



SHELL
EDUCATION

Vocabulary Ladders

Level

5

Understanding Word Nuances



frail

healthy

hardy

mighty

powerful



timid

shy

reserved

friendly

sociable

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Level

5

Vocabulary Ladders

Understanding Word Nuances



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A Note to the Educator

“The difference between the right word and the almost right word is the difference between lightning and a lightning bug.”

—Mark Twain, *The Wit and Wisdom of Mark Twain*

Choosing the right word adds power and richness to a writer’s message. Understanding the reason for that choice adds precision and depth to the reader’s comprehension. This book provides a unique approach to vocabulary study that supports both writers and readers and offers several advantages. First, it sharpens students’ thinking and refines their sense of the underlying concept. Second, it encourages students to consider the purposes and circumstances for selecting specific words so they are used effectively. Third, it provides the writer or speaker with a range of words from which to choose to most appropriately express the meaning he or she intends to convey.

The activities in this book include instructional concepts from the research on vocabulary teaching and learning. The activities require students to review and clarify specific word meanings and relate them to appropriate situations. Students will also have the opportunity to solidify their learning by applying word meanings to their personal experiences.

While the materials in these books are tightly organized, and the activities are clear and straightforward, the connections among words often are not. Word relationships are complex, and there may be several reasonable interpretations of how words should be arranged along a continuum. The word orders in the ladders are not cast in stone. Many times the differences among word meanings are less a matter of degree and more one of the context or situation. To be most effective in increasing the breadth and depth of student vocabularies, teachers must encourage students to explain their own understandings of the word meanings and explain how they are connected and how they may be used, and they must respect these explanations. It is in the process of talking about words that learning about them is best advanced. Thus, the ladders should not be seen as end points to be memorized, but as starting points for discussion, debate, and discovery.

—Jerry Zutell
Professor Emeritus
The Ohio State University



Research

“Give me the right word and the right accent, and I will move the world.”

—Joseph Conrad

It is well established that success in reading requires readers to understand the individual words they encounter in text (Anderson and Freebody 1981; 1983; Becker 1977; Davis 1944; National Reading Panel 2000). Without the understanding of key words, it is very unlikely that readers will have a good understanding of the larger texts in which the words are embedded. Similarly, proficiency in writing requires writers to have a large array of words at their disposal. Word choice is consistently viewed as an important factor when judging the quality of a student’s writing. Indeed, the Common Core State Standards that are now guiding instruction in schools across the United States have identified vocabulary acquisition as critical to success not only in literacy but also in learning within the content areas.

Vocabulary instruction is crucial to success in learning to read and write in English. But developing students’ vocabularies has been challenging for teachers over the years. One reason is that English contains more words than nearly any other language. That means that teachers not only have a lot of words to teach but also need to be very selective in the words they choose. It is not very productive to teach words that students will rarely encounter in oral and written language. Yet in many vocabulary programs, this is exactly the approach taken—teach students unusual and rare words that they are unlikely to hear in speech or read in print.

In classrooms around the country, we see well-meaning and hardworking teachers who teach vocabulary as a list of weekly words, often paired with a reading anthology. Students are expected to find and memorize the dictionary definitions of the words for a test at the end of the week. The following week, the routine begins again with a new set of words. Many students we know do not like word study, and we understand why. Rote memorization of definitions of unusual and rare words for which students have little use or exposure to is likely to shut down almost anyone’s interest in words, as it is a chore rather than an exciting enterprise.

There are many tools available for exploring and expanding vocabulary. One of the best is the tried-and-true thesaurus. Most writers carry thesauri with them so that when they need just the right word to express a meaning, they can find it from an array of semantically related words. Yet in our visits to classrooms across the country, we find that the set of thesauri found in most classrooms goes untouched. Many teachers are not familiar with and have not been taught ways to use a thesaurus as an ally to their instruction. This book addresses that problem by providing an engaging approach to the study of semantically related words.

Research (cont.)

