# 4

# Organizing for Word Study: Principles and Practices

Once you have ascertained the developmental level of each of your students, you are ready to organize your classroom for word study. In earlier chapters, you learned that children acquire specific orthographic features in a hierarchical order: first, basic letter-sound correspondences; second, the patterns associated with long and short vowel sounds; third, word structures associated with syllables and affixes; and finally, Greek and Latin roots and stems that appear in derivational families. The scope and sequence of word study skills is based on developmental spelling research and mirrors this evolution. Word study instruction is aimed where each child "is at" in the developmental process of growth and change. Pinpointing the developmental level of every child in your classroom is the first step toward organizing for word study instruction. Instruction is then planned to target your students' **zone of proximal development** (Vygotsky, 1962).

## THE ROLE OF WORD SORTING

Word study is a method for calling attention to word elements. As children progress in literacy, they learn how to look at words differently. At first, emergent and beginning readers learn to pay attention to initial sounds. Once beginning sounds are automated, they learn to look further. By the time they become transitional readers, reading their first *Frog and Toad* (Lobel) books, they are ready to look at vowel patterns. Later, as children read words of more than one syllable, they learn to look for syllables and affixes. When mature readers come to a word they don't know, they look for familiar roots and stems. Picture sorts and word sorts are designed to help students learn how and where to look at words.

Word study is an active process in which students categorize words and pictures to reveal essential differences and similarities among words. The word sort in Figure 4-1, for example, is designed to help students discover that the final *tch* pattern is associated with short vowels, whereas *ch* is associated with long vowels. *Rich* and *much* are "oddballs" which do not fit the pattern. Word-sorting activities provide opportunities for students to make logical decisions about word elements including sound, pattern, meaning, and use. Repeated practice categorizing words by particular features helps students identify and understand invariance or constancy in the orthography. Progress in the students' understanding of orthographic invariance is related to reading, writing, vocabulary, and spelling development. This is why we say that there is a synchrony among reading, writing, and spelling development (Bear, 1991b).

The sorts discussed in this chapter are phonics, spelling, or vocabulary activities that use categorization to reveal generalizations about words. The chapter begins by describing different kinds of sorting activities. Then 10 principles of word study are presented to help teachers gauge the integrity of their word study program. Some word study activities are easier than others, and teachers must find a balance in the difficulty of the activities they present. Through several examples and general scheduling outlines, ways to organize word study classrooms at several developmental levels are presented. Through the course of this chapter, you will read about how several veteran teachers organize their classrooms. We will address some issues such as editing expectations and grading before ending with a general outline for choosing features of study.

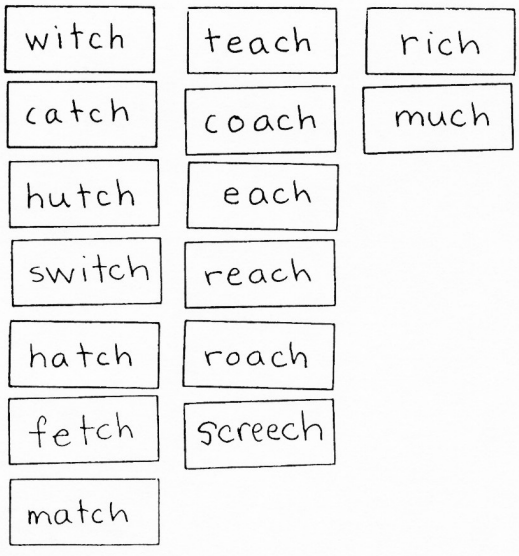



**FIGURE 4-1** Word Sort by Final *ch* and *tch* Patterns

# TYPES OF SORTS

There are two basic sorts: **picture sorts** and **word sorts.** Each serves a different purpose.

## Picture Sorts

Picture sorts are for teaching children to categorize sounds and to associate sound segments with letters and spelling patterns. Picture sorts can be used to develop **phonological awareness,** the ability to identify and categorize various speech sounds like rhyme and alliteration. Picture sorts can also be used to teach **phonics,** the consistent relationship between letters and sounds. At different points in development, pictures are sorted by initial sounds, consonant blends or digraphs, rhyming families, or vowel sounds. Picture sorts call attention to the sound segments under study, and help students learn the letters that represent them.

