

# Empowering Students' Knowledge of Vocabulary

Learning How Language Works,  
Grades 3–5

similes

metaphors

idioms

figurative  
language

word  
origins

nyms

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# Preface

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**Y**ou might be wondering why the two of us teamed up to write this book. We have written together before (six other books) and we share a love of reading, writing, and children. Let us each tell you a little something about how we got into “words”—both the study and use of the English language.

MARY JO: I have always been a reader. Anytime, anywhere . . . even under the covers with a flashlight. I was one of those kids who had to go to the dictionary when I encountered a new word. I was just too Type A to simply skip over a word. That love of reading served me well—particularly when I became a third-grade teacher and I got to share my love of books and new words with my students. Parenting was an easy segue into more reading aloud and conversations about words. Eventually, I spent many years preparing future teachers. I always read aloud to them and encouraged them to share their love of books and words with their students. Somewhere in there, my daughter took an etymology class in high school. I helped her with homework (unfortunately, she had to memorize a lot of words), but I got totally engrossed in word histories. It took off from there . . . and now, everywhere I go, I seem to find word stories (or I should say they find me). My husband’s car magazine explained that a dashboard was originally a board on a wagon to protect passengers from the mud thrown from the horses’ hooves during a “dash.” In *Deception Point* (2001), Dan Brown explained that polar bears are only in the Arctic. *Arktos* is Greek for “bear.” Therefore, Antarctica (*anti* means “not”) does not have bears! I share with students, young and old, that our funny bone is at the enlarged end of our “humerus” bone (ha ha) and that *school* means “leisure” (only wealthy men of ancient times had time to contemplate, discuss, and lecture). I could go on, but my focus has been, and continues to be, to snag students’ interest by sharing stories about words. I love the wonder in their eyes as they listen. Then I watch the

flame of curiosity ignite as they investigate their own wonderings. I encourage teachers to hunt for stories across the curriculum. What better way to make content vocabulary memorable? Examining words, whether it be their histories, a synonym or antonym, how they are used in idioms, similes and metaphors, is both fascinating and rewarding. Welcome to our book!

DAVID: When Daddy set me on his lap and read to me, he used the wrong voices and got the number of pigs and bears mixed up and generally made a mess of things. I had to stay alert because I never knew when he might screw up something else. Sometimes, it was hard to hear him because of my shrieks of laughter. When Mommy read, she always got it right. It was she who bought a book of patriotic writings and helped me memorize the Gettysburg Address when I was four years old.

Guess how many words I knew in the first sentence: “Four score and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent, a new nation, conceived in Liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.” Daddy made reading a funny game that kept me involved. Mommy found ways to challenge me, to introduce me to big words and concepts. She made me think and want to learn more. From her, I discovered that, if I committed words, thoughts, even speeches to memory, I could carry them around in my mind to savor and enjoy wherever I went.

Like Mary Jo, from an early age I loved to encounter new words and find out what they meant. At seven, I entered my “going to be an astronomer” stage. I brought home books from the library that were years ahead of my school grade level. Working through them was painfully slow going but, by second grade, I loved to talk about the size of the universe, how planets were formed, and how Earth (and we!) spin through space in more than one direction and at stupefying speeds.

Borrowing some of that speed, fast forward to today. While Mary Jo has spent much of her life helping students learn to love digging into words to find out where they come from and what they mean, my life has followed a related path. As a storyteller, words are my endless supply of inspiration, my palette of splendid colors, my toolbox filled with everything I need.

Words are . . .  
the shyness of a fawn’s breath,  
the sobbing at a pet’s death,  
the last cracker in the box,  
the gloriously tailed fox,  
the sweet fullness of cantaloupe,

the faith it takes to have hope,  
the bridge that crosses every sea,  
the stepping stones to you from me.





# Power Up Vocabulary Teaching and Learning

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Vocabulary is a matter of word-building as well as word-using.

—*David Crystal*

This is not a “get the word list, memorize the spellings and definitions, take the Friday test” kind of book. It is a book with which teachers empower their students’ knowledge of words through engaging ways to build vocabulary. We believe student interest in words can be sparked by offering new ways to develop a deeper understanding of how language works. Teachers can enhance their vocabularies and improve reading and writing skills. But the number of words students need to learn *and* have command of can be overwhelming. How can we make the learning manageable when there are so many words in English? Consider these facts:

- There are around 200,000 words in the dictionary (and, if you look at the unabridged *Oxford English Dictionary*, you will find 450,000).
- Some words (such as *sister* and *window*) have been in the English language since the days when the Norse warriors sailed to Britannia (now known as England).
- Some words (such as *unibrow* and *hangry*) have only recently been added to the dictionary. In fact, new words are added to the Oxford and Merriam-Webster English dictionaries each year, based on their repeated use in media.

