

## CHAPTER 14

# Word Detectives

Think about your students who have the biggest vocabularies. Are these also your students who read the most? Many new words elementary students add to their vocabulary come from their reading (Baumann, 2009). Imagine, for example that your students are reading about falcons, and they come across the words *eyases*, *ornithologists*, and *stoop*. How many of your students would know what these words mean? *Eyases* is a strange word for most adults, many elementary students don't know what *ornithologists* are, and the meaning for *stoop* probably calls up an image of someone bending down or the small front porch of a house. What will your students do when they encounter these words while reading about falcons? After they read, how many of them will be able to explain that *eyases* are baby falcons, *ornithologists* are scientists who study birds, and a *stoop* is a swift dive, usually to attack prey?

Students who stop and ask themselves "I wonder what *eyases* are?" when they encounter that unfamiliar word will be able to figure it out based on the context and the picture of the baby chicks hatching out of their shells. They will figure out that ornithologists are scientists who study birds and will probably add *ornithologist* to their other words in which *-ologist* means *scientist*, such as *biologist* and *psychologist*. The description of the falcon doing a stoop and capturing its prey with its talons along with the picture will help them add another meaning of the word *stoop* to their vocabularies.

Students can figure out meanings for the words *eyases*, *ornithologists*, *stoop*, and many others using a combination of context, pictures, and, for some words, morphology. Unfortunately, rather than stopping and pondering the meaning of a new word or an old word with a new meaning while reading, many students just skip it and move on. In our experience, when students skip over words that they don't immediately recognize or connect meanings to, it leads to them having little comprehension of what they have just read. In addition, every word they skip is a missed opportunity to add a new word to their vocabulary banks.

The Common Core State Standards recognize the importance of vocabulary to aid comprehension through a focus on meaning and adding new words to students' vocabulary banks. Word Detectives is a lesson framework to help students meet the Common Core vocabulary standards. It teaches students how to use context, picture, and morphology (meaningful word parts) to figure out the meaning of new words and add new word meanings for familiar words while reading. Using the gradual release of responsibility model of instruction, the Word Detectives lesson framework combines student trios and teacher-led conversations to discuss key vocabulary.

## A Sample Word Detectives Lesson

The students in this class are about to read an informational text about falcons. Mr. C. has looked through the text and chosen nine words. Many of the words will be new to students, including two with multiple meanings.

### Purpose Setting and Vocabulary Building

Mr. C. begins the lesson by showing everyone the cover of the book and engaging students in a general discussion about falcons. Students share what they know about these fascinating birds. The class joker adds that the Falcons are a football team in Atlanta. Mr. C. seizes on this comment to talk about the fact that many words have more than one meaning and asks students how they know this book is about the large birds called falcons and not a football team. The students realize that the picture on the cover clearly signals that the word *falcons* in this context refers to birds. Mr. C. then sets the purpose for the lesson.

He says, "As you read about falcons, you are going to meet many words that you may not have meanings for, as well as some multimeaning words like *falcons* for which you have to figure out the meaning that fits the context. Here are nine words we are going to focus on. Before reading, we are going to pronounce the words but not talk about their meanings. We call this lesson framework Word Detectives, because you are going to be detectives and use clues from the pictures, context, and related words you know to figure out the appropriate meanings for these words."

Mr. C. writes the following words on the board and has everyone pronounce them.

<i>ornithologist</i>	<i>alarmed</i>	<i>DDT</i>
<i>eyries</i>	<i>fledglings</i>	<i>plentiful</i>
<i>stoop</i>	<i>eyases</i>	<i>scrape</i>

Several students suggest that they know what some words mean (*alarmed*, *scrape*, and *stoop*), but Mr. C. says that, just like *falcons*, these words might have other meanings, and they will need to use the clues to figure out what the appropriate meanings are in this context.

Mr. C. then arranges the students in trios and hands the book to one member of the trio who quickly sits in the middle and holds the book so everyone can see.

### TIP

*Students work together and interact more when they have just one copy of the text. Handing the book to a struggling reader gives that student an important job to do and confers status on him or her.*

## I Do, and You Watch

Mr. C. grabs some small sticky notes and tells the students what he is going to do: “I am going to read the first four pages and look for any of these nine words. When I find them, I will write them on these notes and place them right next to where I found them. If I find any of the words more than once, I will use another sticky note to mark all the clues to the word’s meaning.”

Mr. C. reads these pages aloud and puts a sticky note on the word *stoop* and two sticky notes to mark the two times the word *ornithologist* occurs. When he finishes reading these pages, he thinks aloud about what the words mean.

He says, “*Ornithologist* is an easy word to figure out! The sentence has the meaning right here when it says ‘Ornithologists, or bird experts.’ *Ornithologist* occurs again when the text explains how they began to solve the problem. I think ornithologists are scientists who study birds. I know that *-ologist* usually means a scientist, like with *biologist* and *psychologist*.

“*Stoop* only occurs once,” he continues, “but I can figure out what it means, because the text explains that the falcon dives straight down at two hundred miles per hour and grabs its prey out of the air and that this dive is called a *stoop*. There is also an awesome picture of a falcon flying with a smaller bird in its talons. This is a new meaning of *stoop* for me.”

## I Do, and You Help

Mr. C. then hands out small sticky notes to all the trios.

