



Vocabulary Development Ideas and Activities

What to do: Review the concepts you can use to support students' vocabulary development. Then put the concepts in action by following step-by-step activity directions for a vocabulary collage or vocabulary parade.

Why it matters: A reader's vocabulary knowledge is the best predictor of their ability to understand text. Activities that improve students' vocabulary knowledge have a direct impact on word recognition, reading fluency, and comprehension.

Vocabulary Development Concept Ideas

Foster Word Consciousness

Word consciousness means being aware of and intrigued by the words and language in one's environment. Being word conscious can increase reading comprehension and help students become more engaged and motivated to read. Here are some simple ways to help students become more word conscious:

- Collect, catalog, or post examples of vivid or meaningful new words.
- Have students locate and share new and interesting words used outside of learning activities. Simply creating an avenue for them to pay attention to the language around them heightens awareness.
- Assign students roles as language detectives, asking them to notice and describe different ways people express similar thoughts.
- Look for interesting word choices in books and have students discuss how the meaning would change if the author chose a different word or phrase.
- Award points to students "caught" using chosen words in conversation or writing.

Play With Language

Students who understand that words and sentences can have more than one meaning are able to think flexibly about language, which is crucial to making sense of text. Students learn to monitor their reading more carefully and consider the context surrounding a word. Here are some ways to help students think about the flexibility of language and its impact on meaning:

- Use jokes, riddles, or multiple-meaning sentences.
 - The chicken was ready to eat. (What does this mean if a farmer says it? What about a chef?)
 - I saw her duck.
 - A duck brought some lip balm to the cash register and asked if he could put it on his bill.
- Play with idioms.
 - Learning idioms is a piece of cake! Introduce each idiom with a picture. Provide a definition and describe the origin of the idiom, if known.



- Here's an example: When something requires little effort to finish, it's "a piece of cake." The origin for this idiom is from the 1870s, when cakes were often given as prizes for winning competitions.
- Then make sure to put the idiom into context by using it in a variety of situations, so students understand the subtleties of its meaning and usage.
- Explore newspaper or magazine headlines, or advertisement copy.
 - Discuss the meaning of newspaper headlines like this one from the *New York Times*: "Balloons have become a high-flying business and sell at inflated prices."
 - Or talk about ad copy such as this from Volkswagen: "If gas pains persist, try Volkswagen."

Explore Word Meanings

Students who understand word meanings at a deep level are better able to access words for their own use to convey specific, accurate, or subtle distinctions. Models that help students explore word meanings from different perspectives encourage deep understanding. See the 21st CCLC NTAC tool titled **Graphic Organizers to Support Student Literacy** for models you can use.

Support English Learners

Acquiring vocabulary in a second language is one of the primary goals of literacy instruction for English learners. Here are some tips to facilitate second language vocabulary acquisition:

- Identify language within text that may be particularly difficult for English learners. Examples include prepositional phrases ("in light of," "by way of," "under the weather," "on the ball"), homonyms, idioms, and slang.
- Preteach essential vocabulary and phrases, using images and objects from everyday life — realia — as teaching aids. Include academic words that they might hear at school but not on the playground, like *analyze*, *summarize*, *forthcoming*, and *therefore*.
- Look for cognates — words that look and sound similar in English and in the student's first language.

Tips for Putting these Concepts Into Action

- Use the step-by-step instructions on the following pages to develop a vocabulary collage activity and a vocabulary parade activity.
- For examples of high-frequency words that students are likely to encounter at school or while reading, check with a school-day language arts teacher or see [The Word Up Project's vocabulary lists](#) for students in grades 2-8 (students in grades K-2 may use the grade 2 list).
- Use the "Root Words, Prefixes, and Suffixes" handout (on the fifth and sixth pages of this tool) beyond the activities to help students continue to learn about word meanings.



Activity 1: Vocabulary Collage

Duration: 45-60 minutes for the student activity (or up to a week if extension activities are included) Suggestion: Have students do this activity at least a week before a community art event so that the collages can be displayed at the event.

Learning Goals

- Understand how root words, prefixes, and suffixes can be used to discern word meanings.
- Become familiar with the meanings of common root words, prefixes, and suffixes.
- Practice writing explanatory texts.

Materials Needed

- Blackboard, whiteboard, or chart paper on an easel
- Copies of the Root Words, Prefixes, and Suffixes table found later in these activity directions
- Student-friendly magazines (e.g., *Time for Kids*, *Highlights*)
- Scissors
- Poster board
- Glue
- Writing paper
- Pens or pencils
- Large index cards

Preparation

- Set a date and invite family and community members to a student art event.
- Set up the room for small-group work (three to five people per group) in arts and crafts.
- Print one copy of the Root Words, Prefixes, and Suffixes table per group.
- Distribute supplies so that each group has a few magazines, a poster board, some glue, and scissors. Set aside writing paper and utensils until after collages are completed.
- Bring an example or photos of Transformer™ toys and write “Transformer” on the board easel.

