

## Visualizing Vocabulary

*Research shows that vocabulary is closely linked to academic success. Yet, Eileen Simmons found vocabulary instruction in the classroom often seemed reduced to answering the question, “What does this mean?” Realizing that this wasn’t enough, Simmons worked to bring her high school students to an understanding—if not a passion—for words. Here, Simmons shares a series of creative activities through which she has won over many students to the power of a good vocabulary.*

EILEEN SIMMONS

Words. I love them. I’m fascinated by them, and I need to know all there is to know about them—obsolete meanings, etymology, changing nuances—all the fun stuff. And I want to pass on this passion to my high school students.

However, teaching vocabulary has never been high on my priority list of classroom activities. I know from my own experience in school the deadly dullness and absolute uselessness of vocabulary lists and tests every Friday. Vocabulary instruction in my classes has been limited to answering the student question, “What does this mean?”

Gradually, I began to realize that this was not enough. I am now teaching more students for whom English is a second language. These students, whether they are immigrants or not, live in homes where English is not spoken. And, increasingly, my students no longer come from middle class homes. Many are the children of the working class—often the working

poor—and, generally, their literacy is electronic rather than print. As a result, very few of my students bring to school an advanced English vocabulary learned over the dinner table.

Research shows that vocabulary is closely linked to academic success. A strong vocabulary is essential to good reading and, because reading and writing are so closely related, essential to writing (Brynildssen 2000, 1). So, I knew I had to improve the vocabulary instruction in my classroom. But I refused to consider word lists and tests, and I understood that, like grammar, vocabulary is best taught in context. Research demonstrates that vocabulary is most effective when students construct their own meaning and are able to visually represent a word and its related terms (Smith 1997, 1-2). I wanted to make vocabulary visual, to involve students in wrestling with personal meanings, to help them understand relationships among words, and to introduce them to the pleasures of etymology.

### Creating the Vocabulary Card

I knew that by closely looking at a single word, students would be able to learn, in addition to the definition of that word, much about the way language works. To advance this understanding, I created what I call the vocabulary card. I called on ideas I’d picked up from *Drawing Your Own Conclusions: Graphic Strategies for Reading, Writing and Thinking*, by Fran Claggett, that had helped my students go beyond illustrating text to visualize concepts and think metaphorically. I also drew on a vocabulary idea I borrowed and adapted from a writing project colleague who helped her English language learners expand their English by having them write a word on a three-by-five-inch card and then brainstorming and writing related words on the same card. For instance, for *baseball*, students might write “bat,” “ball,” “cap,” “diamond,” and other baseball-related words.

As you will see, the vocabulary card works best with “big” words, such as those found

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in works with a heavily Latinate vocabulary. *Frankenstein*, Martin Luther King's *Letter from Birmingham Jail* and the *Declaration of Independence* all qualify.

Sometimes, I ask students to pick a word from their reading to work with. Other times, I select words, make a word list, cut the list into strips, and have the students draw their word from my Edgar Allan Poe coffee cup.

Now students are ready to go to work. The first step is to divide the word into prefix, root, and suffix—not syllables. I explain that not all words have prefixes and suffixes, but that some will have more than one prefix or suffix. This distinction is not an easy concept for students to grasp. *Antirevolutionary*, for instance, has seven syllables but only one prefix, two suffixes, and one root word. I model this for the students on the overhead projector, but the lesson seldom takes at this distance, at least not the first time. I need to get closer, to walk around the classroom and explain the difference between syllables and word parts to small groups of students.

The next step is to find the meaning of each part of the word. This puts students into territory where they have been before—usually not very successfully. They have memorized lists of prefixes and suffixes and their meanings, but, for the most part, this exercise hasn't much advanced their knowledge. But now they are not memorizing; they are digging, performing a kind of literacy detective work. They discover how to identify the prefix in the dictionary: the *in* with the hyphen after it; the suffix *tion* with the hyphen before it.

Then I turn the students loose on the fun part. "Find the etymology," I announce.

"The what?" they ask.

I explain that they're looking for the history of the word. "What language was this word before it became English?" This research can be challenging. When they look for the root word for *inconceivable*, for instance, they'll discover that while the root word is *conceive*, the root of *conceive* is *ceive*. I need to be prepared to help.

