

# No Such Thing As Sight Words?

By Dr. Kelli Sandman-Hurley, Dyslexia Training Institute

What would you think if I told you there is no such thing as a sight word? For example, think about the word <sign>. What happens when you add the suffix <-al>? It becomes the word <signal> and the <g> suddenly makes sense because now it represents a phoneme. So the <g> in <sign> is in there to mark its connection to the words: signal, signature, designate and so on. This is a true word family. The word does is simply <do> + <es> like <goes> is <go> + <es>, the way we pronounce a word changes, but the way we spell it does not. The word been is <be> + <en> just like <being> is <be> + <ing>. The <w> in the word <two> is there to mark its relationship to twice, twin, between, twenty, twilight and so many more. The word <the> has a schwa at the end because is usually an unaccented syllable, and when you do accent the syllable then you do hear the <e>. And yes, very little children love this logic. Speaking of love, did you know that an English word cannot end in <v>, which is why <love>, <have>, <glove> and several others are spelled with <e> in addition to the fact that ancient scribes could not write an <u> and <v> next to each other without it looking like a <w>, which is another reason the <o> is in <love> and <glove>. The word <come> is spelled with an <e> to mark its relationship to <came> and in scribal times they could not use a <u> next to an <m> or it would look like the same letter. Interested?

## Here are Steps to Teaching Words that Don't Appear to Make Sense

1. First, there needs to be a conversation about what the word means. We have to instill in our students that our written language is based on meaning, in addition to phonology. So, to have a student 'sound out' a word, in many instances, will not work, and we brand those words 'sight words'. Let's use the word <people> to illustrate how to teach so-called 'sight words'.
2. After the discussion about the meaning of <people> and a consensus has been reached regarding the meaning, it's time to check out the history, etymology, of the word at [www.etymonline.com](http://www.etymonline.com). There you will learn that the word <people> is derived from the Latin <populous>. This is a great opportunity to talk about how many English words started as Latin words. Now it's time for the students to pose a hypothesis, with some guidance of course, 'Is it possible that the <o> in <people> is there to mark its connection to <populous> or <population>?' It is certainly plausible since they share meaning. Low and behold, a quick trip to Etymonline and the word <population> confirms that <people> is related to <population>. Aha! That is why that pesky <o> is in the word <people>, it's not crazy at all. The <o> is called an etymological marker and yes, our students do understand this terminology and we use it often.
3. Now that the students *understand* the spelling of <people> they are more likely to spell it correctly and also be able to pronounce (read) it as well. Now they can invoke what they know about phonology and pronounce it /pe pəl/.

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4. Lastly when a student comes across a 'sight word', or a word that they cannot remember how to spell or pronounce (read), they now know how to investigate the word to understand not only that particular word, but English orthography.

Let's revisit the word <sign> and take a look visual representation to illustrate how to teach a student about true word families and how the pronunciation of a word can shift based on its morphological parts. It is important to allow the students to notice the phonological shifts and announce them to you. This matrix was created for free at:

<http://www.neilramden.co.uk/spelling/matrix/>

|          |             |     |            |
|----------|-------------|-----|------------|
| de<br>re | <b>sign</b> | al  | ing        |
|          |             | ate | ion<br>ure |
|          |             | i   | fy         |
|          |             | ing |            |

The students can also build word sums with the base <sign>. While they create these word sums, they announce each letter (not pronouncing the word) and when they get to the process arrow, they announce that the word is 'rewritten as' and they write the word as a whole. Below are three word sums of many from the matrix above.

sign + al → sign

sign + ate + ure → signature

de + sign + ate → designate

Students find it refreshing when they learn that English is not crazy. They light up when they finally understand that English is an evolutionary language that has evolved over time and that words that seem 'crazy' are not crazy at all, but they have to investigate to understand how a word came to be spelled in its current iteration. This is just the tip of the iceberg and there is so much more we can share with our students. Here is a great video to kick off this type of instruction (Structured Word Inquiry). Enjoy the journey you and your students are about to take:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0mbuwZK0lr8>