

# Activities for Vocabularies to Take Flight

By

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### Vocabulary Instruction

Vocabulary instruction is more important, specific, and fun than ever before. Research supports explicit and systematic vocabulary instruction and active study with numerous, meaningful experiences with words. This paper presents activities that meet these criteria for effective vocabulary instruction.

What are the benefits of vocabulary instruction? Words satisfy the human need to name things and describe experiences, and as vocabularies grow, thinking can expand. There is a reciprocal relationship between learning vocabulary and reading. Particularly in the intermediate grades, reading presents a rich context for learning vocabulary and, in return, learning vocabulary improves reading comprehension. Reading informs vocabulary and vocabulary informs reading: reading vocabulary. Of the 3,000 words that students learn each year in school, teachers have time to teach only approximately 400 words. Students learn the bulk of their vocabulary from reading and talking. By middle school, students learn most new vocabulary from reading.

The words chosen for vocabulary instruction are based on three principles: 1) Choose words with a high value in the content areas—these are words important conceptually in math, science, and social studies. Look not only at new vocabulary words, but also for vocabulary words that assume knowledge of a process: *multiply, dissolve, contain, enforce*. Students may be



able to read these words, but they need to learn what the words mean in these academic contexts. 2) Choose words that are within students' instructional ranges in terms of meaning and structure. Choose only three or four words for each session and know if the emphasis is on word meaning or students' developmental differences in reading and word knowledge. 3) Keeping in mind the number of words taught directly, choose words that show students how to study words. For example, when students take apart words, they are learning to identify prefixes, suffixes, base words, and roots.

How are students' vocabularies given flight? In school, vocabulary instruction is infused into each reading lesson. These activities are presented in a developmental order, beginning with activities for emergent and beginning readers. The goal of this word study is for students to use vocabulary to relay and "grow" their ideas.

### Read-to Activities

When you read to students, some words will be particularly important to the story. Sometimes an aside to define such a word will be useful, and other times using a change of voice to indicate a mood will be helpful (e.g., using a deferential tone to emphasize the word *frivolous*). Often, the materials in the teacher's guide suggest related phrases that will come to mind as you create a narrative to introduce new vocabulary.

### Concept Sorts with Pictures and Objects

From preschool through the primary grades, picture and object sorts are active and thoughtful ways to categorize and classify. As you sort, language flows to you and your students when describing the sorts. English language learners can easily be involved as they sort without the same vocabulary and then hear the vocabulary words that describe and identify their sorts.

Begin with easy contrasts, those items that fit and those that don't. For example, sort pictures of people wearing shoes with blue on them and people who aren't, or sort pictures of horses from pictures of other animals (a horse/nonhorse sort). To follow up on a concept sort, students can go on picture hunts through preselected pictures in magazines for similar items, such as shoes categorized by style, coats with zippers and coats with buttons, and animals and nonanimals.

### Creative Dramatics

Primary-grade movement and characterization introduce students to basic, everyday vocabulary: *run, stand, hop, close our eyes, bend, stretch*. These are words that you may think students already know. Refer to a physical item, picture, or movement as you talk about these basic words.

This is also a good time to emphasize individual sounds for fun. For example, show students how to run in place if walking in place forward and backward has gone well. R-r-r-un down to see your friend. (Students run in place, moving their arms as if running. Students imitate stand-in-place running.)

### Vocabulary Instruction Before, During, and After Reading

Vocabulary instruction occurs before, during, and after a reading lesson. Select a reasonable number of words for explicit instruction and teach other words during or after the reading. Focus on nouns and verbs for preteaching. If the word-reading and vocabulary demands are high for students and approach a frustration level, summarize what they will read; as they read, they will build on your summary and their reading will be more fluent and thoughtful.

Make notes on a chart or board as you talk about a word and its usage. Having the key terms posted may

come in handy later as students think about a word meaning while reading. Make webs of related terms to present an overview. Ask students to brainstorm what they already know about the subject.

