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AUTHOR Works, Cathenia G.  
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ABSTRACT

This resource booklet, intended for teachers, contains practical suggestions for promoting vocabulary enhancement in the classroom. The booklet lists and explains a number of common and less common vocabulary-building strategies and techniques, including Vocabulary Self-Collection Strategy, Color Shock, Clusters, ABC Books, Anagrams, Word Banks, List-Group-Label, and Roots. It also discusses Semantic Mapping and Graphic Organizers. The booklet concludes that recent investigations in the richness of context in natural text, the usefulness of text, the level to which a person "knows" a word, and the size and growth of vocabulary make educators understand that the acquisition of a full, rich, functional vocabulary involves the complex process of relating words to ideas. Contains a 37-item bibliography. (NKA)

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# How to Build a Better Vocabulary



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By

**Cathenia G. Works**  
**DeKalb County Schools**

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# **How to Build a Better Vocabulary**

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DeKalb County Schools**

# **How to Build a Better Vocabulary**

## **About This Booklet**

This resource was developed by **Ms. Cathenia G. Works**, a teacher at Briar Vista Elementary School and a candidate in the DeKalb County Schools Reading Certification Program, as a part of a course assignment to develop an effective resource for developing vocabulary skills. It contains a number of valuable and practical suggestions for vocabulary enhancement in the classroom.

This booklet was printed and distributed by Area 6 of the DeKalb County Schools in the hopes that it would be a valuable resource to teachers.

**BILL HAMMOND**  
Area 6  
Instructional Coordinator

## **Vocabulary Self-Collection Strategy (VSS)**

Vocabulary Self-Collection Strategy (Haggard, 1986):

After locating a new word in their environment, students are asked to share (a) where they found the word, (b) the context, and (c) the importance of the word and why they selected it. It is fun for the class to guess the meaning of the word from the context before the definition is read by the student who selected the word.

## **Visual-Auditory-Kinesthetic-Tactile:**

The Fernald is a popular multisensory technique (Tierney, Riddance, & Dishner, 1980). Students are asked to trace the target word with a finder while pronouncing each syllable until it can be written from memory (with eyes closed at first). Ghost writing, writing in the air, or writing on a child's back can be helpful for practicing this technique.

## **Color Shock:**

Color shock (Vitale, 1982) is a technique that was originally designed for right-brained, learning disabled students to help them remember sight words. Right-brained children seem to have a special sensitivity for bright colors. During this strategy, children write their vocabulary, spelling words, or multiplication tables in color shock (each letter or number is written in a different color, beginning with the color green for go to designate the beginning of the word). This technique has improved directionality, visual discrimination, and sequential memory skills in many learning disabled students.

## **Clusters:**

For vocabulary instruction to be meaningful, words should be presented in semantic frameworks through categories or clusters (Marzano & Marzano, 1988). A cluster is a set of words that relate to a single topic.

Clustering is the process of relating a target word to a set of synonyms or other associated words. Clustering enables students to understand the target word better and retain it for longer periods of time.

### **ABC Books:**

ABC Books have been used successfully for teaching vocabulary, even at the secondary level (Pope & Polette, 1989). Students can be motivated to discover words through illustrations on the basis of their prior knowledge or schemata instead of memorizing the words from a required list. Through the use of complex alphabet books such as The Ultimate Alphabet (Wilks, 1992) and Animalia (Base, 1987), students are encouraged to identify synonyms, antonyms, and parts of speech for their self-selected words. Students may also enjoy creating their own ABC books based on selected themes, topics or units of study.

### **Anagrams:**

Anagrams are another fun and interesting way to learn vocabulary or spelling words. In The Eleventh Hour by Graeme Base (1989), readers use anagrams and additional clues to solve a very complicated mystery. This book is a great way to introduce anagrams, and it appeals to all ages. (The answers are sealed in the back of the book for novice sleuths.) Students may also have fun figuring out lists of words in which the letters are scrambled. They can be “Word Detectives.”

### **Book Boxes:**

Teachers and students collect objects or “realia” for key words or concepts in the story, placing them in a box along with the book and any other related reading materials. This technique is especially helpful for second-language learners.

### **Boxes for Visual Configuration:**

This visual discrimination technique involves drawing around words to emphasize their length and shape. It helps emergent readers distinguish between frequently confused letters and words, such as those with b, p, or d. They learn to recognize shapes before distinguishing letters or words.

