

Word

Walls

A Support

for Literacy

in

Secondary

School

Classrooms

by Jennifer Cronsberry



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Word Walls: A Support for Literacy in Secondary School Classrooms

Introduction

Each year students must learn and use thousands of new words in their various subject discipline studies. They are required to perform complex tasks using new vocabulary. The use of a word wall in a classroom can be a highly effective teaching strategy to improve literacy skills. Word wall activities encourage active student participation. Gestures, such as pointing to key words during a lesson, offer visual reinforcement which can be very helpful for students. Word wall activities engage students while they learn key vocabulary, whether it be learning to explain a word, to compare it to other key concepts, or to spell it.

A word wall is a group of words that are displayed on a wall, bulletin board, chalkboard, or whiteboard in a classroom. The words are printed in a large font so that they are easily visible from all student seating areas. These words are referred to continually throughout a unit or term by the teacher and students during a variety of activities.

Word walls:

- provide an approach to meaningful teaching of vocabulary with an emphasis on student engagement and higher level thinking skills;
- build vocabulary, thereby improving reading comprehension and writing style;
- reinforce understanding of subject-specific terminology with a focus on students internalizing key concepts;
- help students improve spelling and awareness of spelling patterns;
- provide visual cues for students;
- encourage increased student independence when reading and writing.

Curriculum Connections

Word wall activities can be used to improve literacy in all curriculum areas by helping students build vocabulary, improve spelling in written work, and explain ideas through oral communication.

Examples

<p>In English curriculum students:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• use specialized literary terms in analysis and explanations of reading materials;• comprehend new vocabulary encountered in reading materials;• increase effectiveness in writing style through increased awareness of diction and a broader vocabulary.	<p>In Science curriculum students:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• communicate scientific ideas, procedures, results, and conclusions using appropriate language and formats;• recognize and describe the major components of the universe using scientific terminology and units.	<p>In Geography curriculum students:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• demonstrate understanding of terms and concepts;• demonstrate a knowledge of geographic terms.
<p>In Arts curriculum students:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• use appropriately language specific to each of the arts when doing critical analysis;• describe dance works, using the language of dance criticism.	<p>In Business curriculum students:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• define key information technology terms;• use current information technology terminology appropriately.	<p>In Mathematics curriculum students:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• communicate the findings of investigations, using appropriate language and mathematical forms.

Basic Organizational Principles

How Many Words and How Often?

Vocabulary instruction using a word wall focuses on a small number of targeted vocabulary words that are key to student success in a unit and the course overall. Teachers decide whether to introduce new words weekly or to begin the unit by introducing all new vocabulary as an overview. The approach would depend on the focus of the word wall and the unit with which it coincides.

The words selected for a word wall are addressed continually, using a wide variety of engaging activities.

Creating the Word Wall

In secondary schools, where different teachers, different courses, and different grade levels often share the same classroom, finding sufficient space for a word wall may prove to be a challenge. In the Resources section of this document there are references to sources of ideas from teachers who have found ways to display word walls in limited space. When space is limited, the word wall may need to be changed for each unit rather than keeping key terms up all year. Ideally, key terms from a previous unit could be moved to another space in the room to remain available for visual reference throughout the course.

Ideas

- Mount the words on construction paper or card stock and laminate them.
- Colour code the words, either using coloured markers for lettering or coloured paper for mounting. Colour coding can be used in numerous ways, e.g., same colours can be used to highlight homonyms, synonyms, parts of speech, frequently misspelled words, or categories.
- Use a wall area that is visible to all students. If the word wall is to be used effectively, students need to be able to glance at the word wall from their desks while they are working.
- Mount words on the wall in alphabetical order. Using alphabetical order makes it easier for students to skim the list and find words.
- Make access to the words easy, e.g., use tape or tacks to mount the words so students can move individual words.

Types of Words

All courses have subject-specific terminology that can be used for a word wall.

