

# Helping Students Own Language Through Word Study, Vocabulary, and Grammar Instruction



## Executive Summary



2111 Pontiac Lake Road  
Waterford, MI 48328-2736  
248.209.2314  
[www.oakland.k12.mi.us](http://www.oakland.k12.mi.us)

October 2016

---

## **Board of Education**

President: Dr. Theresa Rich  
Vice President: Mr. Marc Katz  
Treasurer: Mr. Connie Williams  
Secretary: Mr. George Ehlert  
Trustee: Mrs. Barb DeMarco

## **Superintendent**

Dr. Wanda Cook-Robinson

## **For further information on this document, contact the authors:**

Delia DeCourcy, Literacy Consultant, Oakland Schools  
delia.decourcy@oakland.k12.mi.us

Michele Farah, Ph.D., Literacy Consultant, Oakland Schools  
michele.farah@oakland.k12.mi.us

Diane Katakowski, Speech and Language Consultant, Oakland Schools  
diane.katakowski@oakland.k12.mi.us

Susan M. Koceski, Ph.D., School Psychology Consultant, Oakland Schools  
susan.koceski@oakland.k12.mi.us

Copyright © 2016 by Oakland Schools. All rights reserved.

*Oakland Schools does not discriminate on the basis of sex, race, color, national origin, religion, height, weight, marital status, sexual orientation (subject to the limits of applicable law), age, genetic information, or disability in its programs, services, activities or employment opportunities. Inquiries related to employment discrimination should be directed to the Assistant Superintendent of Human Resources, Personnel Management and Labor Relations at 248.209.2429, 2111 Pontiac Lake Road, Waterford, MI 48328-2736. For all other inquiries related to discrimination, contact the Director of Legal Affairs at 248.209.2062, 2111 Pontiac Lake Road, Waterford, MI 48328-2736.*

# Executive Summary

Most teachers acknowledge that word study instruction builds a solid foundation in reading and writing skills. The topic, however, is often neglected or sidelined in literacy instruction. The issue stems from a lack of background knowledge, resources, and time. Additionally, word study is often taught in a way that does not best engage students.

So, what is word study, and how can teachers effectively integrate it into instruction?

## Defining Word Study

Word study for grades K-12 encompasses the following elements:

- Phonological awareness
- Letter-sound knowledge
- Spelling
- Vocabulary
- Grammar

These elements are critical in the building of students' reading and writing skills. Research indicates that phonological performance, for instance, is a strong predictor of long-term success in spelling and reading. Similarly, an early, systematic focus on phonics yields greater achievements in reading than later, more piecemeal instruction. At the same time, children who get off to a slow start with word study rarely become strong readers.

Word study is vital to students' literacy. That is why teachers should deliberately—and strategically—implement the following elements into their instruction.

## Phonological Awareness Instruction

Phonological awareness is the understanding that spoken language can be broken down into smaller and smaller units, and that these units can be segmented (pulled apart), blended (put together), and manipulated (added, deleted, or substituted). Phonemic (individual sound) awareness is the most advanced and essential level of phonological awareness, and it is a reliable predictor of later reading achievement in the early grade levels.

Research indicates that 20 hours of phonological awareness instruction, provided in small groups, by the end of kindergarten is typically sufficient for most children to master blending, segmenting, and manipulating all of the individual sounds in a three-to-five-sound word, which is necessary to

---

move successfully along the literacy progression. Instruction is most effective when students are taught to use sound-symbol relationships as they segment, blend, and manipulate phonemes. As soon as children begin to notice individual sounds in words, phonological awareness activities should incorporate letters. Utilizing letter tiles, or requiring children to write letters to represent sounds they hear, facilitates growth in both phonological awareness and phonics.

## **Letter-Sound Instruction**

Phonics is an instructional strategy that teaches the relationships between letters and sounds, as well as the letter-sound relationship's application in spelling and reading. Explicit, systematic phonics instruction teaches beginning readers about the alphabetic principle; that is, that written letters or graphemes represent spoken sounds and that these sounds go together to make words. Systematic and explicit phonics instruction has been shown to offer numerous benefits. These benefits apply to spelling and reading comprehension, among other areas, and can apply to all students, including those who are at risk.

Explicit phonics instruction follows a specific sequence, one that begins with the development of phonemic awareness, and eventually moves onto word work for decoding and encoding. The specific strategies for letter-sound instruction are varied. But they should include:

- the use of multiple modalities (oral, visual, and tactile);
- careful observation of children's reading and writing;
- the use of word hunts;
- assessments that systematically examine skills;
- the use of interactive writing experiences in kindergarten and first grade;
- cueing children to monitor for meaning and letter sound relationships that have been taught;
- and the reliance on authentic reading opportunities.

