

Mrs Wordsmith® | Research

# How to Best Teach Vocabulary



## Part 2

Help children build links  
between words

“Words are, in my not-so-humble opinion, our most inexhaustible source of magic.”

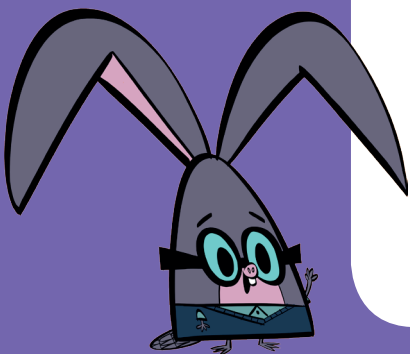
Dumbledore, in J. K. Rowling's  
***Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows***

## Teach words in the context of other words to increase children's word consciousness

Research in cognitive linguistics suggests that words are stored in the mind in groups, forming complex networks (Moreno & van Orden, 2001). To form these groups, we subconsciously generate links between newly acquired words and other related words that we are already familiar with. This is why children should be given opportunities to draw links and comparisons between words, known and new, easier and harder.

## Teach synonyms and antonyms

Teaching new words in the context of words with similar meanings (synonyms) and words with opposite meanings (antonyms) helps children strengthen the connections they build between words, and increases the likelihood that these words will be remembered (Quigley, 2018: 83).



Did you know that children find synonyms puzzling at first glance? This is because they naturally assume that every new word they learn has a different meaning from all the words they already know, otherwise, their logic goes, why would there need to be another word! (Heidenheimer, 1978; Clark, 1993).

However puzzling a synonym is for children at first, it's crucial for them to gain familiarity with synonyms. This is because, even though absolute synonymy doesn't exist, near-synonyms are everywhere.

**Near-synonyms are words that have many overlapping features but differ in other aspects, such as their frequency of use, their degree of formality, or the positive and negative connotations they carry (Pustet 2003). Some examples are hungry and peckish; eat and devour.**

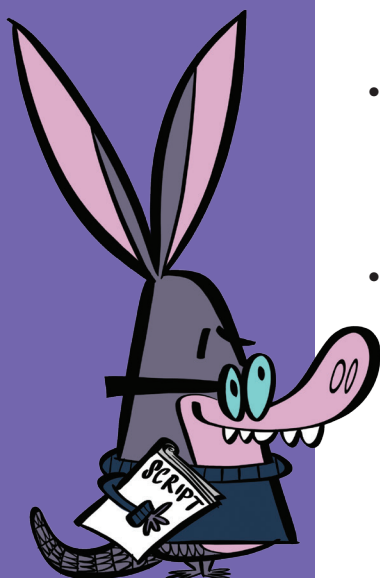
Because children struggle to grasp synonymy, and because near-synonyms are everywhere, it is crucial for children to compare related words in order to understand differences and similarities between them. This way, they will be better equipped to make appropriate word choices for any given purpose.

This methodology of teaching vocabulary has gained ample recognition by researchers who claim that presenting two words that are semantically related increases linguistic awareness (Graves, 2006; Stahl & Nagy, 2006).

To focus on synonyms, you can play the game of “Let’s see how many words we can think of that mean the same thing as happy in 2 minutes”. You can do the same with antonyms (based on Neuman & Wright, 2013: 46)



“Devious  
plan”,  
“voracious  
appetite”.  
Words, too,  
have their  
soulmates



## Teach word pairs

Word pairs (or collocations) are combinations of words that are statistically likely to appear together in text or in spoken language (O'Dell & McCarthy, 2008).

Collocations are so ingrained in our memory that, when a word isn't followed by its usual partner, the result sounds odd to us; consider 'bride and broom' or 'fish and peas'!

This is because collocations form part of what is called 'formulaic language'; If "blundering" is used alongside "politician" enough times, that pairing becomes a formulaic expression and we tend to use it more often.

## The research evidence

Collocations and formulaic language are key aspects of vocabulary and language learning because studies have shown that we rely on them a lot more than we previously thought.