Effective Vocabulary Instruction

Although there is no single scientifically endorsed way to teach vocabulary to all students, there are central principles that can guide teachers in creating effective instruction (Brabham et al. 2012; Nagy 1988; Stahl 1986). These principles are:

1. **Meaningful Clusters**—Organize words into meaningful clusters in which the words to be taught are related in some useful way. Words can be clustered by relation to theme or topic (*volcano, lava, magma*), word derivation (*bicycle, bifocals, biannual*), or essential meaning (*big, large, enormous*). Since words in a cluster are related, students can make connections among words within each cluster.
2. **Meaningful Use**—Have students engage in meaningful use of the words by exploring the words in multiple reading and writing activities.
3. **Repeated Encounters**—To learn words deeply, students need to encounter the words repeatedly in various texts and practice using them in oral and written language.

Throughout the years, we have used these three principles and have found them to be quite successful. We have added our own two principles to make vocabulary instruction even more successful. These principles include:

4. **Regular and Consistent Routine**—Vocabulary instruction should follow a regular and consistent routine so that students are well aware of the procedures for word learning, and their time is spent in exploring words rather than learning new procedures.
5. **Brief Instruction**—Formal vocabulary instruction should be brief. In order to provide adequate instruction in all required areas, time is of the essence. Formal vocabulary instruction, then, should take approximately 15 minutes per day. Keep in mind, however, that time may also be devoted to the study of word decoding and spelling in addition to vocabulary. Also, we feel that informal vocabulary instruction and learning can and should take place throughout the school day—during reading and writing as well as in content-area instruction.

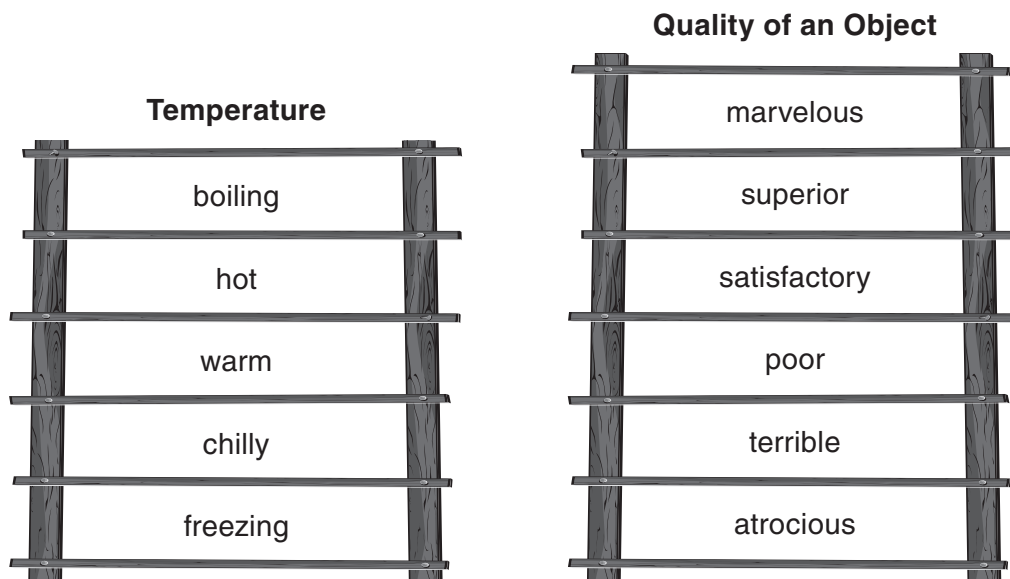
We have attempted to incorporate these fundamental principles into a novel approach to vocabulary instruction called *Vocabulary Ladders*.

Research (cont.)

What Are Vocabulary Ladders?