Picture sorting is particularly suited for students in the emergent, letter name–alphabetic, and early within word pattern stages of spelling development who do not have extensive reading vocabularies. These are the students who are focused on the alphabetic principle or the basic single-syllable patterns of English orthography. Picture sorts may be used with English as a second language (ESL) students who are struggling with unfamiliar sounds or vocabulary. However, picture sorts are not particularly useful for native speakers of English at the level of syllables and affixes or derivational relations.

The basic premise of all sorting tasks in a word study approach is to compare and contrast word elements, separating or categorizing the examples that go together from those that don't. Picture sorts, such as the one shown in Figure 4-2, are first modeled by teachers as they work with students who share similar word study needs. Working as a group, children are given a collection of picture cards to sort into contrasting categories. They say the names of the pictures as they place them in the groups under the teacher's direction. At the end of this guided activity, students work independently to sort similar sets of pictures into the same categories.

Picture sorting differs from commercial phonics programs in four important ways. First, picture sorting works from the known to the unknown; the names of the pictures can already be pronounced. As children sort through a stack of picture cards,

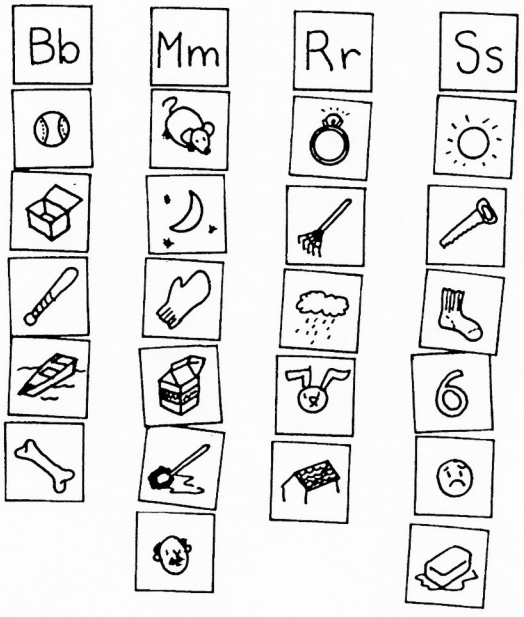



**FIGURE 4-2** Picture Sort by Initial Consonant Sounds

they pronounce the name of each picture and concentrate on analyzing the sounds within each word. This is not possible if students cannot name the words in the first place. Unfortunately, this is too often the case with unknown words in commercial phonics programs.

A second way in which picture sorting differs from packaged phonics programs is that picture sorting is analytic, whereas most phonics programs are synthetic. Rather than building up from the phoneme to the word in a synthetic approach, picture sorting begins with the whole and then examines its parts. In learning about vowel sounds, for example, the whole word is first pronounced—"cat." Only then is the initial consonant peeled off from the "at." Through this analytic approach, picture-sorting tasks work first with **onsets** (beginning consonant elements) and **rimes** (phonograms), before working down to the level of individual **phonemes.** Research in phonemic awareness suggests that individual phonemes are abstract and that analysis of onsets and rimes provides a more accessible, intermediary stepping stone to the more difficult level of phoneme (Goswami, 1990; Treiman, 1991). Through picture sorts, students learn to analyze speech sounds into their constituent parts.

A third way in which picture sorts differ from most phonics programs is that picture sorting does not involve rote memorization, isolated sound drills, or overreliance on poorly understood rules. Sorting tasks are conducted so that students determine similarities and differences among target features as they utilize higher level critical thinking skills to make categorical judgments. When students make categorical decisions about whether the middle vowel sound in *cat* sounds more like the medial vowel sound in *map* or *top*, independent analysis and judgment are required. Students make decisions for themselves.