To be explicit in word usage and meaning, develop word associations and narratives. A third-grader may be able to read the word *forest* but not know what it means. A key rule is to provide two examples of how a word is used when you introduce it. Talk about the subject and give yourself time to be redundant. Talk around the word with synonyms and phrases that include the word. As you explain something about forests, you can remind students where they have seen or heard of forests. "You'll see in a moment that the characters are in a forest, a forest much like the national forest property at the lake. In a forest the woods are thick with trees." Draw several stick trees beside the word to illustrate. If the story hinges on knowing more about forests, spend more time on the topic and related terms. Ask,

"What do you know about forests?" and, perhaps, start a KWL chart. If the forest is not integral to the story, begin reading and return to vocabulary during and after the reading if the discussion leads in that direction.

### Written Concept Sorts

In written concept sorts, students sort words related to ideas they are studying. Concept sorts are found at all grade levels across all content areas to develop, such as rock, insect, and plant collections; rock sorts of igneous, sedimentary, and metamorphic rocks; plant sorts of local fauna; and butterfly

sorts by geographical area. This is just a sampling of the concept sorts that can be a part of unit studies.

By the middle of third grade, students study the vocabulary in written concept sorts. Take the key vocabulary and write the words on a word-study template with three columns of eight rows. Many of the words come from boldfaced terms in the text. Choose the key terms related to the content studies. These can include names, locations, and technical terms. To conduct a closed sort, define the sort by underlining the key words for sorting. For example, to start a unit of study on fish and how they breathe and to make comparisons between land and water animals, students can work in pairs to read nearly all of the words and then sort them in either a closed sort (a teacher-directed

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sort) or an open sort (a student-defined sort). In this example the underlined words (*fish*, *land animals*, and *both fish and land animals*) define the closed sort:

**Write these words as word cards.**

<u>fish</u>	<u>land animals</u>	<u>both fish and land animals</u>
gills	two-legged	insects
fins	four-legged	mouth
gill cover	lungs	brain
tail fin	lions	spine
scales	humans	nostrils
bass ( <i>freshwater</i> )	hippocampuses	stomach, heart, liver
marlin ( <i>saltwater</i> )	birds	amphibians
stripers		frogs

After completing this sort, students are often ready to share their ideas about and interest in these topics. They record the sort in their word-study notebooks, and then through word-study notebook assignments, add more fish vocabulary as the unit of study proceeds.

### Links Between Reading and Spelling

A strategy to learn new vocabulary is to think of related words. In upper-level word study, students dig to uncover related words through word histories. The study of the history and derivations of related words increases associations and contexts to learn new words and concepts. If students think of other words spelled the same way, they can connect the spelling to the meaning of the words. In the area of grammar, students consider parts of speech and spelling, e.g., words that end in *-ion* are nouns. In the area of derivations, students look for word roots to make connections, e.g., what the words *justice*, *judge*, and *judicial* have in common. Spelling can be clarified by studying meaning connections. For example, as students study the meaning and spelling of a word with unsounded consonants, such as the *n* in *condemn*, they make meaning associations with *condemnation* where the *n* is sounded.

### Learn to Learn

Teach students strategies to learn words as they read. A few strategies are presented here. As you read with students, show them how to be conscious of vocabulary when they read, because the new vocabulary often encompasses the key ideas and concepts.

Students also need to be conscientious when they read, with the integrity to stop when vocabulary knowledge interferes with comprehension. "Hold on, I don't know

what that word means, and it's important here." Students need to make a number of decisions and to be earnest as they read to comprehend. You can frame discussions in terms of what students should do when they come across a word they don't know. One decision is whether to let it go, tab it for future reference, or stop and slow down and reread around the word.

### Take Apart Words and Find Related Words

The study of word parts and related words is the focus of upper-level word study. When students study the different parts of words, they study the structure or morphology of words. The study of morphology includes prefixes, suffixes, and root derivations. Use the phrase "take apart" to remind students to look for how words are divided for meaning, pronunciation, and spelling. Ask, "What parts do you see in a word? Do you see prefixes or suffixes that we can remove? Let's take apart the word." Through several demonstrations of the process, students begin to make their own entries in their word-study notebooks. This is the interesting word exercise described below. When students study the morphology of words, they increase the number of meaningful interactions and associations with the vocabulary they are learning. Students also brainstorm related words. These may be written on a board or chart underneath the related word part. As students think of related words, they make the meaning connection that secures vocabulary learning.