### **Word Banks:**

Students would have personal word banks for storing and remembering their self-selected and teacher-selected words, such as spelling words. During the year, students watch their word banks grow. These words may come from daily journals or reading materials. Index boxes, curtain rings, or blank books that are alphabetized serve as efficient organizers. Some teachers may prefer **word walls** that list high-frequency words or words in specific categories.

### **Unknown Words:**

The following word attack strategy is recommended for students in the primary grades:

1. **Beep it.** Say “beep” for the unknown word and read to the end of the sentence. Think of a word that would make sense in that space. Use context clues.
2. **Frame it.** Put index fingers around the word to separate it from the rest of the sentence.
3. **Begin it.** Look at the beginning sound or sounds (letter or blend).
4. **Split it.** Divide the word into syllables and pronounce them.
5. **Find it.** Look the word up in the dictionary

### **Homonyms:**

One method of expanding vocabulary is to list homonyms in columns, with the word the child is most likely to be familiar with on the left. An exercise calling for the use of each word in a sentence will provide a check on the mastery of meanings.

### **Synonyms:**

Pupils are given written illustrations that words that have the same meaning are called synonyms. "*Give me another word that means the same as big, work, fast*" will, as a rule, elicit responses from everyone in the group. The objective should always be to provide instruction that will insure that the pupils see the words, hear them pronounced, and experience their use in written sentences appropriate to their language background.

### **List-Group-Label:**

List-Group-Label (Riddance & Searfoss, 1980): This is a great strategy to use with the ABC book *Animalia* by Graeme Base (1987). Working in cooperative groups, students list as many words as possible that begin with a specific letter on a piece of chart paper. (*Animalia* works well for this activity because it comes with a wall frieze that matches the book.) Students are given a time period to complete their lists (e.g., 15 minutes). The older the students, the more words/pictures they will be able to recognize because of their prior knowledge and schemata. After the lists of words are made and counted, students sort and label the words according to different categories.



## **Riddles:**

Riddles can be used to introduce new vocabulary words for stories in basal readers or trade books. Students will enjoy writing and guessing riddles much more than writing sentences and definitions. Riddles could be a component of thematic units in an integrated curriculum. For instance, Tyrannosaurus Wrecks (Sterne, 1979) contains 145 riddles about dinosaurs. For example, "What did the dinosaur cattle baron say to the outlaw?" The student will reply, "Get off my terror-tory." Reading a riddle from the chalkboard each day is another exciting way for students to learn many new sight words. They may also enjoy bringing their own riddles to class.

## **Roots:**

The study of Latin, Greek, and English root words and affixes can greatly increase a student's vocabulary. Morphemic analysis and the study of etymology or word origins are especially beneficial for students in the intermediate grades and junior high. Deriving word meanings from their roots can be challenging and rewarding. For instance, the root *tele* (far) is found in the following words: telecast, teleconference, telegram, telegraph, telephone, telescope, television, and telethon. Students can expand their word knowledge further through the exploration of the remaining roots in the words. For example, the root *phon* (sound) in telephone is found in earphone, microphone, phonics, phonograph, saxophone, and symphony. The possibilities are endless. An added benefit of this word study is to encourage students to use the dictionary.

This makes the words more meaningful and easier to remember.

### **Active Involvement:**

If vocabulary instruction is to be effective, the students must be actively involved (Carr & Wixson, 1986; Nagy, 1988; Ruddell, 1986). Physical involvement such as hands-on activities to accommodate their kinesthetic-tactile learning styles can be effective. Having students do nonverbal skits, acting out the meanings of words, is another possibility (Ridfell, 1988).

Finger spelling with the manual alphabet is another strategy that actively involves students during vocabulary instruction. In the past, finger spelling has been used only for names, places and words for which there were no signs (Sullivan & Bourke, 1980). By using 26 hand shapes, all the letters of the alphabet can be made and written in the air.

### **Repetition:**

To facilitate comprehension of text, repetition of vocabulary is necessary to ensure quick and easy access of words during the reading process (Nagy, 1988). Vocabulary acquisition through repetition can be accomplished through language experience, choral reading, Readers Theatre, tape recorded books, patterned or predictable books, basals and rhymes in poetry.

Yams or tall tales is an imaginative way for students to learn new vocabulary and/or concepts. One procedure is to divide the class into cooperative groups of four or five students. Select five meaningful vocabulary words from their next story. Challenge them to see which group can create the wildest, most exaggerated story using the same five words. Then let them read the real story and compare!

