Closing the word gap: activities for the classroom

English
Closing the word gap: English

Section 1: Vocabulary for your subject

Annabel Wall has taught English for almost 20 years. A former second in department and consultant for BBC Bitesize, she’s also the author of a range of educational resources and textbooks, including SPaG and AQA GCSE English revision guides.

She shares her practical classroom ideas for closing the word gap with strategies to develop students’ understanding of the words we read, hear, and speak.

Using word banks

Advice for teachers

Explicit teaching of new words is needed for students to develop their vocabulary. The first stage of this process is to select the important vocabulary.

Don’t give students an overwhelming word bank with dozens of words. Divide the subject-specific vocabulary into manageable lists. These lists may be shared with students, or they could just inform planning and teaching.

Consider how best to divide the vocabulary. For example, a possible split could be based on vocabulary tiers. Tier 1 words are those used in everyday talk, tier 2 words appear across the curriculum but not usually in everyday talk, and tier 3 words are subject-specific vocabulary:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tier 2 words</th>
<th>Vocabulary for skills</th>
<th>For example, the words implies and summarise.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tier 3 words</td>
<td>Vocabulary for knowledge</td>
<td>For example, the words soliloquy and adverb.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As an English teacher, I would also emphasise:

| Archaic vocabulary (words that are no longer in common use or have changed meaning over time) | For example, some Shakespearean words like sans and 19th-century words like countenance. |
Within these broad groups, there could also be further subgroups. The **literature** vocabulary for knowledge could also be divided in the following way:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Poetry</th>
<th>Prose fiction</th>
<th>Drama</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>alliteration</td>
<td>chapter</td>
<td>act</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>assonance</td>
<td>character</td>
<td>aside</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>figurative</td>
<td>mood</td>
<td>audience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>metaphor</td>
<td>narrative</td>
<td>monologue</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>personification</td>
<td>opening</td>
<td>playwright</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>rhyme</td>
<td>paragraph</td>
<td>scene</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>rhythm</td>
<td>protagonist</td>
<td>soliloquy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sibilance</td>
<td>setting</td>
<td>speech</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>simile</td>
<td>theme</td>
<td>tragedy</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The **language** vocabulary for knowledge could be divided in the following ways:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grammar</th>
<th>Punctuation</th>
<th>Spelling</th>
<th>Vocabulary</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>clause</td>
<td>comma</td>
<td>consonants</td>
<td>antonym</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>conjunction</td>
<td>ellipsis</td>
<td>homophone</td>
<td>etymology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>object</td>
<td>em dash</td>
<td>mnemonic</td>
<td>morphology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sentence</td>
<td>exclamation mark</td>
<td>plurals</td>
<td>stem</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>subject</td>
<td>hyphen</td>
<td>prefix</td>
<td>synonym</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>syntax</td>
<td>inverted commas</td>
<td>suffix</td>
<td>thesaurus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tense</td>
<td>semicolon</td>
<td>vowels</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Suggested strategies for using word banks**

- **The SEEC model.** Use the SEEC model – select/explain/explore/consolidate when introducing new vocabulary. Select the words you want students to know. Explain each word’s meaning, giving multiple examples that are relevant to students. Explore words further if you feel it will deepen students’ understanding and awareness. Consolidate by testing, using, and modelling the word in your speech and encouraging students to find out more about the word through targeted research (Quigley, 2018).

- **Dictionaries.** Support students when using dictionaries. Ensure you have the right dictionary at the right level for your students, and scaffold tasks carefully to build confidence. Take time to decipher any special marks or abbreviations to help students to access words.
Student-friendly definitions. Definitions need to be in student-friendly language and appropriate for students’ reading age. Create your own written and verbal definitions in class. Differentiate to encourage students to compare these to the dictionary definition when more support is required.

Frayer model. Use a Frayer model template (like the one below) for new words. The non-examples heading could be replaced with antonyms, and the characteristics heading could be replaced with synonyms.

Definitions
A feeling of sadness.

Characteristics/synonyms:
thoughtful
self-reflection
pensive
depression

Examples
Hamlet is a melancholy character.
The haunting music created a melancholy mood.

