

## Vocabulary Word Walls

**(It's what you DO with them that makes the difference!)**

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We have all had our word walls. We are supposed to have word walls, right? Go into almost any elementary classroom and you will see words in alphabetical categories. All the A words under a BIG A, and all the B words under the BIG B, etc. These are frequently used words that students can refer to when reading or writing. That is what many teachers consider their word wall. They think that they have fulfilled their mandate to “have a word wall.”

What many teachers have not considered is vocabulary word walls. I have personally used vocabulary word walls effectively for years. Vocabulary word walls allow students to revisit and review vocabulary that has been introduced to them. If done correctly, they can make a classroom come alive and encourage word play and exploration (one of the 4 broad research-based practices for building vocabulary).

This is important... they are only effective if your goal in putting them up is to offer opportunities for your students to revisit the words you have taught them. In our staff development trainings, we've learned that the most effective method of review is called “spaced review” (revisiting something new over time). Interestingly, this “spaced review” is rarely practiced in classrooms, even though teachers know that students must be exposed to a new word many times for it to become part of their knowledge base, readily available for receptive and/or expressive uses.

When done correctly, vocabulary word walls can partly address 2 of the 4 broad research-based practices for building vocabulary:

1. Word Play and Exploration - most of the words must be student generated (with your help) for it to count as one of the 4 broad research-based practices for building vocabulary.
2. Explicitly Teaching Words -One part of this broad research-based practice is to revisit the words many times. We know that students must be exposed to a new word many times and hopefully in different contexts in order for it to become part of their personal vocabulary, available for their use. Revisiting is probably the most often neglected part of explicitly teaching vocabulary words.

## So How Do We Build Vocabulary Word Walls?

Remember, the goal of your vocabulary Word Wall is to 1.) get students interested in helping build it and interested in words and 2) give students the opportunity to revisit the vocabulary words they learned during the year. That means you must set up situations where the students *MUST* use the Word Wall to complete assignments. For practical ideas and forms for using your word walls,

refer to *Vocabulary Word Walls, Centers and Partner Learning*, and Chapter 5 in *The New Book of Knowledge* for assignment ideas. Here are a few suggestions for word wall posters that either I have implemented or colleagues of mine.