## **Spelling Instruction**

Full literacy is critically dependent on competence in spelling. To grow more efficient in their reading and writing, children must understand the conventions that govern words' structures, and how their structures signal sound and meaning.

As children proceed down the road toward fluent spelling, they progress through a series of developmental stages. To facilitate learning in these stages, instruction should focus on the exploration of patterns, as opposed to focusing only on memorizing or learning to spell frequently occurring words.

This means instruction should eschew whole-word instruction, or, as some call it, "drill and kill." Research suggests that a blend of teaching approaches can be effective, and that instruction be organized to introduce letter-sound correspondences, syllable patterns, morpheme patterns, and strategies for long, unfamiliar words.

---

## Vocabulary Instruction

Early vocabulary acquisition is a key determiner of literacy success throughout school, and is closely tied to students' reading comprehension. Yet too often, the teaching of vocabulary happens out of context. This instruction uses word lists with definitions to memorize, rather than deeply integrating this learning into the teaching of reading and writing, or while doing reading and writing within a particular discipline. This out-of-context approach results in a lack of transfer because a deep, contextualized understanding of each word is not acquired.

In selecting no more than ten words per week to teach, teachers should focus on tier two and three words. Tier two words are high-impact, general academic words that students may or may not use in spoken language but which they will come across in academic texts. While they occur in all content areas, they are usually left to the ELA teachers to teach. Tier three words fall into one of three categories:

- Domain/discipline specific: words that are used mainly in a specific content area.
- Topic specific: words necessary to understand in order to communicate about a specific topic within a domain or discipline.
- Passage critical: words important to understand in order to grasp the meaning of a paragraph or entire text.

To facilitate successful vocabulary instruction, teachers must provide students with multiple ways of learning new words, including

- promoting word consciousness;
- developing students' curiosity about word meanings;
- building independence in word analysis;
- and supporting regular reading.

Additionally, successful instruction should promote deep processing, in which a student uses new information about a word to create a new product, like producing a sentence that correctly uses the word in the proper context.

Teachers should also strategically introduce new, potentially problematic words before students begin to read, and provide instruction after students read. Last, students must be exposed to more and varied kinds of texts. These experiences can and should extend beyond reading into discussion, writing, and multimedia creation.

## Grammar Instruction

In current ELA curricula, grammar is often treated as an afterthought. Moreover, the instructional approach to grammar is often ineffective because the instruction focuses on mastering a collection of abstract rules about language. This analytical approach to grammar is not rooted in a practical application of grammar's rules. Research indicates that this does not lead to a transfer of knowledge for students and offers limited improvements for students' writing.

An alternative approach focuses on writing production, as teachers help students craft clear and compelling sentences for a specific audience and purpose. One particularly effective approach involves sentence combining. This teaches students about grammatical options as they construct their own sentences and paragraphs. It takes place within the context of the writing process, and includes rich models and significant amounts of practice.

This approach, which researchers lay out in discrete sequences, offers numerous benefits for students. Benefits include an enhanced sentence sense, improvements in written organization, and enrichments in voice and style. Sentence combining can be effective when taught throughout a recursive writing process: both as a prelude to writing, and during revision.

## **Taking Action**

Given that experts do not advocate a scope and sequence for vocabulary and grammar instruction, documenting expected instruction in these two particular areas can be challenging. We suggest that curriculum documents focus more on pedagogical approaches and strategies, as well as defining what start-of-year, mid-year, and end-of-year assessments for word study, vocabulary, and grammar look like and how they track student growth. Also extremely useful would be a collection of effective lessons for particular grade bands that address specific skills, grammatical constructions, and word concepts.

More broadly, we recommend a series of steps to build teachers' capacity and to foster professional learning. Within content-area departments, PLCs, or grade-level groups, teachers could reflect on their current practice in teaching word study, vocabulary, and grammar. This white paper lays out a series of guided questions to guide these discussions.

A book study, too, would be useful for teachers. This small but focused effort can deeply shift instruction. This paper's conclusion includes several resources to jumpstart a book study.

Teachers have much to gain by observing each other. This is also true in the areas of word study, vocabulary, and grammar instruction. Teach-to-teacher visits and lab classrooms are fruitful exercises for ELA teachers, and can open up transformative conversations. Last, this white paper describes several online resources, including webinars and online courses, that serve as important forums for professional learning.

Any of these resources can lead to a transformative change in ELA classrooms—a change that will offer long-lasting benefits for all students, as they continue to develop as readers and writers.