Efficiency is a fourth reason why picture sorts are more effective than most commercial phonics programs. Picture sorting doubles or triples the number of examples children study, and they study them in a shorter amount of time. Workbooks may have only three to five examples per page, and most of these exercises ask children to fill in the blank or color their choices from the answers provided. It takes an average first grader 10 to 20 minutes to complete such a workbook activity, time that could be better spent reading. In contrast, sorting a stack of 20 to 30 picture cards takes just a few minutes. Compare the number of examples in Figure 4-3 to see the differences.

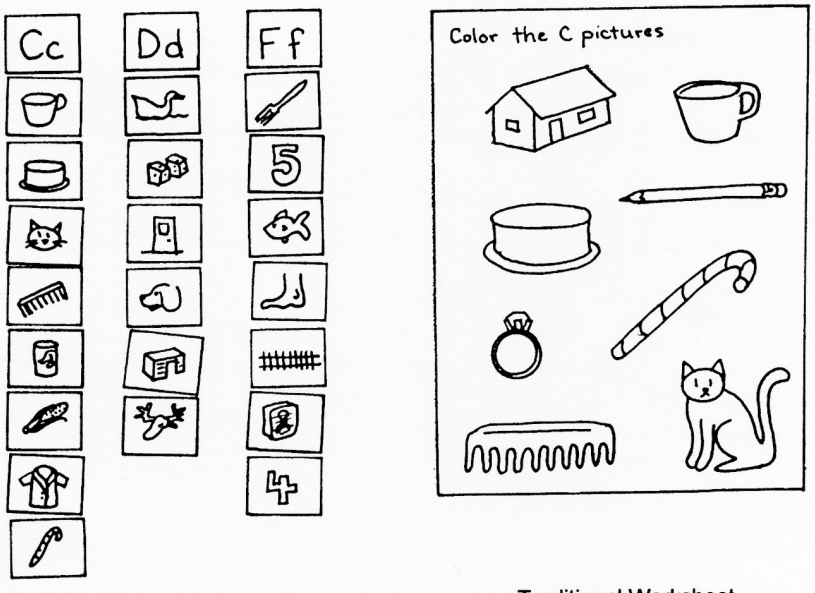



**FIGURE 4-3** Picture Sorting Offers More Practice Than Traditional Worksheets

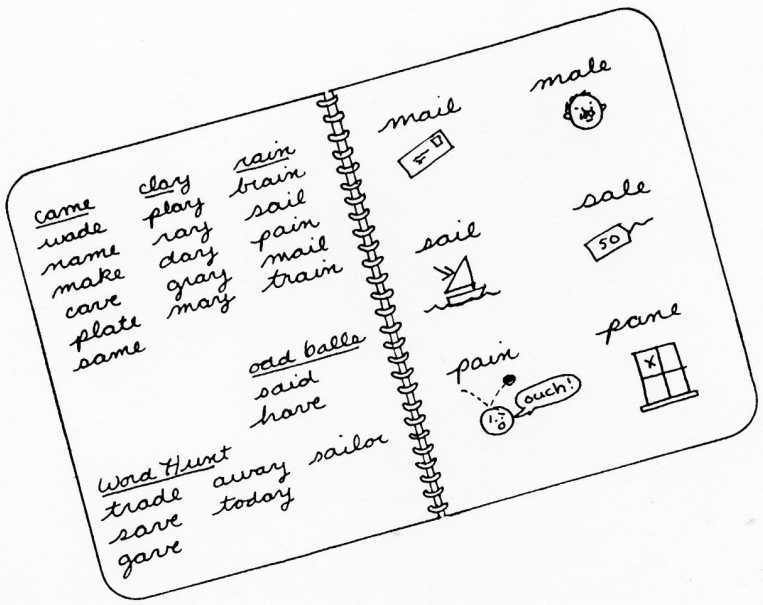



**FIGURE 4-4** Word Study Notebook

Although picture sorts are used mainly for sound, they can also be used to teach word meanings through **concept sorts.** Picture sorts are particularly useful for students learning English as a second language. Pictures of a dog, a cat, a duck, and so on can all be grouped to make an animal category. These can be contrasted with pictures of a flower, a tree, a cornfield, a pumpkin, and so on—all examples of plants. English vocabulary is expanded as students sort pictures into conceptual groupings and repeat the names of each picture and the category to which it belongs.

