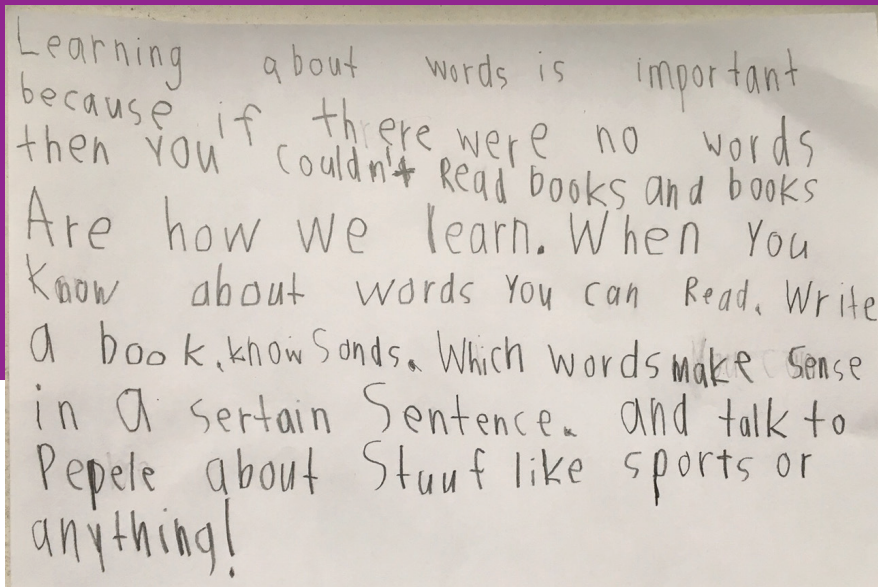


What Is Word Study?



Learning about words is important because if there were no words then you couldn't read books and books are how we learn. When you know about words you can read, write a book, know songs, which words make sense in a certain sentence, and talk to people about stuff like sports or anything!

—Liam, age 7

Seven-year-old Liam says it best—learning about words is important. Words are our ticket to life. The thousands upon thousands of words I will use in this book don't say it much better than he does. If I had to pick one idea of Liam's that expresses the "why" behind my writing this book, it is this: Learning words helps you talk to people about stuff. My approach to word study is that it *is* a social endeavor; it's creative, curiosity-fueled, and classroom community building. Word study is also a gateway to reading, writing, and thinking—sure, yes, you know that. There are lots of other books you could pick up on word study that will crack that open, but how is this book different? I'm going to show you that the key to successful word study is to keep it about playfulness and peer interaction. Words express you. Yourself. Words clarify and deepen connections to others. Make no mistake about it, too: Words are power. Knowing words opens doors. Vocabulary is thinking. So simple, but profound. The more words we know, the more nuanced our thinking. This is the kind of power we want for the children we teach.

Language is the universal currency of connection. Musicians use their language to create and compose pieces that entertain, connect, and move us. Artists use images and sculpture to make meaning and instill feelings—the buzz created when we view, feel, and share art is unmistakable. Athletes communicate nonstop with their teammates, opponents, coaches, officials, and fans. Our ability to listen, understand, speak, question, share, read, and write is paramount. Words penetrate all we do. As such, if we want word learning to stick and we want our students to use and apply their knowledge of words in every facet of their lives, we need to embed, highlight, and create opportunities to study words in each part of our days.

Just how do we go about systematic, joyful word study? The lowest hanging fruit may appear to be a program or some kit with a colorful lidded box that has it all—but no, as is true of many things in teaching, there is no one-size-fits-all easy answer. However, engaging in conversation with colleagues, looking to our students, and taking the risk to try out new ideas will result in more meaningful, playful, and productive learning than we might have first imagined.