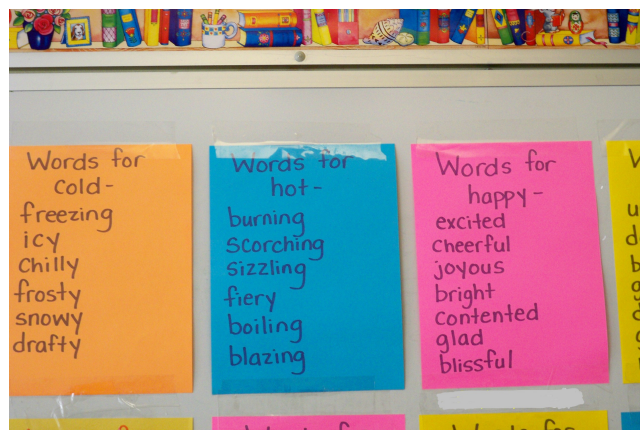
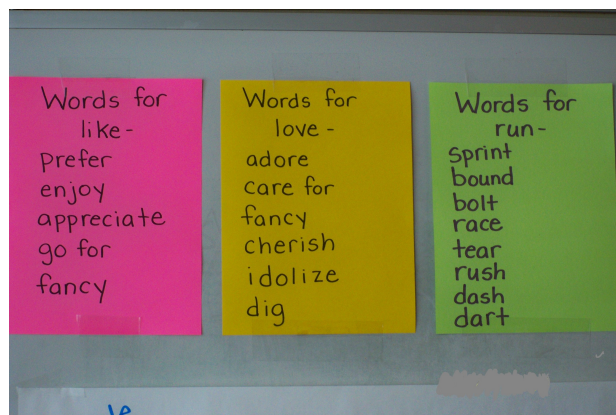
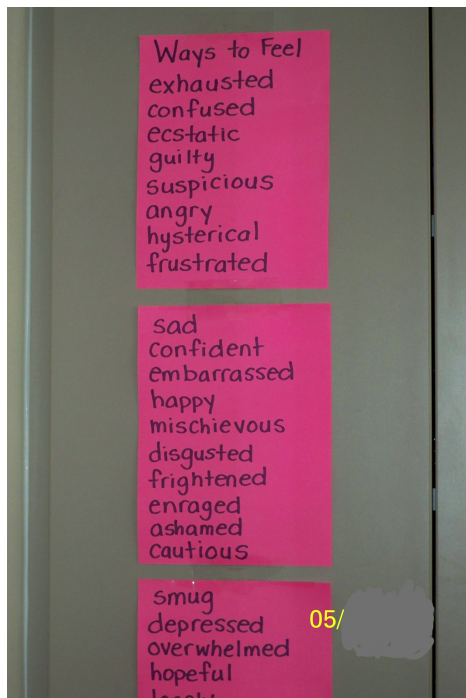
1. After teaching the names of parts of the body (ankle, wrist, shoulder, shin, cheek,...), I drew an outline of a student on bulletin board paper and labeled the parts. As I taught the spelling of the parts, I underlined the many different digraphs, diphthongs, and blends. We hung the human form with labels on the wall. Since the students had learned the names of the parts of the body, they could use the labels to help them remember sounds (“sh” in shoulder and shin). I’ll never forget, one year a little girl, Esperanza, came to my class in January and spoke very little English. I had her choose someone for us to trace and label as described above. After tracing, labeling, and hanging it up, she and a friend went over the labels and body parts daily for awhile. One day, during guided reading, I asked what sound sh made. Esperanza, got up from the table, went to the drawing, bent down to see “shin.” She came back and made the correct sound, /sh/. Esperanza learned a lot about the sounds of the English language by using that diagram with labels. If you think of it, the sounds of parts of the body comprise many of the 47 sounds (blends, r-controlled vowels, digraphs, diphthongs, consonants, consonant clusters, long vowels and short vowels).
2. I started many different lists on construction paper, hung them on the walls, cabinet doors, and bulletin boards. I usually started a new poster when we encountered a new word in teacher read-aloud or shared reading. I kept adding to the posters all year long when new words were encountered in reading or other subjects. Here are some poster titles we made:
  - good feeling words - (generous, brave, ...)
  - bad feeling words - (stingy, cheap, coward, ...)
  - relationship words - (uncle, aunt, cousin, ...)
  - homophones - the students’ favorite - (do, dew, due)
  - homographs - (read, read, record, record)
  - categories - Thank you to Liz Denny for this great idea. She saw a remarkable increase in the number and proper use of these words in student writing. See Figure 1.
    - Ways People Feel (exhausted, elated, embarrassed, etc.)
    - Ways of Saying “Said” (I separated these into loud (bellowed, etc.) and soft (whispered, etc))
    - Words for Hot (scorching, sizzling, blazing, etc.)
    - Words for Walk (saunter, stroll, race, etc.)
    - Words for Like (fancy, prefer, etc.)

[This was really cool.] The first time we encountered a good-feeling word (generous) in our teacher read a-loud, I got up and took a yellow piece of construction paper and wrote “Good-Feeling Words” at the top and hung it up on one side of the room. [Yellow for bright and sunny.]. I wrote our first word “generous” on it. I immediately took a red piece of construction paper and wrote “Bad-Feeling Words” at the top. I walked to the opposite side of the room and hung it up. I reviewed the meaning of opposites. We talked and determined that the opposite of “generous” would be “cheap,” so I wrote that as the first “bad-feeling” word. Later, we encountered “stingy” and we added that to the bad-feeling word list. You’d be surprised how many good and bad feeling words there are. Anyway, soon we had so many good and bad feeling words that we had to tape a second piece of construction paper on to the bottom of each poster.

THEN, I made a cool partner-learning word sort activity using those lists (See “**What Do We Do Now?**” Part A below).