Vocabulary Ladders (VL) is a cluster approach to teaching many words at once. The words in a VL are semantically or meaningfully related to one another (much like in a thesaurus). Unlike many vocabulary lists, we have included many words that students are already familiar with so that the focus of each lesson is not on learning a large number of new vocabulary words but understanding the nuances of the words they may have already encountered. Think of the words that you might find in an entry of a thesaurus. All of the words have similar essential meanings. However, they may all differ in degree (*miniscule* vs. *small*) or nuance (*cute* vs. *beautiful*). The skill of determining nuance in words is a key component to the new Common Core State Standards. So not only can the words within a semantic cluster be grouped together but they can also be organized according to their degree of essential meaning or level of nuance. These connections can also merge into opposite meanings at the other end of the spectrum. Through this approach, students not only learn groups of related words but they also are given opportunities to explore the shades of meaning that exist within each cluster. Ten minutes of VL instruction three to four days a week leads to deepening students' understanding of words they may be familiar with and expanding the sheer size of their vocabularies. Regular work with VL will help students understand and use the relative degree of meaningful difference between words in an engaging way. Below are two examples of vocabulary ladders that we have used in our instruction with students:

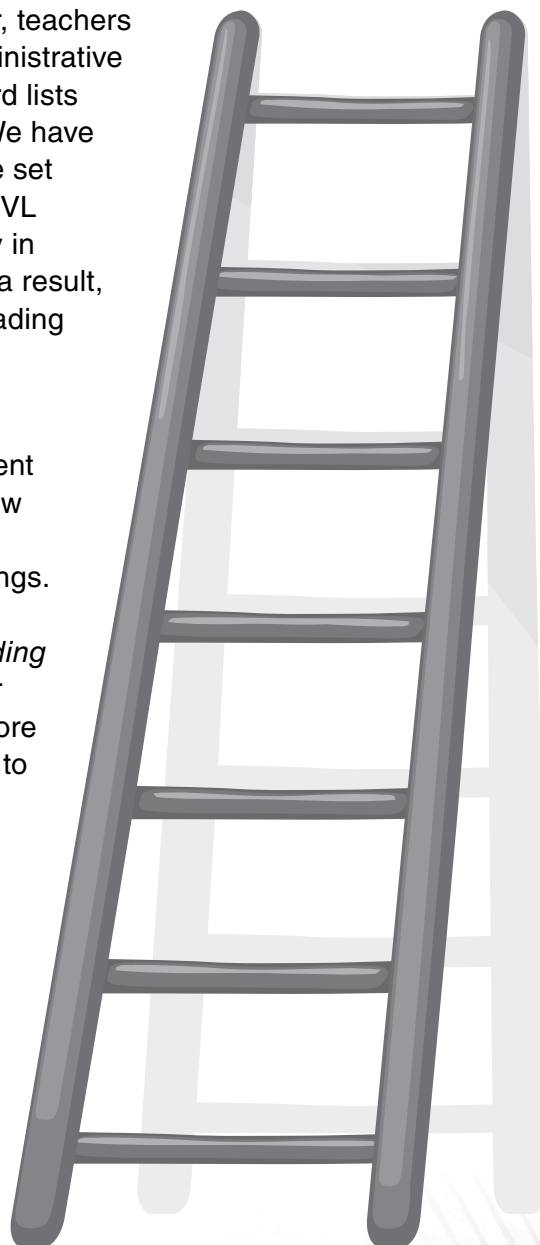
The skill of determining nuance in words is a key component to the college and career standards.



Research (cont.)

As you can see, the words in each cluster are related by their essential or base meaning or theme, but they also differ from one another in the magnitude of their essential meanings. Exploring words in this way will help students see that authors have large palettes of words to choose from when writing. A writer can choose just the right word to express his or her meaning. Knowing these words will help increase students' understanding when they read what authors have written. At the same time, studying VL will expand students' vocabulary palettes so that when they write, they can also choose precise words that exactly fit the meaning and nuance that they are trying to express (e.g., *Barbara felt sad as she left home* vs. *Barbara felt teary as she left home*). Certainly, teachers can create VL themselves to use with students. However, teachers today are so busy with all their instructional and administrative duties that it is difficult for them to create student word lists to use on a consistent (weekly) basis for students. We have done the legwork for teachers by creating a complete set of VL that they can use with their students. With the VL in hand, teachers can now engage students regularly in exploring clusters of semantically related words. As a result, vocabulary knowledge will increase and students' reading comprehension and writing composition will improve.