Non-examples/antonyms:
joyful
cheerful
happy

Matching activities. Give students a range of matching activities: match words with definitions, words with synonyms, words with antonyms, etc.

Call My Bluff. Experiment with Call My Bluff definitions. Students work in two pairs, with one pair creating four definitions for a specific word, but only one definition is correct. The other pair tries to work out the correct definition.

Independent learning tasks

Student word banks. Word banks don’t have to be teacher driven. Students could also create their own personalised word journals or word hoards.

| Subject: English |
|------------------|------------------|------------------|------------------|
| Word | Where did I hear/read it? | Definition in my own words | Links to other words I know | Tick when used it in my own learning |
| soliloquy | My teacher used the word in our lesson on ‘Much Ado About Nothing’. | Speaking on your own onstage. | Links to word solo, which means one. | |

To monitor how they are decoding new and unfamiliar words, students could use the Teachit English resource Strategies for understanding new words (30612).
Making links between key terms

Advice for teachers

It’s essential for students to make links between key terms and see the relationships of words within a group. Most students love to spot patterns, and encouraging a curiosity about how words are connected will help them to develop a vocabulary with more depth. These links could be based upon meaning, etymology, morphology, context, or topic.

Diagrams provide a strong visual hook for these grammar and poetry terms and help to show the links between them:

Students need to revisit key words and make new links between words in new contexts. For example, they may be introduced to the word *enjambment* in a poetry lesson but can then revisit the word during their study of Shakespearean verse.

Suggested strategies for making links between key terms

- **Displays.** Create classroom displays that show the links between words, such as a word wall of cause and effect conjunctions. The focus should be on student-friendly definitions and examples. Use sticky tack so that the words can be moved around and changed.

- **Prior knowledge.** When a new word is introduced, ask students to think about how the word links to words they already know. For example, the word *dissonance* could be linked to the words *assonance* and *consonance*, as well as linking to sound.
Independent learning tasks

- **Categories.** Give students a selection of tier 2 words, and ask them to create their own categories for these words. Discuss the different groupings and how the links have been made. Encourage students to find different ways to present these links, perhaps using free mapping tools available on the web, like Coggle.

- **Maps and organisers.** There are various ways that these links can be organised, such as word/concept/topic maps, word family trees, and knowledge organisers. Encourage students to experiment with different formats and display or share the most effective in class.

Exploring etymology and morphology

Advice for teachers

The study of etymology and morphology is crucial when developing students’ word power. This fascinating area of language study encourages students to investigate the words they encounter and spot patterns. Focusing on useful root words can help students to develop their specialist English vocabulary:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Root word</th>
<th>Meaning</th>
<th>Examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>biblio</td>
<td>book</td>
<td>bibliography, bibliophile</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bio</td>
<td>life</td>
<td>biographical, biography</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>chron</td>
<td>time</td>
<td>chronological, synchronise</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>gram</td>
<td>letter</td>
<td>grammar, anagram</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>log</td>
<td>word, reason, speech, or thought</td>
<td>prologue, epilogue, dialogue</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>narra</td>
<td>to tell</td>
<td>narrator, narrate, narrative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>omni</td>
<td>all</td>
<td>omniscient, omnipotent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sol</td>
<td>alone</td>
<td>soliloquy, solitary</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