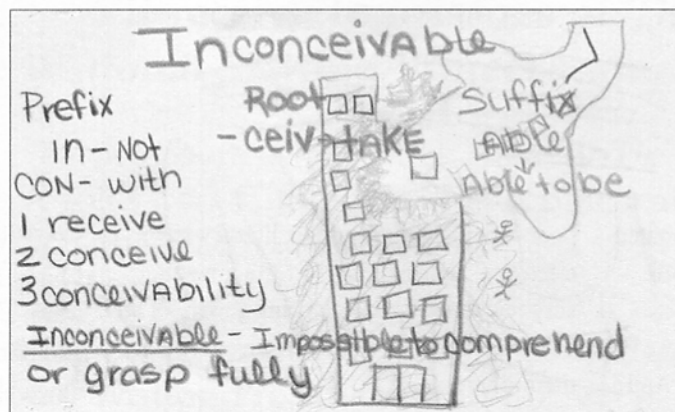


Figure 1

Next, students do a quickdraw of the concept of the word, not the definition. A picture of the definition of *pedestrian* is a person walking. A picture of the concept could be a foot. Their drawings are wonderful, creative, and occasionally breathtaking. One young man was puzzled about how to draw *desolation*. We talked for a minute or two about the intensity of the word's meaning. A few minutes later, he said, "I think I've got it, Mrs. Simmons," and handed me the card. On it was an exquisite drawing of an airplane flying into the second World Trade Center tower while the first one lay in ruins. I was stunned for a moment and told him, "You certainly do!" (The World Trade Center became the concept drawing for several words. See figure 1 for *inconceivable*.)

To help students establish connections among words, I ask them to find three words with the same root. They can usually do this by looking on the same dictionary page as their word, although I frequently direct them to other parts of the dictionary because I want them to understand the power of prefixes and suffixes. So a student investigating *inconceivable* is led to the related words *receive*, *conceive* and *conceivability*.

Finally, I direct students to the text they're reading to discover how the author used the word. I ask them to identify the part of speech (frequently a function of the suffix) and to write the definition as the author intended it. Armed with an understanding of the history, concept, and context, students begin to understand the power and nuances of English.

After they have completed this, I give them a five-by-eight-inch card and these instructions:

- Write the root of the word in capital letters in red in the middle of the card. Draw an arrow and write the meaning of the root and the language of its origin.
- Write the prefix in black to the left of the root. Draw an arrow and write the meaning of the prefix.
- Write the suffix in blue to the right of the root. Draw an arrow and write the meaning of the suffix.
- In the lower left corner, write three words with the same root.
- Put your quickdraw in the lower right of the card.

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- Write the author's definition and part of speech at the top of the card.

When the students finish their cards, I put them up on the bulletin board.

As students examine the cards their classmates have produced, they are not so much collecting new words as they are developing an understanding of how the English language works

**Illustrated Vocabulary**

Valuable as this activity is, it can also be time-consuming. Sometimes, I introduce a quick version of the vocabulary card. Students divide the word into its parts, find the meaning of each part, and then appropriately illustrate the parts. The students do a "quickdraw" on a sheet of white paper. As with the vocabulary card, I ask them to draw concepts rather than illustrations. (See figure 2 for an illustration of *geologist*. The object on the left next to the glasses is a magnifying glass intended to facilitate close study.)

**The Word Biography**

One way to help students understand that words have histories is to ask them to

delve into the origins of a word created from someone's name. I give the students a list of words that originally were someone's name: *guillotine, bloomers, derrick, pasteurize, macadam, boycott, mesmerize, watt, maudlin*—there are many possibilities.

(See sidebar of useful resources, page 17.) Students are asked to research the person and then, adopting the persona of their character, create five artifacts that illustrate both the person's life and the word his or her name became. They can create business cards, advertisements, or catalogs—their imagination is the limit. Keeping in character, they can write letters to each other.

Amelia Bloomer created a catalog of several styles of her garment—striped, polka-dotted, even a flip-down lace creation. She also made business cards. Rudolph Diesel had the complete package

for a booth at the Tulsa Engine Convention: booth license, price list, catalog, sign, business cards.

Joseph-Ignace Guillotin wrote to his parents, explaining the humaneness of his invention and asking them to come see it.

Sometimes, students bring together a couple of these people. In one inspired work, the

Fourth Earl of Sandwich recognized the marketing potential of Louis Pasteur's invention combined with his: "I would like to propose a plan," he writes. "Your new drink teamed with my new 'sandwich' marketed to poker players worldwide. The perfect combination to quench the players' hunger and thirst without ever having to leave the cardtable."