“I need your help with the next four pages,” he says. Read them, and use these sticky notes to mark any places where you see any of the nine words. Once you have all the words on these pages marked, you can help me by explaining what you think they mean.”

The students read and quickly find that the text uses the word *plentiful* once and *DDT* five times. They mark them and then tell Mr. C. where to find these words.

He asks, “The book tells us that birds of prey eat mice and other animals and keep them from becoming too plentiful. Who can help me explain what *plentiful* means?”

The students explain that without birds of prey, too many mice and other little animals would roam around, so *plentiful* means there are *a lot*. Mr. C. writes the word *plenty* and helps students see the morphemic connection between these two meaning-related words.

Different students read aloud the five sentences in which *DDT* occurs and conclude that *DDT* is a poison sprayed on crops to kill insects. Falcons were eating the insects, and the *DDT* harmed the falcons’ eggs. The class is glad to learn that *DDT* was banned, and the falcon eggs are once again producing baby falcons.

## You Do It Together, and I Help

The trios work together to finish the article, hunting down the other five words and marking each occurrence with a sticky note. Mr. C. circulates and reminds them they need to not just find the words but use the clues to figure out what the words mean.

### TIP

*Seizing every opportunity to point out morphological relationships between words will help your students rapidly increase the size of their vocabulary banks!*

## The Class Debriefs

The lesson ends with each trio sharing the clues it used to figure out appropriate meanings for *alarmed*, *eyases*, *eyries*, *fledglings*, and *scrape*. The class has clearly enjoyed being word detectives, and Mr. C. assures students they will do more Word Detectives lessons in the future. He also reminds them that whenever they are reading, they can be word detectives: “When you read, you are always going to find words you don’t have meanings for. Even when you are an adult, you will encounter new words. Before I read this, I didn’t know what *eyases* and *eyries* were. You are also going to find words you know with new meanings. I didn’t know that the awesome fast dive a falcon makes to catch its prey is called a *stoop* or that the nest made of rocks is called a *scrape*. You can be a word detective every time you read and use the context, pictures, and related words as clues to help you solve word meaning mysteries.”

## Planning and Teaching a Word Detectives Lesson

Review the text students are going to read. Select eight to ten new words for which the text has clues. Include some words for which your students know related words so they learn to analyze for morphemic connections. When possible, include a few words that you didn’t know previously so students see that even adult readers need to use clues in the text to figure out meanings for words. Also, be sure to include words your students probably have meanings for that have different meanings in the text. Use the following six steps when teaching a Word Detectives lesson.

1. Tell students the purpose of the lesson. Many students think that people just happen to know the meanings of all the words they read. When these students encounter an unfamiliar word in their reading, they skip it and move on. Breaking the skip-it habit is critical to student reading growth. Students who skip over new words miss many opportunities daily to add words to their meaning vocabularies. The vocabulary deficit grows as they progress through the grades. Students need to know that everyone encounters new word meanings while reading, and authors provide clues you can use to figure out word meanings.
2. Display the words you have chosen, have everyone pronounce them, and write them on sticky notes. Do not let anyone suggest meanings for words. If students tell you they know what a word means, respond that they will find out if the meaning they know is the meaning in this text or if there is another meaning.
3. Use the “I do, and you watch” and “I do, and you help” phases for several words to model for students how to use clues to help determine appropriate meanings. When possible, include in these modeling steps words with morphemic clues and words for which your students have one meaning but not the appropriate meaning.
4. Have students work in trios (“You do it together, and I help”) to complete the reading and figure out appropriate meanings for the rest of the words. Give each trio just one copy of the text and a bunch of small sticky notes. Have students mark the targeted word every time it occurs. Circulate and

make sure they are not just marking words but talking about what the words mean and what clues helped them solve the word mystery.

5. Convene the class and discuss meanings for all the words the trios worked on. For each word, have students read the context in which the word occurred and explain how this context provides clues, visuals, and morphemic connections.
6. Conclude the lesson by pointing out that all readers need to be word detectives whenever they read. Review with students how they used context, pictures, and morphemic connections as clues to the meanings of words. Share with students any words you didn't have appropriate meanings for before reading the text.

## Word Detectives Lessons Across the Year

Observe your students as they work together in their trios. Fade out your modeling and help as you notice they understand how to use context, pictures, and morphemic clues to figure out appropriate meanings for words. When your formative assessments indicate that most students can use clues to figure out appropriate meanings, have them complete the task independently (“You do, and I watch”).

You can encourage your students to use their word detective skills while reading on their own. Designate one day a week as Word Detectives Day. (If you choose Wednesday, you can declare it Word Detectives Wednesday!) Give each student one sticky note at the beginning of independent reading time. Have students look for and mark a word they didn't know the meaning of but figured out using in-text clues. When independent reading time is over, let a few volunteers share the word they sleuthed out and what clues (context, picture, or morphology) they used to solve the mystery.

## How Word Detectives Lessons Teach the Standards

The focus of the Word Detectives lesson framework is on teaching students to use all the clues in text—context, pictures, and morphology—to figure out the meanings of words that are appropriate in the text they are reading. Word Detective lessons help students meet Reading informational text standard four (RI.4) and Language anchor standards four through six (CCRA.L.4–6), all of which focus on learning word meanings from reading. As students engage in discussions about word meanings in their trios and with the whole class, they are engaging in the collaborative conversations that Speaking and Listening anchor standard one requires (CCRA.SL.1).