- Studies on the matter vary, but it is estimated that anything between 50% and 80% of what we say is made up by pre-established formulae (Oppenheim, 2000; Erman & Warren, 2000).
- This means that only half or less of what we say is actually made up on the spot; the other half consists of pre-made strings of words that we have stored in our long-term memory.
- These numbers highlight the importance of being familiar with the linguistic context in which newly acquired words are more likely to be used.
- To fully grasp the meaning of the word, and to be able to use it proficiently, speakers need to internalize the collocations and language formulas that the new word is likely to appear with.

## **Knowledge of word pairs has been proven to increase the quality of children's academic written work**

A study by George McCulley (1985) found that readers perceive texts containing many common word pairs to be more readable and logical, and this translates into better scores in written tests.

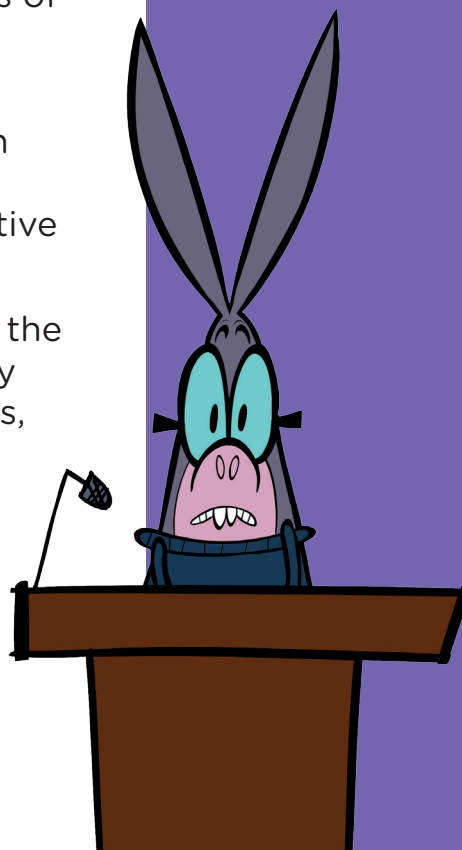
This is because using vocabulary in its most typical contexts shows an overall awareness of, and familiarity with English usage, and gives writing real clarity and flow.

## **Knowledge of collocations also has a positive impact in non-academic writing activities**

Research by Klebanov and Flor (2013) for the Educational Testing Service showed that higher scoring essays tend to have higher percentages of both highly associated and dis-associated pairs, and lower percentages of mildly associated pairs.

This means that students who receive the best grades are those who can use words in the expected formulaic ways, as well as in surprising, unusual ways that sound innovative and original.

This is because it's only once children know the accepted conventions of language that they can override them for effect; in other words, children have to know the rules before they can start challenging them to write original creative pieces.



# Activities

Here are some suggestions for games you can play to help children familiarize themselves with word pairs, using Mrs Wordsmith's Storyteller's Illustrated Dictionary:

## Guessing Mingle Review

After teaching a group of words and their word pairs, have students write one of the taught words on a piece of paper, place it on their forehead, and walk around the room. They pair up and quiz each other on word pairs for the word on their forehead. They can then shuffle and repeat with a different partner who has a different word.

## Heads up

Write one of the Storyteller's Illustrated Dictionary words on a piece of paper and write its word pairs on the back. Hold up the word and ask children to guess its word pairs. Any team that guesses a word pair that's on the back of the card gets a point.