Suggestions

Geography <ul style="list-style-type: none">• terms and concepts associated with geographical regions• vocabulary for forms and characteristics of systems, e.g., social services, transportation, resource management, political structures, energy networks	French <ul style="list-style-type: none">• verbs conjugated with “etre” for passé compose• reflexive verbs• unit vocabulary	Mathematics <ul style="list-style-type: none">• vocabulary for math concepts and terms course topics, e.g., integers, polynomials, equations, analytic geometry, measurement, coefficient, slope
Science <ul style="list-style-type: none">• terminology to describe major concepts• biological reproduction processes, e.g., mitosis, prophase, metaphase, anaphase and telophase• types of asexual reproduction in plant species	Arts <ul style="list-style-type: none">• elements common to all arts, e.g., space, time, form, contrast, unity, variety, movement, balance• historical periods with stylistic links in the arts, e.g., baroque, pre-Raphaelite• terms used in photography, sculpture, etc.	English <ul style="list-style-type: none">• literary terms or media terms, e.g., camera techniques• theme words or transition words• graphic text features• synonyms or homonyms• mood/atmosphere words• vivid verbs• prefixes, suffixes, roots• easily confused words, e.g., accept/except• parts of speech• commonly misspelled words

Classroom Activities Using Word Walls

- There are many creative ways to use word walls to engage students in learning. The activities may be full lessons, or brief exercises that encourage students to refer to the word wall and review key terms. Shorter activities encourage students to 'play with' language and can be beneficial for reinforcement of basic skills.
- Where possible, students should interact with the word wall words whether it be to affix a prefix, or a plural 's,' or to move words so they are intrinsically engaged by the active, creative, and participatory nature of word wall activities.
- Some classroom activities suggest the use of word cards. These activities require at least one set of the words on cards such as recipe cards. The words could be generated from a computer and glued to recipe cards when multiple sets are needed.
- Students should maintain a personal word wall. To make the word wall list stand out, provide an organizational handout that students glue to three-holed construction paper. The construction paper fits into a binder, but sticks out a little more than regular binder paper, thus making the word wall list easily accessible.
- The suggested activities are organized as whole class, small groups/partners, or individual activities. Unless specifically indicated, the activities are done with all the words posted on the word wall. Some of the activities could be completed with just the new word(s) introduced on a given day.
- The word wall activities are suggestions only and can be adapted or modified for use within different grade levels and subject disciplines.
- In presenting word wall activities, teachers must be sensitive to students who may be uncomfortable with completing a task in front of their peers, e.g., spelling exercises are suggested as individual or partner activities.

Whole Class Activities

Mystery Word

Introduce a new word by writing the letters in a scrambled order. To assist students in unscrambling the word, give clues, either about the word's meaning or about how it is spelled. Students apply their knowledge of spelling patterns, as well as activate their prior knowledge, depending on the clues given.

Visiting Word

After students have worked on a word wall for a substantial period of time, add a "visiting" word. This encourages students to do a review of the word wall as they hunt for the new word. Present the visiting word as the new word for the day.

Missing Word

Take one of the words off the word wall and rearrange the remaining words. Students scan the word wall and figure out which word is missing. Give clues to help to determine the missing word.

Quick Definitions

Provide a definition (orally and/or written on the board) of one of the word wall words. Students choose and write the word to match the definition. Repeat the process encouraging students to review all the words as they select the answer.

Looking at Spelling

Students use masking tape to 'underline' the part of the word that is typically difficult to spell (e.g., because it is an exception to a rule, a homonym, hard to hear phonetically).

Using coloured strips of masking tape, students underline common spelling patterns in the words such as 'i' before 'e,' double consonants, or 'qu.'

Small Group Activities

Word Pictures

Working in teams, students select one of the words from the word wall and illustrate it on the board or on chart paper. The opposing team gets a point for a correct guess and illustrates another word.

Word Relationships

Each student shares the word on their word card with a partner, and together, they decide on a way that their two words are related or have something in common. A time limit could be imposed after which students rotate to a new partner and repeat the process. After doing this a few times, the pair could join with another pair, and see if they can find a relationship between the four words. Discussing similarities and differences helps students to master new vocabulary meanings.

Word Cards Partner Game

Pairs of students take turns choosing a word card and offering a definition for the word. The partner guesses and spells the word.

Parts of Speech

Each small group is given a part of speech and must decide which words on the word wall fall into the category. If more than one group is looking for the same part of speech, they compare lists and discuss any discrepancies.

Small cards can be affixed adjacent to the words on the word wall to identify the part of speech for each word.

Drama

Students choose a word from the word wall and improvise a situation that portrays the word. Peers guess the word.