There are also root words that could help students decode unfamiliar words in an unseen text. For example, if a student knew that *odor* is a Latin root meaning smell or scent and that *mal* means bad, they could work out the meaning of *malodorous* (smelling bad!).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Root word</th>
<th>Meaning</th>
<th>Examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>meta</td>
<td>change, transfer</td>
<td>metamorphosis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>miss, mit</td>
<td>send, let go</td>
<td>emit, dismiss</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>path</td>
<td>feeling, emotion</td>
<td>apathy, empathy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>rid</td>
<td>laugh</td>
<td>deride, ridicule</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tract</td>
<td>to pull or draw</td>
<td>detract, attraction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>vac</td>
<td>empty</td>
<td>evacuate, vacuum</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
You could also explore common prefixes that could help students to decode unfamiliar words:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Prefix</th>
<th>Meaning</th>
<th>Examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>anti-</td>
<td>against</td>
<td>anticlimax</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>auto-</td>
<td>self</td>
<td>autobiography</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>con-</td>
<td>with</td>
<td>conjunction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>fore-</td>
<td>before</td>
<td>foreword</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mis-</td>
<td>wrong</td>
<td>misunderstand</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pre-</td>
<td>earlier, before, in front of</td>
<td>preface, previously</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>re-</td>
<td>again</td>
<td>reassert</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Remind students that Shakespeare often played with words, for example, adding prefixes to create a new word and increase the dramatic impact, such as un- (unhair, unkinged), be- (bespeak, bemock), and en- (entomb, enthral). Decoding how these words are formed can unlock their meaning.

**Suggested strategies for teaching etymology and morphology**

- **Neologisms.** Introduce students to the word *neologism* and demonstrate how to work out the meaning of this word using etymology and morphology. For example, the word *neo* means new, and *log* is from the Greek meaning word or speech, so the word *neologism* means ‘new word’. Share some examples of recent neologisms – the OED added 1,400 new words in 2018, including *nothingburger*, *fam*, and *burkini*. Discuss your favourites as a class.

- **Student neologisms.** Remind students that Shakespeare is famous for his neologisms or invented words that have become part of everyday speech. Challenge students to create their own neologisms using their knowledge of root words and prefixes. The aim is to develop a more playful attitude towards vocabulary and at the same time strengthen their knowledge of etymology and morphology.

**Independent learning tasks**

- **Informed guesswork.** Give students an extract with unfamiliar words, and ask them to work out the meanings. Place an emphasis on informed guesswork, using the context of the word as well as their knowledge of etymology and morphology. They could use a table to record their ideas:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Word</th>
<th>My definition guess</th>
<th>Dictionary definition</th>
<th>Definition in my own words with an example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

- **Research.** Ask students to research the etymology of a word. There are lots of excellent etymological dictionaries online such as Etymonline. Students can present their findings in a visual way or even record their observations as a video. You could divide the students into groups, for example, some focusing on words of Latin origin and others focusing on Greek words.
Using talk to widen vocabulary

Advice for teachers

Don’t underestimate the importance of talk in the English classroom – both your talk as a teacher and students’ talk. The sounds of the words are very important for students coping with unfamiliar vocabulary. Asking students to look up a word in a dictionary is only helpful if they can then discuss the definition and make sense of it in their own words.

Students are more likely to use and understand English vocabulary that is used in the classroom frequently. Don’t be afraid of using academic language in the classroom; just introduce new words gradually using the SEEC model of learning. Research shows that repetition is needed to really develop word depth, and that students must encounter a word at least four times (Beck et al, 2002).

Stress to students that they are learning to ‘talk like an expert’ and that every specialism has its own language.

Suggested strategies for using talk to widen vocabulary

- **Classroom talk.** Keep using the key words in classroom talk – keep repeating words, and give quick verbal definitions.

- **Wider uses.** Use the words in different contexts. For example, students often isolate the word *metaphor* as being linked to poetry – highlight its use in non-fiction texts and other contexts.

- **Verbal synonyms.** Provide verbal synonyms as regularly as definitions. Repeat student answers using synonyms, for instance, replacing some words with more academic versions. For example:

  Student: *The start of the story makes me feel tense.*
  
  Teacher: *Yes … the opening creates a sense of tension for the reader.*

- **Student-friendly definitions.** Integrate student-friendly definitions into classroom interactions, for example:

  Teacher: *Sam just used an interesting word: apprehensive means to feel worried or unsure about something. For example, you might feel apprehensive before an exam.*

- **Pronunciation.** Encourage students to note down how to pronounce a word and remind students that many adults struggle to pronounce unfamiliar words too. Model how to note down the sounds of a word, e.g. *so-lil-o-quee.*

- **Drama improvisations.** To help students with 19th-century words, try some drama improvisations such as a tableau or mime to explore a bank of words that are unfamiliar to the modern ear, such as *countenance, divined, grievous,* or teach a whole lesson in role as a 19th-century teacher!

