

TRAIT FOCUS: WORD CHOICE

Lesson Objective

Students create their own thesaurus cheat sheets for use when evaluating their writing for word choice.

Creating a Thesaurus “Cheat Sheet”

The thesaurus is one of the most useful reference materials for working with the writing trait of word choice. It is important for student writers, even in the primary grades, to have a familiarity with this resource. In fact, dictionary and thesaurus skills are a staple of most state standard frameworks.

Not every classroom, however, is able to provide a thesaurus to every student. If this is the case, or if you find the logistics of using individual books cumbersome during class time, students can create their own mini-reference charts to keep on-hand for daily writing assignments. Moreover, this exercise is an effective way to inspire students to look beyond the general nouns and weak verbs that first draft writing often produces.

The book *Stone Soup* by Jon J Muth is an excellent mentor text to help jump-start student writers in creating their own thesaurus “cheat sheets.” Integrate the following Literature/Writing Connection lesson into your instruction as a way of broadening your students’ understanding of the trait of word choice.

Story Overview

This European folktale has been told in many variations for centuries, using everything from a stone to a nail to an axe. Classic children’s writer Jon J Muth creates a wholly new version set in rural China. In Muth’s version, three Buddhist monks come upon a village which has fallen on hard times and has no food to spare. Even so, the monks know that three stones make a delicious soup, but a carrot makes it even nicer, as does a bit of meat, and salt and pepper...

Scurry, Don’t Stroll (Run, Don’t Walk)

1. As part of your instruction on using various reference materials during the writing process, pass out copies or display your own thesaurus to the class. Lead a general discussion of how the book is arranged, what its parts are, and how it is used. Ask for a few practice words from your students and find the synonyms. Explain how this is a useful tool to use when you want to find just the right word.
2. Read the book *Stone Soup* to your class. Afterward, refer back to your favorite page, paying special attention to Muth’s use of vivid, colorful nouns and verbs. Reread the page to your class, placing emphasis on the writer’s word choice and how it paints the scene he is describing.
3. Now work backwards. Choose a noun or verb from the text and see if your students can name the general noun or weak verb from which it possibly came. For example, *curious* might have come from *weird*; *travel* from *walk*; *wise* from *smart*; etc.
4. Ask your students make a two column chart on a piece of paper. Write the heading “Instead of...” for the left column and the heading “Use...” for the right.
5. Brainstorm some of the most common nouns and verbs your writers use in their work. For example, *man*, *woman*, *said*, *walk*, *take*, or *smile*. Write these in the left column.
6. Use the thesaurus as a class to look up alternatives to each of these words: *husband*, *policewoman*, *bellow*, *wander*, *seize*, or *smirk*.
7. Once their charts are complete, your students will have a personalized cheat sheet to keep handy when they want to improve the word choices they use in their own writing.