What to Do

- Engage students by asking them to guess how the “Transformer” toy got its name. Hint that they can discover the answer by looking at the “Root Words, Prefixes, and Suffixes” handout. Show them how each word part in *transformer* has a meaning that, when combined, explains the way the toy works: <trans> = across or over, <form> = shape or structure, <er> = a person or thing performing an act. Therefore, a transformer is a robot (person/thing) that can change from one shape (form) to another (across).
- Explore the “Root Words, Prefixes, and Suffixes” handout with students. Have them brainstorm other examples of words that use those root words, prefixes, and suffixes. Ask, “How does knowing the meaning of the word parts help you decode the meaning of the word?” Record these example words and their word part(s) on the board or easel.
- Explain to the students that they’ll be creating a collage, giving it a name by using a combination of the word parts on the handout, and writing a short explanation about their collage. Their collages will form an art display for family and community members. For



example, if students create a collage of scenes from around the world surrounded by eyes and lenses, they might name it “transgeoscope” to convey “looking across the world.” Their text would explain what the collage represents and how it got its title.

- Organize students into small groups and ask each to spend a few minutes looking over magazines for pictures to inspire their collage. Each group should work together to make a collage that’s creative and unique. As they complete their collages, provide paper and writing utensils and have students try different combinations of word parts to title their work. After students agree on a title, have them collaborate to write an explanatory text about what their collage represents and how the collage got its title. The title of the collage, the names of the artists, and a final copy of the text should be written neatly on an index card and displayed next to the collage, like a display card in a museum.
- Present the collages to family and community members at a student art event. Have each group stand by their collage and explain their piece to visitors.
- Extend learning if time allows: Give small groups newspaper articles or other short informational texts and have a competition to see which group can find the most words with word parts from the handout in a set amount of time. Students can also create sculptures for this activity using clay, found objects, etc.

Evaluate (Outcomes to Look For)

- Students recognize word parts in the words they encounter.
- Students identify how word parts convey the meaning of a word.
- Students work collaboratively to create an art piece.
- Students write an explanatory text that conveys their ideas and information about their collage clearly and accurately.

Note: The activity described above was adapted from the “Name That Junk” activity in *Fun Literacy Activities for After-School Programs* by Sue Edwards and Kathleen Martinez, School-Age Notes, Nashville, TN, 2004.

See the next two pages for the “Root Words, Prefixes, and Suffixes” handout mentioned above. It’s ready for you to print and share!



Root Words, Prefixes, and Suffixes

Keep this handout! It has information you can use to unlock the meaning of new words you encounter at school, at work, while reading, or in everyday life. Here are some things to know:

- **Root words** are the part of a word that holds the most meaning.
- Many English words are formed by combining a Greek or Latin root word with a **prefix**, a **suffix**, or both.
- For example *reaction* combines a Latin root word (*act*) with a prefix (*re*, which means “back” or “again”) and a suffix (*tion*, which means “the action or process of doing something”).
- As shown in the chart below, some root words have **combining forms**. For example, the root word *ped* may be followed by an *e* or an *i* when combined with a prefix or suffix to form a word.
- Knowing about root words, prefixes, and suffixes can help you figure out what some words mean — even if you’ve never seen those words before!

Root Words, Meanings, and Examples

Root Words and Combining Forms	Meanings	Examples
act	do, move	action, react, actor, activate
astro	star	astronomy
auto	self	autobiography
bio	life	biography
brevi	short, brief	abbreviate
chrono	time	chronological
cosmo	universe	cosmological
dent	tooth	dentist, dental
form	shape, structure	formal, format
geo	earth	geology
hydro	water	hydroplane
macro	large	macrocosm
micro	small	microcosm, microscope
multi	many	multiply
ped, pede, pedi	foot	pedal, centipede, pedicure
phobia	fear	claustrophobia
phon, phone	sound	phonics, telephone
photo	light	photograph
scope	see	telescope



Prefixes, Meanings, and Examples

Prefixes	Meanings	Examples
ante-	before	anteroom
anti-	against	antibiotic
circum-	around	circumference
ex-, e-	out of, from	exit, escape
extra-	beyond	extraordinary
fore-	front	forehead
inter-	among, between	intersect
intra-	within	intramural
mis-	wrong	mistake, mislead
non-	no, not	nonsense
post-	after	postseason
pre-	before	preview, presume
semi-	half	semiannual
sub-	under	submarine
super, sur-	above, over	superintendent, surpass
trans-	across, over	transfer
ultra-	beyond	ultraviolet

