating investigation entitled, “A Critical Examination of the Psychology of the Whole Word Method.” I have republished it on my website. I am including his more detailed essay, “Basic Sight Vocabulary – A Help or a Hindrance” as an appendix at the end of this paper.

Dr. Patrick Groff spoke on the dangers of sight-words back in 1967 at a Reading Reform Conference. I have published his talk, “Sight Words: The Humpty Dumpty of Reading Instruction,” on my education page.

Miss Geraldine Rodgers has also written extensively on the dangers of sight-vocabulary. You can learn more about her work on my website. I have a three-part YouTube clip which presents a chapter “Why Would Anyone in His Right Mind Want to Teach Sight Words Anyway?” from her book of essays, *The Case for the Prosecution, In the Trial of Silent Reading “Comprehension” Tests, Charged with the Destruction of America’s Schools*.

Elizabeth Brown has done some very detailed investigation into the Dolch List. Visit her website: www.thephonicspage.org.

Diane McGuinness has a very excellent and highly detailed study of sight-words in her 1999 book, *Why Our Children Can’t Read and What You Can Do About It*.

I believe it is even possible to detect and measure the damage to students’ reading abilities caused by the teaching sight-vocabulary with whole-word memorization techniques. The test is called, *The Miller Word Identification Assessment*. It is available for free on my website.

BASIC SIGHT VOCABULARY - A HELP OR A HINDRANCE?

By. Mr. Raymond Lautita

(Reprinted from the SPELLING PROGRESS BULLETIN - summer 1966)

Perhaps the most difficult task of the corrective-remedial teacher concerns the problem of basic sight vocabulary. The poor reader has a smattering of half-learned, often confused words to support his pitiful attempts at reading. A variety of instructional techniques have been developed but the acquisition of a substantial number of basic or service words remains a continuing problem for both the moderate and severe reading disability.

A typical and comprehensive example of service words is the list developed by Dr. Edward Dolch. The Dolch Basic Sight Vocabulary List is widely used as the basis for the reading series written by Dolch and others for use specifically with retarded readers. The Dolch list, made up of 220 words, "constitutes about 65%, of all words in the reading material of the primary grades and nearly 60%, of those in the intermediate grades."¹ The problem of the retarded reader is complex and frustrating, for until he develops mastery of these necessary "cluing" words, he is unable to utilize context as a technique in deciphering unknown words. He stumbles through every passage read, making numerous errors until he is thoroughly defeated.

Children who suffer this type of disability, literally all of the hardcore cases, are doomed without specific diagnosis and rehabilitation. Unfortunately, the number of children receiving this kind of help is infinitesimally small and the number of people trained to dispense it even smaller.

It seems obvious then that the only way to eradicate or at least lessen the problem, is to search for an answer to the question, "Why are so many children crippled because of their inability to cope with the problems imposed by the basic or sight vocabulary?"

Over the past several years, a number of answers to the question have become apparent as a result of practical research with hundreds of disabled children. First, the very nature of a basic sight vocabulary is an immediate stumbling block to large numbers of children. It imposes severe handicaps on the culturally deprived, the visually or aurally immature, children suffering from visual or auditory perception or discrimination difficulty, those experiencing directional control problems and the child with speech difficulty.

Service words must be mastered if progress is to be made in the developmental reading programs used in the schools. Yet these words are for the most part un-phonetic, abstract, and not liable to precise definition. Instructions accompanying the Dolch Sight Vocabulary Cards state that these are "Words - pronouns, adjectives, etc. - which cannot be learned from pictures, yet must be known if a child is to read with confidence." Understanding must come then through usage learned from the child's speech models, or during a relatively short exposure to these words in school situations.

It is a fact that great numbers of children have not learned and are not learning these words, either at sight or with confidence. The distinct possibility exists that perhaps basic words, learned at sight, are not the best way to initiate reading instruction in view of the failure of so many to develop reading skills by means of this technique.

A second possible answer to the question suggests itself. Every teacher has seen the havoc that confused perceptual responses can cause. There are cases that can best be described as being massive in that intelligent reading is impossible because of the profusion of confused, omitted and substituted words. A close look at the Dolch list offers a possible explanation for this phenomenon. The number of words of similar configuration is immediately apparent. Once a child experiences difficulty and has only configuration to rely on as a tool of attack, he becomes heir to all the errors of generations of disabled readers.