- **Classroom observers.** During group tasks, reward students who use key vocabulary, and encourage them to observe classroom talk actively and coach one another. Allocate roles to students so that during a reading task they are noticing and recording new words.

- **ABC feedback.** Use ABC feedback in the classroom to encourage talk – ask students to **agree with,** **build upon** or **challenge** what another student has said.

- **Word games.** Encourage a playful, spoken approach to words. There are lots of word games to choose from, including the radio game Just a Minute, when students talk about a word for one minute without deviating, hesitating, or repeating a word. The Teachit English resource *Speaking and listening word games (16245)* includes some more.
**Independent learning tasks**

Give students ‘talking’ homework to encourage their confidence with unfamiliar words. For example:

- **Favourite unusual words.** Ask someone (a friend or someone you live with) to share their favourite unusual word – what does it mean and why do they like it?
- **Be the teacher.** Spend five minutes teaching someone else three words you have learned in English this week, or teach a friend some common word stems, and discuss what words they know that use these stems. Write down their suggestions/ideas.

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**Avoiding common mistakes and misunderstandings**

**Advice for teachers**

Keep your own record of students’ common vocabulary mistakes and misunderstandings. For example:

- using the term *paragraph* instead of *stanza* for poetry
- referring to a *sentence* of poetry rather than a *line*
- using the verb *quote* instead of the noun *quotation*
- referring to the *reader* when writing about a play, instead of the *audience*.

Students frequently encounter misunderstandings when tackling Shakespearean vocabulary. It’s important to teach students explicitly about Shakespeare’s language to give them strategies for deciphering the text. It can be helpful to remind students that some familiar words that Shakespeare used have since changed their meaning (e.g. the word *silly* meant innocent or simple, and *luxurious* meant lustful).

Even students with a wide vocabulary can use complex words incorrectly. Model a growth mindset by talking about mistakes you’ve made as a teacher and how you’ve learned to cope with specialist vocabulary in your subject. Stress that mistakes and misunderstanding are a natural result of learning any new words.

**Suggested strategies for correcting these mistakes and misunderstandings**

- **Spot the mistakes.** Give students sample paragraphs where the words have been used incorrectly. Students highlight the mistakes and discuss why they are incorrect.
- **Malapropisms.** Introduce students to the idea of *malapropisms* (a lovely new bit of vocabulary), and show them amusing examples from film, Twitter, and YouTube, etc.

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**Independent learning tasks**

- **Social media.** Provide students with examples from social media and see if they can ‘study’ these to spot the misuse of words. Politicians like Trump are often a good source.
- **Aides-memoire.** Ask students to create their own memory aids for remembering tricky vocabulary, such as creating their own posters with doodles and images.
Understanding vocabulary for exams/assessments

Advice for teachers

Students need to be taught explicitly the language of assessment; English language and English literature have their own exam jargon, and these words can create a barrier for many students.

Don’t assume that all students will understand even basic words. For example, key stage 3 and key stage 4 students may fail to access an exam question at a fundamental level if they don’t understand specialist exam nouns like text, extract, source or features. Students also need to understand all the command words in an English exam, for example explain or summarise.

Keep your own records of the key exam words, and monitor how often you use them in classroom talk and written activities; find opportunities to consolidate student knowledge of these words in a variety of contexts. Ensure that students who struggle with their reading are very familiar with the rubric of the exam paper too.