We must find ways to help students face the challenge of learning and remembering the words they need to be successful readers and writers.

Our task, then, is to discover approaches to teaching vocabulary that actually embrace the oddities in our language. For instance, words change over time and acquire new definitions. Back in the days of rail travel, we use to say *car*, but, once the automobile was invented, we changed that to *railroad car*. Definitions expand—a *mouse* was a small rodent, but now has a technology definition. And words can have multiple, diverse meanings—*novel* can be a book or a new or unusual approach to doing something (such as this book for teaching vocabulary). How do we address all these aspects of vocabulary teaching? To begin thinking about our teaching approach, choose your favorite activity of the following two:

- *Activity A.* Memorize the spelling and definition of the following ten words from our study of explorers:
  1. *expedition*—“a journey, voyage, or excursion undertaken for a specific purpose” (Merriam-Webster, 1993a)
  2. *coconut*—“the fruit of the coconut palm that is a drupe consisting of an outer fibrous husk that yields coir and a large nut containing the thick edible meat and, in the fresh fruit, a clear fluid called coconut milk” (Merriam-Webster, 1993b)
  3. . . . and so on. (P.S. Test on Friday!)
- *Activity B.* Read the following two word histories. Tell (or read aloud) these stories to four classmates. Listen to four classmates tell stories about their two words until you have heard all eight stories. Add those words to the sheet provided (be certain to spell them correctly) and record a few key words to remember each one’s history and meaning.
  1. *Expedition*—This word’s beginnings are in the Latin prefixes *ex-* (meaning “out”; think of the word *exit*) and *ped-* (meaning “foot”; think of the word *pedal*). At first, it meant to “free one’s foot” from a snare or trap. The idea of freeing oneself to go forward was used by the military in the seventeenth century. The word came to mean a long, organized journey, with the purpose determined by a particular need.
  2. *Coconut*—Portuguese and Spanish explorers landed on tropical islands and found palm trees that dropped “pods” containing a large nut that appeared to have a face on it. Using the Portuguese word meaning “grimace,” they called it *coco*. English explorers adapted this and made it the compound word *coconut*.

If you are like most students we have met, you would much rather be assigned Activity B, because it:

- involves the social aspect of talking (with purpose),
- uses peer teaching rather than teacher preaching—in other words, students take an active, rather than passive, role in their own learning,
- helps create memories about the words, which has greater impact on long-term memory (when we employ a novel approach, we provide students with a way to best remember new content), and
- raises students’ awareness about words in new and interesting ways.

We know depth of vocabulary assists in reading and writing across the curriculum. Particularly, as students have “learned to read,” they need a wide base of words as they “read to learn.” That is, carrying their literacy skills into content reading and writing is critical throughout their school careers. We know joyful engagement can entice even the most reluctant learners (Fresch, 2014), so finding ways to motivate all students is crucial. The instructional chapters in this book present playful examples using poetry and prose and practical follow-up activities for antonyms, synonyms, acronyms (and many more “-nyms”), similes, metaphors, idioms, and word origins.

In all of the word categories, our aim is to make words memorable, instead of memorized. We believe providing a look at specific, unique word categories adds an engaging way to help students learn larger numbers of words without relying on the memorization model. Instead, we use a teaching model that plays with the language through poetry, nonfiction, and narrative. We suggest that taking a novel approach can enhance students’ ability to expand their vocabulary. As Fenker and Schütze (2008, para. 10) advise: “Although most teachers start a lesson by going over material from the previous class before moving on to new subject matter, they should probably do just the opposite: start with surprising new information and then review the older material.” So, let’s surprise our students.

## Teaching Vocabulary

Words surround us. In both printed and visual media, students need to develop a command of hearing, speaking, reading, and writing a large cadre of words. Focusing their attention on definitions, histories, uses, and spellings deepens understandings about words, inside and out, and helps students effectively com-

municate. We have long known that oral and written vocabularies are critical to success in school. Laflamme (1997) argues that “vocabulary knowledge is the single most important factor contributing to reading comprehension” (p. 372). Likewise, the National Assessment of Educational Progress (2012) concludes:

To comprehend what they read, students must integrate their knowledge or sense of words as they are used in particular passages to understand the overall topic or theme. Understanding key words that support the main idea or theme and details that contribute shades of meaning further enhance comprehension to create a richer experience. (“Summary of Results,” para. 1)