THE DIFFERENT FACETS OF WORD STUDY

Quite simply, word study is the study of words . . . in all kinds of ways. When we study words, we think about sounds, letters, and spelling patterns, but we also think about the meaning, connections, connotation, usage, and impact of these words. In 2010, Rasinski and Zutell wrote,

Word study is the direct study and exploration of words. . . . When we store words in our brain, the sound, spelling, and meaning are usually consolidated. When we view a word on the printed page, we access the sound, spelling, and meaning simultaneously and immediately. (p. 6)

I greatly appreciate how Rasinski and Zutell *start* by making the connections between sounds and letters, spelling, vocabulary, reading, and writing. We can't separate one from the others. A well-rounded approach to word study incorporates phonemic awareness, phonics, spelling, and vocabulary. In this book, I focus on how to start up and step up all these crucial elements of word study. The ultimate goal of word study is for students to develop knowledge of spelling patterns in general and also increase their specific knowledge of words, including the meaning of individual words. In their third edition of *Words Their Way: Word Study for Phonics, Vocabulary, and Spelling Instruction*, Bear, Invernizzi, Templeton, and



The different facets of word study.

Johnston explain, “Through word study, students learn how the spelling system, or orthography, works to represent sound, pattern, and meaning. Writing then exercises that word knowledge” (2004, p. 26).

This *learning how* aspect is critical; we want students to be strategic, *independent* word learners who do it on their own for a lifetime. Researchers Michael F. Graves, Steven Schneider, and Cathy Ringstaff emphasize this in a powerful article in *The Reading Teacher*, “Empowering Students With Word-Learning Strategies: Teach a Child to Fish” (2018). To bring about this learner independence, our word study approach needs to be multifaceted (Baumann & Kame’enui, 2004; Blachowicz, Fisher, Ogle, & Watt-Taffe, 2006; Graves, 2016; Kame’enui & Baumann, 2012; Stahl & Nagy, 2006) and “include providing students with rich and varied language experiences (in reading, writing, and discussion), teaching individual words, teaching word-learning

STARTING UP

Pam recommends using a spelling inventory at the start of the year. She also taught me how to look for patterns in student work so I began to quickly see individual, small-group, and whole-class priorities. I used these patterns to help choose and match the words to the students. This method was much better than what I had done in the past, which was give everyone the same lists in the same order year to year. Check out Appendix B for a list of commonly used spelling inventories.

—Michele, Grade 6 Teacher

STEPPING UP

In our district, we use three different spelling inventories. They came with the program we use. Different grade-level bands (K-1, 2-3, 4-6) each have their own inventories. This creates a common language and an aligned approach to choosing words across the district. Pam then helped us learn how to use the results of this inventory to support student learning. See Chapters 4 through 7 for more information on using inventory results and more informally found day-to-day information to differentiate classroom practice.

—Jan, Literacy Coach

strategies, and fostering word consciousness (interesting and excitement about words)” (Graves et al., 2018, p. 553).

To me, the term *word consciousness* shows up in learners as curiosity. This is what we model and what we want learners to possess. In addition, we cultivate an analytical bent. For example, we might first get curious about students, investigate their current strengths and areas of readiness, and then design instruction that fits their stage of spelling development (Bear et al., 2004). We could then work to facilitate appropriate and relevant experiences where whole words are studied, phonemes are studied in real words, and we dig deep to study the *why* behind words—all the while consistently incorporating reading and writing into these practices. In this way, we would be working from student strengths and designing student-centered learning that is appropriate and within each learner’s *zone of proximal development* (Vygotsky, 1962). The ideas in this book will help you do this. Over the course of the school year, students will learn how to use strategies for learning words when they are most ready. Most importantly, they will learn to employ the strategies flexibly, on their own.

What Word Study IS	What Word Study ISN'T
Learning particular words and word features	Learning letter sounds in isolation
Recognizing and thinking about patterns across words	Reading controlled texts
Generalizing ideas about patterns we find	Passive
Phonics, phonemic awareness, spelling, and vocabulary	Only phonics
Developing strategies to study words	Only spelling
Active	Only vocabulary
Developmentally appropriate	One-size-fits-all
Collaborative	BORING!
FUN!	