## Word Sorts

Word sorts are like picture sorts except that printed **word cards** are used. Since learning to spell involves making associations between the spelling of words and their pronunciations, it is important that children know and can already pronounce most of the words to be sorted. Because children are sorting known words, their sorts help them to discover the orthographic patterns that represent certain sounds and meanings. These understandings are then extended to the reading and spelling of new words.

Word sorting is useful for all students who have a functional sight word vocabulary. Letter name–alphabetic spellers sort their words into groups that share the same beginning sounds, by **phonograms** or word families (*jump, lump, stump* vs. *lamp, stamp, camp*), and by meaning. Students in the within word pattern stage sort their words into groups by vowel patterns (*wait, train, mail, pain* vs. *plate, take, blame*). Within word pattern spellers hear the sounds and see the consistency in the way vowel sounds are spelled. Syllables and affixes spellers benefit from sorting words into groups by syllable stress or syllable structure. Spellers learning derivational relations sort words by similarities in **roots** and **stems** such as the *spect* in *spectator, spectacle, inspect,* and *spectacular* versus the *port* in *transport, import, portable,* and *port-o-john.*

Like the picture-sorting routine, the word sort is first introduced by the teacher. Following the demonstration and discussion, children are guided in sorting written words in contrasting categories and are directed toward correctness as necessary. After this guided practice, children sort independently. These sorts might later be written into columns in word study notebooks, such as the one shown in Figure 4-4.

Let's walk through a series of word sorts that would be appropriate for a group of within word pattern spellers. This example will help make the concept of word sorting come to light. These students sort to examine long vowels. In this example, they are learning long-e spelling patterns.

In conducting vowel pattern word sorts, students first sort by **sound** and then by **pattern.** Students begin by sorting a deck of word cards into two piles by sound: long vowel sounds and short vowel sounds. The categories would look like this:

| Short-e | Long-e |
|---|---|
| men | cheap |
| shed | priest |
| head | clean |
| deaf | niece |
| thread | need |
| best | thief |
| | creep |

In the second step, students sort each column of words by orthographic patterns. There are three columns for long vowels and two for short vowels:

| CVC | CVVC | ea | ie | ee |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| men | head | cheap | priest | need |
| shed | thread | clean | niece | creep |
| best | | | thief | |

These sorting tasks can be challenging for children who, in the past, have looked at words by sound or isolated rule alone. They may have heard the rule, "When two vowels go walking, the first one does the talking." As you can see from the preceding example, this rule doesn't always work. While *ee* is a very consistent pattern for long-e, *ea* has two vowel sounds. Rules with many exceptions are disheartening and teach children nothing. Learning about English spelling requires students to consider both sound and pattern simultaneously to discover consistencies in the orthography. This requires both reflection and continued practice. The goal is for students to sort by sound and pattern simultaneously, automatically, and accurately.

## Variations of Sorts

Variations of picture sorts and word sorts can serve different instructional purposes. Teaching explicitly through direct instruction, encouraging student hypothesis testing, connecting word study to reading and writing, building speed and automaticity—all are important instructional goals, and for each, there is a sort. Closed sorts, open sorts, word hunts, writing sorts, repeated sorts, and speed sorts will be described in relation to their instructional purpose.

### *Teacher-Directed Word Sorts*

Most of the word sort tasks described in this book are teacher-directed or **closed sorts.** In closed sorts, teachers define the categories and model the sorting procedure (Gillet & Kita, 1978). For example, in a beginning-sound phonics sort, the teacher isolates the beginning sound to be taught and explicitly connects it to the letter that represents it using a **key word** to designate the categories. The teacher models the categorization of additional beginning sounds, then gradually releases the task to the students' control as they replicate the process. As they work, teachers and students discuss the characteristics of each sort. Then there are many opportunities for students to practice sorting independently. This practice is carefully monitored and corrective feedback is provided.