Vocabulary knowledge is essential to school success—in reading, writing, and learning in all content areas. Knowledge of words allows the learning of new text to occur more easily, especially when students independently encounter complex text or close readings. Although there is no single way to teach students vocabulary, we feel *Vocabulary Ladders: Understanding Word Nuances* provides you—the teacher—and your students with a productive and engaging way to explore and discover the words that may allow your students to be successful.



Implementing Vocabulary Ladders in the Classroom

Recognizing the time limits of teachers and students, we developed the VL approach to take no more than 10 to 15 minutes, three to four days a week. In these short, powerful lessons, students will be immersed in the exploration of word clusters of related words through teacher-selected activities. Students will be asked to explore the words, put the words into a meaningful order, use the words in constructing sentences, and use the words in written compositions. Through this process, students will learn the cluster of words in depth, embed the meanings into their permanent oral vocabularies, use the words to help them understand the texts they read, and improve their writing proficiency and accuracy.

This book is made up of 20 lessons. An additional five lessons as well as a blank *Activity Cards* template can be found in the Digital Resources (filenames: *additionallessons.pdf*; *cardstemplate.pdf*). Each lesson contains a theme and a cluster of words that will be explored over several days. On the next page is the general plan used in VL for teaching nuanced meanings of word clusters. This daily breakdown is just a suggestion. We encourage teachers to decide what flow works best for their students. As the teacher, you are free to implement each weekly lesson however you like. Each lesson can be done over three, four, or five days. We do recommend that at least three days per week are devoted to vocabulary ladders. Massing the weekly activities into one or two days will not provide the rich, in-depth coverage of the words that will allow for deep learning and continuous use.

Note: We recommend that you allow students to work in groups on Day 1. The discussion that occurs within the groups as they attempt to organize the words is quite valuable and likely critical to cementing these words in their permanent oral vocabularies. Those students who have a more thorough understanding of the words will assist students who may not be as familiar with them. Discussing and exploring word relationships is more valuable than establishing a single correct order, so argument and debate are encouraged. (Each lesson provides a reasonably correct order that can be used in the follow-up activities.) The key is to become acquainted with the words, discuss the words, and explore how the words might be ordered.

The following page provides a suggested schedule for implementing each lesson. By the final day of the lesson, students will have expanded vocabularies and will have deeper understandings of the nuances or shades of meaning embedded in the cluster of words. By this time, students have either referenced, orally stated/defined, or used the words in context multiple times. Through multiple experiences, the words will become part of their personal vocabulary banks.

Implementing Vocabulary Ladders in the Classroom *(cont.)*

Day 1 Introduce and Discuss Words

On Day 1, students will:

- review the words in the specified cluster and identify the theme that connects them (e.g., *colossal*, *huge*, *itty-bitty* all relate to *size*).
- work in groups to identify and discuss a reasonably correct order based on the meanings of the words.

For detailed information on the **Activity Cards** and **Vocabulary Ladders** activity sheets, that will be used on this day, see page 15.



Day 2 Order Words

On Day 2, students will:

- order the words how they think they should be ordered.
- work in groups to explain why words are ordered the way they are.

For detailed information on the **Ordering Words** activity sheet that will be used on this day, see page 16.



Day 3 Use Words in Context

On Day 3, students will:

- carefully choose words from the cluster based on context to complete sentences.
- complete sentence stems by providing explanations that relate to targeted words.

For detailed information on the **Sentence Clues** and **Sentence Stems** activity sheets that will be used on this day, see pages 17–18.



Day 4 Use Words in Writing

On Day 4, students will:

- write responses to a prompt using various words from the theme.
- share their writings with partners.

For detailed information on the **Write About It!** activity sheet that will be used on this day, see page 19.