Stages of Spelling, Reading, and Writing Development: Well-Regarded Research

Bear, Invernizzi, Templeton, & Johnston, 2004	Chall, 1983	Gentry, 1982
<p>Emergent</p> <p>Letter–sound correspondence and alphabetic knowledge not yet solid; letter strings may be used.</p>	<p>Stage 0: Prereading</p> <p>Reader recognizes letters; expresses interest in words and reading.</p>	<p>Precommunicative</p> <p>Writer has message in mind to communicate; often uses letter strings and letter-like symbols to communicate this message.</p>
<p>Letter Name (Alphabetic)</p> <p>Letter–sound correspondence in place; phonetic spelling often includes first and last consonants heard.</p>	<p>Stage 1: Initial Reading and Decoding</p> <p>Reader has letter–sound correspondence; able to read some high-frequency words and many “phonetically regular” simple words.</p>	<p>Semiphonetic Stage</p> <p>Writer has some understanding of letter–sound correspondence, and words written have some “correct” letters (often beginning and ending consonants).</p>
<p>Within Words</p> <p>Able to spell most simple CVC words and able to conventionally write blends and digraphs in simple words; attempts to spell words with long vowel sounds; starting to attempt spelling words containing other vowel patterns (<i>ou</i>, <i>aw</i>, etc.).</p>	<p>Stage 2: Confirmation and Fluency</p> <p>Reader decodes simple words and has increased sight word vocabulary; as a result, can read an increasing number of texts with fluency.</p>	<p>Phonetic Stage</p> <p>Writer able to segment, hear, and write a letter for most sounds heard in a word; relies heavily on sounds heard to help with spelling.</p>
<p>Syllables and Affixes</p> <p>Conventional spelling of high-frequency words, words with short vowels, and many words with long vowel patterns; learning to spell multisyllabic words.</p>	<p>Stage 3: Reading to Learn</p> <p>Reader able to read more complex texts with unfamiliar vocabulary and take on a more syntactical and systematic study of words.</p>	<p>Transitional Stage</p> <p>Writer spells simple words conventionally; vowels present in most to all syllables; greater reliance on visual and morphological information.</p>
<p>Derivational Relations</p> <p>Conventional spelling of most words; greater understanding of the connection between vocabulary and spelling—accordingly, high understanding of word parts, prefixes, suffixes, and Greek and Latin roots.</p>	<p>Stage 4: Multiple Viewpoints</p> <p>Reader able to read complex, academic, and content-driven texts; has a highly systematic repertoire of how to study words and word parts.</p> <p>Stage 5: Construction and Reconstruction</p> <p>Reading comprehension now more efficient than listening comprehension.</p>	<p>Correct Stage</p> <p>Spelling is conventional; high level of sound–symbol understanding; writer relies on wider range of strategies, including knowledge of the orthographic system.</p>



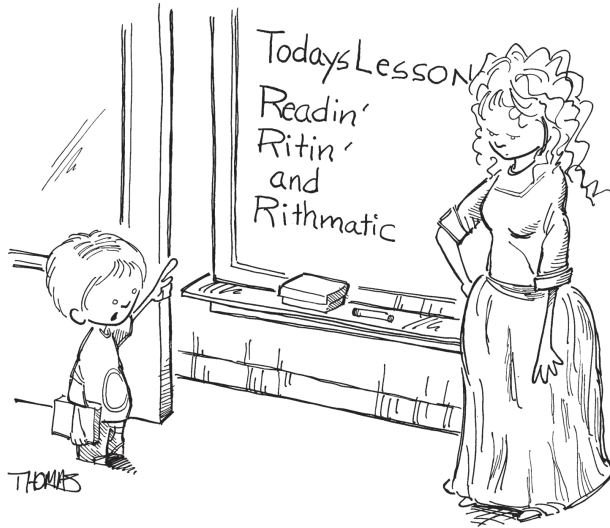
WORD STUDY NEEDS OUR TIME AND ATTENTION

It's time to recognize the power of words and the importance of word study in our classrooms. In 2000, the National Reading Panel reported that direct instruction in phonics and vocabulary are important factors in learning to read. Many of us likely knew this, but perhaps we still struggle to make the time for this direct instruction or figure out just how it "should" look. One thing we know for sure is that we can't continue to use one-size-fits-all spelling instruction. Bear and colleagues say it best when they write,

