

Nellie Edge Online Seminar #3

Accelerated Literacy With High-Frequency Sight Words: We Call Them "Heart Words" FAQ

Why do you use the term high-frequency "heart words" instead of star words, popcorn, or rainbow words? We want the children to know these words instantly "by heart!" These are also the words that let children write heart-connecting sentences such as "I love you." and "I love my dad."

Do the small colored "heart word" sets come back to school after the child learns them? No, most teachers have them practice and keep the sets at home in a growing collection in the child's special "heart word" box. Each set is a special literacy gift for the child. Most teachers gift the child with the next set of "heart words" on a new ring after he has mastered the earlier set. In one kindergarten, the "heart word" ritual includes bringing back their ring of "heart words" and receiving the new set of words they have mastered to attach to the same ring. If children master the first four sets, they receive a large ring, big enough for new first grade words.

Do all the sets of words go home at once? No! Every child gets their first set of pink "heart words" to take home after most of the words have been introduced to the class early in the year (September). After that, we differentiate learning, and the next set goes home after the child has demonstrated mastery of the earlier set. The child knows that nightly practice is expected, and they are excited to meet their first and later "heart word" targets. They are highly motivated by the challenge of getting to work on the next set of 15-16 words! Children always know what their current learning targets are. They only take home the next set of "heart words" to practice after the previous set is mastered. Some highly visual learners have mastered all four sets by December while less experience learners may still be working on the first set.

When do the "heart words" go on the word wall? After a word has been introduced and practiced using multisensory strategies (*Sing, Sign, Spell, and Read!*) then the children watch as the teacher puts the new word up on the word wall. Sometimes the class sings the spelling song when the word goes up and reviews the other "heart words" on the word wall. It is important that children know where to access the word.

Why did you choose the colors pink, purple (lavender), yellow and green? Personal preference! I chose colors that would be easy to find paper choices for, and I noted color connections: Pink and purple are symbolic of "heart words"; yellow means "wait and work a little longer—you're almost there"; green means "Go: You finished all 62 words!" You can choose any consistent colors for small sets of high-frequency words that coordinate with your large wall charts and word wall.

How did you choose these words? These are the words kindergartners used most in writing-to-read classrooms. We looked at words that kindergarten children actually write—which are somewhat different than traditional Basel word lists! It is satisfying for children to read and write “I love you” and so those words are introduced first. We use these same powerful words as our anchor sentence for kindergarten-friendly handwriting.

How do you test the child for mastery? Every teacher has a system that works for his or her teaching routine. Children are usually eager to take the next “heart word” recognition challenge using one of our wall or floor “heart word” charts and to demonstrate writing mastery. Sometimes children are assessed during morning settling-in time; other children spend a few minutes of their “literacy choice time” or recess time with their teacher. In some classes, each child proudly performs their new skills for the whole class and receives a class cheer! Children are very excited—and proud—when they know they’ve reached a new goal! They encourage each other to keep practicing. We intentionally build in lots of motivation.

With the pink and purple sets of “heart words,” we encourage you to assess that each child can efficiently print the word—not just visually remember it.

What Do You Do for Highly Proficient Writers Who Quickly Learn All 62 Pink, Purple, Yellow and Green “Heart Words”?

First we make sure the child can instantly write all of the words (with good handwriting) —not just read them! Then teachers can invite the child to create their own personal new set of words such as “Princess Words” or “Elephant and Piggie words.” (For teachers using our Elephant and Piggie Family Book Club strategies, these words are often given as the next learning challenge; we print them on grey hearts. This supports children as they use Mo Willems’ books as mentor texts for their own narrative story writing.) Some children like to create a new learning challenge with the most frequently used words from their writing workshop notebooks or start on the school’s first-grade list.

How do children transition with “heart words” into first grade?

For a whole school commitment to excellence, it is important for kindergarten teachers to collaborate with the K-2 team (or district literacy coordinators) and incorporate first and second grade word lists, dividing them into rings of 14-16 color-coded “heart words.” (The children LOVE continuing to learn new sets of “heart words” in first grade!) Our colleague, Laura Flocker, adds blue, peach, red, and flesh colored “heart words,” and many motivated kindergartners master over 100 words by the end of the year. (School Die Cut Machines make creating new sets of “heart words” much easier than asking volunteers to cut them!) This approach dramatically accelerates mastery of high-frequency words. Children simply love being able to continue having clear achievable

learning targets in the primary grades—and so do their parents! **We make learning visible. We differentiate the level of challenge...and we celebrate mastery.**

How many “heart words” do you introduce at a time?

We only introduce one “heart word” at a time so children can sing, sign, spell it, and write it in multiple contexts. These first words are children’s anchors when learning how print works. Depending on your class, you may introduce two to four new words every week, always going back and reviewing the previous words. We usually introduce a new word with the *Sing, Sign, Spell and Read!* song and make it a special, multisensory learning experience. Writing the word multiple times on white boards is common.

How do I integrate “heart words” with the high-frequency words from our adopted reading programs?

If you look at the adopted reading program lists, you will find that most of the adopted reading program words are already covered in our “heart word” sets. Add any new ones to your green list or just add an additional set of words—maybe blue “heart words” to cover any that are needed. Because this is a writing-to-read approach, it is especially important that children be encouraged early on to write heart connecting sentences. We have demonstrated how powerfully early writing teaches reading.

Do you introduce all pink “heart words” at once? How do kids differentiate between them?

No, we definitely do not introduce them all at once. We weave them into our handwriting and word work activities and sentences one at a time so that most children have a solid grasp of one sentence such as “I love you.” before they begin building fluency with “I see the cat.” However, many of your highly visual children will master all of the first set of words and sentences quickly because they will also be practicing at home. Children do not get to practice the second purple set of “heart words” at home until they have mastered the pink set. That is how we differentiate learning. At school we continue challenging all children to keep learning new words. We expect the introduced words to be spelled conventionally. Some children need to access them on the word wall while others will already know many of them “by heart!”

If I am wanting to begin now using a more systematic, integrated and authentic approach to writing, where should I begin?

Teach the pink “heart words” through joyful accelerated literacy strategies. Have your students write from memory “heart word” sentences every day until all children have mastery writing three or four “heart word” sentences with confidence and delight. Make sure to balance this with CVC word work and encoding sounds to print (phonics practice) during writing workshop time.