

Five-Minute Vocabulary Strategies for the Common Core



By Lori G. Wilfong



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As districts continue to work to meet the needs of the Common Core, the issue of sharing the workload across content areas has been broached. “We can’t do it all!” Language arts teachers feel overwhelmed as they work to create new courses that integrate nonfiction, fiction, writing, and vocabulary seamlessly into units of rigor for their students. They then turn their heads to their colleagues: “Can you help?”

More than ever, the Common Core calls on social studies, science, math, and practical arts teachers to come together to support the literacy development of all students. For the first time, we have Literacy Standards for these subject areas that solidify the notion that creating readers and writers is not just the purview of language arts teachers but the responsibility of all.

So where to start? Vocabulary is an area that every single content area teacher must teach. Whether we teach music, art, physical education, or a core subject, the academic language of the discipline must be taught in such a way that students learn and apply new words that help them begin to write and speak like scholars.

The strategies presented in this paper are “nook and cranny” strategies. Understanding the unwieldy curriculum that teachers masterfully map out to teach, I became a collector of strategies that take five minutes or less to implement into the classroom. When we have a few minutes left at the end of class where we often let students begin homework or chat—why not turn these moments into word play?

Understand that these strategies are in addition to the planned teaching of vocabulary words that are important to concepts. Instead, these strategies encourage students to use increasingly sophisticated words in their writing and speaking.

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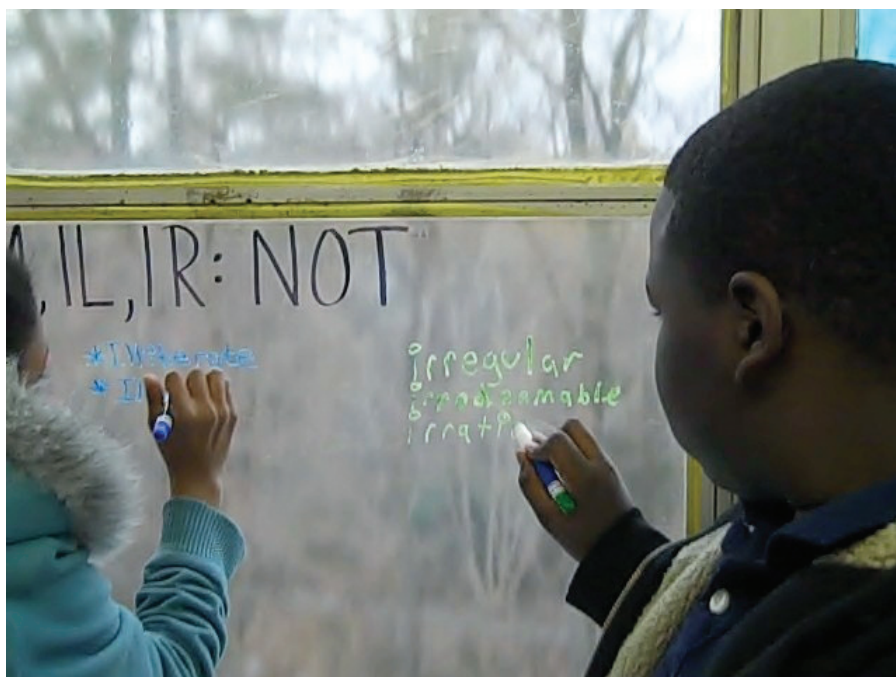
Strategy #1: Golden Words/Phrases

When you walk into Casey Oberhauser's seventh grade language arts classroom, the first thing you notice is the writing on the windows. No, her students are not defacing school property; they are constantly combing through their independent reading selections for golden words and phrases. In order to create a print rich environment (Allington & Cunningham, 2006; Rasinski, Padak, & Fawcett, 2009; Vacca, Vacca, Gove, Burkey, Lenhart, & McKeon, 2011), Casey Oberhauser took advantage of the windows in her room. "It was the one space I hadn't tried to turn into something usable," she said. "And I knew the students would love writing on the windows."

To set up the strategy, Casey purchases Crayola window crayons. During an early read aloud, she models coming across a word that sparks her interest. During a reading of *The Hunger Games*, she will stop after the word "squat."

"Did you notice this word?" she'll prompt her students. "That qualifies as a 'Golden Word.'" Mouths open, the students watch as she takes a glass marker and writes the word on the window. "If you come across a great word or phrase in your reading, you can write it on the window when we are finished with our self-selected reading time."

All year, students carefully read their books, finding words to add to the windows. If time allows, Casey stops before the bell rings to draw student attention to the windows and ask about the context of the word and why it was chosen.



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Strategy #2: Word Jars

As a literacy coach, I often model lessons in classrooms. I end up with a few moments left at the end of my demonstration where the students, teacher, and I will sit awkwardly, waiting for the bell to ring. The Word Jar strategy (Barger, 2006) became my favorite way to fill these moments.

Three containers become my Word Jars (coffee cans work best because of the lids). I cover and label each jar with a different phrase:

- 1) Words that tickle my ears
- 2) Words that warm my heart
- 3) Words that make me feel smarter

These labels work well with primary students; for older students, I might use more sophisticated labels:

- 1) Onamonaopia
- 2) Words that evoke emotion
- 3) Intelligent words

During my first demonstration lesson, I introduce the concept of the Word Jars to the students. I ask them to collect words for me during the week, writing them on notecards and inserting them into the slot I cut into the top of the coffee can lid. I model words for them in each category: *ooze* for the first category, *contentment* for the second, and *ponder* for the third. I leave the jars in the class and during my weekly visits, I purposely leave a few minutes at the end of the lesson to go through the jars to see what words the students had collected for me. I pull a few out, inviting the student who submitted the word to tell us where they found it and why they liked it. We can then add these words to the Word Wall in the classroom.