Commercial phonics, spelling, and vocabulary programs are often characterized by explicit skill instruction . . . much of the repeated practice consists of rote drill, so students have little opportunity to manipulate word concepts or apply critical thinking skills. The best way to develop fast and accurate perception of word features is to engage in meaningful reading and writing, and to have multiple opportunities to examine those same words out of context . . . the most effective instruction in phonics, spelling, and vocabulary links word study to the texts being read, provides a systematic scope and sequence of word-level skills, and provides multiple opportunities for hands-on practice and application. (2004, p. 4)

In 2008, Rasinski deepened this professional conversation on the importance of making time for strong word study instruction. He and his colleagues remind us that there are more words in the English language than any other language in the world. Our students will need systematic, meaningful, in-and-out-of-context word work to make sense of the language with the most words!

As early as 1958, James taught us all, "Teaching is not telling." As part of word study, students actively examine, manipulate, and categorize words. They also pose theories and talk with peers to create larger, transferable understandings. We hope to support our students in becoming confident conversationalists, remarkable readers, and wicked-awesome writers. We know that we want students to take risks in using strong, precise words—even if they may not know how to spell these words. Word study instruction provides the background knowledge necessary to help students become more comfortable attempting to read and use words they do not yet know. We know that if students labor too long on decoding, accessing, or trying to spell a particular word, their motivation will be lost, and they may lose the intrinsic reward that accompanies success. Students who are more confident are more willing to take risks. Well-rounded word study instruction builds this mindset.



"What about spelling?"
www.CartoonStock.com

Making the time for
word study is important!

WHEN:

**ANYTIME! AND COULD BE IN
AS LITTLE AS FIVE MINUTES**

In 2010, Simon Sinek tweeted, "Rule books tell people what to do. Frameworks guide people how to act." When it comes to the "when" of word study, keep Sinek's insight in mind because effective word study is all about you finding and tweaking a framework that works for *you*, your setting, your goals. Anyone who knows me knows well that I am not a believer in "one right way." I have been in countless classrooms spanning all grades and have seen diverse structures yield positive results. The common thread is that there is some time devoted specifically to word study *and* some time where word study is woven into other parts of the day.

We *all* have room for word study. We just need to make the space. In 2010, Rasinski and Zutell wrote, "Finding 5 to 10 minutes at the right time for examining and playing with words can make all the difference between deep and limited understanding" (p. 10). In *Words Their Way*, Bear et al. share that in 15 minutes a day, we can make space for students to compare and contrast words by sound, by consistent spelling patterns associated with patterns of sound, and by meaning, use, and part of speech (pp. 7–8). I have worked with students from kindergarten through sixth grade using a 15 to 30 minutes-per-day model. I have also had the opportunity to implement a language workshop block that allotted as much time for word study and conventions as it did for reading and writing. In Chapter 2, we will explore each of these models

in more detail and with more specifics. Until then, pull out a copy of your daily schedule and start spinning those wheels, contemplating how you can carve out a bit more space for word study.

Word Study Is a Verb, Not a Noun

Dale Carnegie once said, “People rarely succeed unless they have fun in what they are doing.” Albert Einstein proclaimed, “It is the extreme art of a teacher to awaken joy in creative expression and knowledge.” And Simon Sinek noted, “When you use a framework, you are acting.” You are doing, choosing—not merely dispensing spelling lists. One central concept presented in this book is that word study is the perfect time to get students *learning by doing*. We can explore words like scientists do specimens and social scientists do artifacts. We can wonder about words and look more deeply into these curiosities with peers. Word study is active, student-centered learning! The Before and After chart at the end of this chapter shows a peek into the world of Word Study That Sticks. I invite you to try it out with your students.

