How Peabody tracks the words your child knows

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A cold warm-up before each story, three right days before a word counts as sticking, and missed words first. How Peabody's word tracking works, and its limits.

Peabody (peabody.kids) tracks each word a child practises with a quick, cold warm-up before every story. A word only counts as sticking once your child gets it right in that warm-up on three different days in a row. A miss puts it back to practising, and missed words come back first. Grown-ups with a free account see every word in a table, newest trouble at the top, with one question to ask tonight.

That's the short version. Here's why it's built this way, and what it can and can't tell you.

Why "right after the story" doesn't count

Imagine your child reads a story with the word cautious in it three times, then answers a question about cautious. They get it right. Have they learned it?

Probably not yet. Getting a word right minutes after seeing it is a sign it's in short-term memory. What you actually want is for them to still know it later, on another day, without the story in front of them. Memory researchers call this the difference between performance and learning, and it's why Peabody's results screen says "You read 5 new words today," never "you learned 5 words."

So Peabody separates two checks:

- The warm-up, before the story. Words are shown cold. This is the one that counts toward "sticking."
- The check after the story. Useful feedback for the child, but it never counts toward sticking, because the story just showed them the answer.

The warm-up: what your child actually sees

The warm-up is short, and it's a game, not a test. What it looks like depends on the kind of story your child reads:

- Early readers (Pre-K to 1st grade) practise sight words, the common words like was, said and because that children learn to read on sight. Your child taps I read it or Not yet, and a "Not yet" shows the word in a sentence from a story.
- Readers from 2nd grade up practise vocabulary words, five per story. Each word comes with three possible meanings, and your child picks one.

There's a Skip button. On a tired night your child can go straight to the story, and nothing is lost except that day's check.

The rule: three right days in a row

Peabody counts at most one cold read of a word per day, the first one. The day is counted on one clock (Mountain Time, where Peabody lives) so it's the same rule for everyone.

A word moves through three labels:

- Label: New · What it means: Your child hasn't met it in a warm-up yet
- Label: Practising · What it means: They've met it, and haven't yet had three right days in a row
- Label: Sticking · What it means: Their last three warm-ups with it were right, on three different days

A miss at any point, even after a word is sticking, sends it back to practising until it earns three right days in a row again. Peabody says "sticking" rather than "learned" on purpose: three right days is a good sign, not a guarantee.

When words come back

Peabody brings words back on a schedule, like a set of flashcard boxes that move further apart as a word gets easier:

- A word that was missed, or is brand new, comes back next time.
- A word with one or two right days comes back tomorrow, because it needs three separate days.
- A word that's sticking gets keeper checks about a week later, then a month later, then roughly every three months.

Each day's warm-up puts missed words first, then the ones that have waited longest. A "Not yet" word comes back every day until it's read right.

Why spread it out? Because practice spread over several days is remembered better than the same amount crammed into one sitting. That's one of the most replicated findings in memory research, and smaller studies of children learning new words find the same pattern. More in a little every evening beats a Saturday cram.

What grown-ups see

With a free grown-up account, each child's page in the grown-ups' corner has a word table:

- every word your child has met in a warm-up, most recently missed first;
- its label: new, practising or sticking;
- what your child got on their very first try, before any story, so you can see where they started;

- the word's meaning, where Peabody has one;
- one question to ask tonight about one of the words, like "Ask them to use cautious in a sentence about their day," or for sight words, "Write because on a sticky note and see if they can read it."

There's also an honest note under the table, because the checks have limits.

The limits, in plain words

Peabody would rather tell you what it doesn't know:

- A three-choice question can be guessed. A lucky guess is right one time in three. That's one reason a single right answer never counts as sticking.
- Sight-word checks are self-reported. "I read it" is the child's own tap, so it shows what they believe as much as what they know. Listening to them read a page tells you more.
- Peabody never hears your child read. Nothing is recorded or scored by ear, so it can't measure fluency or pronunciation. (A button in a few boxes only turns speech into typed words.)
- Picking the right meaning isn't using the word. Peabody can't tell whether your child uses cautious in their own talk. Asking them tomorrow can.
- It isn't an assessment. Peabody doesn't produce a vocabulary-size score, a percentile or a grade-level comparison, and it doesn't diagnose anything. If you're worried about your child's reading, talk to their teacher.

For a longer look at what this kind of data can and can't show, read where is my child stuck?

Without an account

A child who uses Peabody with no account still gets the warm-ups, the checks and the spacing; the schedule is kept for their reader on that browser. What they don't get is a grown-up's table, because there's no grown-up attached. If you want to see the words, a free grown-up account adds it.

Try it tonight

You don't need Peabody to use the idea behind it. Pick three words from tonight's book. Tomorrow, before reading, write them on paper and ask your child to read them or tell you what they mean, cold. Do it again the next day, and the next. The words they get right three days running are the ones that are sticking.

Or let Peabody keep track: make a free story at your child's level and the warm-up starts with the next one. Peabody is free through the end of 2026, with no sign-up.

Questions parents ask

How does Peabody know which words my child knows?

It checks each practice word cold in a short warm-up before a story. A word counts as sticking only after three right warm-ups on three different days in a row, and a later miss sends it back to practising.

Does the quiz after the story count?

No. The check after a story gives your child feedback, but it never counts toward sticking, because the story just showed them the word.

What happens to words my child misses?

Missed words come back first in the next warm-up, every day until they're read right. Words that are sticking come back for keeper checks about a week, then a month, later.

Can Peabody tell me my child's reading level or vocabulary size?

No. Peabody shows which words are new, practising or sticking, in plain words. It doesn't give a vocabulary-size estimate, a percentile or a test score.

Does my child have to do the warm-up?

No. The warm-up, the questions and the word check each have a Skip button. Skipping just means that day's check isn't counted.

Free at peabody.kids/blog/how-peabody-tracks-words