This is an example of what a colleague of mine did for a word wall. She could then have extended it by putting the words on continuums (see “The Magic of Continuums”)

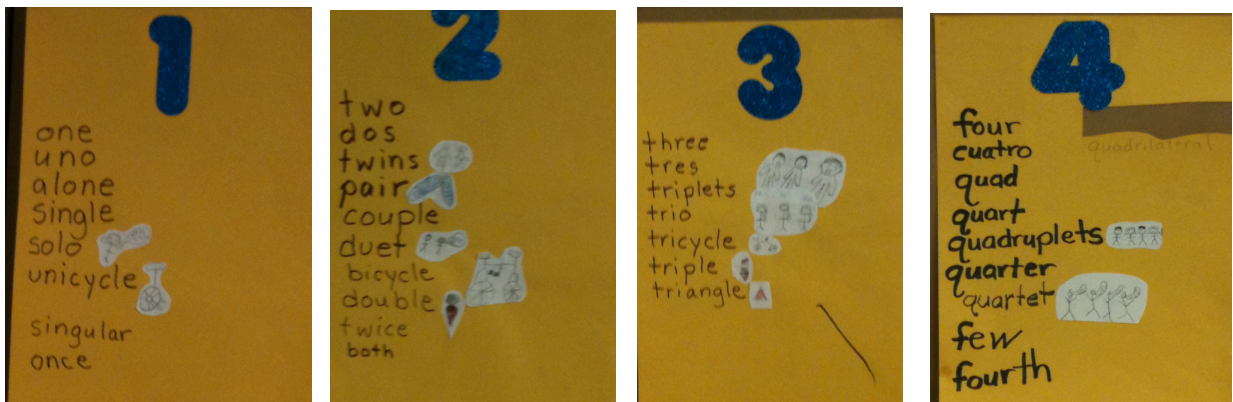
Figure 1 - Liz Denny’s Work



- Numbers - This one occurred to me when I realized that my students didn't know what a solo was, or triplets, or a couple. I was shocked that many did not really understand what the word "pair" meant. So I made one poster for each number (#1 - #5 only). I put all the words I could think of (and the students came up with a few) that related to that number (EX: duet - two people singing). Then I had a few students draw little pictures to show the new words. We glued the pictures by the words.

So on the #1 poster we had words like one, uno, single, uni, unicycle, solo, alone, unique, and on the #2 poster we had two, duo, dos, duet, twins, couple, pair, both, etc. One time, we came across the word "both" and added that to #2 poster. If you try this, you will find that you come across words that represent numbers all the time, so just keep adding to the posters. Be sure the students use this information in centers or writing.

Figure 2 - Number Words



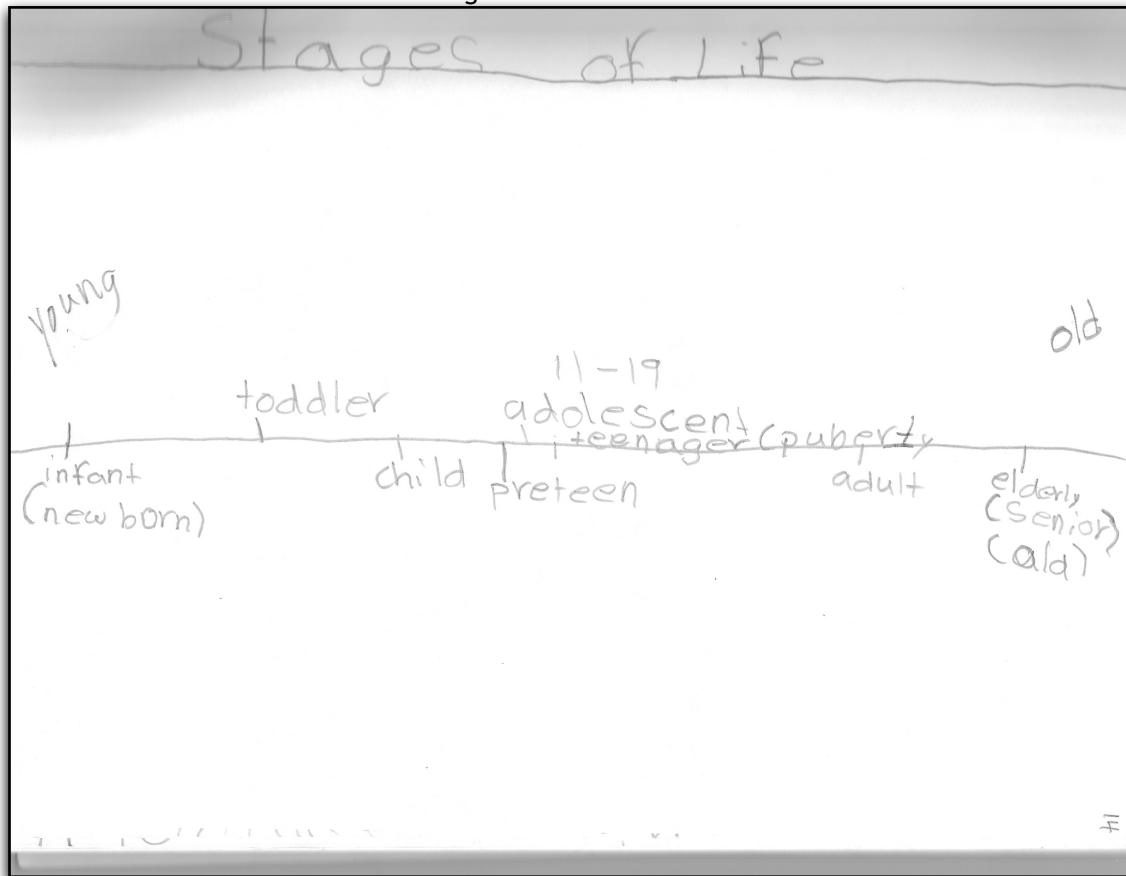
- The students also liked a bulletin board called "Synonyms." It had simple words on separate pieces of index card with a more specific synonym for the word covering it (like a flap). The students would "read the walls" in pairs and read the synonym then quiz each other to try to remember the simple word (synonym) under it. They would lift the flap to self-check. This got them really thinking as they were "reading the walls."



