

# Word Nerds

Teaching All Students to Learn  
and Love Vocabulary



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# Contents

Acknowledgments • v

Introduction • 1

Chapter 1: What’s the Big Deal About Vocabulary Instruction? • 7

Chapter 2: Classrooms That Foster Word Confidence • 19

Chapter 3: Making Introductions • 37

Chapter 4: Squeezing the Juicy Words—Adding Synonyms and Antonyms • 53

Chapter 5: Active Vocabulary Practice • 69

Chapter 6: Celebrating to Validate • 87

Chapter 7: Spreading Vocabulary Wings • 99

Chapter 8: Learning Through Assessment • 121

Epilogue: End of the Year • 143

Appendixes A–H • 149

References • 157

# Introduction

I scurried down the hallway at Atkinson Academy for Excellence in Teaching and Learning toward Margot Holmes's third-grade classroom on an early November day. Colorful samples of student work decorated the halls, and out in the paved courtyard vibrant leaves whirled and danced. Margot had prepared me for my visit to her classroom in an impoverished urban neighborhood, telling me that she and her students would be working on vocabulary instruction. I slipped into the room, expecting to see a good but isolated vocabulary activity, the type of lesson I usually saw when teachers told me they were "doing vocabulary." This time was much different, however.

Margot greeted me with a nod and went on with her lesson. Students began to smile in anticipation as Margot projected a screen saver of multicolored wavy lines on the electronic whiteboard at the front of the room. When she clicked on the sound function on her laptop, a rap beat permeated the classroom and the wavy lines pulsed in time to the music. Students started tapping their feet, clapping their hands, and swaying their bodies to the music. Margot called out, "Don't forget, first we are doing the synonyms and then the antonyms."

She started a rap in time to the music. Margot called out the first part of each verse, and the students finished the phrase by shouting the synonym or example of the word. It went like this:

*When I say "DIVERSITY,"  
You say "DIFFERENT."*

*When I say "LANGUAGES,"  
You say "SPEAK."*

*When I say "NEIGHBORING,"  
You say "NEAR."*

*When I say "SETTLEMENT,"  
You say "VILLAGE."*

*When I say "TERRITORY,"  
You say "LAND."*

## Word Nerds

After these verses, they changed to antonyms/non-examples.

Students chanted in rhythm, moving their bodies to the beat, clearly enjoying themselves. It was obvious that they knew these words and this was part of a well-known routine. My mind started racing. Where did Margot get this activity? What else did she do as part of vocabulary instruction?

When I talked with Margot after the lesson, I learned that she and her teammate, Leslie Montgomery, were working together to implement a weekly plan to teach vocabulary in their primary classrooms. These two teachers had found a way to work vocabulary instruction into their daily schedules and were following a systematic method of helping their students experience academic vocabulary and concept words in order to increase their achievement. They were using multisensory instruction that included music, art, movement, drama, writing, comprehension skills, test-taking skills, and technology. And their standardized test results demonstrated that their kids were learning well. They seemed to have an inspiring story worth telling.

## The School

Leslie and Margot teach at one of the highest-poverty public elementary schools in Kentucky. About 90 percent of Atkinson's students are eligible for free lunch, and another 4 percent are eligible for reduced lunch. Forty-three percent of the students are African American, and 46 percent are white. Many children who attend Atkinson face challenges outside school that are often associated with community poverty: hunger; homelessness; parent incarceration; adults with no jobs or low-paying jobs; poor health, including alcoholism, drug abuse, or mental health issues; and domestic and community violence. Atkinson is designated as the "highest needs" school in Jefferson County, which includes Louisville. The school district serves 97,000 students in 154 schools.

From 2003 to 2009 Atkinson was a Reading First school. Under the federal No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, Reading First grants required schools to purchase research-based reading programs that followed the guidelines of the National Reading Panel (NRP) report (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development 2000). The NRP report discussed the importance of instruction in phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. Although critics of the NRP report pointed out the lack of focus on other factors, such as writing, family literacy, and independent reading, Reading First teachers were required to implement their school's chosen reading program with little deviation.

The Atkinson Reading First grant was initially awarded for a schoolwide scripted program based on grouping and regrouping for ninety minutes each day. When a dynamic new principal came on board and found that there had been no progress in literacy development

## Introduction

during the three years the program had been implemented, he sought permission from the Kentucky Department of Education to switch to a program that included writing instruction and a deeper emphasis on reading comprehension. Like most purchased reading programs, however, the new one still included very little emphasis on vocabulary instruction.