Implementing Vocabulary Ladders in the Classroom (cont.)

Tips for Extensions

- Post words for the week in (and out of) the classroom on charts or posters, and encourage students to use them in their conversation and writing.
- Find ways to use the words of the week when communicating with students.
- Create larger cards with the words on them to use in language centers where students can order (or sort) them in different ways such as number of syllables or negative or positive connotations.
- Once students have a collection of 10 to 20 words from various lessons, have them sort the words along various dimensions. Students can be creative in coming up with their own ways to sort, or the teacher can provide the sorting topics such as sorting words into one-, two-, and three-syllables, sorting words that have more than one meaning and words that do not, and sorting words that have positive connotations and words that do not.
- Students can create “mini-posters” of one of the words from the list, drawing a picture that specifically addresses the nuance of the word (mini-posters could also be added to language centers for students to try to match the word to the poster).
- Encourage students to find (and celebrate) the words of the week in the books and other texts they are reading independently and during teacher read-alouds.
- Incorporate the words in other word-study activities such as word games like WORDO. For information on how to play WORDO, including templates, see the Digital Resources (filename: wordo.pdf).
- Encourage parents to use the words in their own interactions with their children. Send the words home for parents on a set of cards or paper; put the words on your classroom website home page so that parents have access to them.
- As students work with the words in each vocabulary ladder, encourage them to think of other words that can be added. You may ask students to pose their additions in the following manner: *I think _____ fits on the ladder because it means _____. It should go between _____ and _____ because _____.*
- Collect old paint samples that have the same number of shades as the words in the lesson. Have students write each word on a shade of paint and glue the sample in a notebook or word journal.

How to Use This Book

Lesson Overview

In each lesson's introductory page, information is offered to the teacher to help plan his or her implementation of the student activity pages. The following is addressed:

The **title** is a quick indicator of the theme of the lesson. With this, you may want to gather reading material or other resources that relate to the theme in order to further engage students with the vocabulary words.

The **objective** indicates the range of meaning students will be working with throughout the lesson.

A **materials list** identifies the components of the lesson.

A suggested **answer key** is provided for quick and easy reference. It provides either concrete answers, where applicable, or it suggests specific content for teachers to look out for.

Additional words that are associated with the theme are highlighted to further challenge students.

Behavior

Teacher Note
For detailed instructions on how to implement the components of this lesson, see pages 15–19.

Objective
Students will analyze words related to behavior, from **worst to best**.

Materials

- Vocabulary Ladders template (page 142)
- Activity Cards (page 23)
- Ordering Words (page 24)
- Sentence Clues (page 25)
- Sentence Stems (page 26)
- Write About It! (page 27)

Additional Words
Introduce students to additional words such as *courteous*, *sophisticated*, *nasty*, *bearable*, *tolerable*, and *evil* as you work through the lesson.

Answer Key

Vocabulary Ladders

Word	Definition
vile	very evil
crude	bad mannered or offensive in speech or behavior
unbearable	hard to be around or to endure
civil	respectful
polite	courteous and attentive
refined	very formal; elegant
hospitable	friendly, pleasant, and helpful

Ordering Words
Check that students can explain why the words are ordered the way they are.