Strategy #3: Vocabulary Tableaux

Vocabulary tableaux (Rasinski, 2003; Tortello, 2004; Wilhelm, 2002) came about after a discussion with a teacher who described her room full of kinesthetic learners. “We do a lot of charades,” she explained, “but it is getting old. How else can they learn vocabulary with their bodies?”

To bring vocabulary to life, I carefully selected words from the content the class was studying: the food chain. I divided students into groups of two or three and handed each a word on a card. I then modeled the strategy for them: I showed them that my word was *energy*. We brainstormed various ways I could show this word without moving: Putting my arms out to show I was the sun and holding a still runner’s pose were two suggestions by the class. I took my pose and they agreed that it showed energy without moving. Next, they went to work on their words: *herbivores*, *carnivores*, *omnivores*, and *decomposers*. Students were given three minutes to create their word picture. Groups of students took their pose and the rest of the class tried to guess which word they were creating. For *carnivore*, one student got down on all fours and stuck his hands up behind his head to show a lion’s mane. He opened his mouth as if to bite his partner, who covered himself with a green

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tablecloth from the back (props are allowed!). If we got stuck, I would tap individuals on the shoulder and they could give clues about what word their bodies were depicting.

This strategy takes time to flow. However, when students get the basics down, it becomes a great active nook and cranny activity. A different tableau can be called each day to illustrate a word of interest.

Strategy #4: Word of the Week

Word of the Week (Fisher, 2007; Fisher & Frey, 2008) is not a new concept. My own iteration of this strategy was used with English language learners in a middle school in East Los Angeles. My students struggled with vocabulary as a whole, but they were especially challenged with vocabulary in literature. A previous teacher had trained them to look up unknown words, so my students stopped every sentence or so to look up a word, completely losing their comprehension of the text along the way. There was no feasible way to teach them every unknown word in a text, and I was more focused on survival vocabulary for my students, many of whom were new to this country. Yet I still wanted them to experience the richness of the English language. I stumbled across www.allwords.com. On the left-hand side of the website is a link labeled *Word of the Week*. Each week, the website presents a new word of the week, complete with definitions and usage.

The strategy worked like this: Each week, a student is designated the Word Master. They get to sit at my desk and use my computer to research the word of the week from the website. They then briefly confer with me to check pronunciation and meaning. The student is in charge of introducing the word to the class with a brief “word talk,” sharing the meaning and an example of how it can be used in a sentence. The word is displayed above the board in large letters for everyone to see, along with a two- to three-word definition.

The Word Master is then in charge of the word for the week. Every time the rest of the class is able to work the word into class discussion, the Word Master makes a tally mark on a card and, if possible, tries to write down the sentence and context in which it was used. On Friday, before the bell rings, the Word Master reports to the class how many times we were able to use the word and share a few of the instances we implemented it in conversation. The word then is taken off the board and posted around the perimeter of the room, with the tally card below it. By the end of the year, we are able to see the new words we have added to our vocabulary and compare which words were easy and challenging to use in class discussion.

Common Core Connection

Encouraging students to acquire and use a variety of words across contexts is included in the Common Core Standards for History, Science, Math, and Other Technical Subjects. The anchor standard for reading in this strand is: “Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including domain specific vocabulary” (CCSS, 2010). The anchor standard for writing in this strand is: “Use precise language and domain-specific vocabulary to inform about or explain the topic” (CCSS, 2010). All four of these strategies will help move students toward becoming proficient in learning and using new vocabulary—without taking up too much classroom time!

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10 Principles for Effective Vocabulary Instruction (and 10 Things to Avoid!)



DO THIS

1. Select words to teach.



2. Use strategies to engage students in word study.



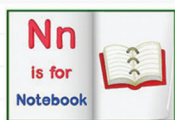
3. Help students to come up with their own definitions.

4. Assess student use of words in authentic writing and speaking.

5. Teach students morphological strategies to figure out words they do not know, in addition to context-clue strategies.



6. Use symbols and pictures to help bring vocabulary to life.



7. Highlight and use a word wall in classroom instruction.

8. Use and apply vocabulary words regularly (versus isolated practice).



9. Allow opportunities for wide reading so students are exposed to words all the time in a variety of books.

10. Model the use of academic language at all times, setting high expectations for language use.

NOT THAT

1. Assign long lists of words (six to eight a week is recommended) but never teach about the words selected.



2. Have students look up lists of words in a dictionary, write arbitrary sentences, or copy words multiple times.

3. Have students simply copy definitions.

4. Give students matching tests that show only memorization of definitions.



5. Tell students to use only context clues to figure out unknown words.



6. Lack the use of visual cues in the classroom to assist with vocabulary instruction.

7. Lack or misuse a word wall in the classroom.

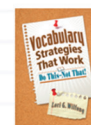
8. Spend a large chunk of language arts time working on vocabulary in isolation.



9. Teach only whole-class books/texts with controlled vocabulary study.

10. Use "kid" language around students and allow students to speak "kid" back.

Adapted from
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