Leslie and Margot were hired as first-year teachers at Atkinson just as the ineffective reading program was replaced. The principal encouraged them to use their own professional judgment to plan best practice instruction for high-risk students. At the same time, they participated in mandated professional development focusing on Reading First strategies and administered the required standardized assessments.

## The Teachers

I first met Margot and Leslie in 2006 when they were students in my elementary preservice language arts class as part of the Master of Arts in Teaching (MAT) program at the University of Louisville. The MAT program is an accelerated program for graduate students who already have a bachelor's degree and want to become teachers. Vocabulary development was included in the course work, but because of limited time it was only one small piece of the literacy focus.

Leslie was born into a family of teachers, but tried other careers first before enrolling in the MAT program. Margot started out to become a dentist, but later decided to follow her mother's path into teaching as well. After completing the MAT program together, Leslie and Margot were both hired at Atkinson.

They entered their first classrooms full of optimism and enthusiasm, but reality soon tempered their high spirits. Both teachers realized their students had a severely limited knowledge of academic vocabulary and consequently had a difficult time remembering the words used in science, mathematics, and social studies lessons. The students also grappled with concept words and descriptive words in everyday conversations. Sensing that these gaps were hindering students' success in school, Leslie and Margot wanted to improve their vocabulary instruction and assessment but did not know how.

As Margot said, "My first year of teaching I simply gave the students words and the definitions and they recorded it in a notebook. They would draw a picture and write a sentence, but that was about it. I would give a test each Friday where they had to write the word and definition. Students may have retained *a few* of the words that year, but because they weren't taking ownership and having to use the words on a daily basis I didn't feel that my vocabulary instruction was effective."

Low student achievement results supported that hunch, so Leslie and Margot launched a quest for better methods.

## Crafting a Vocabulary Plan

After their first year of teaching, Leslie and Margot participated in the Kentucky Reading Project, a state literacy professional development initiative for elementary teachers. I directed the program at the University of Louisville. The Kentucky Reading Project was a two-week immersion into current literacy practices, with follow-up professional development and classroom visits during the school year. We spent a day on research-based vocabulary instruction for elementary students and shared vocabulary strategies. Later that same summer, Leslie and Margot also attended a district professional development session on vocabulary instruction where district presenters shared an idea for a three-day plan for vocabulary instruction targeting the needs of primary students. In this plan, teachers would introduce words on the first day, engage students in enjoyable vocabulary activities that included synonyms and antonyms on the second day, and review and assess the words on the third day. As part of the presentation, the facilitators showed a video clip of Lori Mardis, a local teacher whose featured vocabulary lesson included an activity she called “Vocabulary Party.”

As Leslie and Margot talked about the professional development ideas, they realized that the children in their classrooms needed vocabulary instruction every day. The two teachers spent most of the summer figuring out how to fit daily vocabulary work into a literacy schedule already packed with read-alouds, shared reading, guided reading groups, self-selected reading, instruction in word recognition, and writing. They discussed what words to choose, how to get their kids motivated to learn, what activities they could use, and how to physically rearrange their classrooms so that all these activities could take place. They approached the new school year with a plan and renewed enthusiasm for teaching.

When I entered Margot’s classroom the following November for a coaching visit and saw students engaged in a vocabulary rap, the vocabulary plan was in full swing. Leslie had started teaching second grade at Atkinson but later looped with her students and was now teaching on a third-grade team with Margot. I was intrigued by their methods of teaching vocabulary to a fragile population and was impressed by the command of academic vocabulary their students already displayed. As the former district coordinator of reading instruction and assessment and now a literacy instructor at the university, I was familiar with the research on vocabulary development and the importance of vocabulary instruction and assessment, especially for students from high-poverty families and those with limited English proficiency. I knew that vocabulary instruction had received a new focus at the elementary level after the publication of the National Reading Panel Report in 2000 and as part of the federal Reading First grant program. Because of my school district position, I had visited hundreds of elementary classrooms, yet I had never seen such engaging, systematic vocabulary instruction as in Margot and Leslie’s classes.

## Introduction

I asked to spend some sustained time in their classrooms, and Leslie, Margot, and their principal, Dr. Dewey Hensley, welcomed me. I visited their classrooms many times that school year and along with their school reading coach, Lori Atherton, and a district literacy coach, Maria Carrico, reviewed their required reading assessment data. After Leslie and Margot had implemented their vocabulary plan for one year, their students were scoring higher in vocabulary than all other third-grade Reading First classrooms in the school district.

