



Bringing Words to Life

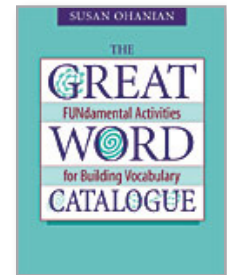
Richard Allington’s research shows that children in high-achieving schools spend an enormous amount of time reading and writing. Kids in low-achieving schools spend lots of time being drilled and doing vocabulary activities.



LITERACY CHAMPION: SUSAN OHANIAN

Susan Ohanian is a longtime teacher and freelance writer whose articles have appeared in periodicals ranging from the *Atlantic* and *Washington Monthly* to *Phi Delta Kappan* and *Language Arts*. A frequent speaker at schools and education conferences, Susan is the author of more than a dozen books, including *The Great Word*

Catalogue: FUNdamental Activities for Building Vocabulary (2002), *Books Day by Day: Anniversaries, Anecdotes, and Activities* (2001), *Caught in the Middle: Nonstandard Kids and a Killing Curriculum* (2001), *One Size Fits Few: The Folly of Educational Standards* (1999), and *Math at a Glance: A Month-by-Month Celebration of the Numbers Around Us* (1995). Writing honors include awards from *Child* magazine and EdPress; [George Orwell](#) Award for Distinguished Contribution to Honesty and Clarity in Public Language, National Council of Teachers of English.



One to Know: Let Us Stand By Words

Let’s invite children to explore the wit, wonder, wisdom, and whimsy of words throughout the day, every day. Memorizing lists of words and definitions is the least effective way to develop a rich vocabulary.

Standing by words in the classroom means exploring words for today—for the children and their needs—today. We must help children come to words today—in awe and in love. Standing by words means we have a constant faith—in the words and in the children who will use them. We can stand by these words because we stand with and for children as we study the words they find through reading together.

Editor’s Note: The research is with us. Vocabulary grows primarily not as the result of direct instruction, but as the result of voluminous reading (Cunningham and Zibulsky, 2014). Avid readers encounter new words in the meaningful context of an unfolding story or rich informational text, thus increasing their opportunities to learn new words. Even a moderate amount of daily, independent reading of trade books has a positive impact on vocabulary

growth. Students of all ages who read independently acquire thousands of new words as the result of reading more. Cunningham and Zibulsky explain:

It is estimated that an 18-month-old learns an average of five new words a day in order to develop a receptive vocabulary of around 8,000 words by the time the child is six years old. At the time of high school graduation ... the average student knows approximately 40,000 words. In order for a child to increase his vocabulary from 8,000 to 40,000 words in roughly 12 years, he needs to learn approximately 32,000 words between first grade and twelfth grade (i.e., seven words a day, every day of the year for 12 years) ... When we consider that the average school program of direct vocabulary instruction covers only a few hundred words and word parts per year, it seems evident that the type of vocabulary development that is necessary for skilled reading is beyond the scope of even the most intensive programs of vocabulary instruction.

Effective teachers of reading know that encouraging their students to read trade books, both in and out of school, is the best way to bolster their vocabulary. And trade books are rich in academic language! So extended reading of children's and Young Adult literature not only increases vocabulary in terms of quantity but also quality. "Written language, including language found in children's books, is far more sophisticated and complex than is spoken language, even that of college educated adults" (Cunningham and Zibulsky, 2014). Indeed, spoken language, compared to written language, is "lexically impoverished."

What to Do: Ten Ways to Explore and Enjoy Wonderful Words

Here are ten ways you can remind students about the wonderful words they encounter throughout the day through their reading.

- **Vocabulary Wall.** Start the day by drawing students' attention to wonderful words you've posted on the wall that you've found in your reading. This can be single phrases of sentences, excerpts from poems, or a word all by itself. You may want to ask students to keep Wonderful Words journals, in which they record these words each day. Over time, students will start volunteering to post wonderful words and phrases they have found in their reading.
- **Vocabulary Testimony.** A good way to end a day is to ask for a student to volunteer a reflection about an interesting word encountered that day. This can be a new word or new look at an old word. For example, noticing the *ant* in *Anthony* causes young readers to see an old word differently, while noting *ant* in *jubilant* might well mean encountering a new word.
- **Arguing for Words.** Provide ongoing opportunities for focused investigation of words. Invite students to choose an "important" word in a play, poem, or story they've just read, and to provide an argument for convincing others of its importance.
- **Question Box.** Invite students to put questions about words in a box and to become word sleuths, volunteering to find answers.

- **Expanding Horizons.** Invite multilingual learners to teach words in their languages. Post some common words such as mother, father, home in many languages. Encourage students to come up with a list of basic words, words we can't do without. Look for commonalities and differences in these words in various languages.
- **Pop-up Words.** Invite students to create a word collage to express an important idea such as joy, friendship, courage, or other abstractions of their choice.
- **Word Collages.** Invite students to create a word collage to express an important idea such as joy, friendship, fear or other abstractions of their choice.
- **Word Games.** Invite students to teach a word game such as scrabble, word ladders (Rasinski and Cheesman, 2021), or hangman to someone they know outside of school.
- **Word Play.** Invite students to create word cartoons that involve puns or some other play on language; provide space in the classroom to display their work.
- **Trying Out Words.** Encourage students to mark and share new words they try out in their own writing.

More to Know and Do

Editor's Note: Increased vocabulary knowledge helps students understand what they read, and reading comprehension is enhanced when students understand the meaning of words. Thus, there is a reciprocal benefit to independent reading of trade books. One of the best-established relationships in the field of reading is the connection between vocabulary development and reading comprehension (Allington, 2012). Independent reading is the major source of vocabulary acquisition beyond the beginning stages of learning to read (Christ and Wang, 2010). Students who read widely learn the meanings of thousands of new words each year.

Here are some of my favorite books that highlight the joy of language and words!

- Douglas Florian, *Insectlopedia*
- Michael Folsom, *Q is for Duck*
- Peggy Parish, *Amelia Bedelia series*
- Marvin Terban, *A Feast of Homonym Riddles*

How to Reach Susan

Twitter [@susanoha](https://twitter.com/susanoha) • email susano@gmavt.net

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