Word Study Invites Inquiry

I once witnessed a first grader slurp her chicken noodle soup at lunch and then begin freestyling, “Campbell! Campbell! Mmm, mmm, good!” as she bopped around the room. Charmed and forever on duty looking for those teachable moments, I made sure that by the time those first graders went home from school they had learned about Clive Campbell, aka DJ Kool Herc, the founding father of hip hop. In a fifth-grade class, I overheard a student tease a friend, “You go on autopilot whenever you play video games.” Later in science class, he came across the term *autoimmune disease*. Hmmm . . . “Jake, didn’t you just use the word *autopilot*?” I asked. “Oh, yeah—wait,” he replied. I could see his mental engines turning. “Auto, autho . . . self. Autoimmune . . . maybe it means a disease that gets started with, umm . . . the self, like from inside you?” I smiled. “You got it. I wonder what else we can discover when we delve into the prefix *auto*?”

Inquiry-based word study experiences allow students to discover patterns, connections, and meaning themselves. In *The Curious Classroom* (2017), Harvey Daniels describes children involved in inquiry as being “seized by curiosity, hungry to build knowledge, and fully in charge of their own learning” (p. xiv). I can imagine nothing worthier of our time and attention! The bottom line is that word study can be an engaging, individualized, meaningful, and *fun* part of our classrooms. Here are a few questions we can use to launch some thinking about words:

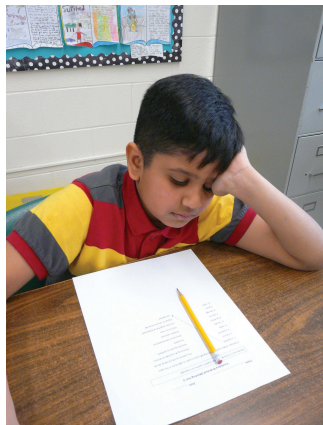


INVITING INQUIRY

- ❑ Why do we study words?
- ❑ Why is it important to learn about words?
- ❑ How do words impact our interactions with others?
- ❑ What do you notice about words?
- ❑ What would happen if we didn't spend time learning to read, write, and use words?

When we invite inquiry into one area of our instruction, it has a miraculous way of seeping into the entire culture of our classroom. When we embrace curiosity, learning becomes more engaging and playful. When we spark the inherent wonder in our students, they create and follow their own learning paths that supersede our greatest expectations. All we have to do is set the stage, make the time, and step out of their way.

BEFORE	AFTER
Word study as a noun: Passive, teacher-driven instruction Assignments, mandates, memorization (lackluster)	Word study as a verb: Active, developmentally appropriate, collaborative (fun)
When word study is a noun . . .	When word study is a verb . . .



. . . students feel bored. This “learning” is quite passive and definitely not joyful.

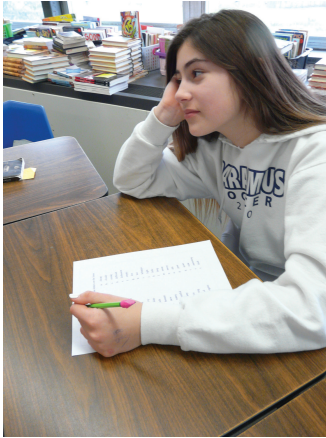


. . . students collaborate and may even giggle!

(Continued)

(Continued)

BEFORE	AFTER
<p>Word study as a noun: Passive, teacher-driven instruction Assignments, mandates, memorization (lackluster)</p>	<p>Word study as a verb: Active, developmentally appropriate, collaborative (fun)</p>
When word study is a noun . . .	When word study is a verb . . .



. . . students don't discover or collaborate. They instead complete surface tasks and one-size-fits-all assignments.

