A BASIC SIGHT VOCABULARY

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Teachers of all grades, from Grade II on, find pupils who have very small or no sight vocabularies. The teachers wish to remedy this condition by drilling on the sight words that will be of most value to these children in their reading. But which are those sight words? The vocabulary of a particular primer will not do because the child's reading is now chiefly in books other than the basal series with which he started and also because the vocabularies of most primers contain many words that, though needed at the primer stage, are later not of general usefulness. No standard word list will do because all such lists contain five hundred words or more, too many to be given drill as a sight vocabulary.

In view of these facts, it may well be assumed that the most essential of the words that are basic to children's reading, and therefore needed as a sight vocabulary, will surely be included in *all* the best lists of words used by children. A comparison of those lists was therefore the logical means of securing a basic sight vocabulary. The first list considered was naturally the vocabulary published by the Child Study Committee of the International Kindergarten Union,[1] which is a summary of many studies in this field. This list contains 2,596 words, which are the most frequent of 7,000 different words found to be known to children before entering Grade I. It was found that, if the words of a frequency of 100 or more (inflected forms being combined) were chosen from this list, a total of 510 words was secured, which is about the number of words on the other two lists which were used. The second list was the first five hundred of the Gates list,[2] which is too well known to need description and which has been used as a basis for many studies in reading vocabulary.

[1] Child Study Committee of the International Kindergarten Union, *A Study of the Vocabulary of Children before Entering the First Grade.* Washington: International Kindergarten Union (1201 Sixteenth Street, N.W.), 1928.

[2] Arthur I. Gates, *A Reading Vocabulary for the Primary Grades.* New York: Teachers College, Columbia University, 1926.

The third list was that compiled by Wheeler and Howell,[1] consisting of the 453 words most frequently found in ten primers and ten first readers published between 1922 and 1929. This list represents as well as does anything available the actual reading materials common in Grade I and therefore the vocabulary upon which, presumably, all later grade reading is built. Each of these three lists is compiled on a dictionary basis (that is, regularly inflected forms of a single root are combined), and a comparison of the three lists could easily be made. From this comparison the list on pages 458–59 was secured.

This list may well be called "basic" because it includes the "tool" words that are used in all writing, no matter what the subject. Conjunctions join clauses regardless of what the clauses are about; prepositions introduce phrases of every kind; pronouns stand for any and all persons and things; adverbs modify every kind of verb; and adjectives modify every kind of noun. Verbs denote action or being of every sort of subject, and the auxiliaries, practically all of which are included in this list, are used with all the verbs of the language.

This list is not perfect, since no list secured from frequency counts can be flawless. The chances of use that enter into frequency counts cause some unimportant words to secure higher frequencies than some more important words. For instance, "jump" cannot be considered a word of wide usefulness, yet on these vocabulary lists it ranked with words like "do" or "make." Perhaps the most unexplainable case is the word "cut." Word-counting will always give some such cases. Word-counting is also certain to leave out of a list some words of importance which should be included but which did not happen to be used often enough in the sampling of material counted.

If the criterion of appearance on all three lists had been rigidly adhered to, the twenty-seven words marked with asterisks would have been cut from the list. This elimination would have been unfortunate, since these words appear in the first 510 of the International Kindergarten Union list and in the first 500 of the Gates list. Many of these words obviously belong with others on the basic list. "Which" belongs with "who" and "that," "done" and "goes" belong with "did" and "go," "start" belongs with "stop," and "write"

[1] H. E. Wheeler and Emma A. Howell, "A First-Grade Vocabulary Study," *Elementary School Journal*, XXXI (September, 1930), 52–60.

A BASIC SIGHT VOCABULARY OF 220 WORDS, COMPRISING ALL WORDS, EXCEPT NOUNS, COMMON TO THE WORD LIST OF INTERNATIONAL KINDERGARTEN UNION, THE GATES LIST, AND THE WHEELER-HOWELL LIST

CONJUNCTIONS
and
as
because
but
if
or

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

PRONOUNS
he
her
him
his
I
it
*its
me
my
*myself
our
she
that
their
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

* The twenty-seven words marked with asterisks were included in only two of the lists.

VERBS—*Cont.*	like	ride	thank
got	live	run	think
grow	look	said	*try
had	made	saw	*use
has	make	say	walk
have	may	see	want
help	must	shall	was
hold	open	show	*wash
*hurt	*pick	sing	went
is	play	sit	were
jump	please	sleep	will
keep	pull	*start	wish
know	put	stop	work
laugh	ran	take	would
let	read	tell	*write

with "read." The numbers under ten belong with the other numbers listed. For this reason these twenty-seven words are included in the basic list; they add a few that do not belong but more that seem as important as others on the list.

It is to be especially noted that this basic sight vocabulary includes no nouns. Nouns cannot be of universal use because each noun is tied to special subject matter. If new subject matter is used, new nouns must be used. Unfortunately, teachers have spent a great deal of energy in teaching the nouns in primers as sight words, and then, as the later books take up new materials, new nouns must be used and not those that have been learned. Perhaps one reason that many children in the intermediate grades do not know by sight the words on this basic list is that the emphasis on sight teaching has been on nouns instead of on these "tool" words. Some few nouns, such as "thing" or "man," do recur a great deal, but in the case of most nouns the rule applies that they are "local" to a particular activity or interest. The nouns common to the three lists are mainly local to young children's interests and to first-grade activities. They are in no sense basic to all elementary-school reading. That the reader may see this fact for himself, the list of nouns is given on page 460.

It is not claimed that the basic list of 220 words includes all the words that the elementary-school pupil should know by sight; the claim is only that he should at least know these. Consequently, when a child in any grade is found lacking in sight vocabulary, he should be tested to see which of these words he does know and should then

be trained to recognize instantly by sight the words that he does not know. For this purpose small cards with the words printed in primer type on both sides are most convenient. The cards can be flashed before the pupil by the teacher or by another pupil, any unknown word named for the subject by the tester (who sees the word on the reverse of the card), and the pack gone over again and again until all 220

95 NOUNS COMMON TO THE THREE WORD LISTS BUT NOT RECOMMENDED FOR A BASIC SIGHT VOCABULARY

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

words are known with certainty. A daily record of words known can be used to show the learner a curve that indicates how he is improving. When the pupil recognizes these 220 words instantly and easily, he will have a "capital" of word knowledge with which he can attack any reading matter and, with guessing from context and perhaps some help from sounding, get something out of it. If his sounding is weak, training in that skill will complete the remedial process, and the pupil will be able to do the learning from books that school work demands.