

Introduction: Word Study Now

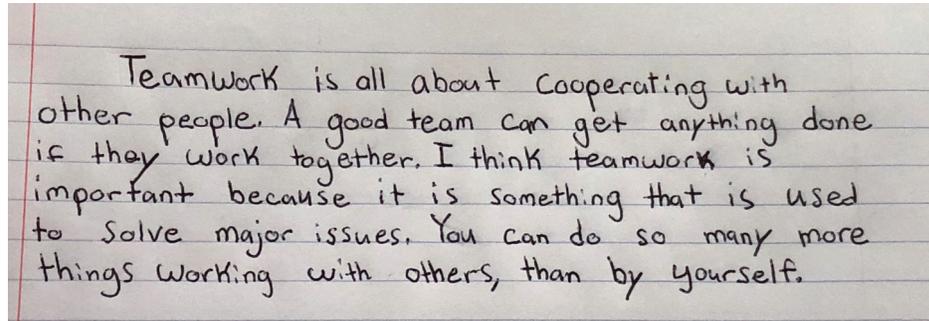


My signature dish—made for me by a very special student!

I was once part of a summer literacy institute where poet and author Amy Ludwig VanDerwater gave an inspiring keynote address about finding our “signature dish.” Our signature dish, Amy explained, helps us focus, even in turbulent times. Without a moment of hesitation, I knew my signature dish: my positivity and my desire to work together with others to make things happen—and whenever possible, happen with a cupful of joy. This “OK-where-do-we-start?” optimism is in my genes, and it was how I was raised. I come from a long line of strong women who, when hit with setbacks, never wallow in pity, but instead solve problems and forge ahead with both strength and a smile.

I have taught students from preschool through sixth grade in the roles of both classroom teacher and interventionist. I have had the tremendous opportunity to learn alongside students and collaborate with educators in numerous communities. Empathy and understanding—coupled with smiles, a positive demeanor, and a plan—help to not only offset challenging circumstances occurring both in and outside school walls but also to get learning jump-started and moving. I now bring this disposition to every school I visit and work in as a traveling teacher and coach. This is personally fulfilling because my signature dish is put to good use every day. This book is essentially an extension of my signature dish.

Word Study That Sticks



—Victoria, age 10

We all are aware of the ballooning demands on young learners. The academic pressures and learning standards students face can be daunting. As classroom, building, and district leaders, we tirelessly and creatively investigate ways to marry mandates with fun, active, developmentally appropriate practice. We are also aware of a constantly changing social and political climate. Words have remarkable power and an equally awesome impact in all of these domains. This book is a necessity because our students, as future citizens, need greater access to words. Words are a gateway to sharing our voices. Words allow us to be heard and allow us to listen to and, perhaps, better understand others. Through words, our stances and choices become clear. Through words, we have the chance to come together, even when we have distinct beliefs and philosophies. To this end, there is a clear and compelling need for systematic, thoughtful word study instruction.





Words give students a voice, help students express their beliefs, and enable students to compromise.

Word Study for a New Generation

I happily spend my days talking with dedicated educators from numerous districts. All hold different positions and work with students at a range of grade levels. In reflecting on these conversations, patterns emerge: We became teachers to make a difference. We feel alive when we collaborate with colleagues to create classroom experiences where *challenging concepts become fun, instruction is effective, and learning is personalized for each of our students*. Without fail, teachers say that those lightbulb moments for learners are the highlights of their days. Teachers talk about how lucky they are to witness the spark of curiosity when students come to new understandings. A friend called it a “perfect storm,” when the feeling in the classroom is electric, unmistakable, and lasting. When she said that, I had chills and then a more subdued moment when I realized that *not one* of a multitude of aha moments was about word study. *Hmmm . . .*

These days, word study is sidelined due to the hyperfocus on tested areas and mandates. One teacher described to me the pressure to constantly push kids forward. She shared, “At times, it feels as though I don’t have the space to afford children the time they need to grow and learn at their own pace.” She went on to describe how hard it is to see children internalize the expectations of those around them and how it leads them to feel anxious about making mistakes and taking risks. When I asked other teachers why curriculum and lesson plans don’t include robust language exploration, they shrugged their shoulders. When I asked if students found any joy in studying words and spelling, I actually got a couple of laughs. When I inquired about student perseverance in decoding tricky words while reading and willingness to take risks (and possibly make mistakes) in their writing by using interesting language (as opposed to more simple and bland language), the reaction was similar. *Hmmm . . .*

TEACHER TIP

Heineken's United Kingdom ad campaign titled “Worlds Apart” demonstrates how words, even in divisive times, have the power to bring together people with contrasting viewpoints.