I spent another eighteen months with these teachers and students at Atkinson. Together we continued to refine their vocabulary plan. Students demonstrated continued success in classroom and standardized tests. I observed vocabulary instruction and how the students reacted.

I was there the day Leslie said to the class, “Let’s play a little *Deal or No Deal* to practice our words,” and Dante looked up, made eye contact with Leslie, and exclaimed with confidence, “I’m already on it!”

I remember with a chuckle the day Margot’s kids played a carefully planned trick on me. They looked like pitiful puppies as Margot sadly explained that they had all failed their vocabulary assessment the week before. Then they laughed hysterically and called out “You got schooled!” when I fell for the ruse (actually each of them had scored well).

I was also there the day the science lab teacher, Heather Gregg Lynd, came into Leslie’s classroom specifically to tell me in front of the students that they were “blowing the top off” the vocabulary in the science classroom because of the word connections they were making.

Margot and Leslie kept journals of their vocabulary teaching. We examined student work samples together. We had a professional discussion each time I visited and talked about ways to enhance what they were already doing well. Leslie again looped with her students, now to fourth grade. Her students were familiar with systematic vocabulary instruction by then, and we considered how she could nurture her intermediate students to an even higher level of vocabulary development.

I recruited Leslie and Margot to present a session on their vocabulary plan for a local Louisville Writing Project conference, for my graduate school classes, and for my next year’s Kentucky Reading Project cohort. At each venue, experienced and novice teachers were enthralled and asked Margot and Leslie to share their plan with their faculties. In my visits to other classrooms, I saw Margot and Leslie’s vocabulary plan being implemented in a bordering school district that is one of the highest-scoring in the state, in a neighboring rural school, and in other schools throughout our urban school district. Teachers serving varied populations of students reported that their kids were also engaged and retaining essential vocabulary as a result of this instruction. Margot and Leslie next won a district Teaching Innovation Award for their vocabulary plan. They accepted their award at a ceremony held at the Muhammad Ali Center in Louisville, with Muhammad Ali and his wife looking on.

## Speaking of Success

In order to receive federal Reading First grants in 2002, states had to commit to assess phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. In our state, a standardized reading test called the Group Reading Assessment and Diagnostic Evaluation (GRADE) was administered three times a year in schools such as Atkinson that received the Reading First grants. Although the test was a measure of knowledge, it was also a high-stakes assessment because program decisions were made based on the results.

According to district statistics, students in Leslie Montgomery and Margot Holmes's classes scored higher on the GRADE vocabulary subtest than students in other Reading First classrooms at their grade level. Additionally, their vocabulary results correlated with increases in reading comprehension achievement. When both teachers moved to the intermediate grades and no longer gave the GRADE test, they continued to teach strategic vocabulary instruction and their students' reading scores on state assessments soared. In 2011, most of the students in these two classes scored "proficient" or "distinguished," the two highest categories on the Kentucky Core Content Test for Reading.

What we describe in this book are methods based on extensive reading, discussion, and learning from others—researchers, colleagues, professional development providers, and students. Margot and Leslie certainly did not create all of their instructional strategies, and we have tried to credit sources wherever possible. For example, the vocabulary rap idea came from Andrea Marcum, an excellent music teacher at Arlington Elementary School in Lexington, who shared it at a Kentucky Reading Association conference session. Other ideas came to us from our literacy coach, who got them from state professional development sessions she attended when Atkinson was a Reading First school, or strategy-sharing sessions during our school district's summer institutes. Some of the strategies are backed by solid research and have been recommended for years by experts in the field. Leslie and Margot developed other strategies together, and the three of us collaborated to craft additional ones. Over time we designed the framework for a strategic vocabulary development plan that would support students from primary through intermediate grades. Although we began with grades two through five, we know teachers who have adapted the plan for kindergarten, grade one, and grade six.

Our purpose in writing this book is to highlight the importance of vocabulary development for all students, but especially for children of poverty. We know how capable and enthusiastic they are about word learning when their teachers provide the right scaffolding, tools, and support. Our dream is that all students will one day express the word confidence and ownership that third grader Matthew revealed when he exclaimed, "Yes! I am the *master* of synonyms and antonyms!" In short, we want our kids to be word nerds now so that they can grow up to be college graduates later.