**Illustrated Opposites**

In these assignments, I've worked toward ways to make the abstraction of language concrete. Several years before I created the illustrated opposites activity described below, an art teacher and I had team taught a unit in which the students did photography, wrote poems, made paper, and created their own books. To help them understand the impact of typography, we asked them to visualize typefaces as people and to describe their personalities. Then we asked them to illustrate word definitions by using appropriate lettering.

For illustrated opposites, I added an element. I gave the students antonyms: *ebullient* and *grounded*; *energetic* and *insipid*; *haughty* and *humble*. I asked them to illustrate the words and their relationships, using the words themselves.

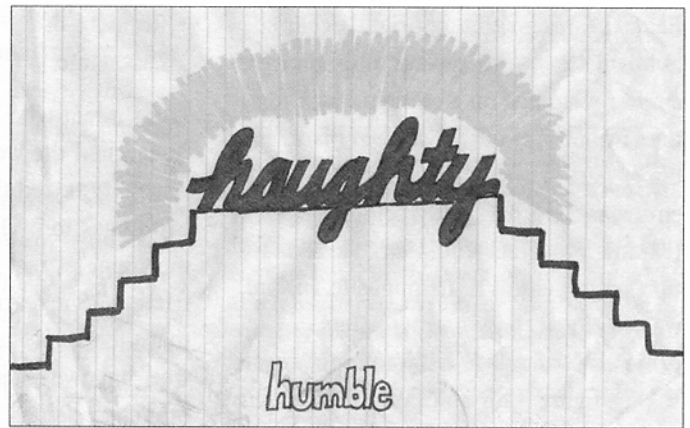


Figure 3

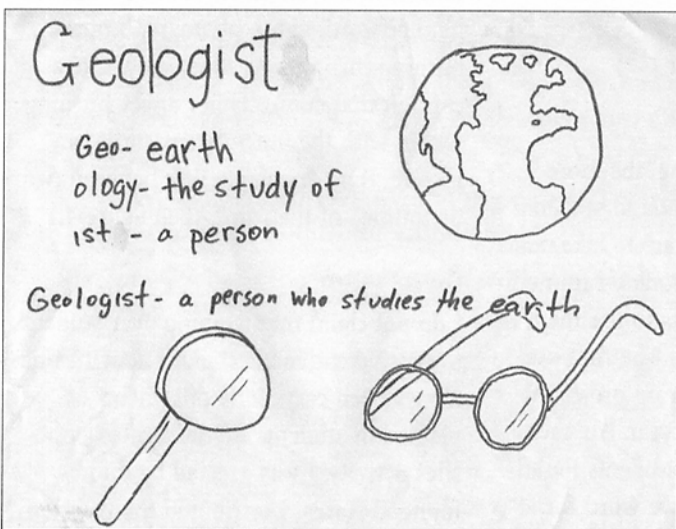


Figure 2

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*Ebullient* was written in brightly colored bubble letters, with springs and bouncy circles; *grounded* on a straight black line, the bottom part of the word in black; the upper part in green. *Energetic* filled the entire page with brightly colored letters crammed together and a large exclamation point behind it. Its opposite, *insipid*, was written in gray narrow letters, centered in the page with nothing around it. (See figure 3 for an example of *haughty* and *humble*.)

### Biopoem

Anyone who works with teenagers knows that many of them act as if the world started yesterday. But there aren't too many big bangs in language history where words emerge brand new without ancestry. I wanted students to grasp the way that language evolves and changes. For this understanding, I put them to work with the *Oxford English Dictionary* to trace the etymology and changing meanings of a word. But an activity like this, I've come to realize, needs something to juice it up. I was faced with the challenge of how students could present this research in a way that would be engaging to others. I remembered the biopoem. For years, I have asked students to adopt the viewpoint of a character in a piece of literature and write a biopoem as a means of assessing how well they understood what they read. I decided to see how this strategy would work with vocabulary. Here is the form for the biopoem:

First name  
 Four traits that describe the person  
 Relative of  
 Who feels  
 Who needs  
 Who fears  
 Who would like to see

Resident of  
 Last name.

The student who researched the word *electricity* traced the word back to its 1646 meaning, "attract by friction." She learned that the term's "family tree" has two major branches; *elek*, meaning "friction, heat" and *tron*, meaning "water" and "diffusion." The biopoem used these two parts for the first name and last name.