Figure 3 - Synonym Word Wall

Continuums are very effective additions to your Word Walls. They are a great way to show how new words relate to words already in your students' vocabulary. Put words on a horizontal line going from least to most, smallest to largest, etc. Ex: "Bodies of Water" - drop, puddle, pond, lake ... ocean. If these are displayed all year, you can add to the continuum when you learn about another "Body of Water." As you first build the continuum and as you add to it throughout the year, it can lead to discussions that help students learn new words incidentally from each other. (See the article "Continuums" on this website and in Chapter 4 in [The New Book of Knowledge](#) for other continuum topics). (Bodies of Water, Ways of Moving, etc.) Click on "The Magic of Continuums" article on this site.

Figure 4 - Continuum



## What Do We Do Now?

Now that you have a few posters with some vocabulary words on them, how do you give the students opportunities to revisit the words? Here are some ideas I tried.

- A. After we had quite a few words on our posters, I made different centers focusing on the words. For example, I wrote synonym pairs on cards (stingy - cheap) and antonyms on cards (cheap - generous), with the word “synonym” or “antonym” on the back of each card (self-checking). The students worked in pairs sorting the stack of synonym and antonym cards. When one wasn’t sure, they discussed it. It was a great literacy center. It encouraged conversation and the students learned from each other. To set it up, I made and laminated a 9 x 12 construction paper mat with index card size boxes and wrote “synonyms” over one box and “antonyms” over the other box. The students sorted the cards, placing synonym pairs in the synonym box and antonym word pairs in the antonym box. After the students sorted them, they picked up the cards in the “synonym” box, turned the cards over and self-checked themselves by being sure each card in the stack had the word “synonym” on the back. If not, the students discussed it. After students did this several times, self-checking each time, they could time each other. This was a very popular center. You could also make another mat with the word “homophones” in one box and “homographs” in the other box. Have stacks of index cards with either 2 homophones or 2 homographs written on them with the answer on the back of each card. Remember, you are getting the words from lists on your word walls.

I would love to watch them do sorting with a partner.

- B. I made other word sorts, such as sorting loud and soft ways of saying “said” and sorting good or bad feeling words.
- C. After learning 3 different objects from Illustrated Dictionary or Book of Knowledge, you (or a student) can write the labels for the three objects, one label on each index card. Then students can sort labels by the objects and write them under the headings (object name). For example, after learning parts of a body, house, and table setting, the students sort the labels by putting them in categories by what object has that part. Almost all the word wall posters could be turned into word sorting centers.
- D. Pair students up and have each pair start in a different part of the room. The student pairs go in a clockwise rotation reading the walls.
- E. Have forms for the students to fill out using the words on the walls. (T-charts, concept forms etc...). Find forms in Sections III and IV in the *Vocabulary Word Walls, Centers and Partner Learning* download.