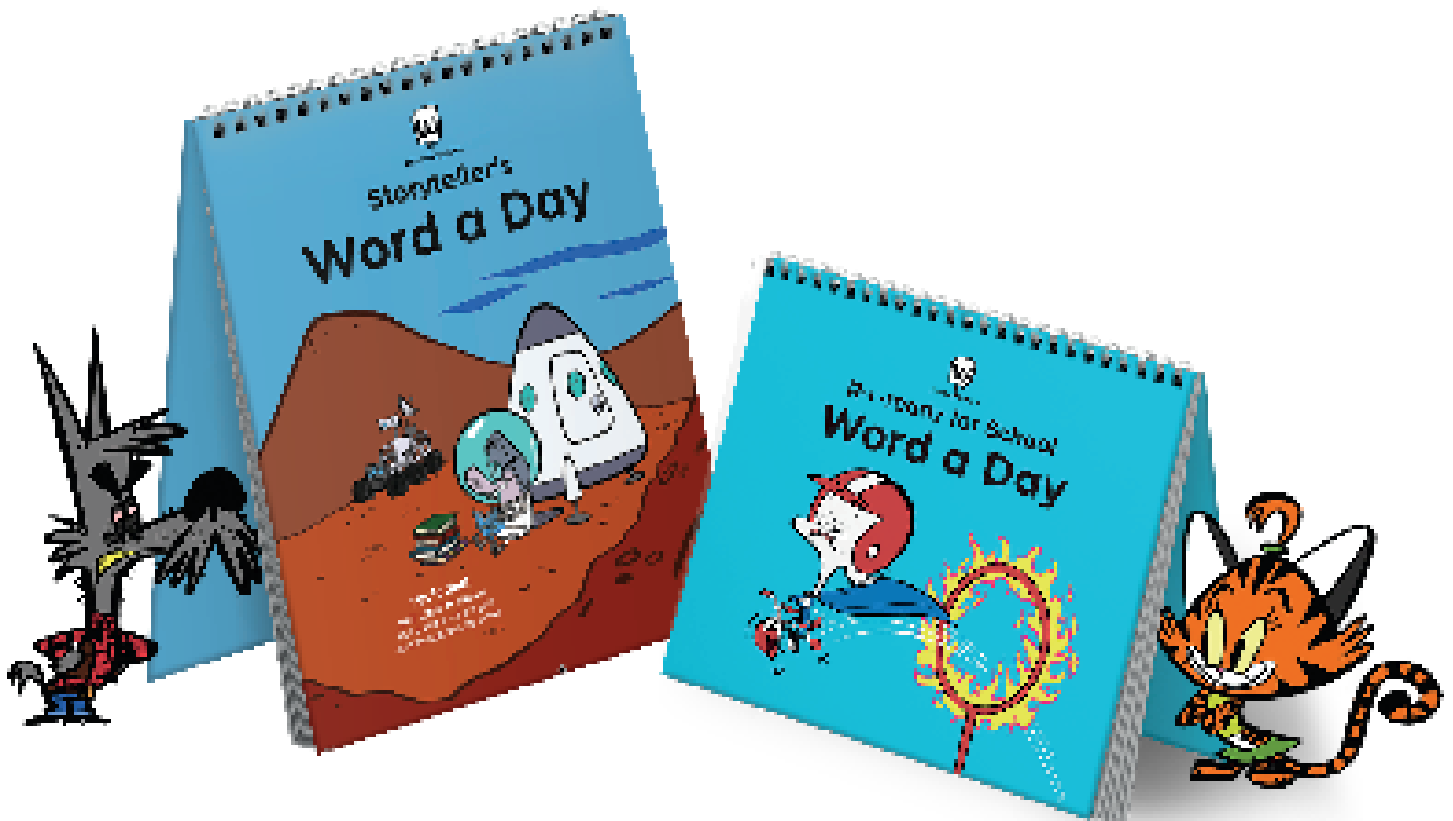


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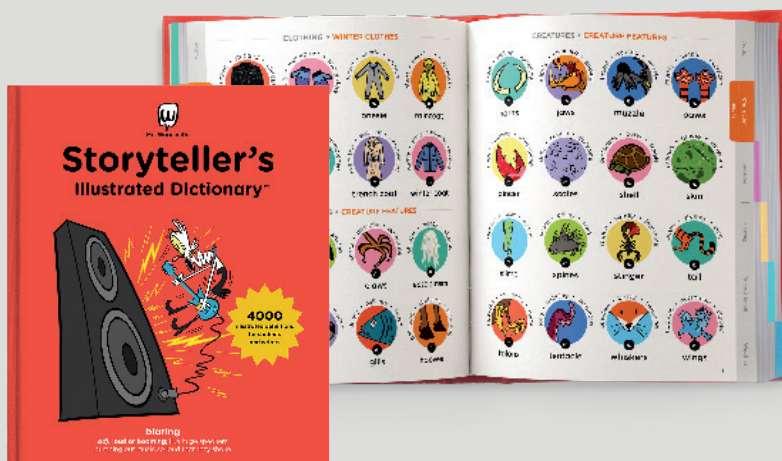
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**"Children's overall vocabulary increased on average by 50% with Mrs Wordsmith."**

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