

## Let's Move from Word Study to Word Play!

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I am a self-proclaimed and unapologetic lexicophile, word nerd, or vocabulary zealot! I love words! I love to learn about how words came to be; I love the fact that some words have the same spelling but varied pronunciations and meanings while other words may have the same pronunciation but different spellings; and I love how words can be used to convey facts, tell a story, or elicit emotion. Words are wonderful for me. Yet, why is it that in many schools across the country students (and many teachers as well) do not find the study of words terribly interesting. Whether it is phonics, spelling, or vocabulary instruction, I have heard students use words such as “boring” or “not today” when word study is mentioned.

How can word study be so interesting for some and so boring for others? I think it is not in the words themselves, but in how words are taught. In many classrooms word study consists of rote memorization of lists of words or the daily completion of word worksheets that involve filling in blanks, matching words to pictures, or some other mind numbing activity.

A few years ago, my wife and I had an interesting epiphany. Every evening during the holidays, between Christmas and New Year's, my family would have dinner together and then, after the dishes were done, we'd go back to the table to play a family game. When my wife and I were putting these games back into the closet a few days after New Year's she said to me with a bit of startle in her voice, “Tim, do you realize the every game we played last week with our kids was a word game!” She was right. We had played *Scrabble*, *Boggle*, *Wheel of Fortune*, *Taboo*, *Quiddler*, *Scrabble Slam*, and several others. In each of the games knowledge of some aspect of words was essential to success. Most important, we thoroughly enjoyed ourselves as we played these family games. Yet, at the same time we were stretching our knowledge of and proficiency in words.

Why can't word study be more of a game than a list of words for recitation? I think we need to take a new look at how we teach words in our classrooms. The more we make word study into a game-like activity, the more engaging students will be in word study, and the more enthusiastic they will be about words. And, for those of you who like to play games such as *Text Twist* or *Words With Friends*, have you noticed that if you play these games regularly you get better at them. We have a special name for when somebody gets better at something - it's called *learning!* As students engage in word play activities on a regular basis they will indeed get better at the activities, they will be learning words and developing in themselves a fascination with words that will go well beyond the classroom.

One word play activity that I will take some credit in developing is called *Word Ladders*. It is an activity in which students start with one word and are guided by their teacher to add, subtract, or change letters in the first word to make a series of new words. The teacher guides the students by giving them hints about the meaning of the new words they are making. In my word ladders the first and last words are often somehow related, and this is what turns it into a game-like activity. Here's a word ladder that you can do with your students this month.

- |          |  |
|----------|--|
| April    | Start with the word April, take away the r and rearrange the remaining letter to make another word for a bucket. |
| Pail     | Take away one letter to make another word for a friend.  |
| Pal      | Change one letter to make the name of a dog or cat's foot.   |
| Paw      | Change one letter to make a word that is the past tense of "see" or a tool for cutting wood.                     |
| Saw      | Change the vowel to make another name for a female pig; or a word that means to plant seeds.                     |
| Sow      | Add one letter to make the opposite of fast.   |
| Slow     | Change one letter to make a word that describes when you want to demonstrate or reveal something to someone.     |
| Show     | Add three letters to the end of "show" to make a word that describes the kind of weather we often get in April   |
| Showers! |  |

April showers bring May flowers!

Now challenge your students to make a similar word ladder that start with May and ends with flowers.

When we turn word study into word play, I think we will go a long way to turn our students and ourselves into lexophiles and word nerds!

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