

Best Practice Idea: Interactive Word Walls

Using a Word Wall in the Secondary Classroom

Definition: A word wall is a display area in the classroom devoted strictly to high-frequency vocabulary that will be used or is being used during the course of a particular unit of study.

There are many reasons, based in research, for the study of vocabulary as an explicit daily activity. From building prior knowledge to providing contextualized information to simply providing students with high-frequency words that will be encountered in particular units of study, no matter what the justification or rationale, no matter what the grade level and no matter what the subject area, word walls are an extremely effective learning and teaching tool.

A word wall is most likely unfamiliar to most high school teachers and is something that has been associated with the elementary classroom. As part of a balanced literacy approach, word walls are being used in elementary classrooms as a means of promoting vocabulary growth leading ultimately to improvement in literacy.

No classroom should be without an interactive word wall. The key to a successful word wall is the word, "interactive." Students need to **actively interact** with the word wall. Writing activities related to your word wall is a key factor to word wall success.

How Can ELL/DL students benefit from Word Walls?

Many state standards require students to not only solve problems with accuracy, but also require students to explain their problem solving process in writing. This can be a challenge to students who are learning English as a second language or for students who struggle with limited vocabulary skills. Creating a word wall in the classroom can support students' writing in relation to their academic thinking.

Concept Wheel

A "concept wheel" is a graphic organizer you can use to allow students to build meaning for themselves. Draw a circle on a piece of paper. Divide the circle into four parts. Make copies for each student. In the first box, the student writes the word from the word wall that they would like to understand better. In the second box they brainstorm a list of words that they think of when they hear the word in the first box. In the third box is the formal definition of the word. The fourth box is the definition in the students' own words. This activity supports the constructivist theory that says students learn best when they "construct" meaning of words on their own.

Important points to remember:

1. Words selected must be useful to students, usable by students and frequently used in the subject area.
2. Select high-frequency words that are used in the context in which you expect the students to know them.
3. Use the same display area throughout the semester for your word wall. Students, once used to the concept, will look for the wall. Consistency is important when presenting organizational ideas to a class. Refer to the display area as the 'word wall' as some students will remember this from their elementary experience.
4. Do not overcrowd the word wall. You may want to remove words as the unit progresses or you may want to display words by unit and then remove the entire word wall when a new unit begins. Some high-frequency words may stay up during the entire course.
5. Creatively display and organize words. It seems that in secondary schools the creative displays are left to the art department. High school students like visual stimuli as much as their elementary counterparts. Creative displays that incorporate the message behind the words can be fun (time consuming, but fun).
6. Add words in manageable amounts (usually between 5 to 7 new words at a time...per week).
7. Make word wall activities a regular and predictable part of the classroom routine. Word wall activities make for natural class openers or closers. The word wall activity should be only about 5 minutes in length unless incorporated with a larger activity, such as a writing assignment.
8. Have your students participate in writing activities related to word wall on a weekly basis. You must have students keep a journal where they write words, definitions, examples, and illustrations. Refer and have students utilize these journals as often as possible.

Getting Started

Start your word wall by clearing a bulletin board space in the classroom. You will want the wall to be at least four feet long by four feet wide. You may want to section off a small section of the wall for each letter so that the words can be placed in alphabetical order easily.

Then, as you introduce new vocabulary, add the word to the wall. You will probably want to include a visual of the term, as well. These visuals will especially help those who are learning English as a second language and those who have limited vocabularies.

Making Word Walls Work in the Classroom (Wagstaff, 1999)

Make Them Memorable - Use text as the context for identifying key words to place on your word wall. Remember, if the key words are any old words, they are likely to be treated as such.

Make Them Useful - The more you use the word wall the more your students will do the same. Demonstrations and think-alouds take only a few seconds, if done frequently, will give you more bang for your buck. It is important that you show students how to use the word wall. Putting the words up at the beginning of the year and telling kids to use it without showing them how is setting your word wall up for failure.

Make Them Practical - Incorporate word walls into your daily instruction. By incorporating the word wall in daily instruction, students will gain automaticity in using this classroom reference.

Make Them Hands-On - Make your wall interactive by using Velcro or sticky tack. This allows students to go to the wall, remove a word, use it at their desk, and return it. Post words WITH your students to make it more meaningful for them.

Make Them Space Efficient - If you lack space, use three-panel display boards. These freestanding materials don't require any wall space, and can be moved around the room and placed on a table for easy visibility.

Make Them Your Way - There is no right or wrong way to build a word wall. What to build, what words to add, and when to add them, all depend on what your students need. Organize your walls in a way that is practical to students. Be creative!

Make Them Attractive - Word walls should be neat and legible for students. The words should be easily seen from any angle in your classroom. Type the words and put them on colored paper, if possible.