

**A MEASURING
SCALE FOR ABILITY
IN SPELLING**

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A measuring scale for ability in spelling by Leonard Porter Ayres

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Educational
Teach
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A MEASURING SCALE FOR ABILITY IN SPELLING

LEONARD P. AYRES



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A MEASURING SCALE FOR ABILITY IN SPELLING

During 1914 and the earlier months of 1915 the Division of Education of the Russell Sage Foundation has been conducting a study of spelling among school children with the object of developing a scale for measuring attainment in the spelling of common words. The object of this report is to describe the investigation and to present the scale which it has produced.

As a first step, it was decided to select a large number of the commonest words and to have them spelled by many school children in order to locate standards of spelling attainment in the several grades. In undertaking this work, it seemed worth while to have the children spell not merely common words, but the commonest words, in order to have the entire study based on what may be termed a foundation spelling vocabulary.

A FOUNDATION VOCABULARY

One thousand words were finally selected as constituting such a foundation vocabulary. They were chosen by combining the results of the four most extensive studies that have attempted to identify the words most commonly used in different sorts of English writing.

The first of these studies was published by the Rev. J. Knowles in London, England, in 1904 in a pamphlet entitled, "The London Point System of Reading for the Blind." The author says of it, "Taking passages from the English Bible and from various authors, containing 100,000 words, a list was made of the 353 words which occurred most frequently, and the number of times each occurred was noted."

The second of the studies was made by R. C. Eldridge of Niagara Falls and the results were published in 1911 in a pamphlet entitled, "Six Thousand Common English Words." Mr. Eldridge made an analysis of the vocabularies of 250 different articles taken from four issues of four Sunday newspapers published in Buffalo. He found that they contained a total vocabulary of 6,002 different words, which with their repetitions made an aggregate of 43,989 running words.

He reported the number of times that each word appeared.

The third study was conducted by the present writer in 1913 and the results were published by the Division of Education of the Russell Sage Foundation in a monograph entitled, "The Spelling Vocabularies of Personal and Business Letters." The study consisted of the tabulation of 23,629 words from 2,000 short letters written by 2,000 people. The total vocabulary used was found to consist of 2,001 different words and the number of appearances of each was reported.

The last of these four studies was carried through by W. A. Cook and M. V. O'Shea and the results presented in 1914 in a book entitled, "The Child and His Spelling," published by the Bobbs-Merrill Company. This study consisted of the tabulation of some 200,000 words taken from the family correspondence of 13 adults. The total vocabulary was found to consist of 5,200 different words and the number of times each occurred was reported.

FREQUENT USE OF A FEW WORDS

There is one salient characteristic common to all of these studies. This is the cumulative

evidence that a few words do most of our work when we write. In every one of the studies it was found that about nine words recur so frequently that they constitute in the aggregate one-fourth of the whole number of words written, while about 50 words constitute with their repetitions one-half of all the words we write. With the exception of *very*, these words are all monosyllables.

It seems reasonable to argue from such evidence that we should do well to find out from such studies as these which words those are that constitute the foundation vocabulary used in ordinary English writing and teach them in our schools so thoroughly that the children by every day use would permanently master them. It seems equally clear that such a list of words forms a better basis for determining standards of spelling attainment than would one made of less commonly used words. For these reasons it was determined to combine the results of the several studies so as to secure the most reliable available list as a foundation for the work.

At first the purpose was to identify the 2,000 most commonly used words, but this project was abandoned because it was soon found to be impossible of realization. It is

easily possible to identify the 10 commonest words in written English. These are probably *the, and, of, to, I, a, in, that, you, for*. With their repetitions they constitute more than one-fourth of all the words we write. Save for the personal pronouns, they are essential in writing about any subject, whatever its nature, from Aaron through zythum. It is likewise possible to identify the 50 commonest words, for, like the first 10, they are true construction words and necessary, no matter what the nature of the subject under consideration. With progressively decreasing reliability the list may be extended to include the 500 commonest words and possibly the 1,000 commonest, but not the 2,000 commonest, for long before this point is reached the identity of the frequently used words varies according to the subject under consideration. For this reason it was decided to limit the foundation vocabulary to 1,000 words.

THE THOUSAND COMMONEST WORDS

The list of 1,000 words finally selected was determined upon by finding the frequency with which each word appeared in the tabulations of each study, weighting that frequency