

Living Words

Word-building strategies help students construct words by manipulating letters and letter combinations. This provides a context, separate from text, for students to play with and manipulate letters and sounds to explore how words work. Word study is often done with manipulatives such as letter tiles, magnetic letter tiles, or whiteboards and markers so that students can easily change a letter or letters or identify patterns within word families. Including these strategies during small-group instruction allows ample opportunity to differentiate skills (beginning, middle, and ending sounds) and complexity (one-syllable versus multisyllabic words), depending on the needs of individual students.

Word awareness is a more advanced skill than word blending. Word awareness requires students to make decisions about letters, sounds, and placement within a word (beginning, middle, or end) during the word-building sequence. Other required decisions include figuring out how the target word varies from the new word, which letter needs to be removed to make the new word, and which letter must be selected to form the new word.

Living Words (Blevins, 2024) is another fun, interactive word-building activity where students use letter cards to make words. Individually, students use small letter cards when making words; when working together, students hold large letter cards and move around as they spell the words that the teacher dictates. Making words reinforces the skills of adding, deleting, and substituting letters to make new words. This is an enjoyable strategy to implement with your students, and you'll want to proceed with similar language and actions as detailed in the following strategy figure.

Strategy: Living Words

Pillar: Phonics

Grade Level:

- ☒ K
- ☒ 1
- ☒ 2
- ☐ 3
- ☐ 4
- ☐ 5
- ☐ 6

Instructional Grouping:

- ☒ Whole Group
- ☐ Small Group
- ☐ Individual

Materials:

- Letter cards for each student or magnetic word-building boards
- If you're using letter cards, have a bag for each student with all letters. At the beginning of the week, list the letters students will need for the week and have them place them in a "letters for the week" bag. It will make word-building activities go much more smoothly.
- Large letter cards for students to hold at the front of the classroom

Consider This:

- To support English learners, provide a simple definition of the target words.

What is it? Living Words is a word-building strategy where students work individually and collectively to spell words while reinforcing the skills of adding, deleting, and substituting letters to make new words. Students can independently manipulate a given word to form a new word by adding, deleting, or substituting letters and sounds.

Why is it important? Students need plenty of practice making and manipulating letters and letter combinations to form words. Living Words is an energetic word-building strategy where students practice adding, deleting, and substituting letters to form new words. By providing individual and group thinking, the strategy supports struggling readers and English learners.

What works in the classroom?

Students need to have specific letter cards placed on their desk or table or use the “letters for the week” bag of letter cards.

Show Me**Teacher:**

1. Say to students, “Today, we are going to make words and change one letter at a time to make new words.”
2. Provide several examples with a CVC word using an explanation similar to the following.

Help Me / Let Me

Select students to come to the front of the room, basing the number on how many letters are in the words you want students to build. Give each selected student a large letter card to hold in front of them.



Teacher: Tell the class, “I want to build the word *men*. Build it at your seats while the students at the front of the room build it here.”

Students: Students at the front of the room move around to build the word while all other students work at their seats. When complete, students display their letter cards in the correct order so their classmates can see the word.

Teacher: Say to students, “Look at the word they built. One thumb up if you think they built the word *men*.” After students respond, follow up by saying, “Put your other thumb up if your word matches theirs.” When students again respond, invite them to read the word together with you.

Teacher and students: Together, the class reads *men*. Place your hand underneath the word and move left to right as you read with students.

Teacher: Tell your students, “Now I want to change *men* to *hen*. What letter do I want to change? Why?” After students respond, ask students to remove the /m/ and replace it with an /h/ to make the word *hen*.

Discuss changing the beginning sound or have a think-aloud conversation. This conversation supports struggling readers and English learners. Students at the front change the word while students at their seats do the same. Continue with thumbs-up.

Extensions

- Build words by changing the medial and ending sounds.
- Build words by changing sound using digraphs (such as *ch*, *ck*, *sh*).
- Build two-syllable words.

Reference

Blevins, W. (2024). *Differentiating phonics instruction for maximum impact: How to scaffold whole-group instruction so all students can access grade-level content*. Corwin.