

# Rebecca Sitton's APPLESEED



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

## Need More and Harder Spelling Words? Don't Miss this One!

If you are accustomed to a conventional spelling program that introduces numerous Spelling Words, you may feel that your students are shortchanged with the Sourcebook approach. Do you need more words?

Customary spelling programs have a fairly lengthy list of Spelling Words, and hard ones, too! There's a fresh, new list each week, so over a school year a student has exposure to an *extensive* body of Spelling Words. Now here is the question: How many of those words did students really learn—that is, so that they spell and use them accurately in their everyday writing?

Consider this. In international comparisons of literacy, the highest-scoring countries attempt to teach *less than a third* as much content as is the custom in US schools (M. Schmoker, 2006). Narrowing the curriculum to the essential content, strategies, and skills is a practice that tightens the focus for learning in these countries. And they have the results to show this practice works.

The difference is this. In the US, teachers cover a lot across the curriculum and hope, albeit with a leap of faith, that kids will learn what they need to know. In the countries that teach less, but students score higher on achievement tests, a different approach is used. First, educators decide what's really important in the curriculum. Then they focus their instruction on that—just that.

My purpose with the Sourcebook methodology really combines these two very different approaches. One approach I use for teaching *skills*, the other for teaching the *words*.

For the *skills* work, I offer a buffet of essential learning and, albeit with a leap of faith, I trust that teachers select the lessons that best meet the needs of their students. I provide a wide array of differentiated activity choices. I believe that with this selection of lessons at hand, teachers are in the best position to make appropriate instructional choices.

Yet, I change gears when it comes to teaching the *words*. Research has clearly identified through multiple studies exactly which words writers need most. In fact, among the 1200 highest-use words, which comprise about 92% of the words a writer needs, the typical college-graduate actually uses the top 100 words slightly over 50% of the time. And, interestingly, that's the bank of words that contains the *most misspellings* in college-educated adults' everyday writing!

The Sourcebooks for Teaching Spelling and Words Skills narrows the *words* tested to the top 1200 highest-use writing words, but recycles these words extensively through the formative testing components to



## Need More and Harder Spelling Words? Don't Miss this One! (continued)

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absolutely ensure their mastery—particularly those words in the high-use top 100. Hundreds of words beyond the top 1200 are generated through the skill-building activities, but they are not formally tested.

No one will ever convince me that we cannot teach our students to spell. We have plenty of time—twelve years—to at least teach them the top 100 highest-use English writing words. So, why aren't they learning these words? Because students are assigned an immensely extensive weekly list, often consisting of infrequently used words, that they memorize just for a test. The words are then forgotten by the student and abandoned by the program following the test.

Also, keep in mind that *assigning* is often an ineffective teaching tool, and that short-term memorization, by anyone's standards, is the lowest form of learning.

My point? By far the majority of US students need a narrowing of the spelling curriculum, at least for the words, and an instructional program that ensures that they learn the words research says are the most important for writers to know. How do students learn the words they need to know?

First, let's determine among the highest-frequency writing words the specific words each student has not yet mastered. Ongoing whole-class in-context word tests—formative tests—pinpoint these words. Once identified, we can target these words for study using word-study strategies taught in the skills part of the program—high-level skills that cause students to become discriminating observers of words, their spelling and use. To put it another way, the program's word tests inform instruction and target study to what needs to be learned.

Then, let's not forget that practice counts. The program's recycling and retesting of these critical words provides *practice*, until there's no doubt the words are mastered.

And one more thing—make teaching authentic. Make the classroom a rehearsal for real-life use of the skills we're teaching. For spelling, this means “spelling counts in writing.” Employers want students to learn basic communication skills in school. So, in my methodology, unannounced writing samples are routinely selected for review. You'd be surprised—it is not time consuming to bracket a small portion of writing to determine a student's ability to spell an increasing number of high-use words in everyday writing. And this figures into students' grades. As we all know, what we grade sends a strong message to students about what's important.

This is a formula that is different from that of any conventional spelling program—an expansion of skills, a narrowing of words. No, students are not getting shortchanged with this system. Students are, however, getting shortchanged with a program that tries to cover too much, but teaches too little.