Suffixes, Meanings, and Examples

Suffixes	Meanings	Examples
-an	related to	American, urban
-ary, -arium, -orium	place for	aviary, aquarium, auditorium
-ent, -ant	one who	president, assistant
-er	a person/thing performing an act	runner, handler
-ess	female	heiress
-est	superlative	warmest, smartest
-ful	full of	playful
-hood	state of being	neighborhood, childhood
-ish	like, tending toward	greenish, smallish
-ive	of, having the quality of	pensive
-ize	cause to become or resemble	Americanize, rationalize
-less	without	smokeless, meatless
-ment	act of, state of	bewilderment
-ous	full of, possessing	joyous
-sect	to cut, divide	bisect



Activity 2: Vocabulary Parade

Duration: 45 minutes (can be extended)

Learning Goals

- Understand the meaning of a vocabulary word.
- Use descriptive text and visual representations to express what the word means.
- Teach the meaning of the word to others.

Materials Needed

- Vocabulary word list appropriate to grade level of students (check with a school-day language arts teacher or see [The Word Up Project's vocabulary lists](#))
- Colored paper
- Paper plates
- Yarn or string
- Scissors
- Drawing utensils (e.g., colored pencils, crayons, markers)
- Tape
- Dictionaries (print or online)

Preparation

- Invite family and community members to attend students' vocabulary parade.
- Print enough copies of your vocabulary list so that students in small groups (three to four individuals) can share one list.
- Write each vocabulary word from the word list on a slip of paper.
- Make an example of a vocabulary headpiece and paper plate necklace to show students. (See examples from Debra Frasier, author of *Miss Alaineus: A Vocabulary Disaster*, at <https://www.debrafrasier.com/vocabulary-parades/in-school-vocabulary-parades/>.)
- Set up room for small-group work.
- Collect art materials and distribute so that each student will get a few sheets of colored paper, a paper plate, and enough yarn to hang the plate around their neck. Small groups can share scissors, tape, and drawing utensils.
- Have print dictionaries available or open an online dictionary such as www.merriam-webster.com in a web browser for student use.

What to Do

- Engage students by asking them why it's important to learn new words. Guide conversation around specific areas of study or careers (such as engineering, music, science, medicine, teaching, law practice, library science, or accounting) that will require knowledge of words typically used by people in that field. Ask for examples (e.g., *diagnosis* if you're a doctor or *leavening* if you're a baker).
- Explore the vocabulary list for the students' grade level. Ask students what words they know or have heard before and where they might see this word being used — for example, a basketball coach might use the word *bounce* (from the grade 2 list) as they teach the team how to play the game. Show students the vocabulary headpiece and paper plate necklace



you prepared and share your word, its meaning, a sentence that demonstrates its meaning, and an example of its use in real life.

- Explain that students will be creating their own vocabulary word costumes and presenting their words in a vocabulary parade. Organize students into small groups and have each student choose one of the prepared slips of paper. This will be their vocabulary word for the parade. Each student will design a headpiece using colored paper featuring their word. While some students are working on their headpieces, other students can write the definition of their word on the back of their plates. Help students use the yarn or string to turn their plate into a necklace.
- Encourage students to decorate their headpiece and plate necklace with paper cutouts, pictures, or symbols that will help them remember what their word means. They may also create wristlets or other costume pieces if they wish.
- As they work on their costumes, have students think of a sentence that demonstrates the meaning of their vocabulary word, and an example of where this word would be used. Have them practice this explanation in their small group and get feedback from their peers on their sentence and example. If they wish, students can write their sentence and example on the back of their plate, along with the definition.
- Present students' costumes in a vocabulary parade! Have students parade around and display their costumes to family and community members. Give each student an opportunity to share their word, its meaning, their sentence, and their example. Ask each student to also identify the meaning of one to two other vocabulary words they learned from the parade.
- Extend learning if time allows: Read *Miss Alaineus: A Vocabulary Disaster* by Debra Fraiser. You can find activity ideas to use with the book on the author's website at [In-School Vocabulary Parades](https://www.in-schoolvocabulary.com/).

Evaluate (Outcomes to Look For)

- Students work together to gain a better understanding of new vocabulary words.
- Students identify the meanings of two to three new vocabulary words.
- Students identify real-life uses of new vocabulary words.

The limits of my language are the limits of my world.

— Ludwig Wittgenstein

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