

Games and Activities to Develop Vocabulary and Word Consciousness to Improve Reading Comprehension



Tracy Bunting
M.S.D. of Pike Township
TLBunting@Pike.k12.in.us
ElevatED Conference 2026

Memory Challenge (K-8): Put students into pairs or small groups. Give them a time limit (e.g., 3 minutes) to write down as many words, phrases, concept vocabulary, etc., that they can on a recent concept or topic. The pair or group that remembers the most items wins! Extension: Have them pick out three to five ideas or words to explain to the rest of the class. This is a great way to review units of instruction.

Concentration (all grades): This is a great review game. Divide the class into small groups. Each group is given a set of cards – word cards and definition/picture cards. Place the shuffled cards faced down. Students take turns flipping over two cards per turn to match vocabulary words with the definition/picture. If there is no match, the student returns the cards to the original location. The play passes to the next student, who attempts to make a match. When a match is made, the student keeps the pair of cards, and the play passes to the next student. The student with the most matched cards wins!

Scrambled Words (primary & intermediate): Write 5 – 10 words with their letters shuffled (e.g., ranviesrco for carnivores). Challenge students individually or in pairs to unscramble the words as quickly as they can. The first student or a pair of students to do so correctly wins. The teacher can then quickly review each word by eliciting information about the meanings, usage, etc. from the students. Relate the words to the content you are teaching.

Word Charades (primary & intermediate): Students work in small groups of students for 5–10 minutes to plan a charade to demonstrate the definition of a given word. Each team then takes turns to dramatize the meaning of a word silently while the rest of the students guess the word. Student teams can use small white boards to show their guesses or elect a team spokesperson to volunteer a guess. Be creative and try to relate it to the content you are teaching.

Whole Group Word Play

Counting Dude, Bragging Dude (grades 2-6): Form two lines of students facing each other so that each student has a partner. Each student should have a word (word lanyards work well). One line of students is the “Counting Dudes,” and the other line of students is the “Bragging Dudes.” The pair introduces themselves to each other as their word and tells each other what their word means (e.g., “Hello, I am a *carnivore*, which means I am an animal that eats meat.”) At the teacher’s signal to begin, “Bragging Dudes” must use their word in a 7-up sentence (7 or more words). The “Counting Dude” in each partnership must determine the accuracy of “Bragging Dude’s” sentence and count the number of words used. The Dudes switch roles and then find a new partner. If played for three rounds, students will have practiced using and reviewing six words.

Scramble (all grades): In Scramble, students create a human concept map by arranging and rearranging groups representing word networks. For this activity, students should have a familiar word that they understand. Randomly call out, “Scramble!” throughout the day. Students should try to group themselves with related words such as synonyms and antonyms standing together; students who have words with prefixes stand together; students with rhyming words stand together, etc. Students can switch words throughout the day and

“Scramble” at the teacher's signal. Word lanyards work great for this activity. Challenge students by saying “Scramble” and only make a certain number of groups. This will cause students to look for deeper word relationships. Teachers will need to choose words with intention.

Hot Seat (Grades 3-12; for K-2, the teacher gives the clues): Students try to guess a word using clues given by their partners or teams. Students giving the clues are in the “hot seat” and must know synonyms, antonyms, and the meaning of the word to be successful giving clues to his/her teammate(s). Be creative and try to relate it to the content you are learning.

Last One Standing (Primary & intermediate - Note: can exclude beats): Give the class a topic (e.g., states in the U.S.A., food, animals, things found in a kitchen, etc.). Ask students to stand up in a circle if possible. Clap out a beat and say, 1-2-3, followed by a topic-related word. After the next three beats, the next student in the circle gives a word related to the topic, and so on. Anyone who cannot think of a word or repeats a word that has already been said has to sit down, and it is the next person's turn. The winner is the “Last One Standing.” Be creative and try to relate it to the content you are teaching.

The Alphabet Game (3-12): Divide the class into 3-4 teams and assign a secretary to each group. On one side of the board, write down six topics or categories (e.g., book titles, animals, movies, historical events, countries, etc.). To start the game, the teacher randomly selects a letter and writes the letter on the board. Each member must work together to quickly find a word (or phrase, event, etc.) for each chosen category that starts with the chosen letter. The first team to complete all six categories shouts, “STOP!” The class then stops writing, a member of the team that finished first goes to the board to fill in the categories. The teacher checks the answers with the class and then chooses another letter to play another round. Be creative by using it to review content learning.

Chain Link (K-12): This can be a very challenging game. “Chain” Link is similar to “Scramble” in that students are making a human concept map. The difference is that it is extending the meaning beyond synonyms and antonyms. One student begins the link by explaining the meaning of their word. The rest of the class thinks of ways their word connects to the first word. Once a student(s) say(s), “Link,” the teacher selects a student to explain their connection to the word. If the connection makes sense, the teacher has the student link up with the first student. Now the students must think of ways the words connect with the first and/or second student's word and add to the “chain link.” The objective is to make as many links in the chain as possible. Challenge the class to make a complete chain by linking every student in the word chain.