### Student-Centered Sorts

Student-centered or **open sorts** are particularly useful after students are already accustomed to sorting and are quite adept at finding commonalties among words. In open sorts, students create their own categories with the set of words. These sorts are more diagnostic in nature because they reveal what students know about examining the orthography when they work independently. Open sorts provide an opportunity for students to test their own hypotheses and they often come up with unexpected ways to organize words. For example, when given the words shown in Figure 4-1, some students sort by the final patterns (*tch* or *ch*), others sort by the vowel sounds (long and short), and others sort by rhyming words. Some of the most productive discussions about the orthography come when students explain why they sorted the way they did in an open sort. As students become sorting pros, they begin to anticipate teacher-directed closed sorts.

## Connecting Sorts to Reading and Writing

### Concept Sorts

Sorting pictures or words by concepts or meaning is one of the very best ways to link vocabulary instruction to what your students already know and to expand their conceptual understanding of essential reading vocabulary. **Concept sorts** are appropriate for all ages and stages of word knowledge and should be used regularly in the content areas. Mathematical terms, science concepts, social studies vocabulary words—all can be sorted into conceptual categories for greater understanding.

Concept sorts can be conducted as both open and closed sorts. Open concept sorts are perfect for assessing background knowledge before embarking on a new unit of study. A new science unit on matter, for example, might begin by having children categorize the following words into groups that go together: *steam, wood, air, ice cube, rain, metal, glue, paint, plastic, smoke, milk,* and *fog*. A discussion of the reasons behind their conceptual groupings is most revealing! As the unit progresses, closed concept sorts can be used for teaching essential concepts and terminology. Having children categorize other examples under the key words *solid, liquid,* and *gas* will help them sort out the essential characteristics for each state of matter. Information about reptiles and amphibians as well as examples of each might be sorted as shown here:

| Amphibians | |
|---|---|
| usually lay eggs in water | frogs |
| three-stage life cycle | toads |
| moist skin, no scales | salamanders |
| | newts |

| Reptiles | |
|---|---|
| usually lay eggs on land | turtles |
| two-stage life cycle | snakes |
| dry scaly skin | alligators |
| | chameleons |
| | iguanas |

The creative possibilities for concept sorts are endless. They can be used as advanced organizers for anticipating new reading. Concepts sorts can be revisited and refined after reading, and they can be used to organize ideas before writing. Concepts sorts are even useful for teaching grammar. Words can be sorted by parts of speech.

### Guess My Category

When children are comfortable with sorts, you can introduce any new area of study with a collection of objects, words, or pictures with an activity called Guess My Category. In this sort you do not label or describe the categories in advance. Rather, it will be the job of your students to decide how the things in each category are alike. You begin by sorting two or three pictures or words into each group. When you pick up the

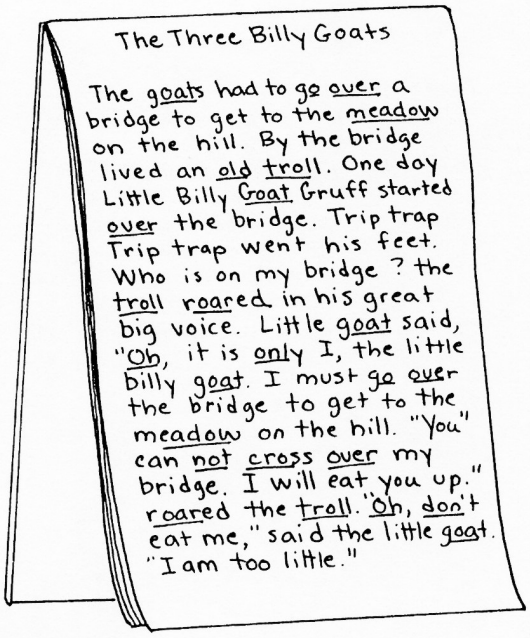
next picture or word, invite someone to guess where it will go. Continue doing this until all the pictures or words have been sorted. Try to keep the children who have caught on to the attributes of interest from telling the others until the end. Playing Guess My Category stimulates creative thinking. You might give small groups of students sets of words or pictures that might be grouped in a variety of ways. Ask each group to come up with their own categories working together. Allow them to have a miscellaneous group for those things that do not fit the categories they establish. After the groups are finished working, let them visit each others' sorts and try to guess the categories that were used. Guess My Category items can later be placed in centers or stations where students may work together to form different groupings. Emergent to beginning readers can dictate to an aide, parent volunteer, or older student their reason for putting together the objects as they did, or they can compose their reason using invented spelling.

