

**The Secret Life of Words:
Engaging Middle Grade Students in Word History Storytelling to Develop Vocabulary**

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Storytelling has a time-honored history of passing knowledge to the next generation. For instance, the first fairy tales were oral cautionary stories about taking care when going into the woods alone, not trusting a stranger, or eating a suspicious apple. Generation after generation passed these stories along, committing to memory the pertinent facts and attached emotions. Indeed, “story” and “history” have common roots – both deriving from the Greek and Latin for accounts of factual events. In time, “story” concentrated more on fictional accounts, “history” with actual events of the past.

Bruner (2002) claimed storytelling is universal and a “dominant form of discourse” (Atta-Alla, 2012). Studies have shown that storytelling enhances language skills (Egan, 2005) and develops vocabulary and syntax (Strickland and Morrow 1989). “Storytelling is a tool that can be used in any form of [the] language development curriculum” and has particular potential in urban settings (Ali, 2008, p. 70). “Those who have observed children listening to an absorbing story have often been impressed with the quality and persistence of their attention, surely an important ingredient in any learning context” (Elley, 1989, p. 176). Storytelling can take vocabulary learning out of the memorization model and into “making memories” about words. Dewey reminded teachers not to simply “give” information to their students. Otherwise, “the information was likely to be committed to memory in a rather lifeless or mechanical way. He called this ‘static, cold-storage’ knowledge” (as cited in Phillips & Soltis, 1998, p. 39). Students are not “passive recipients of information about new words” (Wilkinson & Houston-Price, 2013, p. 592). Indeed, “teachers discovered that children could easily recall whatever historical or scientific facts they learned through story” (NCTE, 1992, unpagged).

Considering the size of the English language, memorization is not the only way to learn new words. Having students be actively engaged in encounters with words makes the learning memorable. (See Jack Lynch, Rutgers University <https://www.jacklynch.net/language.html> for language map)

So where does the storytelling begin? Try word histories. Whet their appetite with interesting stories. Once they get interested in these, have students research words as related to your curricular needs (content area studies, vocabulary development) or their interests.

Begin with *researching names*: <http://www.behindthename.com>

Move on to word histories: <https://www.etymonline.com>

I've got a secret (works well as a “hook” for introducing word histories)

1. The origin of *easel* is:
 - A. *Els* meaning “other”
 - B. *Esel* meaning “stand”
 - C. *Ease* meaning “to rest”
 - D. *Ezel* meaning “donkey”
 2. The origin of *arena* is:
 - A. *Harena* meaning “sand”
 - B. *Arenusa* meaning “large enclosure”
 - C. *Areania* meaning “gaming area”
 - D. *Heranan* meaning “meeting place”
 3. The origin of *berserk* is:
 - A. *Bersk* meaning “to burst”
 - B. *Bersberker* meaning “bear shirt”
 - C. *Breesk* meaning “violent”
 - D. *Bershk* meaning “crazed”
 4. The origin of *comet* is:
 - A. *Comos* meaning “of great length”
 - B. *Comtes* meaning “celestial cone”
 - C. *Kometes* meaning “having long hair”
 - D. *Kometes* meaning “heavenly body”
1. *Ezel* meaning “donkey.” This “beast of burden” was created by the Dutch artists to name the stand they made to hold a canvas. They also gave us “landscape.”
 2. *Greek: an arena was a place for gladiator battles.* The sand absorbed the blood.
 3. *Icelandic equivalent of "savage Norse warrior," who was distinguished by the coat or shirt of bear fur thrown into battle.*
 4. *Greek: "having long hair."* Aristotle first used "kometes" to describe the heavenly body that seems to have long hair trailing from its "head." The name was later adopted into Latin as "cometes," which eventually made its way to English.

Unabridged dictionaries include etymologies before the definition:

kind good-natured woman — *Joan Merman* > *e*: a sweet
dol-lar \ˈdulo(r)\ *n* -s often attrib [alter. of earlier *daler*, fr. D or LG, fr. G *taler*, short for *joachimstaler*, fr. Sankt *Joachimsthal* (Jáchymov), town in northwestern Bohemia, Czechoslovakia, where the first talers were made] 1: an old German taler coin 2: any one of a number of coins of various countries patterned after the taler: as *a*: a Spanish or Spanish-American peso or piece of eight *b*: any of several coins issued in the U.S. (as a silver coin issued 1794–1935, after 1837 weighing 412.5 grains or 26.730 grams of silver .900 fine, and a gold coin issued 1849–89, weighing 25.8 grains or 1.6718 grams of gold .900 fine) — see *TRADE DOLLAR* *c*: a silver coin of Canada issued since 1935 chiefly for commemorative purposes *d*: any of several British coins issued for use in certain territories of the Commonwealth (as a silver coin for Hong Kong issued 1866–68 and a silver coin issued at intervals between 1903 and 1926 for the Straits Settlements) — called also *British dollar* 3 *a*: the basic monetary unit of the U.S. serving as a medium, standard, or basis of foreign exchange (provided the ~s required as credit to finance reconstruction in war-devastated areas) (a loan to enable a country to pay in ~s for additional imports from the U.S.) (the area of American minor satellites and its accompanying ~ bloc would have to be indicated — O.S.K.nauth) *b*: any of various basic monetary units — see *MONEY* table 4 *a*: a currency bill representing one dollar *b*: a token representing one dollar 5: *PESO* 6: *YUAN* 7 *slang Brit*: *CROWN* 8a (3) 8: the commercial interests of the U.S. in trade in foreign countries (whether the flag will follow the ~)

Webster's Third New World International Dictionary (1993)

Use in game formats:

1. Word history matching game:
 - a. Word
 - b. Language of origin and its meaning
 - c. Story behind the word
2. Idioms
 - a. What's my story – idiom histories (see *Empowering Students' Knowledge of Vocabulary: Learning How Language Works, Grades 3-5* Mary Jo Fresch and David L. Harrison, NCTE)
 - b. Idiom matching game

The “nyms” - categories of words with interesting histories

1. Eponyms (originate from people's names)
 - a. **Graham Cracker** - This food was named for Rev. S. Graham who promoted a healthful diet (1800's)
 - b. **Frisbee** - Yale students created an outdoor game with pie pans from the Frisbie Pie Company (1950's)
 - c. **Sideburns** - Named for Civil War Union General Ambrose Everett Burnside
 - d. **Leotard** – Jules Léotard, French acrobat
2. Retronyms (words created due to invention or historical incident)
 - a. **World War I** (previously The Great War)
 - b. **Snail mail** (email)
 - c. **Acoustic guitar** (electric guitar)
 - d. **Cloth diapers** (Pampers)
 - e. **Conventional oven** (microwave oven)
3. Acronyms (words from the “high” letters of words)
 - a. **ZIP** = Zone Improvement Plan
 - b. **EPCOT** = Experimental Prototype Community of Tomorrow
 - c. **NABISCO** = National Biscuit Company
 - d. **PICNIC** = Problem In Chair, Not In Computer
4. Proprietary Eponyms (product names that have become common in usage)
 - a. **Kleenex** = facial tissue (in 1920's as part of a gas mask)
 - b. **Jello** – fruit flavored gelatin (1897 Pearle Wait, a carpenter, developed a cough remedy and laxative tea in his home)
 - c. **Jacuzzi** = whirlpool bath (1968 – invented as a health aid for rheumatoid arthritis)
 - d. **Velcro** = hook & loop fastener (1941 – Swiss engineer, George de Mestral, on a walk in the woods, discovered that the cocklebur is made up of hundreds of tiny hooks that cling to fabric and animal fur)

A few stories to research:

- How are these words related?
 - **album, albatross, albino, Albus Dumbledore**
 - **Apron, napkin** (hint: Old French *naperon* – *small tablecloth*)
 - **Senate, senile** (hint: PIE *old*)
- Why are left-handed writers called “**south paws?**” (hint: baseball diamonds)

- Why did E.B. White choose these names in *Charlotte's Web*? **Arable, Charlotte, Wilbur**
- Why did J.K. Rowling choose these *Harry Potter* names? **Harry, Lord Voldemort, Ron, Hermione**

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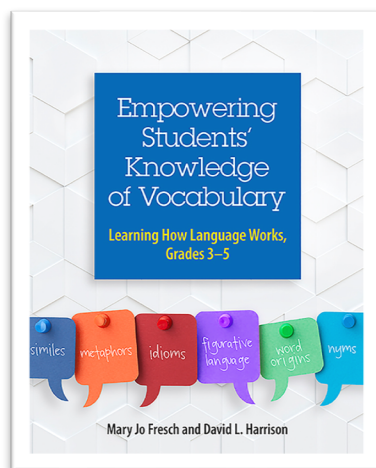
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