Specialist word bank

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Command words used in GCSE English exams</th>
<th>AQA</th>
<th>Edexcel</th>
<th>OCR</th>
<th>WJEC Eduqas</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>analyse</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>comment</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>compare</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
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<tr>
<td>consider</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>convey</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>describe</td>
<td>✓</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>discuss</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>effect/s*</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>evaluate*</td>
<td>✓</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>explain</td>
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<td>explore</td>
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<tr>
<td>extract/s</td>
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<tr>
<td>features</td>
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<td>present/ed</td>
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<tr>
<td>respond/response</td>
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<tr>
<td>similarities</td>
<td>✓</td>
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<tr>
<td>text</td>
<td>✓</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

*Words identified in recent examiner reports as posing difficulties for students.
Key areas of concern identified in examiner reports

Recent GCSE examiner reports suggest that students need a more developed understanding of the word *evaluation*, with one board noting that ‘… the concept of critical evaluation is not easy for most candidates’ (WJEC Eduqas, 2018). There should be an explicit focus on the *how* as well as the *what* during the evaluation of a text. Edexcel also highlighted students’ understanding of the word *evaluate*, observing that at times students explained and commented instead of fully evaluating.

There were also references to students confusing the words *reader/audience* and *novel/play/poem* in their written response to the texts.

In all examiner reports, there is also evidence that students spent too long ‘feature spotting’ or ‘device spotting’ (OCR, 2017) and not enough time focusing on the *effect/s* of language (AQA, 2017).

Examiners also reveal that students sometimes selected words and phrases that they did not fully understand, and therefore were unable to write a convincing analysis. Students performed much better in the exam if they focused on individual words that they understood and explored the effects.

Suggested strategies for teaching vocabulary for exams/assessments

- **The Frayer model.** Use the Frayer model to teach important exam vocabulary explicitly (see the example given earlier).
- **Games and drama.** Introduce command exam words in different, less threatening contexts, such as with a game or drama activity. A fun way to do this is with a series of simple objects, for example, a trainer. Students must then use the different exam words to identify the trainer, describe the trainer, explore the trainer, or evaluate the trainer, etc. This can be turned into a competition as students guess which exam word is being used, with the focus on speaking rather than writing.
- **Make it topical.** Use a topical subject to practise responding to exam commands – pick two things that can be compared, and ask students to model their responses e.g. evaluating the games *Fortnite* and *Overwatch*.
- **Collages and posters.** Give students lots of old exam papers, and get them to cut them up. They can then create collages and posters of the key exam vocabulary, deciding on relevant groups and links.
- **Sort the words.** Give students the key exam vocabulary on sort cards, and ask students to:
  - sort the words into verbs and nouns
  - rank them depending on their difficulty
  - group the words that are similar in meaning.
- **Match the command words.** For extra challenge, give students snippets of exam answers, and ask them to match them to the correct exam command words.
- **Formative assessment.** It’s useful to assess formatively how well your students have understood the exam vocabulary using a range of different approaches:
  1. Explain the difference between *explore* and *evaluate*.
  2. Give an example of when you would *summarise* information in your daily life.
  3. What are the similarities between the words *extract* and *section*?
  4. Write a sentence using the word *infer*.
  5. Give an example of when you *compare* in three of your subject areas.
  6. Give a definition, in your own words, for the word *source*. 
Independent learning tasks

- **Student audit.** Students could audit their own understanding of exam vocabulary in word journals:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Exam word</th>
<th>Know it well, can explain it, use it, and respond correctly to it in an exam</th>
<th>Know something about it or have a vague idea of what it means</th>
<th>Have seen the word on an exam paper and/or heard the word</th>
<th>Do not know the word</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

- **Links across subjects.** Encourage students to make links across subject areas: which English exam words are used by other subjects? Are there any words that have a slightly different meaning in different subjects (for example, the word *source* in English and history)? Students can create posters for key exam words using examples from all the relevant subject areas.
Closing the word gap:
English

Section 2: Vocabulary to improve your students’ writing

Here are Annabel Wall’s suggestions for effective classroom strategies to develop students’ ability and confidence in using key vocabulary in their written work.

In English lessons, students face the challenge of writing a wide range of fiction and non-fiction texts. A limited vocabulary can stifle their written voice, so how do we help students improve their own written vocabulary?

1. **Good readers make better writers**

   All English teachers know that good readers make better writers, so encouraging reading for pleasure should underpin any approach to improving students’ written vocabulary.

   In an ideal world, all year 7 students would arrive at secondary school with a love of reading books. However, for some students reading is not a pleasure. So how can we get students to read more?