Daily vocabulary instruction is essential. And, as with any area of the curriculum, *how* we teach is just as important as *what* we teach. “Students need to be excited about and invested in any activity we bring to our teaching—and their learning. . . . Not only will they care about their learning, but we will also have made a lasting impression in their language arts skills” (Fresch, 2014, pp. 5–6). We can transform our introductions to and content of lessons if we find ways to motivate our students to sit up and take notice. Take, for instance, ASICS shoes. Most of us buy them, cut the tag off, and put them on. But wait, there’s more! When Mr. Kihachiro Onitsuka started his company in Japan in 1949, he specifically chose an acronym—ASICS—to name the shoes. ASICS comes from the Latin phrase *anima sana in corpore sano*, meaning “healthy soul in a healthy body.” That’s a fun fact, and learning it might entice students to investigate other words that are acronyms (e.g., *scuba*, *Epcot*, *laser*, and *zip code*).

So how did we decide to organize the chapters of this book? English language arts vocabulary standards across the country set clear goals in learning about synonyms, antonyms, idioms, metaphors, similes, and other important word categories. These same standards provide expectations for students to use their vocabulary knowledge to comprehend complex text. We want students to develop a strong and rich knowledge of words.

And why have we chosen the approach for teaching that follows in the next chapters? There are many reasons to get beyond the old and tired memorized vocabulary list. As Lynch (2019) notes, “students who actively participate in classroom lessons are more likely to internalize content” (para. 2).

Our own beliefs about vocabulary instruction guided the format of this book. In particular, we believe instruction should:

- actively engage students,

- invoke curiosity, moving students from supportive learning to self-motivated exploration,
- encourage a discovery of the relevance of vocabulary learning,
- allow students to demonstrate individual competence, and
- encourage a community of learners to engage in peer-to-peer learning.

You will find the chapters that follow all tap into each of these five elements. The activities require active engagement. Many of the activities ask students to investigate together, thus building a community of learners. There are often choices of how to apply the knowledge they learned in new situations, thus showing individual competence. Some choices will provide opportunity for discovery about the language that can make lasting impressions on learners. And all will help students apply their learning. For instance, when writing, we often are trying to find that “just right” word to describe a setting or character—your students will see that synonyms help us do that! Sometimes, we wrestle with opposite ideas—students will discover that antonyms can help better describe what they are thinking! Expanding knowledge of similes and metaphors can make students smart consumers, as these phrases abound in advertising:

- “Like a good neighbor, State Farm is there!” (insurance provider)
- Built “like a rock” (Chevrolet trucks)
- “Sometimes you feel like a nut / sometimes you don’t” (Mounds and Almond Joy candy bars)
- “For skin as smooth as a peach” (Olay Pro-X skin cream)

And similar phrases are in the movies we watch and songs we hear:

- “My mom always said life was like a box of chocolates. You never know what you’re gonna get.” (*Forrest Gump*, 1994)
- “And every task you undertake / Becomes a piece of cake” (*Mary Poppins*, 1964)
- “Clap along if you feel like a room without a roof” (“Happy,” Pharrell Williams, 2013)
- “Do you ever feel like a plastic bag? / Drifting through the wind” (“Firework,” Katy Perry, 2010)
- “It’s been a hard day’s night / And I’ve been working like a dog” (“Hard Day’s Night,” The Beatles, 1964)

Relevance of what they are learning is evident when we see advertisers offer a play on idioms—for years, Morton Salt has told us “when it rains, it pours,” while the Sanyo underwater camera is “the tip of the iceberg.” And, similar to the story of ASICS, word histories will easily invoke curiosity. Once students are motivated through these activities, we believe they can learn new words in many unique and fast-paced ways.

## Vocabulary Studies

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Vocabulary development plays a critical role in literacy and content area learning. The more words a student knows, the better their reading comprehension will be (Blachowicz, Fisher, Ogle, & Watts-Taffe, 2006). Vocabulary instruction, therefore, is particularly important for students who struggle with reading. Learners possess four vocabularies: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. When children first begin school, their listening vocabulary dominates. While this is their largest vocabulary for a while, it is soon followed by speaking, reading, and writing vocabularies. Reading comprehension relies on students’ knowledge of nuances of language and the implicit as well as explicit definitions of words. Writing demands both breadth and depth of vocabulary in order to best express ideas and concepts.

Traditional vocabulary instruction is often highly dependent on a memorization model. Activities that encourage deep processing challenge students to move beyond memorization and increase their ability to learn and retain words through direct and indirect means (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000). Teachers must consider multiple approaches to actively engage all students in learning new words.