### Golden Lines and Interesting Words

These activities are aimed at vocabulary for expression and comprehension. Begin with several demonstrations and guided practices. Students may suggest a golden line or interesting word to use in the demonstration. Students introduce the quotation or word by explaining why it caught their attention.

A golden line is one or two sentences that catch your attention. They may clarify or vividly describe something. Ask students to look for golden lines as they read: "As you read and you find an incredible sentence, make note of it and return to it later. Use a self-stick note or write the page number on a slip of paper or in your notebook." Students dedicate an area of their word-study notebooks for golden lines, and they bring their notebooks and entries to book clubs for discussion.

As students read, ask them to look for "interesting words." In content materials these are often the key vocabulary words. In textbooks these are often the words in boldface type. The first series of interesting

words students study may be related to a shared reading. Later, students may create sections for content-area vocabulary in their word-study notebooks, especially in the sciences and social studies.

Teach students to find what they think are interesting words. Students bring their interesting words to word-study sessions. For one or two sessions, students offer some suggestions, then you make some generalizations about "interesting words." When you first introduce word-study activities to students, explore what "interesting words" might be. Ask, "What is an interesting word?" Students may answer, "A word we don't know." "Never heard it before." "Has an interesting meaning." "Hard to spell." "Reminds me of another word." "Interesting combination of letters." "Hard to pronounce." "Interesting idea." Build on these choices and show students how to take apart words and think of related words.

A lesson plan for upper-level word study focuses on the meaning connections that students can make with words (Bear, Invernizzi, Templeton, & Johnston, 2004.)

1. *Collect interesting words as you read.* Often, the words students collect are the words that you have chosen to discuss and explore further. Once students have learned to choose words themselves, gradually introduce a few of the vocabulary words for them to include or divide among themselves.
2. *Record the word and sentence.* Sometimes sentences are too long, so students can record sections of the sentence.
3. *Look at word parts and think about their meanings.* This is where "take apart" occurs.
4. *Think of possible related words.* Students can work in pairs to brainstorm related words and can concentrate on different parts: prefixes, suffixes, roots, bases.
5. *Study the word in the dictionary.* Record interesting information. Notice how late this comes in. Students can include additional words from the dictionary in their lists of related words. In structured lessons, show students which parts are interesting, particularly the meaning of the roots.
6. *Review and share.* In reading groups, discussions of what students read often begin with someone sharing an interesting word.

### Word-Study References

Several references are important to have in small quantities for small-group upper-level word study of derivations, word parts, and related words.

To conclude, vocabulary instruction is part of all areas of the curriculum. Each specialized area has its own vocabulary that students master through the grades. By the time students enter the workforce full time, they have a vocabulary of 90,000 words, half of them learned in grades K through 12. The more sophisticated their vocabulary, the finer gradations students make in their understanding. All teachers are vocabulary teachers who increase students' curiosity about words to advance learning and thinking.

### Biography

Donald Bear is director of the E. L. Cord Foundation Center for Learning and Literacy, where he works with children who struggle to learn to read and write, directly through assessments and tutoring programs in the center and through numerous outreach Reading Buddies tutoring programs.

Donald is a professor in the Department of Educational Specialties in the College of Education at the University of Nevada, Reno. He has been a third- and fourth-grade classroom teacher. Donald has taught and conducts research in programs at all levels from preschools to family learning centers. Assessments that he has developed are widely used in statewide literacy programs. He conducts workshops and consults with school districts to develop their literacy programs.

Recent studies and writings examine the synchrony of literacy development, word study with English language learners, upper-level word knowledge, and the literacy learning of preschoolers. He is a coauthor of several books, including *Words Their Way*. Donald has been involved in a number of grants and innovative professional development programs.

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