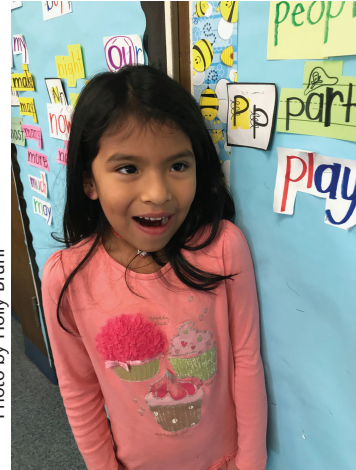
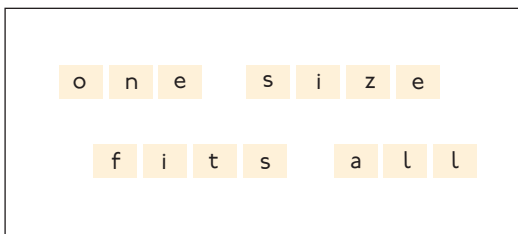
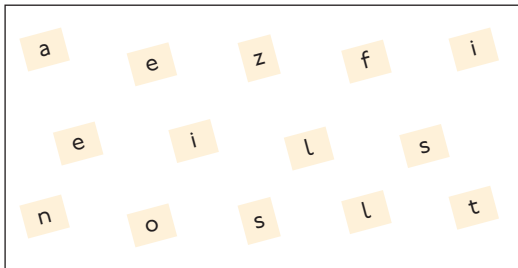


Photo by Holly Bruni

. . . there is a sense of discovery. Students experience "WOW!" moments all the time.

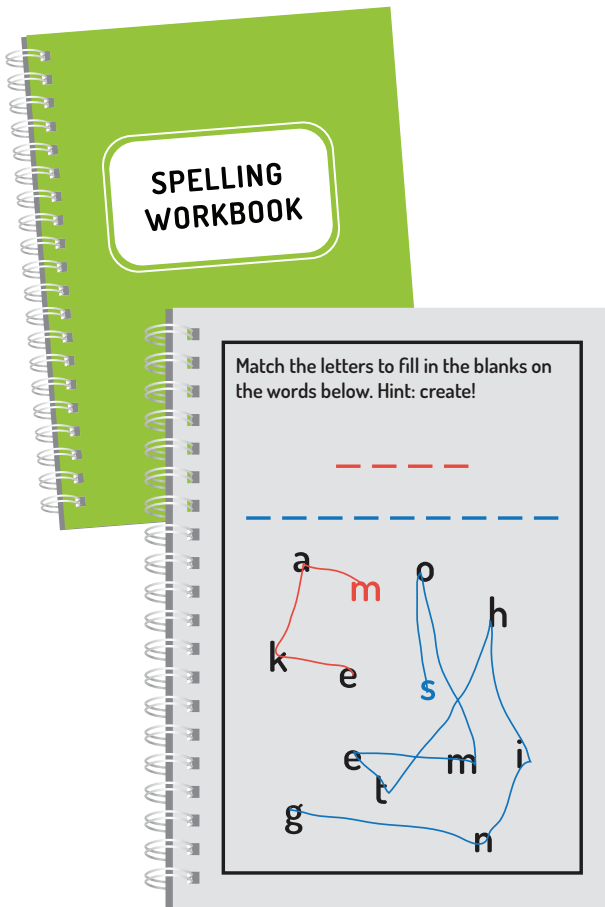


. . . it is tried to be made into a "thing." A workbook or a worksheet is not able to create student-centered, differentiated, active word study habits.



. . . students learn to make choices. Even young students make decisions about how they best learn.

BEFORE	AFTER
<p>Word study as a noun: Passive, teacher-driven instruction Assignments, mandates, memorization (lackluster)</p>	<p>Word study as a verb: Active, developmentally appropriate, collaborative (fun)</p>
<p>When word study is a noun . . .</p>	<p>When word study is a verb . . .</p>



. . . students move their bodies and learn in creative and nontraditional ways.



. . . students engage in high-level thinking, including sorting, categorizing, creating theories, defending viewpoints, and so much more.



. . . students nurture all facets of word learning!