

10-1-1984

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### Recommended Citation

Schell, L. M. (1984). Teaching Confused Words. *Reading Horizons: A Journal of Literacy and Language Arts*, 25 (1). Retrieved from [https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/reading\\_horizons/vol25/iss1/4](https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/reading_horizons/vol25/iss1/4)

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# TEACHING CONFUSED WORDS

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LaMont read, "The dogs where barking," Todd often confused baby and body, and Dana frequently used ever, every, and even interchangeably.

There are several reasons for this typical behavior of those children who are having difficulty learning to read. One, the confused words have a high degree of graphic similarity; they look very much alike. Two, usually they represent abstract concepts. Most of these words are what linguists call "structure" or "empty" words. They have no concrete referents and their meanings are acquired only from the context in which they appear. Of, there, as, and for are such words. Something in human memory makes such words far more difficult to remember than words such as shoe, arm, or bike. Three, they are emotionally neutral. Words which are either positively or negatively emotional are more quickly learned and retained than are neutral ones.

If a child confuses look-alike words, we can't remediate the situation by relying on "business as usual" methods. Methods used previously may have contributed to the problem in the first place. Therefore, even though confused words are a subset of common sight words, we can't use methodology typically used to teach children sight words; we need to use procedures especially appropriate for the situation. Fortunately, much recent attention has been paid indirectly to this problem.

If we combine the above explanations of why these words are frequently confused with some recent research and suggestions by reading experts in recently published articles, the following recommendations of what to do when children repeatedly confuse words emerge.

1. Don't jump to the conclusion that intensive instruction is needed.

Many children confuse a word or two yet their comprehension isn't hindered to any appreciable degree nor is their reading growth impeded. Only when confusion is a hindrance to understanding or to further achievement should the confused words be focused on.

2. Study one confused word at a time. Studying two confused words simultaneously won't de-confuse the child but will only tend to prolong the confusion. Psychologists say that one incompletely learned word interferes with mastering the learning of

a look-alike word. Think of being introduced to identical twins: Joan and Jane. When you meet Joan the next day, do you say, "Hello, Joan" with certainty and confidence? Or do you hesitate, unsure of whether it's Joan or Jane? It's the same way with children and look-alike words. And occasionally the problem is more severe when there are triplets: Joan, Jane, and Jan (there, then, and them).

3. Study this one word first in isolation. Even though some reading specialists may not agree with this recommendation, the best research we have (Ehri and Wike; Singer, Samuels, and Spiroff) says that studying the word in isolation rather than context will focus the child's total attention on the graphic details of the word to be learned. To call the child's attention to the graphic details that distinguish one word from another, have the child:

- a. Spell the word orally while looking at it.
- b. Spell it orally from memory.
- c. Copy the word while looking at it.
- d. Write it from memory.

Children who repeatedly confuse visually similar words seem to be responding to the general shape of the word; they don't pay close attention to the significant details created by the letter. We need to use procedures such as those above to help the child to scrutinize the word and to establish an accurate image of it in the visual memory area of the brain.

4. Read the word in context. There are few commercial materials that focus on specific words. Therefore, teacher-constructed exercises are necessary. Two kinds are appropriate.

- a. Traditional exercises in which the child must write the word, e.g.,

A cowboy rides a \_\_\_\_\_.  
(horse) (homes)

- b. Teacher- or teacher-pupil-written stories in which the word appears repeatedly, e.g.,

What time is it? What made me sleep so late? What  
am I going to do today? I know what I will do. I  
will do what makes me happy!

5. Review the word regularly. Most children with reading problems need numerous exposures to and practice with learning words; they seem not to learn them as the result of one or two activities. Several educationally sound procedures such as the following may be used to provide variety in practice: WORDO (a variation of Bingo), flash cards from a word bank, a card readerk such as the Language Master, or more activities such as 4a and 4b above. An excellent technique—although slow—is to have the word written from memory after it has been flashed.

6. Practice recognitions in a flash situation. After much practice, the word should be presented—along with others that have been studied—in a flash situation of about one-half second. Either a tachistoscope can be used or the teacher or aide can

use a blank card as a shutter in front of the word on a word card. This stage is very important as the child is learning to recognize the word instantly without time to study it. Psychologists call this "cue reduction."

7. Now—and only now—introduce the second confused word. It is probably advisable to wait at least a week after you feel the child has mastered the first word before you start teaching the look-alike word. Use steps 3-6 above and make sure it too is mastered to nearly 100 percent accuracy in both a study and a flashed situation.

8. Present the confused words together in context. Again, because there are few commercial materials that provide practice on specific words, teacher-constructed exercises may be necessary such as those illustrated in step 4. Enough practice should be provided so that the child quickly and accurately reads the words without stumbling or hesitating.

9. Review periodically. Children who confuse look-alike words typically suffer from "Monday morning amnesia" and even a whole week of perfect responses doesn't guarantee future perfection. Periodic review is essential for lifelong mastery.

10. During the time the words are being studied, whenever the child stumbles over one of them, hesitates, or miscalls one, merely tell the child the word. Because the child has not yet mastered the word, don't say, "Look at it carefully," "Sound it out," "What is that word?" etc. This level of independence will come later as the child more nearly masters the word.

### Conclusion

Oftentimes past suggestions for helping children learn to distinguish between confused words didn't work with a high degree of assurance. But recent insights and research such as the articles listed below promise better, quicker, and more reliable results.

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