### **Semantic Mapping:**

Semantic Maps are diagrams that help students see the relationship between words. Since it was first developed by Hanf (1971) and expanded by Jackson and Pearson (1988), this strategy has been used effectively as a pre-and post-reading technique, a prewriting activity, a study skill strategy, and a vocabulary development strategy. Research seems to support its effectiveness over more traditional techniques. The following steps illustrate the use of semantic mapping as a vocabulary development strategy.

*Step 1: The teacher selects an important word or topic.* The word should be familiar enough to students that they can readily list a group of words that relate to it.

*Step 2: The teacher writes the word on the chalkboard or overhead.*

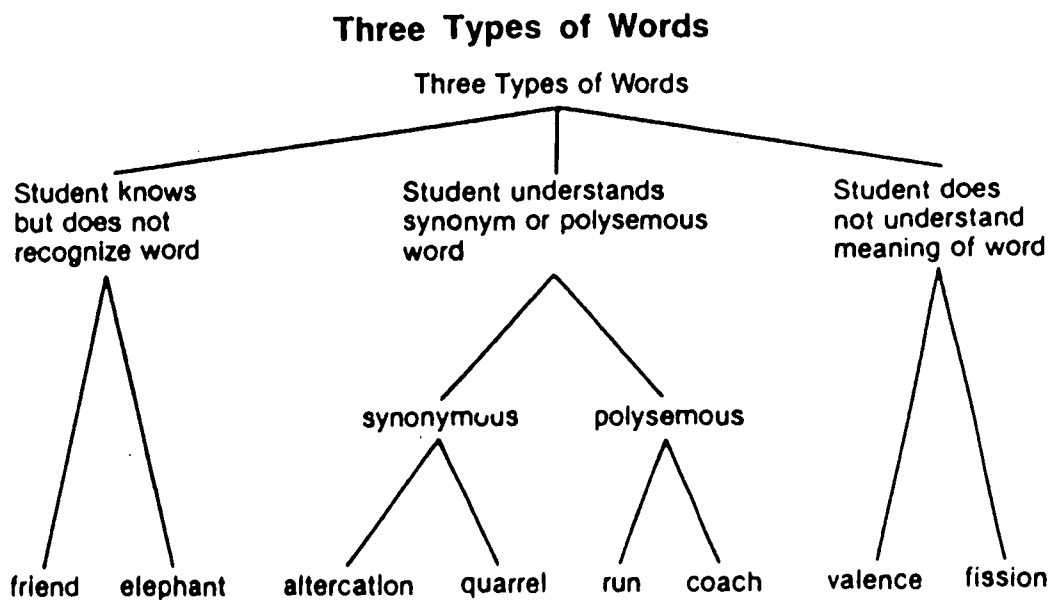
*Step 3: The teacher encourages students to think of as many related words as possible.* They can complete this step first individually and then as a group by sharing lists.

*Step 4: Students and teacher then add labels to groups.* Some teachers copy completed maps onto chart paper and keep these large-sized maps posted for the duration of a unit. As students learn new words or discover new relationships, they can add them to the chart using a different colored marker. The charts give students a concise overview of the key concepts within a unit and of how concepts are related. They also enable students to relate new words to those they already understand.

Because semantic mapping helps students see relationships between ideas and connect known information with new information, it is a valuable tool for developing their vocabulary and conceptual understanding.

### Graphic Organizers:

Originally called Structured Overviews by Ausubel (1988), graphic organizers have been used as pre- and post-reading aids, as study strategies, and as vocabulary development activities. They are a way to show relationships between words in the form of a tree diagram.



## CONCLUSION

Researchers in the last decade have helped to illuminate a direction for effective vocabulary development for students. Educators have recognized the important role of vocabulary knowledge in comprehending text for some time. Recent investigations in the richness of context in natural text, the usefulness of text, the level to which a person “knows” a word, and the size and growth of vocabulary have educators understand that the acquisition of a full, rich, functional vocabulary involves the complex process of relating words to ideas.

Experts in the field of language development agree that the main vehicle for vocabulary instruction should be encouraging students to **read widely**. Selected words, however, should be chosen for extended, rich instruction. This instruction should focus on helping students become independent learners, encouraging them to become widely involved in the processing of selected words, providing multiple exposures to words, and guiding them to develop a positive attitude toward learning words outside the classroom. Research-based and field-tested learning strategies such as List-Group-Label, Semantic Feature Analysis, Graphic Organizers and Semantic Mapping are available for use by teachers at any level. Along with wide reading, these strategies help students learn unfamiliar words by associating words to be learned with ideas and words they know.

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