Confusing words of similar configuration is a fault more or less common to all reading disabilities. It is likewise apparent in many normally proficient readers and possibly acts as an inhibitory factor in full reading comprehension. The possibilities for confused responses are infinite, especially when it is remembered that instruction in the alphabet and phonics as aids in word recognition are instituted after, or at best, simultaneous with, the learning of words at sight.²

Once a confused perceptual pattern becomes established, it becomes the child's habitual response pattern for printed symbols unless replaced with a different approach. Attempts at instruction in the basic sight words without simultaneous instruction in word and letter recognition are generally unsuccessful for remedial students. Table I indicates some of the possible configurational confusions with words found on the Dolch list. Table II is a list of confused responses observed and recorded through the years by this instructor, errors believed to flow directly from initial word and letter confusions.

TABLE I

This table contains words selected from the Dolch Basic Sight Vocabulary List which have configurational similarity and have the potential to contribute to the development of visual response patterning which is unreliable and confused.

is-in-on-no-an-or	come-came-can
at-to-it-if-of-off	is-as-am-an-any
we-me-my-may-many	do-does-goes-go
be-by-buy-big	give-gave-get
he-her-here-where-were	not-no-on-now
were-weren't-want-when-then	full-fall-fell
in-an-are-any-many	but-put-pull-push
call-cold-could-would	be-he-the-we
they-then-them-there-their	live-like
well-will-with-which-wish	or-are-of-on
new-now-how-who-own-no	then-when
you-your-our-or	up-us-use
his-him-had-has-have	up-us-use
there-where-were	so-soon
these-those-this-that	for-from-of

TABLE II

This table contains a number of observed errors over a period of years and which appear to be the direct result of early configurational confusion with resultant confused visual response patterning.

about-above	ever-even-never	main-mountain
aim-am-I'm	eyes-yes	memorial-memories
aimed-named	face-force	other-older
alike-Alice	fast – first	parrot-pattern
away-always	feeding-feeling	plant-paint
barn-burn	five-fire-fine-find	quiet-quite-quick
beak-back	fly-flew	raised-risen
beat-bird-ball	fluttering-floating	robbing-rubbing
bees-hears	for-your	sad-said
beneath-beneficial	forest-fasten	sharpen-sandpaper
build-built	forty-thirty	shot-sort
burn-brown	friend-fellows	sight-straight
calf-clip	funny-furry	sincerity-insect
chance-change	grain-green	speeding-sleeping
circus-circle	greater-getting	something-sometimes
clawing-climbing	guard-ground	stuck-stick
clear-clean	had-hid	stung-struck
cloth-clothes	having-waving	sweet-soft
cooked-cooled	head-heard	tell-tall
creatures-cutters	heart-head-hard-hand	told-took-talk
cuffs-covers	helmet-metal	thin-tiny
damaged-danger	home-horse-house	took-tool
darting-darkening	horny-hungry	tried-tied
decided-destroyed	hunt-hurt	troops-trappers
drink-duck	inked-alike	trot-trip
drive-dive	into-until	warring-worrying
drop-drip	lay-laid	was-weed
eagle-age	lead-learn	went-wait
even-eleven	lives-leaves	whip-wipe
evening-eleventh	made-marry	winter-water

A third possible answer to the question relates to the problem of reversals. This is an area in which considerable research has been done but which continues to confound all teachers of reading. There is as yet no definite understanding of the causes of reversals and, of more concern to teachers, there is no pragmatic approach that guarantees correction.³ Is it possible that the research done has been oriented along the wrong lines and that the answer lies in another, less complex direction?

When a child is exposed to a word at sight, prior to alphabetic training or instruction in phonics, he is of necessity responding to a configuration or shape. Thus when the word in is taught, the child responds, not to two separate symbols in a serial arrangement, symbols that have unique and recognizable visual and auditory characteristics, but rather his response is primarily directed toward an immediate perception of a configuration – in

When he is then exposed to words of similar configuration, what assurance do we have that the child has observed the subtle changes which have occurred within the configuration, as in the word no? In fact, what assurance do we have that the word no will not elicit the same response? The child at this time is immature and does not possess well-developed powers of discrimination, either aurally or visually. His capacity for directional control is in the formative stages and will take months, even years, to stabilize into an unflinching left-right response pattern.⁴

The possibility exists that reversals are not caused in all cases by confused dominance. Rather, it is eminently possible that they are the result of confused visual response patterning caused by the introduction of whole words before the child is prepared to respond with a consistent, serial method of apprehension. The child who has not developed an understanding of the serial nature of language, or who has not acquired a thorough recognition of the letters of the alphabet, is liable to the evident confusions that result from the similarities inherent in the English print system.

What is the difference between was saw can sun or in is an on no me we to the child who isn't cognizant of the nuances of the letters comprising the language and who is responding primarily to word configuration? Table III contains a partial list of words on the Dolch list which lend themselves to reversal, stemming again from faulty visual patterning resulting from too early exposure to whole words.