Plurals

Small groups are assigned a group of words to pluralize. Students identify the nouns and tape the plural ending of the word on the word wall. Discuss each group's work as a class.

Word Ad

Each group chooses a word, and brainstorms all the possible uses of the word. They create a radio or television ad to 'sell' one of the words from the word wall and present it to the class.

As a variation, students think of a product for which they create a radio advertisement, using as many words as possible from the word wall. The group avoids making direct reference to the product and asks the class to guess what it is that the ad is trying to sell.

Categories

Students create categories and group the words from the word wall to fit those categories. Set the number of words that are allowed in a "miscellaneous" category and create a maximum and minimum number of categories that can be used. This activity could be done individually first; then students share and compare their categories with a partner. They share their groups of words with the class who guess the principle behind the sorting.

Musical Words

In groups of five or six, with each group member having one word card, students circulate the cards within their groups, while music is playing. When the music stops, the group members take turns giving the meaning of the word they have. Group members can challenge the correctness of the definition offered by their peer. If a group member cannot provide a definition, the group members discuss the meaning, asking the teacher for assistance, if necessary.

Prefixes and Suffixes

Each small group is given a set of the suffix and prefix cards and decides to which words on the word wall they can add them.

As a variation, assign each group a set of words from the word wall for which they must decide the appropriate suffixes and prefixes.

Contextualization

Students write about a situation in which a word wall word would be commonly used. The student reads the situation to the class, who then guess the relevant word.

As a variation, students portray multiple contextual situations, if applicable, e.g., *brackets* are something that could be spoken about in both writing and construction contexts.

Word Origins and Root Words

Each group finds the word origin and root words of a set of word wall words and presents its findings to the class.

As a variation, groups give the origin of a word and the class guesses the corresponding word wall word.

Names for Musical Groups

Students brainstorm creative names used by musical groups from both the past and present. After looking at the unique and varied nature of the names, students use one to three words from the word wall to create a name for a musical group.

As an extension, students could write a description of the fictitious group and its style of music.

Individual Activities

Definition Bingo

Students fill in a bingo-type grid with word wall words. As definitions are read out, students cross out the corresponding word on their grid. The first person to get a complete line of words wins.

As a variation: give synonyms or antonyms for appropriate word wall words.

Reading Bingo

Students fill in a bingo card with new words for a unit. As students complete the unit's reading, they fill in the page numbers where the unit's words appear. Acknowledge the first person who gets a straight line completed, then assign completion of the entire grid for everyone in the class.

As a variation: Students skim text to find words they have listed on their card.

Word of the Day

Choose a "Word of the Day." Encourage students to use the "Word of the Day" meaningfully during the class and highlight appropriate use. Add the word to the word wall.

Words in Writing

Encourage students to use the word wall words in their daily classroom writing. When work is collected or read in class, highlight the words from the word wall that are used appropriately.

Memory Association

Encourage students to make connections and increase comprehension by selecting a word wall word that connects to a positive personal memory. Students explain the connection in writing and share their writing with a partner. Volunteers read their writing aloud to the class.

Maximum Words in a Story

Students write a story involving as many words from the word wall as possible within a given time frame. Students underline all the word wall words they used and share their stories in small groups. Each group decides which to read aloud, e.g., the story with the most words or the most creative story.

Unfolding Five Words in a Story

Students are given a word wall word every two-minutes for ten minutes (five words in total) to incorporate into a story they are writing on a topic of their choice. When a new word is given, students work that word into their story immediately. Encourage students to write continuously and quickly during the ten minutes. Students share their stories in small groups and each group chooses one story to be read aloud to the class.

Words within Words

Students make a list of as many words as possible by reorganizing some of the letters of a word wall word. Students could write the word on a piece of paper and then cut the letters apart so that they can move them around and try different combinations.

Note: Limits can be set such as that the words must have at least three letters and names do not count.

Poetry

Students write a poem related to the topic under study using as many words as possible from the word wall. As a variation, students choose just one word from the word wall and write a poem about that word. Students share their poetry.

Making Connections

Students give an example of someone from history or the present for each of the traits on the character traits word wall. For a shorter version, students choose ten of the traits for which they could give one example.

Note: This activity could be adapted to suit other word wall topics.