*Elek*  
*Shock, current, vital,*  
*magnetic*  
*Relative of anatomy, atom,*  
*contemplate, epitome*  
*Lover of friction, lightning, heat*  
*Who feels hot, shocking, active*  
*Who needs chemical action,*  
*magnetism, energy*  
*Who fears water, rain, diffusion*  
*Who would like to see stimulation,*  
*technology, mechanics*  
*Resident of cities*  
*Tron*

### ABC Books

As with all types of learning, the more relevant new words are made to students' lives, the more likely they are to take hold. When I discovered ABC books, I immediately thought of many ways to use them in my high school classroom. The first use was as a community-building project at the beginning of a school year. For each letter of the alphabet, the students found an appropriately descriptive word for themselves. Students elaborated on the

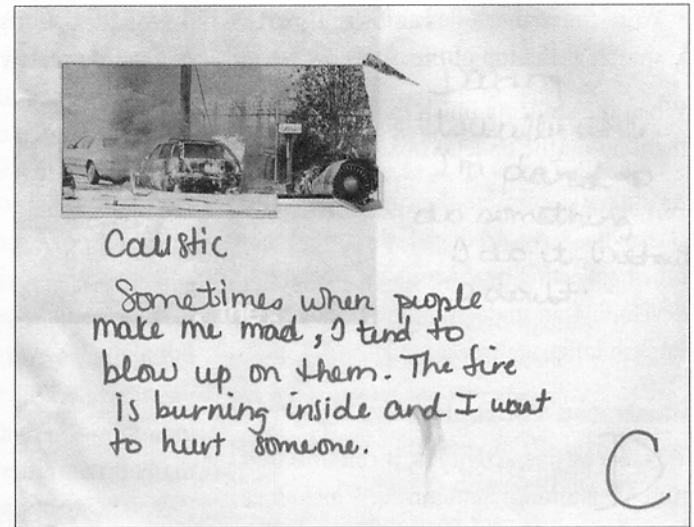


Figure 4

word by writing some sentences and creating an illustration. I noticed that the students were using the dictionary and thesaurus to find the exact word to describe themselves, especially as they got toward the end of the alphabet. They shared new words with their classmates and asked others' opinions about whether the word accurately described them. They were expanding their vocabulary and having a great time doing it.

Students discovered powerful words from all parts of the alphabet. One student described her anger as "caustic." Illustrating her word with a photograph of a burning car in a war zone, she wrote a caption that connects her anger burning within with the hurtful sarcasm it can inspire, thus drawing a link between two definitions of the word. (See figure 4.)

### Conclusion

I do not claim that winning over students to these creative vocabulary activities has always been easy. Early on, when I explained to students my illustrated opposites activity, I was greeted by dumbfounded stares. I attributed the reaction

to astonishment at “one of Mrs. Simmons’s weird ideas.” However, as soon as the bell rang, students streamed to their counselors, demanding schedule changes. Enrollment dropped from thirty to twelve in three days.

The class was made up of second-semester seniors, many of whom had been students in my English classes. For some reason, they thought I would follow the traditional routine for vocabulary class: workbooks, word lists, and tests. That’s what they wanted. “No offense, Mrs. Simmons,” one of the students who changed her schedule told me, “but it’s the end of high school. I don’t want to work that hard.”

The twelve students who stuck with me that semester taught me that vocabulary

learning can be presented in a way that is fascinating, visual, and imaginative. They groaned and rolled their eyes when I presented them with yet another outlandish assignment. But they came through as we worked out these activities together. I pointed them in the right direction, then got out of the way as they put their creative juices to work exploring language. Their legacies are the activities described here. And, partly because of their help, I have never again experienced a stampede out the door of my class in the direction of the counselor’s office.

### References

Byrnildssen, S. 2000. “Vocabulary’s Influence on Successful Writing.” *ERIC Digest*, D157. Bloomington, IN: Clearinghouse on Reading English and Communication.

Claggett, E., with J. Brown. 1992. *Drawing Your Own Conclusions: Graphic Strategies for Reading, Writing and Thinking*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

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## Resources Useful in the Search for “People Words”

### Books

- Funk, Charles. [1948] 1985. *A Hog on Ice and Other Curious Expressions*. New York: Harper and Row.
- Funk, Charles. [1950] 1985. *Thereby Hangs a Tale: Stories of Curious Word Origins*. New York: Harper and Row.
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- Merriam-Webster Inc., ed. 1994. *Webster’s Word Histories*. Springfield, MA: Merriam-Webster Inc.
- Onions, C. T. 1966. *Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology*. Oxford: University Press.

### Websites

[www.takeourword.com](http://www.takeourword.com)