## *Word Hunts*

Students don't automatically make the connection between spelling words and reading words, even though they are almost the same thing (Ehri, 1997). Word hunts help students make this connection. In **word hunts,** students hunt through their reading and writing for words that are further examples of the sound, pattern, or meaning unit they are studying.

Teachers can model word hunting with a portion of text copied onto chart paper, or they use copies of text on overhead transparencies. Working line by line, teachers demonstrate how to locate words that fit the categories under study. After this teacher demonstration, students return to texts they are reading and writing, and they hunt for other words that contain the same features. These words are then added to the columns in the word study notebook under the corresponding key word.

Here is an example of a word hunt by a small group of students in Mrs. Fitzgerald's third grade class during a unit on folktales (see Figure 4-5). After working with long-o and short-o in word study, they found and charted these lists from *The Three Billy Goats Gruff* (Galdone, 1973):


The Three Billy Goats

The goats had to go over a bridge to get to the meadow on the hill. By the bridge lived an old troll. One day Little Billy Goat Gruff started over the bridge. Trip trap Trip trap went his feet. Who is on my bridge ? the troll roared in his great big voice. Little goat said, "Oh, it is only I, the little billy goat. I must go over the bridge to get to the meadow on the hill. "You" can not cross over my bridge. I will eat you up." roared the troll. "Oh, don't eat me," said the little goat. "I am too little."

**FIGURE 4-5** Word Hunt With Story Retelling

| Long | Short | ? |
|---|---|---|
| oh | not | voice |
| goat | gobble | who |
| go | cross | too |
| meadow | got | roared |
| don't | on | |
| over | | |
| troll | | |
| old | | |

After this sound sort, students sorted these words by orthographic patterns and organized them in their word study notebooks:

*Groaned* and *goat* were added to the *oa* column.
*Home* was added to the *o*-consonant-*e* column.
*Troll* and *old* were added to the *o*-consonant-consonant column.
*Meadow* was added to the *ow* column.
A new pattern of open, single, long-o spellings was discovered with *so, going,* and *over.*

This word hunt added more examples for the students to consider, and new categories were created.

Word hunts connect word study to other literacy contexts and can also extend the reach to more difficult vocabulary. One child sorted one-syllable *a* words into three columns, by vowel sound and long vowel patterns.

| Short-a | Long-a | |
|---|---|---|
| cat | drain | snake |
| lap | maid | lake |
| chat | tail | plate |
| **relax** | **explain** | **escape** |

After sorting the one-syllable words into groups by vowel sound and pattern, the student returned to the book she was reading to find other examples to add. The words in bold print were added to her columns. Through a simple word hunt, this student was able to generalize the consistency in the pattern-to-sound representation within one-syllable words to two-syllable words! Word hunts provide a step up in word power.

When conducting word hunts with emergent to beginning readers, teachers should have children scan texts that they have already read before *and* that are guaranteed to have the phonics features they are searching for in them. Several companies publish little books for emergent readers that contain recurring phonics elements. *Ready Readers*® by Modern Curriculum Press, and the **phonics readers** published by Creative Teaching Materials are two examples of simple little books organized around specific phonics features that repeat in the text. Although such text may not be the heart of your reading program, they offer children a chance to put into practice what they are learning about words and to see many words at the same time that work the same way.

## Buddy Sorts and Writing Sorts

In addition to closed sorts and open sorts, there are buddy sorts and writing sorts. A **buddy sort** should be done after students have had a chance to practice a sort several times and can be done with a partner. A key word is laid down for each category. One partner calls out a word without showing it and the other points to the key word it would follow. Buddy sorts are particularly useful for students who could use some time attending less to the visual patterns and more to the sounds because they do not see the word they are asked to sort. Buddy sorts provide a useful study activity to prepare for a spelling test.