   - Encourage them to read comics, magazines, game reviews, graphic novels, or the *Guinness Book of World Records* (often the most popular and dog-eared books in the school library).
   - Sneak in some wider reading during lessons, but don’t worry about always having to ‘do’ something with a text – sometimes it’s enough to just read something and let them think and enjoy.
   - Set students the optional challenge of joining the local library and bringing in their library card to class as evidence. This works well if offered as an alternative to doing that week’s homework!
   - Set up group reading challenges. For example, at my last school all the year 7 tutor groups competed to see who could exceed their average height in books. The spines of each book were photocopied, and a pile was created on the wall for each tutor group to chart their progress. There are several Teachit English resources with a competitive element, including the [Great reading race](#) and [Reading bingo challenge](#).
   - Encourage talk about reading throughout the school, and not just in the English classroom – ask other departments to share their favourite books too. Have displays celebrating a variety of readers and their love of books.

2. **Taking the fear out of reading aloud**

   Reading aloud has fallen out of fashion in a lot of English classrooms, and even confident students can find the prospect of reading aloud daunting. However, reading aloud can provide some of the most useful opportunities to focus on and discuss unfamiliar vocabulary. Students are more likely to use a word in conversation if they know how to pronounce it. If they use the word in their talk, they are more likely to use it in their writing.
Here are some strategies for making reading aloud less intimidating:

- Give students time to prepare what they will be reading aloud, or try learning some Poetry By Heart.
- Allow students to choose what they read to the class – perhaps having a slot once a week when a few students can share an article they've found or a text they are interested in.
- Organise for students to read aloud in small groups (just as they do at key stage 2 in guided reading).

Model a growth mindset to your students: explain that many adults find reading aloud a challenge and that sometimes a real effort is needed to overcome this fear and anxiety.

3. Students taking the lead

It’s important that students see the connection between their own reading and their writing.

Ask students to create bookmarks with spaces for words. During reading, encourage them to keep a record of interesting words they find. Devote regular slots during the week to reviewing and talking about these words, and ask students to give definitions in their own words.

These bookmarks can then be shared and used during writing tasks. They could also lead to 'Word of the day' or 'Word of the week', or contribute to a class word bank of interesting words.

Ask students to think about how words they have learned in other subjects could be used in their English writing. For example, find out what they are studying in history, and ask the students to draft a piece of creative writing set in that period, including some of the words they’ve recently learned in history to give their writing an authentic feel.

4. Playing with words

Give students the space to play with words in their writing. An effective approach is to pick a genre like science fiction or fantasy and encourage students to create their own word banks as part of their story planning.

These word banks could be generated in groups, with students inventing some words through various means. For example:

- **portmanteaux words** (words created by blending two words together) such as *mimsy*, which is a combination of *miserable* and *flimsy*
- **compound words** (words created by joining two words together) such as *moonlight*
- **neologisms** (newly coined words) such as *saturning*.

Use fun digital tools to inspire students, such as Word Generator.

5. Using academic vocabulary in their own writing

Students with a limited vocabulary often struggle to write in an analytical style. One effective approach is to teach them academic vocabulary using a topic that is relevant to their everyday lives. Then get students to use academic vocabulary to write about their interests. For example, one of my students wrote a formal essay on skateboarding, starting with his own word bank of specialist terms and imagining he was writing for a knowledgeable audience.
Conjunctions are useful building blocks for formal writing. Students will sometimes use conjunctions in the wrong place, dropping them into a sentence without a real understanding of how the word affects the structure, meaning, and clarity of a sentence. There are various strategies for supporting students in their use of conjunctions:

- Ask students to sort conjunctions into groups – subordinating conjunctions, coordinating conjunctions, and conjunctive adverbs. Explicitly teach the purpose and function of each type of conjunction. The Teachit English Connectives writing placemat (20352) is a useful guide.
- Be aware of students overusing conjunctions, especially complicated conjunctions. Remind them that *and*, *but* or *or* are often the most suitable words to use. Clarity is always more important than sophistication.

