

Rebecca Sitton's APPLESEED



PLANT THE SEEDS TO GROW SPELLING AND WORD-SKILL LITERACY.

Ask Rebecca

Rebecca,

My class is new to the Sourcebook program. I have some students who routinely miss at least half the words on a Word Test. What to do? They're getting failing grades and the parents are up in arms! They want the words before the test!

Paul Novak
Teacher

Dear Paul,

Who's failing?

We are failing to be sensitive to students and parents new to the Sourcebook methodology, both of whom are products of a customary spelling program that teaches students to spell just for a test. Here is information to solve your problem. The solution is threefold. It must share with parents why the rules have changed, address how to ensure that students do not miss so many words on the Word Test, and outline how to grade spelling during your transition to the Sourcebook methodology.

Let's start with parents.

Customary spelling programs allow students and parents to have the test words prior to the test. Students study the words just for the test—they memorize them, get their

passing grade, and then promptly forget the words. Gone! There is no transfer of the words to writing because the students learn the words short-term, not long-term. And the only reason we're teaching spelling is for writing.

This is a major problem, particularly as many state standards begin to require students to demonstrate they can write using conventional spelling and grammar, and now that the SAT includes a writing component in its battery of tests for college entrance information. If we pass students on a customary spelling test when they really don't know how to spell the words long-term, they fail later on tests that count—and they fail to learn to spell using the measuring stick of the community and any employer—spelling well in everyday writing.

The Cloze Story Word Test and the word skills taught in the Sourcebook program address this dilemma of students learning words just for a test. It is not a program based on short-term memorization of a “canned” list of words each week. Its focus is on understanding how words work to give students insights about all words, and then they apply this information to their spelling words.

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Ask Rebecca (continued)

Their spelling words are the words they miss on each unit's Word Test—that is, without having studied the words the night before. Then students' study is targeted to these words so that they learn them forever. The test is really a "survey" that tells us which words each individual student needs to learn, a list differentiated to students' needs. The spelling words are not predetermined by a program, and the spelling words cannot be studied just for the test. The result is that students learn to spell the words they need to become better writers.

Now, if we were to give students and parents the words on the Word Test before the test is administered, and the students studied the words just for the test, what information would the test give us? Not much. We'd only know which of the words among those they studied the night before that they recall the next morning at test time. And what would the result be? Grades that are hollow, invalid. Students who cannot spell in their writing.

Most parents understand that their child must learn to spell words for more than just a test. They know how important it is to their child to have the competence to spell well in everyday writing. And if we give them the words to study for the test, they know their child is learning the words just for the test. That's not good enough for them. Parents across the country are faulting the schools and their teachers because kids cannot spell. They say schools are not teaching spelling. They want a spelling curriculum!

The Sourcebook provides a curriculum of skills and words, and parents can be included in both. The skills are introduced to parents on each unit's Take-Home Task, an at-home activity. I recommend you provide students and parents with the Core Words list, a blackline master in your Sourcebook that lists all words that are tested at a grade throughout the school year. Since this list is in alphabetical order, it does not compromise the integrity of your Word Tests. No one knows which words among all those listed on the Core Words list will be on any one test. Yet, it makes the words students need to learn available for all to see. No surprises.

As you have probably already discovered, all words are systematically recycled on the Word Tests, so every student's spelling words are automatically recycled on subsequent tests—in fact, recycled many times to ensure their mastery. How students control their Word Test grades is to learn the words they miss so they do not miss them again and again.

The *Tutor Me Training CD-ROM Introduction to Parents* shares the Sourcebook curriculum with parents and helps them see the futility of teaching their child the spelling words prior to the test to make it look like their child can spell. It is a straightforward overview of the problem (teaching for short-term memory) and a guide to understanding the solution (teaching for long-term mastery). Look for [Tutor Me](#) on the order form.

Second, let's solve the problem of students missing too many words on the Word Test.

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Ask Rebecca (continued)

Students should not miss more than half the words on the Word Test. After the first test (which I suggest you do not grade), you can determine which students are at risk—missing more than half the words. Here is how to avoid the problem on future Word Tests. With your Sourcebook in hand, find the Teaching Notes that can instantly change this. Look for the section *Students with Spelling Challenges*. As in all other sections of the Teaching Notes, I anticipate your questions. Look for the sidenote question: *How can students challenged by spelling participate in the Word Test?* Read the information adjacent to this question for a quick, practical modification to solve the problem.

Keep in mind that students who are products of the customary methodology have many “holes” in their spelling foundation. Over time, these deficiencies will cease for most of your students. But for now, we need to limit the number of words they are missing for three reasons. First, we don’t want them to begin to think they cannot spell. This perception leads to other problems we don’t want. Second, it takes them far too long to fix their words on their test, write them on their take-home Words to Learn sheet, and in their stay-at-school Spelling Notebook. Third, when students have such a lengthy list of spelling words, their chance of learning all the words is slim. Let’s limit their spelling words for now to those that are the most critical for their writing success. The Word Test modifications will do this instantly.

Last, what about grading?

No failing grades, please. As you implement the Sourcebook program, share with students and parents that this new program has different expectations for spelling mastery than did their former spell-the-words-on-Friday program. It is harder to learn words “forever” than to learn words for one test. And it doesn’t happen instantly. Yet, once words are really learned, it makes writing easier and surely more acceptable!

This is a transition period, and your grades must reflect this. Be positive. Your grades should reflect growth and effort. They cannot be punitive. Let’s remember why your students are having problems! We allowed them to learn the words short-term. That wasn’t their fault; it was a shortcoming of ours. Now we’re moving ahead together, progressing toward long-term mastery of the words.

Let me know how it goes. I believe your students will soon show genuine progress. To speed up this growth, compliment them on each small increment of success. Remind parents to do so, too. Nothing is more motivating than success! Whether you think you can, or whether you think you can’t—you’re right!

Do you have a question? Call me at home or toll free at the office, send me an email, or set up a complimentary conference call for a group of colleagues who have questions. • email: rsitton@sittonspelling.com
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