Because of the primarily visual nature of initial instruction in sight words, the retarded reader uses visual clues as his initial means of word attack. It follows that confusion about letters and words, because of unreliable directional control, would cripple even the most intelligent and well-motivated students. Table IV contains a partial list of observed reversals which it has been concluded are a natural outgrowth of the condition described.

There has been, and will continue to be, a controversy over the whole word method as opposed to the phonetic approach to reading instruction. It isn't intended here to fan the fires of that controversy but rather to offer new direction in the search for answers.

There are a great many questions which need to be answered. Does initial exposure to whole words establish a habitual response pattern that makes later instruction in the alphabet and phonics almost futile? How permanent and pervasive is the damage resulting from early discrimination and directional difficulties? Should the alphabet be taught prior to formal reading instruction as an aid to the child in word recognition? Should words of a concrete and phonetic nature be taught initially to develop a more sound understanding of the structure and serial nature of language? Are letter confusions the result of prior experiences with words of similar configuration which have elicited faulty visual and auditory responses? Do children from deprived backgrounds need a period of pro-school instruction prior to exposure to printed language? Do we have adequate programs for the early detection and remediation of potential reading disabilities?

More significantly, do the theories of D. O. Hebb, which indicate that perception is the result of serial apprehension, cast doubt on the almost universal acceptance of the whole word method as an initial teaching technique? ⁵ Dr. Hebb, of McGill University, has developed a theory of perception opposed to the idea of “gestalt” on which the whole word method is based.⁶ Hebb states that “the course of perceptual learning in man is gradual, proceeding from a dominance of color, through a period of separate attention to each part of the figure, to a gradually arrived at identification of the whole as a whole, an apparently simultaneous instead of a serial apprehension.”⁷

Thus a child either unfamiliar with, or confused about, the letters of the alphabet, would be liable to a condition that could completely debilitate him. It is the opinion of this writer that this conclusion is present in sufficient numbers to warrant further investigation.

Many of the questions posed here lend themselves to investigation by classroom teachers interested in doing valuable and rewarding research at the local level. In the long run, it may be the teacher in the classroom who alone possesses the information requisite for any really constructive and basic changes.

TABLE

This table contains words taken from the Dolch Basic Sight Vocabulary list which are particularly susceptible to reversal because of their structure.

are-red	eat-ate	him-my	never-every	own-now	you-not
at-to	far-ran	his-so	no-on	to-into	may-am
as-so	for-from	if-for	not-to	was-saw	in-no
big-go	got-to	let-tell	now-who	wash-shall	it-at
both-those	he-the	out-to	of-for	we-me	its-so
don't-not	help-play	my-am	one-no	were-write	just-start
where-here	with-that	you-they	how-who		

TABLE IV

This table contains a number of errors observed which are believed to result from early directional confusion and resultant unreliable visual response patterning. These errors are extremely subtle and do not always appear to be reversals. Most of the errors observed over the years can be traced to faulty visual or auditory clues. The errors are classed as horizontal reversals, vertical reversals, and a broad grouping involving the letters r-h-n-u-v-m.

Vertical

bad-pad	but-put	do-go	got-but
beed-beep	dad-pad	does-goes	me-we
but-pet	den-pen	drag-drop	pan-band

Horizontal

aimed-named	calm-clam	raised-risen	guard-ground	forest-fasten
beater-bailed	could-cloud	size-inside	inked-alike	helmet-metal
ben-den	deep-beep	eagle-age	line-outline	sight-straight
brood-barn	drag-gray	ever-very	stem-snert	whip-wipe
brown-drown	never-serve	eyes-yes	sun-us	
calf-clip	no-want	flat-calf	trap-tar	

r-h-u-n-v-w-m

behind-beneath	fire-five	hand-hard
diver-driven	funny-furry	no-more
even-over	gun-gum	not-you
find-five	met-net	often-after

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Note from Internet Publisher: Donald L. Potter

October 10, 2005

I originally published Mr. Laurita's essay as a scanned copy over a year ago. I am pleased to republish it in a freshly typed edition for quicker download and easier reading. This essay is one of the very finest exposes of the harm done by teaching a sight-word vocabulary to students beginning to learn to read. I would like to thank Mr. Laurita for giving me permission to republish this essay for free world-wide distribution on the Internet.

Other essays by Mr. Laurita are available on the Education Page of my website, www.donpotter.net. I especially recommend his masterpiece, *Orthographic Structuralism: The New Spelling*.

Helen Lowe did some very detailed and convincing work analyzing the relationship between the whole-word methods and the patterns of errors student make.