Sentence Clues

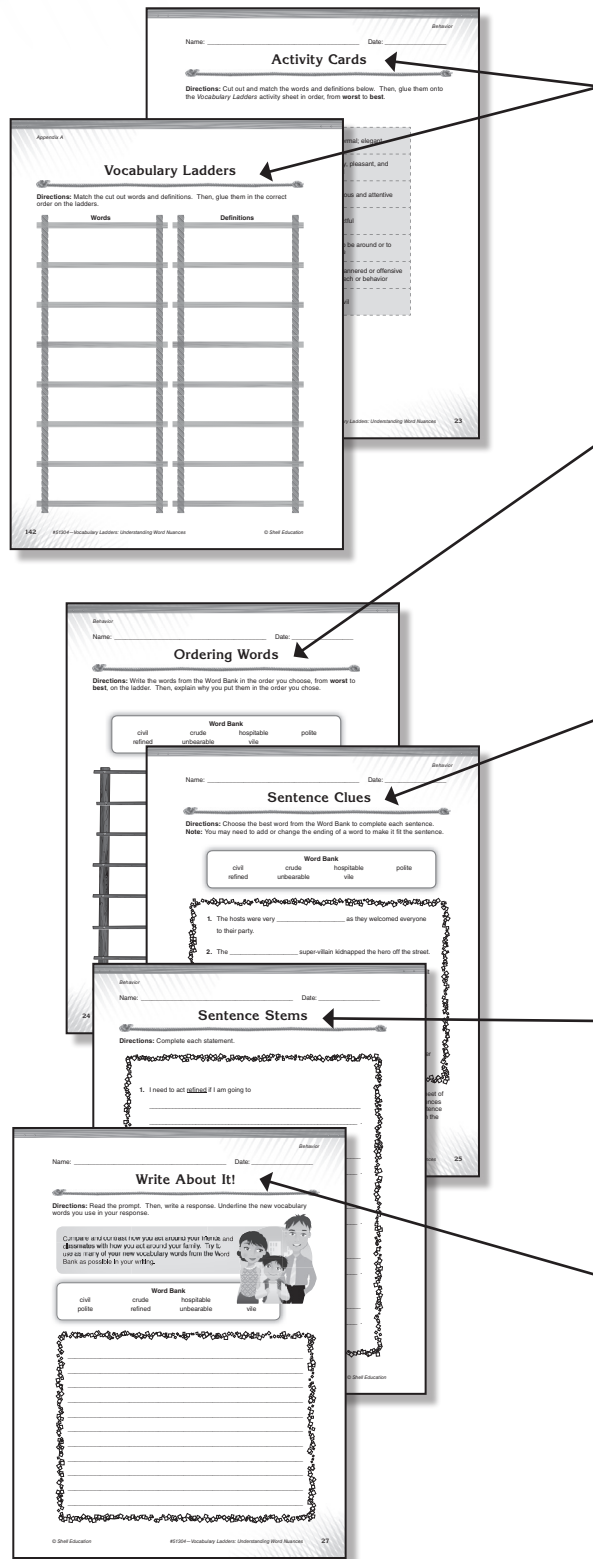
- The hosts were very (hospitable) as they welcomed everyone to their party.
- The (vile) super-villain kidnapped the hero off the street.
- The (unbearable) scene of all the destroyed homes was difficult to view after the earthquake.
- Everyone admired how the (refined) lady walked down the staircase in her beautiful evening gown.
- Although Sylvia is not kind to me, my mother taught me to be (civil/polite) to all my classmates, so I always say, "hello" to her in the morning.

Sentence Stems
Check that student responses reflect the meaning of the underlined word in each sentence frame.

Write About It!
Check that responses include the new vocabulary terms used in the correct way.

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How to Use This Book (cont.)



The words and definitions in each lesson are provided on **activity cards**. Students will cut these apart and glue them on the **Vocabulary Ladders** activity sheet. For detailed information on how to implement these activity sheets, see page 15.

With the **Ordering Words** activity, students write the words in an order of their choosing and then explain why they put the words in that order. For detailed information on how to implement this activity sheet, see page 16.

With the **Sentence Clues** activity, students choose the best word from their Vocabulary Ladders to complete sentences. For detailed information on how to implement this activity sheet, see page 17.

With the **Sentence Stems** activity, students respond to sentence frames that deal with the Vocabulary Ladders words. You may wish to have students write their responses and then share with partners, in a group, or in front of the class. For detailed information on how to implement this activity sheet, see page 18.

With the **Write About It!** activity, students read a prompt and use their themed vocabulary words in their responses. For detailed information on how to implement this activity sheet, see page 19.

All of the activity sheets and teacher resources can be found in the **Digital Resources**.