Be careful of just teaching formulas for formal, literature essays (whether it be PEE, PEEL, WET RATS, or similar). These can be useful, especially for students who are struggling, but there is a danger that teaching this kind of formal analysis can become overly prescriptive – ‘follow this and you will get it right’. Allow for creative thinking and a variety of structures within formal essays.

Make a note of common sentence stems that students are using in your class, and then model some alternatives. For example:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The writer uses …</th>
<th>The writer employs …</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lots of different …</td>
<td>A <strong>variety</strong> of …</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>This means that …</td>
<td>This suggests to the <strong>reader</strong> that …</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The people watching the play feel …</td>
<td>This reveals that …</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Like when …</td>
<td>The <strong>audience</strong> feel …</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Also, the writer uses …</td>
<td><strong>For example</strong> …</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The play is about love …</td>
<td>In <strong>addition</strong>, the writer uses …</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The book …</td>
<td>The play <strong>deals</strong> with the <strong>theme</strong> of love …</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The good use of …</td>
<td>The <strong>text/novel</strong> …</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Instead</strong> write …</td>
<td>The <strong>effective use</strong> of …</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

6. **Using words to describe effects**

Although specialist terminology is essential in the English classroom, it’s important to avoid feature spotting in analysis, as this can limit the scope of a student’s response.

Remind students that the learning of specialist vocabulary is about acquiring a **language** to talk about literature. Model how to make the specialist term the subject of the sentence. For example:

The **alliteration** in the opening paragraph, ‘the dense mist drifted’, creates a sense of unease.

Having a wider vocabulary allows students to write about the **effect** of the writer’s choices. This is often an area that students struggle with in English because they cannot draw on a bank of subtle words to describe the exact effect.
The following list may be a useful starting point for students:

| … this creates a feeling of … | amazement  
anticipation  
apathy  
consternation  
disbelief  
dissonance  
empathy  
freedom  
harmony  
shock  
sympathy  
tranquillity  
trepidation  
unease |

| … establishes a sense of … |

| … this choice of … provokes feelings of … |

### 7. Building a rich, creative written vocabulary

We often encourage students to build up a knowledge of descriptive words, such as using varied adjectives and adverbs during creative writing. However, it’s useful to remember that a rich, creative vocabulary also needs a variety of verb choices.

A particularly useful way to demonstrate this is to ask students to think of alternatives to ‘he said / she said’. For example:

- muttered  
- countered  
- ventured  
- explained  
- demanded  
- whispered  
- declared  
- answered  
- insisted  
- bellowed  
- hissed  
- commented  
- snapped  
- asked  
- replied  
- blurted

A school thesaurus can be very useful, but difficult to access for some students. Introduce students to a simplified online thesaurus such as [power thesaurus](#).
Encourage students to explore the subtleties of meaning within synonyms. For example, although the following adjectives are all broadly synonyms, each has different connotations: old man / elderly man / ancient man / decrepit man.

Give key stage 3 students ‘word ladders’ to upgrade their word choice. For example, during a writing task they could consider and discuss the effect of the following word choices:

Remind students that sometimes the most complex or unusual vocabulary choices are not the most effective. Most English teachers have encountered an overly enthusiastic student who has been heavy-handed with a thesaurus!

8. **Getting students to read aloud**

Involving parents/carers, and setting homework that involves reading aloud at home. To support the reader and listener with this task, you could use the following template:
Dear Listener,

I'd like to read aloud to you for five minutes. You can be doing something else while I do this, such as cooking a meal, as long as you are listening. After I've read, we will then have a quick chat about what I've read to you. If there are any tricky words, we will work these out together.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What did I read aloud?</th>
<th>Who was listening?</th>
<th>List of words that were tricky to say out loud:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

List of words that I found tricky to understand:

Questions I have about what I’ve read:

Questions my listener had about what I read:

Words I found interesting:
Lesson idea: The fiction vocab swap

Topic: Creative writing

Materials required: Short story openings, A3 sheets, highlighters or coloured pens.

Activity

Explain to students that today they will work as magazine editors. They have been given a manuscript of a short story for publication, but the writer’s choice of vocabulary needs some work. Today they will work on the opening section of the short story and make some changes to improve the vocabulary and its effect.

