

Each year that I've taught eighth grade English, I've tried to analyze the weak areas in my students. Writing has always been hard for most of them. I love to write so I was hoping that I could instill some of my love for the craft into them—that didn't work. While our scores on mandated tests were improving each year, it just seemed to be little steps. One thing that I've noticed over the years though was that my students really lacked a broad vocabulary. Without a broad vocabulary, I decided, my students' writing suffered. So this year for my self-evaluation process I decided to tackle vocabulary. Sounds good, but how do I do it?

My older brothers and sister all took Latin in high school. We lived in a state that was predominately one religion that wasn't ours. We were Catholic. My mother decided that we would attend Catholic school and in Catholic school you were expected to take Latin. However, we moved to Kansas my eighth grade year, and the town where we moved didn't have a Catholic high school. I wasn't required to take Latin. I decided to take Spanish instead. First of all I heard it was much easier than Latin, and secondly, no one in my family knew Spanish so I would seem really smart. I still laugh at how I butchered that language and no one in my family knew any different.

The thing was, though, that I discovered that my siblings had a far better grasp on English than I did. They knew roots and they could figure out the meanings of words just knowing the roots. Of course I didn't figure this out until I was much older. However, with that in mind, I decided to tackle this vocabulary problem by predominately teaching roots to my students. We'll learn prefixes and suffixes too, but, just like a tree, the power is in the roots—the foundation if you will.

My plan is to give three root words and one prefix and suffix each week to learn. At the end of the week, there will be a test on the five for that week, five from the previous week, and five more from past weeks. Hence, each Friday students will have a test of a mix of fifteen root words, suffixes, and prefixes. In a six week period then, the students will have learned 15 roots and five each of the prefixes and suffixes. The sixth week students will be given a test that is review for all the roots, prefixes, and suffixes given so far. Anything is game. There will be only twenty questions on the review test so not all the words will be tested.

Also, my students will have three by five cards that they will make flash cards with. One side will be the word and other side will have the meaning. They will keep these cards to study. Once they have mastered the word, they will put an X on the card and transfer it to their "learned" cards. Ah, but then comes the question, "How am I going to get these kids to organize their cards so that they are neat and easily accessible?" I remember taking a class at the university and

the instructor said that we should give our kids something to hold to keep their hands busy and thus they would be able to concentrate more. She suggested that we give our kids rubber bands! Somehow a classroom of eighth graders armed with rubber bands brought a chill to my spine! So here I was actually entertaining the thought of giving these kids rubber bands. Let me assure you that it was just a fleeting thought!

I decided to use those circular rings that can be easily opened. Students can just punch a hole in the upper left corner and go from there. There should be an easy way to discern a root from a prefix or a suffix. I know there are colored cards but in an effort to keep cost down, I'm just going to have my kids color in the right hand top corner of each card. You can choose whatever color you want but it needs to be consistent. I decided that the root words wouldn't be colored, prefixes would be orange, and suffixes would be green. All these cards will essentially become word banks for the students.

One of my fellow teachers knew that I was looking for those rings and found a reasonable source. The place is called Classroom Direct. They have a website, I believe it's classroomdirect.com. I had trouble finding what I wanted at the website so I called them at 1-800-248-9171. I got 100 1 ½" rings for under six dollars. There are probably cheaper ways of organizing, but this seemed the easiest for me.

Once students have written the root word on a card, they will look in the dictionary and find words that use the root. These will also be on cards, complete with their definitions. My plan is to use Mondays for vocabulary. Class will begin with students pairing off and learning their new words along with past words. Students will have worksheets using roots past and present. I haven't included these because I haven't created them. One book that I found is Words on the Vine by Claudia Vurnakes. It is a McGraw Hill Children's Publishing book. (ISBN 1-56822-661-6) I also plan to use the template for root squares that you fill in with roots, prefixes, and suffixes and let the kids create words.

One class each week will choose a vocabulary word for the students to learn. These words will also be put on the 3x5 cards but they will not be on the weekly vocabulary tests since I've made those tests up and have no clue what the words will be. Instead these words will show up on other tests. They may be extra credit or they may be embedded in the test itself.

If you decide to use this program, take advantage of discussions. In lesson 12, for instance, the extra credit question is about a benign tumor. The root word "ben" means kind so a benign tumor is kind to the body. You can then discuss a malignant tumor. Malignant has the root word "mal" which means bad. Hence a

malignant tumor is bad. To test the cells of a tumor they take a biopsy. "Bio" means life, so they take live cells to discover if the tumor is benign or malignant.

Our school librarian comes to my room for book talks. When she discusses banned books she always discusses *The Giver*. One of the reasons that *The Giver* has been banned is because the community practices infanticide. My kids always say, "What's that?" It's the perfect opportunity to let them figure it out. They know that "cide" means kill and they know what an infant is so it doesn't take any time for them to come up with the answer. I love to see that light come on!

I will be trying this program for the school year 2008-2009. I am sure that I will be adjusting and changing as I go along. If you decide to use this information, I hope you will share what works and doesn't work for your students.