

Phonics vs Sight Words — What Actually Works

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Should you be teaching sounds, or whole words? The two methods do different jobs, and knowing which one to reach for saves a lot of frustration.

What phonics actually does

Phonics teaches letters-to-sounds and blending. This lets a child sound out words they've never seen. The tradeoff: English spelling is inconsistent.

What sight words actually do

Common irregular words get memorized by sight. The tradeoff: memorization doesn't transfer to similar-looking words.

Why the fight is mostly pointless

Nearly every strong approach uses both — phonics to decode, memorized sight words for the common irregulars.

Regular spelling → sound it out together. Common irregular word → just tell them and move on.

What this looks like at home

- **Sound out regular words together.**
- **Just tell them the irregular ones.**
- **Read the same books repeatedly.** Repetition builds sight words.
- **Don't quiz mid-story.**

When to worry, and when not to

A child with no decoding strategy at all after months of regular reading is worth a second opinion from a teacher or tutor.