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My dogged optimism still in high gear, I kept asking teachers questions, knowing that my “yeah, buts . . .” were getting me closer to figuring out how I could help them reenvision word study. So I did what every right-minded action researcher does: I went to Trader Joe’s; bought chips and guac, a wide selection of cheese and chocolate, sparkling water, and wine; then, I invited four teacher colleagues to my house after school. By sundown, they’d sung like canaries, telling me the real reasons they resisted the idea of professional learning around word study. The gist, they felt, was that if they were to open themselves up to all the possibilities, it would be like diving too quickly into the deep end of a pool. They wanted first to lean on a resource that gave them a framework for better word learning. One teacher said, “I wish something great was out there that checked *all* the boxes and fit every need—instead of just one or two.” *Hmmm . . .*

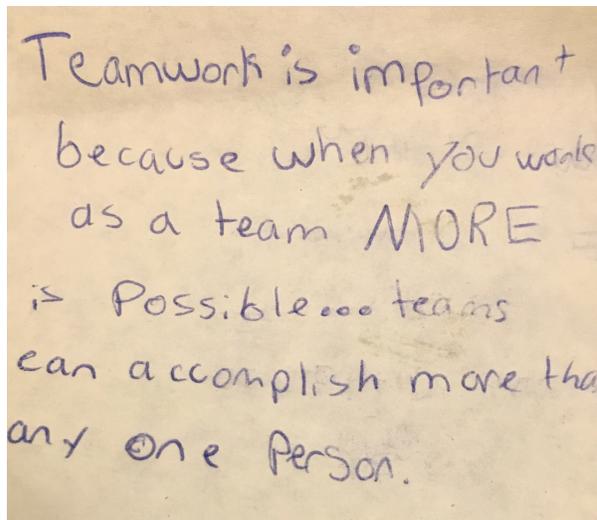
And with that, I had *my* aha moment that galvanized me to write this book. As we polished off the last of those tasty snacks, the teachers described how they are tired of having to cobble things together. They are adding in, taking out, modifying, and tweaking what they have as a way to include what they feel is most important for their students. Many teachers feel there is not enough emphasis on phonemic awareness, phonics, or vocabulary. Many see current word study programs as one-size-fits-all and/or difficult to manage. Many see it as rote, surface, and heavily reliant on short-term memorization. Almost all share concerns about lack of transfer—and even lack of knowledge—once the Friday test is over.

Word Study That Sticks sets out to be the resource we have been wanting but haven’t yet found. It includes the following:

- ☑ Challenging, discovery-based practices
- ☑ Joyful, student-centered learning
- ☑ Personalized and differentiated instruction
- ☑ Developmentally appropriate routines
- ☑ Instruction in *all aspects* of word study, with enough phonemic awareness and phonics in the primary grades and balanced emphasis on spelling and vocabulary in all grades
- ☑ Practical ideas to include word study into different parts of the day so we see transfer of learning
- ☑ Something that intertwines a myriad of established best practices to support all learners
- ☑ An easy-to-implement approach that can be used to start up word study

- ☑ Built-in professional development so you feel prepared in moving forward with a stepped-up approach to word study instruction
- ☑ Access to words that precisely express ideas and viewpoints

Let's get started. We are in this together! We can do this, we will do it, and we will have fun doing it! (There's my signature dish.) I am in this with you, and together, we will bring curiosity, enthusiasm, and a sense of liveliness to word study.



—Patty, age 10

How to Use This Book With Other Programs or as Your Sole Resource

This text can easily be used in conjunction with other programs your district may already have in place. It also can be used to help your district create its own approach to word study, seamlessly incorporating the best aspects of many different existing programs along with additional insights and ideas.

WE HAVE A PROGRAM IN PLACE

I am a big believer in holding onto what's working. If there are parts of your current approach to word study that you like and feel are relevant, effective, and joyful . . . by

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all means, *keep those practices in place!* Is there something you are not too fond of or feel is missing? Are you one of the many educators who believe your current approach is not checking off all your boxes? Are you hoping to step up your current word study instruction? Use this resource to easily and effectively enhance and lift the level of the word learning currently happening in your classroom and school.

WE HAVE NOTHING

Let's face it—there are positives and negatives to not having a set of consistent word study practices in place. The benefit (yes, always starting with the positive!) is that you have the power and capability to create it as you like and see fit. This freedom is empowering and is filled with opportunity, but it can also be overwhelming. This book will support you along the way! I am here to hold your hand and provide encouragement as you plan, tinker, try out, modify, and formalize word learning in your classroom and school.

