

USING A WORD WALL

Why a Word Wall?

A word wall is a very powerful tool in any classroom. Although it's often associated with second language learners, the word wall focuses all students' learning on the most important vocabulary and concepts. It informs teacher planning; a good selection of vocabulary words should be the concepts used as a foundation for assessment, activities, labs, projects, homework, and the center of a unit in any classroom.

Many science textbooks have a very large number of vocabulary words for students to memorize. At the same time they may be short on conceptual presentations. The traditional method of assigning 20 words to be written with definitions does not usually help most students to learn and remember them, or facilitate their learning to do science.

The job of a teacher in this context is to triage the most important words, to focus students on learning and retaining key vocabulary words that will be the basis for their most important learning in the unit. A byproduct of this kind of planning and triage is that instruction can be tailored to the needs of a particular class, maintaining high expectations while providing instruction at a level that makes it possible for students to advance.

In the context of hands-on activities, the word wall can be used as another reminder of an important concept. Many teachers like to introduce a new word after students have the hands-on experience; first they experiment, then they are given name of a process they have been using.

Word walls are most effective with no more than 5 or 6 new words a week. When a new topic comes up with new vocabulary, previous words can be retired to another display, or the cards can be put away for a while. .

Using the Word Wall: Sponge Activities

Repetition is one of the keys to using a word wall. The activities do not have to be lengthy to be effective. Word walls are good for sponge activities: for two minutes at the beginning of class students can answer a question or two about the words: Which three words describe the properties of a cell. Which word do you think is crucial to understanding potential energy? How could you explain "surfactant" to a fourth grader? How many students have alveoli, and if you put your hand up, how do you know you have them?

You could give points for students who use one or more of the words correctly during the class discussion. Or, you could have secret Word of the Day that the first person who says it *in context* gets extra credit.

You might ask students to write their own questions about the words in advance, and then pick one to ask every few days.

Ask students to write a chant or rap or song using some or all of the current words.

Using the Word Wall: Games

1. Not Quite Taboo

This game is played in classes learning a new language, but is easily adapted to other classroom situations. It's a wonderful device for having students explain ideas in their own words.

The game is better after several weeks of new words, so that the students aren't choosing from too few words.

Divide the class into two teams, one in each half of the room. A member from one team sits in front of the class with his/her back to the board. On the board is written a word for the student to guess. Members of the same team can provide clues, without using any forms of the word to be guessed. If appropriate, students may be asked to keep their hands flat on their desks, so that they can give only verbal clues.

Teams alternate providing clues for their teammate at the board, and points for a correct answer are scored at each round.

2. Bingo

Make a set of blank bingo cards and have students fill in the squares with different words from a whole unit. Collect and shuffle the cards, then play a game of bingo. You read the clues or definitions and they mark off the word on their card.

3. Slap the Wall

On a board or chart paper, write a lot of word wall words. Line the students up in front of the words in 5 lines (teams). One turn is you calling out a clue or definition. The first person of the 5 people to cover the word with their hand gets a point. Then the five students in the front of the line move to the rear, and the next turn begins with five new players.

4. Table Review

Put students into groups of four and set up a random drawing (perhaps popsicle sticks) to choose a table and player A, B, C, or D at that table. Give the group a list of study questions for them to discuss for a limited amount of time. Each group is responsible for making sure that every member in their group understands and can answer any questions. Once the discussion time is over, there is no more helping fellow members of a group. After the discussion time, call on different students at random, giving a point for each correct answer. Finish up by making sure every table has had roughly equal turns. The group with the most points wins.