How to Introduce Word Study

Show students how to sort and to complete the other activities that comprise your word study routines (e.g., word study notebooks, games, centers, spelling tests). The first few days of school are spent in assessing literacy development. Over the first few weeks of school we make time to introduce sorting to students. We do this in whole class sorting and we choose sorts in which everyone can participate. After this introduction, and then for the rest of the year, we break in to small groups by instructional and developmental levels. Students who have been involved in similar routines and activities can mentor other students.

How to Introduce Word Study in a Primary Classroom: A Two-Week Schedule

Nielsen, Bear, Baren, 2000

How do we introduce word study to our students? We introduce word study gradually and we start with independent level word sorts to introduce the process of sorting. Students can learn the basic format for sorting words and pictures in a whole class setting as long as everyone can participate in the sort.

As you will see in this outline of 2 weeks of word study, students are guided through a few sorts in a whole class setting. Later, in small groups, procedures are introduced that are more focused on students’ developmental needs. The focus in week one is on a concept sort, and in week two, the sort examines long and short o words and patterns. Substitute easier sorts to ensure that students can focus on the process of sorting.

Week One in a Primary Classroom: Whole Group Work

Day 1: Introduce Concept Sort on Overhead (30 minutes)
   a. Use transparency chips. Start with concept sort using pictures. If words are used, make sure that students can read the words accurately.
   b. Model sort the pictures into two categories only: those that fit and those that don’t. Talk through the sort as the students watch. Be interactive, ask them where they think pictures go, ask if they know why you are sorting the way you are.
   c. Discuss categories and why each picture fits.

Day 2: Repeat Sort from Day 1 (20 minutes)
   a. Students come to overhead to sort.
   b. Sort the same words with a different category.
   c. Talk through the thinking process.
   d. Model a written explanation of the sort with a picture or in two or three sentences.

Day 3: Open Concept Sort in Small Groups (25 minutes)
   a. Groups of three or four students are given a box with objects for a concept sort.
   b. Have each group choose one person to explain their sort.
   c. Allow 5 minutes for each group to sort words.
   d. Share results with whole class.

Day 4: Introduce Closed Sort (30 minutes)
   a. Review the steps to sorting. What did we do? What were we looking for?
   b. Give criteria for new sort to the whole class.
   c. Students sort in the same groups as yesterday.
   d. Each group copies sort onto chart paper. Students may write one or two sentences to explain their sorts.
   e. Student-made charts are posted around the room.
Make single contrasts within these pictures and objects. After students sort, and talk about their sorts, they think of other ways to sort and conceptualize these pictures and objects.

Concept sorts with pictures
- clothing for winter and summer
- animals that live in water and out
- transportation pictures (cars and boats) colors
- birds and humans
- different size and color dinosaurs
- dogs and cats

Concept sorts with objects
- buttons
- plastic animal pieces
- geometric shapes of different colors
- different shaped erasers
- shells of various shapes
- smooth and rough rocks

Week Two - Primary: Introduce Sorts that Examine Word Structure

Day 1: Two Column Sorts Based on Sound Differences (30 minutes)

a. Collect no more than 15 pictures that fit a specific pattern. Choose several pictures or words that do not match. Review the pictures to be sure students can recognize them. The pictures should follow an obvious pattern (initial consonant, short vowel family like -it, or –ick).

b. On overhead, lay out pictures in random order. Lead sorting by stating the category: “Pictures that sound like 'ball' at the beginning.” Set out a picture as the key. Model the process with a few pictures.

c. Have students come to the overhead and compare a picture to the key word at the top of the column. If it matches, it goes in the column underneath the key picture. If it does not fit, it goes in the “not” column.

d. When columns are complete, ask: “Are we sure?” Read each picture or word, and compare it to the key picture until all pictures are reviewed.

e. Ask: “What do we know about the pictures in the column with the key picture?” Discuss the exact features.

f. Make a copy of the sort on chart paper for tomorrow, or place the sort in a pocket chart for reference.

Day 2: Automaticity (20 minutes)

a. Repeat sort on overhead with students: “What did we notice? How did we decide?”

b. Refer to chart and ask students to copy several of the pictures onto a page. This page will be placed in a little letter or alphabet book of pictures. When using words, students copy most of the words. Make your own copy on a piece of paper. Introduce the word study notebook and how this page fits into their word study notebooks. They should understand that the notebook is a place to collect words, record our sorts, and keep a record of what we do in word study groups.

c. Discuss the sort column by column. Write explanatory sentences on the chart. If students are middle beginning readers and writers, they can write each sentence in their word study notebooks. Cruise the room and encourage accuracy, completeness, and neatness. Praise.

Day 3: New Word Sort (3 columns, 30 minutes)

a. Choose a list that can be divided into 3 columns; e.g., initial consonants, short vowel / long vowel / crazy pile.
b. Give groups envelopes with 15 pictures to sort (or 20 words). Have groups review the pictures and discard unknown pictures. (Assign roles to group members: facilitator, recorder, and spokesperson.)

c. Focus on sound differences. Remind students to compare pictures to the key picture.

d. Share results orally. Discuss the crazy pile words and why they do not fit into the established categories.

e. Display the sort on the pocket chart or on chart paper. Students record the sort.

f. Discuss the columns and their characteristics. If appropriate, students write sentences in notebooks and on chart paper.

**Day 4: Whole Class Word Hunt**

a. Review chart from yesterday. Discuss categories again.

b. Students search for the sound features through pre-selected pages from magazines, or the teacher can have them sort through a series of pre-selected pictures. If students are looking for words, they search for words with the patterns in books that are at their independent reading levels.

c. In groups, students review their pictures or cut and paste their pictures onto pages for their books. When using words, students write their choices onto chips.

d. After 10 minutes, stop the picture or word hunt. Sort through the pictures they found: Which ones follow the patterns? Which pictures go in the crazy pile? How do we know?” The results of the word hunt can be recorded on a chart. There will be mistakes. Help students to review criteria for sorting. Think with them.

**Pictures for initial consonant can be found in many places, including the appendix in the 2nd edition of *Words Their Way*.