

MOVE TO THE MUSIC

Strategy: Word Wall

What?

A word wall is an organized display of vocabulary words, grouped or listed, in a designated part of the classroom.

When?

Before, during and after reading

Why?

Word walls support a language-rich learning environment by fostering word consciousness and giving students access to words they need. They provide a visual cue of essential knowledge, concepts and skills. Word walls can be used to support sight-word acquisition with younger readers and to build content literacy across grades and disciplines. Purposeful organization of words on a word wall helps students see relationships between words and ideas.

How?

Word walls can vary greatly in how they appear and should reflect the character and culture of the classrooms they occupy. They can take up space on a wall, window or door and they can be made with index cards, sentence strips or construction paper (to name a few). Lettering should be large, neat and visible from every seat in the classroom.

How you organize vocabulary on a word wall should be determined by the purpose for learning and by the relationship between the words. For example, words that begin with the letter B, words that are relevant to women's suffrage, words that are synonyms for tolerance, or unfamiliar words students will encounter in an upcoming text.

Word walls should be dynamic, adapting and expanding over the course of the year so that students view them as a helpful reference. If space allows, some teachers add to their word walls, growing a cumulative list of "words we know." This allows the class to reteach and review vocabulary all year long. In other classrooms, word walls are rotated with each new lesson or unit, highlighting new learning and focusing word study. Several digital formats can help create online or personalized word walls, such as worldle, worditout and wordsift. Consider incorporating visuals, such as bright colors and pictures, into your word walls to create a fuller picture of the wall's overall concept. Incorporating such visuals will also make the word walls more memorable to students.

Connection to anti-bias education

A word wall is a great way to help build the intellectual and emotional safety students need to be their full selves in class and to talk about personal or controversial topics. It also serves to communicate to students what is valued as worth learning. Along with content standards and learning objectives, consider integrating these kinds of words:

- Identity-centered or culturally affirming words (e.g., cornrows, tortilla)
- Difficult or sensitive words (e.g., racism, atheism)
- Words that describe power dynamics (e.g., gentrification, solidarity)
- Words and terms that matter but are not in the textbook (e.g., stop and frisk)

Consider assigning the classroom job of "word wall wizard" to a student or students with strong spatial or artistic skills. These students are to be responsible for designing and posting word lists to the word wall.