Berne and Blachowicz (2008) suggest that vocabulary instruction may be problematic because many teachers are not “confident about best practice in vocabulary instruction and at times don’t know where to begin to form an instructional emphasis on word learning” (p. 315). Offering rich and varied language, teaching individual words, teaching word-learning strategies, and increasing word consciousness can be fruitful in increasing a student’s vocabulary capacity. Such activities give students opportunities to use and see words in a variety of ways. Researchers agree that one important component of vocabulary study is to develop word consciousness. Diverse strategies, such as those that follow, help expand students’ word consciousness and bolster teacher confidence that word learning “is a bowl of cherries.”

## What's Ahead?

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Four chapters, forty lessons, and twenty-six independent activities (presented in the main text and in Appendixes A and B). The lessons let you and your students explore how *nyms* are names, play with similes and metaphors, dig into idioms, consider shades of meaning, and discover origins of everyday words. Have a few minutes betwixt and between other lessons? Or before an assembly? Or stuck inside on a rainy day? Grab this book, flip to a lesson, and away you go! The *empowering vocabulary* lessons are for students to use to independently extend and put into action the new vocabulary they have learned under your guidance. Appendixes C to E provide additional resources that will complement and extend your current vocabulary instruction. Appendix C details electronic resources for teachers, Appendix D suggests electronic resources for students, and Appendix E features resources for and about English language learner (ELL) students. And then there is Chapter 6—words of wisdom from eight renowned authors of children’s books. Are students antsy standing in line a little too long? Open to Chapter 6 and read aloud an author’s story about choosing and using words to make their books interesting to young readers.

Each of the strategies in this book encourages inquiry into language in a different way. Playing with and talking about words engage students in learning, which helps them to remember the vocabulary because of the experiences they have within a community of learners. To offer such experiences, teachers must become *verbophiles*—“people who enjoy word study and become language enthusiasts, lovers of words, appreciative readers, and word-conscious writers” (Mountain, 2002, p. 62)—and *verbivores*—people who “devour words” and are “heels over heads (as well as head over heels) in love with words” (Lederer, 2019, para. 1). Only through their own enthusiastic interest in words can teachers hope to engage all learners in word or vocabulary consciousness. Helping students personally connect to both the teacher’s love of words and the words themselves has the potential of promoting improvement in word knowledge (Kelley et al., 2010). Oh, and be ready for some laughter. In our experience, students not only engage in these lessons but also find themselves connected and delighted as well!

With this fun and practical book, grades 3–5 teachers have at hand both the research and the day-to-day practical activities that support a fascinating approach for empowering their students' vocabulary. Upper elementary students will develop a deeper understanding of how the English language works, enrich their vocabularies, and improve their reading and writing skills through the information and lessons provided by veteran educators Mary Jo Fresch and David L. Harrison. Five chapters present definitions and playful examples (in poetry and prose) to teach antonyms, synonyms, acronyms (and many more “nyms”), similes, metaphors, idioms, shades of meaning, and word origins. Practical lessons and activities for each category will engage students in joyful practice. A final chapter offers insights into language choices by eight well-known children's poets and authors, including two former US Young People's Poets Laureate—Kenn Nesbitt and Margarita Engle—and world-renowned Jane Yolen.



**Mary Jo Fresch** is an academy professor and professor emerita in the School of Teaching and Learning, College of Education and Human Ecology, at The Ohio State University. **David L. Harrison** has now published 100 books of poetry, fiction, and nonfiction for young readers and teachers, and in 2020 he became the first recipient of the Laura Ingalls Wilder Children's Literature Medal.

*As a special education teacher who works with students who have unique behavior and emotional challenges, I found the vocabulary exercises refreshing and thought provoking. My small group of students really dug deep and tapped into their individual potentials. It was exciting to see vocabulary growth in my group. Once an accepting norm was established, my students felt safe to really shine in their individual approach to the various exercises.*

—Ken Slesarik, grade 5, Vista Peak School, Phoenix, Arizona

*The chapters are easy to navigate and full of great information. I will definitely take what the authors have provided and add to my workshop instruction for this coming year.*

—Christine Titus, grade 5, Hickory Woods Elementary School, Novi, Michigan

*The students really enjoyed taking nursery rhymes and extending the similes and metaphors and creating opposites. It had the students eager to share ideas, extending their thinking and pushing themselves to be more creative. The accessible and familiar starting point of the nursery rhymes enabled students to feel safe upon entry into the lesson and fostered the growth mindset to take the risk. I had students coming back to me for several days as they came up with additional ideas—without prompting.*

—Maria Krzdlo, grade 4, DeMasi Elementary School, Evesham Township, New Jersey



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