

# Classroom Idea-Sparkers

Judith Kieff is Assistant Professor, Department of Curriculum and Instruction, University of New Orleans

## WINNING WAYS WITH WORD WALLS

Word Walls are organized collections of frequently used words, written in large bold letters and displayed in the classroom. Teachers and students use them as reference points for teaching, studying, and completing assignments. Originally, Word Walls were used exclusively to teach word recognition skills through a focus on word families. However, classroom observations and interviews with teachers reveal many innovations in the ways this teaching tool is being used. This column presents ideas for using Word Walls to promote learning among students from primary through middle school.

In general, teachers create and use Word Walls in their classrooms to foster the development of reading, writing, and spelling skills. Word Walls can help students recognize and spell frequently used words correctly, and see patterns and relationships between words and categories of words. Word walls promote independent work habits by providing a readily avail-

able reference as students complete their reading and writing activities.

### Creating Word Walls

Several commercial kits with pre-printed words are available from school supply companies. However, many teachers prefer to customize their walls by selecting words that are frequently used or of particular interest to their students. These words are typically printed individually on card stock, using black ink and a large font. Some teachers use a word processor, while others print them by hand. The word cards can be displayed any place that is easily accessible to students. Many teachers use Velcro or magnetic tape to affix the words to the display area. This enables them to move the words around when conducting word-study lessons. Students also can remove a word, copy it, and return it easily.

### Word Walls for the Primary Grades

In the primary grades, Word Walls are most frequently used to display:

- High-frequency words (sight words drawn from basal lists or commercial programs)
- Spelling words
- Seasonal or holiday-related words
- Words from commonly used categories (colors, numbers, shapes)
- Names of classmates and school personnel
- Word rhyming families ("ack," "ight," "ame").

### Word Walls for the Intermediate Grades

In the intermediate grades, Word Walls are most frequently used to display:

- Words related to current word study (verbs, adjectives, nouns, compound words, contractions, homonyms)
- Frequently misspelled words
- Words related to the current theme
- Science words
- Math words
- Unusually difficult but interesting words.

### Word Walls for Middle School

In middle school, Word Walls are most frequently used to display:

- Vocabulary that is critical to the subject matter
- Foreign vocabulary
- Character names and settings from literature
- Words or names related to pop culture or current events.

## Using Word Walls

Each teacher can adapt the word wall to fit his or her own purpose and style. Often, the use of the wall evolves over the course of the school year, and students can take an active part in its development and maintenance. The teachers I spoke with shared certain guidelines for creating and using Word Walls:

- Display the words in alphabetical order or in word families—whichever is most appropriate to your students' needs
- Add only about five words each week
- As you add new words, eliminate old ones by moving them into a word basket or word bank
- Use the Word Wall daily as a part of lessons, as a reference, and as a focus of word games
- Expect students to correctly spell the displayed words
- Observe when students use the word wall independently, and reinforce their actions
- Over the course of several days, select activities that provide multi-sensory experiences.

## Specific Ideas for Utilizing Word Walls

Begin the year by creating a Word Wall that shows all of the students' names. Create the word cards by using both the written name and a picture of the student. Add word cards with the names and pictures of school personnel, classroom pets, guests, and volunteers. Students will learn to call everyone in their community by their proper names, while learning how to use the Word Wall as a reference. Play age- and skill-appropriate games to reinforce both the use of the Word Wall and word-related skills. With kindergartners, for example, reinforce their understanding of beginning sounds and alphabetical order by playing guessing games with the words on the wall.

Build the wall collaboratively with students. Have students nominate words that they think should be a part of the wall. Also, give students the responsibility for creating and illustrating the word cards.

Make the Word Wall a teaching-learning tool, not just a display, by using it throughout the day to teach, re-teach, or review concepts about words and word families. Otherwise, it just adds to the clutter of the room.

Demonstrate to students how to use the tool as a reference for their reading and writing activities. When appropriate, refer students to the wall before answering their questions.

Frequently remove words from the wall that students should have mastered. Set the expectation that words on the wall become a part of the students' repertoire. Transfer the words from the wall to a class word bank or to a word file accessible on the computer, to promote independent study skills.

Have students create their own personal dictionaries for use at their desk. They can use a card file or Rolodex file. Again, students should weed out their files frequently so that they see their vocabulary grow.