Preview of the Three Parts

You may feel inclined to read this book cover to cover—go for it! You may prefer to read snippets and sections as you feel ready—another great plan. You may also choose to access certain features included in this book more than others; if so, you can bookmark, highlight, and return to these specific parts at your leisure. What follows is a sneak peek of each part of this book and the special features included throughout. By taking a few minutes to learn the structure and format of this book, you will be ready to use it in the way that *you* feel is just right!

PART I: CURIOUS, CREATIVE WORD STUDY

This section outlines the first steps to take in preparing for a rich year of word study. Think of Part I as your own personal launch unit for both you and your students. In this part, I will outline what is needed to roll out word study. We will review the foundations of word study, classroom setup, prioritized materials, and management of those materials. Advice is also given for inviting students into a world of word study. The included lesson ideas, charts, and student work explicitly show how to introduce word study routines to your class.

PART II: FOSTERING ENGAGEMENT AND INDEPENDENCE

This section covers all you need to know to solidify word study practices in your classroom. In this section, you will find research, advice, and ideas regarding what explicit word study will look like in the classroom each day. It is here we begin to empower students with greater choice, thereby increasing motivation and ownership of this important work. Multiple lessons and additional word study routines are laid

out clearly. These additional routines highlight the different aspects of word study instruction: phonemic awareness, phonics, spelling, and vocabulary. These choices and routines support differentiated classroom practice. Additionally, support is provided for how to bring curiosity, inquiry, and discovery to all aspects of word study.

Part II also includes ideas on how to support our students' success. I address how to build meaningful classroom talk around words, provide purposeful small-group instruction, and coach into collaborative partnerships. Finally, goal setting, reflection, and celebration are all addressed in detail.

PART III: TEACHING FOR TRANSFER

In this section, we take word study to the next level. Explicit, clear, and practical advice is provided for how to embed word learning into *all* parts of the day so transfer happens! This part of the book is intended to be accessed after basic word study practices are fluently and confidently occurring in classrooms. It is here we will delve into how to sneak word study into reading, writing, math, social studies, science, and *more!*

Preview of Features

WHAT, WHY, WHEN

This regularly occurring feature gives the “just-right” amount of research-backed background info on each *best practice* described. It gives helpful information to explain what the practice is, when we might use it, and perhaps most importantly, why we would take the time to include this as part of our classroom practice. This feature is a user-friendly way to introduce each new idea and aspect of classroom work. Each time this feature occurs, it is followed by the more practical, accessible, ready-to-go advice, lessons, and ideas we all want and need to make sense of and implement these research-supported best practices.

INVITING INQUIRY

We all want students to make sense of and grow ideas with greater independence. Children are naturally curious. We want to do all we can to foster inquisitiveness about words in general and also about the way words work. This helpful feature lists questions and prompts (in language you can use) to promote student curiosity and discovery around words.

WORKAROUNDS

New work can be challenging! Even with explicit advice and examples, we may stumble here and there as we set out on this journey. As someone who has been

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there and lived the “mistakes,” stumbles, and hurdles, I wanted to provide a little preventative medicine for others embarking on a similar path. This feature highlights and pinpoints areas of possible challenge and provides advice for avoiding or overcoming each encounter.

STARTING UP AND STEPPING UP

As educators, we can sometimes feel isolated. I believe we can feel more connected and supported by sharing experiences, advice, and encouragement more often. This feature includes the voice of actual teachers who have tried out the ideas in this book. You will hear from colleagues across the country on ways they used these practices to *start up* or *step up* word study in their own classrooms.

TEACHER TIP

Sometimes, it helps to have a tip (or two) to help things go a little more smoothly and efficiently. This feature intends to do just that—provide a little extra clarity, a suggestion, or advice on where to go to learn more.

PRACTICAL PRIORITIZING

New work can also be a bit overwhelming. I am huge believer in starting small and prioritizing so that we can play, reflect, celebrate, and then implement with both confidence and intention. At the end of specific chapters, I have included a *brief* checklist of first steps to take in carrying out most essential aspects of the classroom practices included.

BACKED BY THE EXPERTS

Whenever I especially want to arm you with specific, strong support for a lesson or routine, you'll find these references to research-based best practices. Remember, use these and any other sound bites in classroom letters home, faculty meetings, and conversations. A rising tide of expertise lifts all boats!

In *Big Magic: Creative Living Beyond Fear* (2015), Elizabeth Gilbert reminds us that we know more than we think! She encourages us to open our perspectives and shake ourselves free of the status quo. To that end, when we pursue what we love and derive joy from new adventures in our work, it helps us to grow, grow, grow. As Gilbert suggests, it's OK to “imitate before we innovate” (p. 142). I invite you to draw inspiration from the content included in the coming pages. Enjoy this journey with your colleagues, students, and yourself. Have fun taking chances, being playful, and seeing things differently. Let's get this party started!