



# What is an Abstract Word or Symbol?

What is an abstract word?

There are Abstract Words and Symbols, as well as Concrete Words & Symbols. Those words and symbols that you can experience with your senses (see, hear, feel, touch, taste, smell) are considered concrete words and symbols - for example: tree, whistle, ball, house, lemon.

## **Abstracts**

**you, he, her,  
ours, the, a, and  
at, always, on,  
that, therefore,  
which, but, is,  
are, was, can't...  
a, b, c, d, e, f ...  
1, 2, 3, 4, 5, ...  
( ) "..." , . : ; ?**

All other words and symbols are abstract – they lack any concrete, 3-D, physical association to give them meaning. To the left is a chart of some abstract words and symbols.

Every child can use abstract and concrete words appropriately when they talk, tell stories, play, ask and answer questions. However, learning written language can be a Pandora's Box for the child. Over 50% of the words and symbols read in the written texts and books in K-3 are abstract. These abstract words often interrupt and derail the young learner from being able to read fluidly with comprehension.

There is notable confusion among educational experts for learning to read the Most Commonly Read Words – which, in fact, consist of 85 abstract words out of the first 100 most commonly read words. Few educators know how to address the problem beyond using rote and drill! Academia distinguishes the

group of abstract words by several different names:

- Abstract Words
- Sight Words
- Stumble Words
- Dolch Words
- Outlaw Words
- Trigger Words
- Fry Words
- Interrupter Words
- Most Commonly Read Words

Yet, regardless of what label is used for this group of words, teaching them by rote and drill does not ensure mastery of the words. Too many readers do not learn to read at grade level in our educational system.

## The Problem

Confusion begins when learning to read and write with tools that are a specific set of abstract symbols - alphabet letters, numbers, words, and punctuation marks!

When a child reads out loud and stumbles over a word, reads it incorrectly, hesitates, or skips a word or lines, the culprit is usually an abstract word or symbol. To learn to recognize and comprehend a word, the young reader needs to "experience" all 3 parts of the word:



1. What it looks like,
2. Sounds like, and
3. Means 3-dimensionally

Once a child masters simultaneously the look and sound of the letters of a word or a symbol, and one of its definition, the child will recognize it, fluidly read it and comprehend it.

Since abstract words and symbols lack inherent, concrete meaning, they have no physical representation that can be experienced and give them meaning. Therefore, a 3-D experience of the meaning of the word has to be created in order for the abstract word or symbol to be recognizable and become comprehensible. Most dictionary definitions for a word contain a multitude of abstract words – this is not a 3-D learning experience. For example, let’s look at a definition of the word “the”: That one which is here or which has been mentioned. Out of the 11 words and symbols of the definition, only 1 is a concrete word (“mentioned”).

Adding to the confusion produced by dictionary definitions of abstract words is the phonetic information of what the letters of the word sound like. Here is a dictionary definition of the word “confusion”:

1. Confusion: a noun
2. Sounds like: kən'fyo oZHən/
3. Definition: The state of being bewildered or unclear in one’s mind about something.

Can you “read” (make sense of and sound out) the phonetic symbols of the word? Also, notice only 3 of the 14 words and symbols in the definition are concrete words.

### Reading and Apparent “Word Blindness”

In the following poem by Jean Vanier, the non-visual words (abstract words) are underlined in the text on the left. In the second version of the poem on right, the underlined words have been erased.

#### Poem by Jean Vanier

##### Version One:

To Love is not to give of your riches  
but to reveal to others their riches;  
their gifts, their value;  
and to trust them and their  
capacity to grow.  
So it is important to approach people  
in their brokenness and littleness  
gently  
so gently,  
not forcing yourself on them,  
but accepting them as they are,  
with humility and respect.  
(by Jean Vanier)

#### Poem without Stumble Words Showing

##### Version two:

Love give  
riches  
reveal riches  
gifts value  
trust  
capacity grow  
important approach  
people  
brokenness littleness  
gently  
gently  
forcing yourself  
accepting  
humility respect



Does the right version make any sense to you? Are you confused by it? This is the kind of “word blindness” that can be experienced by the reader who has not mastered reading written abstract words and symbols. The curious aspect of learning to read fluidly through abstract words and symbols is that reading errors occur inconsistently. The major influential is the level of confusion the reader is experiencing while reading.

Unfortunately for the 3-D learner, of the 100 Most Commonly Used Words and Symbols in the English language 85 are abstract and often cause a reader to stumble! Abstract words and symbols cannot be pictured or sensed, and yet they make up more than 50% of the words in text read by children in kindergarten through 3rd grade!

After a young 3-D reader runs into a series of interrupting abstract words and symbols over a couple of sentences, paragraphs or pages, confusion is rampant and the reader takes a mental health break – the student’s imagination and focus leave the task! Typically, after several months of this type of behavior, the teacher will label the child as a daydreamer, lazy, or unable to stay focused. The teacher believes she cannot help the child because he cannot stay connected to the work they are doing. As a consequence of his poor performance in school, the student may come home from school and tell his mom: “I am stupid!” “I am dumb!” Usually the mother knows her child is intelligent and her heart aches to hear her child’s words. This low self-perception revelation is one of the clearest indicators of her child being someone who learns differently than most of his peers.

### The Solution to Learning to Read Abstract Words and Symbols

Magical I Am™ app is a new and unique digital game that plays on mobile devices, and therefore is available to the learner to play anywhere, any time. Magical I Am™ app teaches the 3-D thinker in his learning style. This edutainment game uses a proven reading methodology and digital 3-D techniques to provide the look, sound and meaning of abstract words and symbols for the 3-D learner to experience while having fun playing an adventure game.

Having fun playing a game and having exciting 3-D experiences in the game become powerful teaching tools. Once a 3-D learner masters the look and sound of an abstract word or symbol, and one definition of it, seldom does he have to master any other of the definitions of that word. He now can read it and understand it wherever he encounters it in writing.