Create a Word Wall Center, or add activities to your existing language arts center that focus on the Word Wall. In the center provide materials for tracing or writing, art materials for illustrating word cards, and materials for students to use when creating their own word banks. Have a duplicate set of the Word Wall words and job cards that suggest such practice activities as sorting words in categories or putting them in alphabetical order. You also could use the center to store materials needed to play Word Wall Bingo.

Assess students' learning by observing their use of the Word Wall. Some assessment activities include having students read from the wall or giving assignments related to their skill development needs. Include these assignments and anecdotal records about students' spontaneous use of Word Walls in their language arts portfolio. Personal word banks drawn from the Word Wall show progress in word mastery.

## Word Wall Games and Activities

Games can maximize the Word Wall's role as a teaching-learning tool. Here are some general game protocols:

### Word Wall Bingo

**Materials:** Worksheets with grids containing 6 or 9 spaces; a jar or basket; slips of paper containing each of the Word Wall words; beans or other markers.

**Preparation:** Create a master grid with a specified number of spaces. For primary grades, six spaces would be plenty. For intermediate and middle school, the grids could contain as many as nine spaces. Copy the grid for each student and keep multiple copies handy so the game can be played spontaneously. Write each Word Wall word on a slip of paper, fold it over, and place it in the jar or basket.

**Play:** Students create their own bingo card by choosing words from the wall and writing one word in each space. When all the students are ready, choose a word from the word jar and call it out. Continue until someone has a bingo.

### I Spy

Materials: Word Wall, paper, and pencils for students to write clues.

Preparation: Have students select a word from the wall and create three clues—a category clue, a phonemic clue, and a meaning clue—that will lead other students to discovering the word. For example:

I spy a word from the ack family. (category clue)

It begins with the same sound as bat. (phonemic clue)

You can't see it smile even if you are looking right at it. (meaning clue)

*The word is back.*

Play: Ask one student to read his clues, one at a time. When another student correctly identifies the secret word, that student continues the game by reading his or her clues.

### Secret Word of the Day

Materials: Word Wall; celebration materials, such as confetti, streamers, bells, or whistles.

Preparation: Select one word each morning to be the secret word, and write it down in your lesson plan book.

Play: Encourage students to use the words on their Word Wall in daily conversation by choosing one word each day to be the secret word. Each day, when you first hear the word used correctly in general conversation, ring a bell, blow a whistle, or toss streamers. The winner might choose the secret word for the next day.

### Something's Missing

Materials: Word Wall.

Preparation: None.

Play: Keep students' attention focused on the Word Wall by removing one or two words and hiding them somewhere in the room; this hiding place would be somehow related to the meaning of the missing word. When students discover that a word is missing, have class members work together to create clues that lead to the discovery of the hidden word.

### Something Is Wrong Here

Materials: Word Wall.

Preparation: None.

Play: Another way to keep students interested in the word wall is to occasionally mix up the order in some way. For example, mix up the alphabetical order of the words or put some of the words in the wrong word families. Again, make a fuss when someone discovers that something is wrong.

### Other Ideas for Incorporating Word Walls Into Classroom Routines

#### Family Involvement

- In the initial classroom newsletter, introduce the Word Wall by discussing its purpose and function. Include a picture of students using the Word Wall.
- Provide families with an initial copy of the Word Wall reproduced on copy paper. Update this list in each newsletter, or display it on a classroom Web site.
- Encourage families to create a duplicate of the classroom Word Wall at home by using index cards and magnetic tape, and arranging the words on the refrigerator or other large surface. Family members should encourage students' independent use of the wall to complete homework assignments.
- Families may want to create a Family Word Wall that includes names of relatives and words of special significance. This Word Wall could be used as a reference when students are writing letters, sending E-mails, or writing thank-you notes.
- Family members could nominate words that have significant family or cultural meaning for the classroom Word Wall.

#### Special Needs

Adapt the Word Wall for students with special needs by:

- Including the Braille form of the word on the wall, displayed at an appropriate height
- Including appropriate vocabulary related to any student's disability
- Using a white glue to trace words and give them a tactile feel
- Making sure the words are displayed at a height that is accessible to students who use a wheelchair
- Using a curtain to cover the Word Wall at various times to decrease the amount of visual stimulation, which may be distracting to some students.