Word Connotation

Students indicate words with positive or negative connotations from their personal word wall list, using a set of plus (+) and minus (–) cards. Student volunteers indicate which words have positive connotation and which words have negative connotation by placing the appropriate card beside the word wall word.

Word Search

Students use the words from the word wall to create a word search puzzle. Students exchange word searches with a partner and find the word wall words.

Concept Ladder

Students place a word wall word at either the top or the bottom of a ladder image. In each successive part of the ladder, students fill in information about a different aspect of the word, e.g., what is it like, what is it opposite of, where is it found, how is it used.

Concept Map

Students create a concept map for words that define complex concepts. They place the word in a circle or box on the centre of a page and then draw other circles/boxes branching off the centre to contain subtopics which can then be further broken down.

Media Re-naming

Ask students to re-name a television show or movie using at least one of the appropriate word wall words. Students write the new name on a piece of paper, along with the original name. Use the papers periodically at the end of class by reading out the new title and asking students to guess the original name of the show or movie.

Rankings

Students individually list the word wall words, in writing, from most difficult to easiest for them to understand or to spell. If this activity is done at the beginning, middle, and end of a unit, students can note how their rankings have changed.

Visual Representation

Students choose one word from the word wall to convey its meaning visually. Encourage students to not just add illustrations around the word, but to use the letters of the word to convey meaning appropriately. Post the visual representations around the room and/or the word wall.

Rhyme Time

Students select three to five word wall words with which they can rhyme words. Students list as many rhymes for each word as they can in a given time limit.

Metaphors and Similes

Students practise their abstract thinking skills by choosing five words from the word wall and creating either a simile or metaphor for each of the words. Students can share their similes and metaphors with others in the class.

As an extension, each student chooses one simile or metaphor and writes the comparison on construction paper, which is displayed around the classroom. The teacher reads a few comparisons each day to reinforce the concept of similes and metaphors.

Links to Assessment

Assess student learning through their use of the targeted vocabulary in the larger scope of their classroom activities and assessments.

Depending on how the words are introduced – whether daily, at the beginning of the week, or at the beginning of a unit – diagnostic assessment should be brief. Vocabulary assessment could also be incorporated into larger diagnostic assessments done for a unit.

If students already have some familiarity with the words, the activities that focus on higher-level thinking skills and extending meaning are suitable. If students have little initial understanding of a group of words, start with something like a concept map or concept ladder to scaffold meaning.

Student understanding of the words from the word wall should not be assessed through isolated vocabulary tests that assess only rote memorization of words rather than genuine understanding of their meaning.

An observation checklist could be created to assess student mastery of the word wall words:

Volunteers accurate answers in whole class word wall activities	
Completes word wall activities with ease	
Uses word wall vocabulary appropriately in class and peer discussions	
Demonstrates use of words in a variety of contexts, during independent work	
Uses words in class work appropriately	
Spells word wall words correctly in written work	
Glances to the word wall during class	
Refers to personal word wall list	

Students should be assessed for their increased knowledge of and skills with the word wall words as part of larger performance tasks at the end of a unit/study.

Examples

- Assess students' ability to spell the word wall vocabulary accurately, in completing a major assignment.
- Assess students' increased vocabulary by looking at their ability to use word wall words effectively in a writing piece at the end of a unit.
- Assess students' understanding of key concepts inherent in the words by their ability to answer terminology-based questions on a test.

Resources

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Callella, Trisha. *Making Your Word Wall More Interactive*. Huntington Beach: Creative Teaching Press, 2001. 1-57471-773-1

Cunningham, Patricia C. and Richard L. Allington. *Classrooms That Work: They Can All Read and Write*. Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1994. 0-205-35541-2

Interactive Word Wall

<http://www.teachnet.com/lesson/langarts/wordwall062599.html>

Ontario Ministry of Education. *Think Literacy: Cross Curricular Approaches Grade 7-12*, 2003. Ontario: Queen's Printer For Ontario, 2003. 0-7794-5426-X

Peel District School Board. *Reaching Higher: Supporting student achievement in literacy*. Ontario: 2000.

Word Walls

<http://www.theteacherscorner.net/writing/wordwall/index.htm>

Working with Words

<http://www.wfu.edu/~cunningh/fourblocks/block4.html>