- Start by asking students to stick the opening in the middle of an A3 sheet. They will work individually first, reading the opening and highlighting in different colours the words they would change or remove. Remind them that their focus is only on word choice – they can change, add, or remove individual words, but they cannot alter the basic narrative structure of the story.
- Then they will work with a partner, comparing and discussing their choices and possible replacements. At this point, they could experiment with using a thesaurus. To differentiate, you could also provide students with a small word bank with definitions and encourage them to swap in some of the vocabulary.
- The pairs will then swap their A3 sheets with another pair and discuss the differences.
- Ask for volunteers to read out the changes they have made and discuss the effect of these vocabulary swaps.
- Show students the second draft version of the opening, and discuss with the whole class how the changes compare to their own choices.

Teaching tips

- Remind students that writers can be verbose (using more words than are needed) in a text. They may need to simplify word choices too.
- Explain the meaning of tautology (saying the same thing again, just in a different way) and see if students can find an example in the text.
- Focus on subtle changes to the text in the two versions, such as the change from sobbing to crying. What is the effect of this change? Why has the editor chosen torso in the second sentence? What do they think of the choice of adverb in fiercely cold? Do they disagree with any of the edits? Remind students that small changes to vocabulary choice can really lift a piece of writing, and encourage them to make links to their own writing.

Independent learning tasks

- After these activities, students should draft and edit their own work using some of the insights they have gained from the activity.
- Students could use the poem ‘Stealing’ by Carol Ann Duffy as inspiration for their own writing and then draft their work with a focus on vocabulary choices.
1 Short story opening

The white snowman’s head sat on the front seat. The white bottom bit of the snowman was in the back seat contained by the seatbelt. There was already some wet water on the floor with the cans and crisp packets.

A big scratch ran along the length of the shiny red car.

He didn’t know why he’d stolen it. It wouldn’t last long in the car, it perhaps wouldn’t last the car journey. It was really very cold, but he didn’t want to put on the heating. His fingers were freezing cold.

He imagined children sobbing in the morning when they saw it had gone. Or perhaps they would imagine it had escaped into the snowy landscape.

2 Short story opening – second draft

The snowman’s head rested on the front passenger seat. The torso was in the back seat secured by the seatbelt. There was already a puddle of water growing on the floor amongst the squashed coke cans and faded crisp packets.

A long, disjointed scratch ran along the length of the otherwise pristine car.

He didn’t know why he’d taken the snowman. It wouldn’t last long, perhaps it wouldn’t last the journey. It was fiercely cold but he didn’t want to risk the heating. His fingers were numb.

He imagined kids crying in the morning when they saw it had gone. Or maybe they would think it had come to life and escaped into the snowy landscape.
Lesson idea: Word frames

Activity
Tell students that they will be working on improving their use of academic vocabulary in their literature essays. You can use this activity during or after writing an essay.

Put the students into pairs, and allocate each student a word frame with formal vocabulary choices. The example here uses alternatives for the word shows in a literature essay, but the frames can be adapted to focus on any element of academic vocabulary.

Students place the frame over their writing so that their essay sits in the centre of the frame. Using the frame as a guide, they must then make at least four changes to their word choices in the essay. They are aiming to give their writing a more academic tone. The students then swap their work and discuss their choices – would their partner make any different changes?

Alternatively, the word frame could be used at the start of writing to encourage the use of a variety of academic vocabulary.

Teaching tips
- This activity hinges on a gimmick, but it can be enough to spark a student’s interest in their vocabulary choices.
- Laminate the frames to make them more durable or reusable. Alternatively, they can be made from old cereal boxes.
- The word focus of the frames can change depending on the needs of the class. For example, the frame could be filled with formal conjunctions or specialist terminology. These frames also work well for unseen poetry analysis, with the poetic terms giving a focus for the annotations of the poem.

Independent learning tasks
- Set students the challenge of creating their own bespoke word frames. Give prizes for the most creative, and then turn them into a moveable display.
- Ask students to create specialist word frames for different tasks, for example, a Shakespeare essay or a poetry essay.
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