

MAKING EVERY BOOK COUNT

by Maria P. Walther and Carol J. Fuhler

A Running Start on Building Vocabulary

Words, words, words. Readers need ready access to a wealth of words to make essential connections with text. Writers must dip into their repositories to find the best words to convey their thoughts. In both cases, readers and writers have to make sense of a growing number of words encountered daily, continually striving to expand their word knowledge. This column will examine four practical ways to teach new words beginning in the early weeks of school and continuing onward throughout the year. Highlighting a word of the week, collecting words for writers, building and drawing on background knowledge to understand new vocabulary, and using context are the strategies to be discussed. For a complete list of the books mentioned here, turn to "Comprehensive Bibliography" on p.62.

Word of the Week

Raise word curiosity one word at a time with this engaging method of learning new words. In the library or classroom, spotlight a richly worded picture book or novel. It might go on the ledge under the whiteboard or on an easily visible counter. Make a word tent from a 5-by-8-inch index card, folded lengthwise. Write the word of the week on one side of the card. Then write the page number from which it came on the back of the tent. In the case of unpaginated picture books, a sticky note might mark the page. Encourage children to examine the word, try to guess its meaning, and then read the sentence in the book for additional clues. After a brief class discussion of the word, set aside a few minutes each day to highlight it and use it in student-generated sentences.



"During the opening weeks of school, set the stage for vocabulary acquisition that will last the whole year through."

If you're looking for an alphabet book for primary-grade students that provides a word, the definition, and then uses it in a sentence, check out *Fancy Nancy's Favorite Fancy Words* by Jane O'Connor. A word-building picture-book possibility is *Read All about It!* by Laura and Jenna Bush, where words such as *professional*, *pesky*, *grotesque*, *awe*, and *hysterics* are included in the story about a reluctant reader named Tyrone.

Librarians might go a step further and emphasize a word a day from a novel for intermediate-grade learners. Words like *paraphernalia*, *behemoth*, and *disdainful* are a few options from Mark Jean and Christopher C. Carlson's *Puddlejumpers*. Jane Ray treats readers to words like *dappled*, *transformed*, and *vain* in the folktale *The Apple-Pip Princess*. In order to assimilate new vocabulary, readers and writers must see, hear, and use the words 10 to 15 times each. To encourage this, talk about words as suggested above, and have students write new words in their writer's notebooks for easy access. Then challenge them to use the words in their writing during upcoming weeks.

Words for Writers

The use of mentor texts during writing minilessons offers endless possibilities to teachers and students who are in pursuit of new words. For instance, if you notice that students are using the same verbs over and over again, select books with vivid verbs that will add pizzazz to student writing. For example, in Carmen Agra Deedy's *Martina the Beautiful Cockroach*, readers will find wonderful verbs like *stammered*, *strutted*, *crooned*, *hoofed*, and *scurried*. Readers settling into chapter books can gather verbs like *emerged*, *scooped*, *padded*, and *clamoring* when reading Steve Voake's *Daisy Dawson Is on Her Way!* These are fresh, descriptive verbs to add to one's own writing.

Build on these innovative words by teaching a lesson on synonyms as another way to enrich writing. Brian Cleary's *Pitch and Throw, Grasp and Know: What Is a Synonym?* is a perfect title to introduce this topic. Demonstrate how synonyms can build vocabulary by picking a common word from the daily read-aloud. Ask students what other words the author might have used to say the same thing. Then bring out a thesaurus appropriate for the grade level and model how these resources are used. Intermediate-grade students might also check out <http://www.merriam-webster.com>, an online dictionary and thesaurus. To apply what has been taught, put students to work in small groups to generate a list of rich possibilities for other overused words, such as *like*, *went*, *fun*, and *said*. Chart and post their findings for easy future reference. Finally, discuss how using the different



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words can often change the meaning of the text. Students will soon learn the importance of choosing the best word to get across what they want to say in their writing.

Words for Readers

Before readers open a book, it is helpful if they have a bit of background knowledge or schema about the topic and are familiar with any challenging vocabulary in the text. This pre-reading minilesson has multiple purposes. First, it offers an opportunity to discuss a few selected vocabulary words. Second, it enables teachers to check existing background knowledge. Third, it builds a schema for the story. To prepare for this lesson:

- Pread a picture book or novel.
- Select a few critical words or phrases that relate to the story elements of character, setting, action, problem, and solution.
- Print each word or phrase on a sticky note.
- Write the story elements on a piece of chart paper.

For our example, we'll use the book *Muncha! Muncha! Muncha!* by Candace Fleming:

- Character: Mr. McGreely, hungry bunnies
- Setting: vegetable garden
- Action: growing yummy vegetables, hoed, sowed
- Problem: gnawed sprouts, nibbled leaves, chewed stems, chomped blossoms
- Solution: outsmarted


As you read each word or phrase, discuss the meaning. Then ask students to predict the story element to which the word or phrase relates. Post the word under that particular element. Now it's time to enjoy the story. After reading, revisit the chart to determine whether the predictions matched the author's story. Not just for primary readers, this strategy is just as effective with a picture book for older readers, such

as *Brothers* by Yin or *Lady Liberty: A Biography* by Doreen Rappaport.

Cues from Context

Obviously, students also need strategies to define new vocabulary words on their own. One such strategy is teaching children how to use the context of the sentence to figure out and define a new word. When students are taught to use the context, they are really reading around the new word.

Model this process by demonstrating how to use the sentence in which the word appears to gather clues to its meaning. Choose sentences or paragraphs from current read-aloud picture books or novels. Explain how you might have to read additional sentences before you get a hint at what the word means. Unfortunately, this method isn't foolproof because not all words can be defined by the words around them. This is one tool to practice and to use independently, however.

During the opening weeks of school, set the stage for vocabulary acquisition that will last the whole year through. First, encourage children across the grade levels to read, read, read, for there is no replacement for the benefits of wide reading. Then teach practical strategies so that students understand how to gather new words. Challenge readers to become word detectives, scouting out words to teach their classmates, keeping them actively involved in the quest for new words. Finally, find ways to encourage children to use their new words in the discussions, reading, and writing, for it is through using them that they become their own. 

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