**Writing sorts** are a variation of both closed sorts and buddy sorts. In writing sorts, a key word is written down first for each column. Then words are called out by the teacher or a partner, and students write the word in the proper category using the key word as a model for spelling. Writing sorts provide an important link to writing and reading, especially when combined with word hunts. Writing sorts are also an instructionally sound way to construct spelling tests for the early grades.

## Building Automaticity

### *Repeated Individual Sorts*

To become fluent readers, students must achieve fast, accurate recognition of words in context. The words they encounter in context are made out of the very same sounds, patterns, and meaning units they examine out of context, in word study. One of the very best ways to build accuracy and automaticity in word recognition is to build fast, accurate recognition of these units. To meet that goal, it is necessary to have students do a given picture or word sort more than one time. Repeated individual sorts are designed for just that—repeated sorting. Just as repeated reading of familiar texts builds fluency, repeated individual sorts provide a student with the necessary practice to build automaticity.

### *Speed Sorts*

Once students have become accurate with a particular sort, **speed sorts** are motivating and develop fluency. *Speed sorting* is no different than ordinary word or picture sorting except that students try to complete the task quickly. It helps to have a stopwatch on hand to actually time the sort. The students try to beat their previous times, and this helps them build automaticity in the categorization of particular orthographic features. Students can be paired with other students to time each other, and they learn to chart their progress.

All of these sorts differ quite a bit from traditional spelling instruction. Sorting activities give students plenty of practice and experience manipulating and categorizing words by sound, pattern, and meaning until they can sort quickly and accurately.

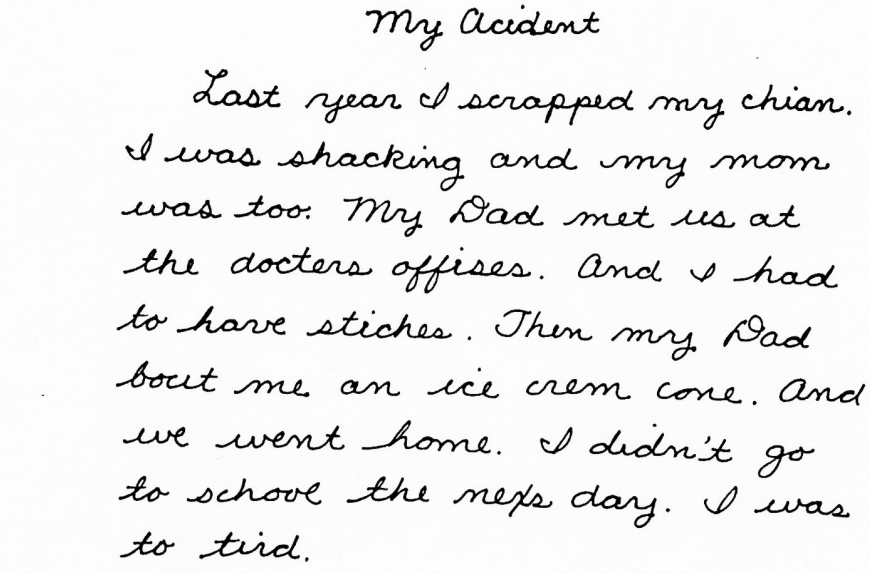
# TEN PRINCIPLES OF WORD STUDY INSTRUCTION

A number of basic principles guide the kind of word study described in *Words Their Way.* These principles set word study apart from many other approaches to the teaching of phonics, spelling, or vocabulary. The 10 guiding principles are summarized in Figure 4-6, and discussed in detail in the following paragraphs.

**1. *Look for what students use but confuse.*** Students cannot learn things they do not already know something about. This is the underlying principle of Vygotsky's zone of proximal development and the motivating force behind the spelling-by-stage assessment described in Chapter 3. By classifying invented spellings developmentally, a zone of proximal development may be identified and instruction can be planned to address features the students are "using but confusing" instead of those they totally neglect (Invernizzi, Abouzeid, & Gill, 1994). Figure 4-7 displays a writing sample of a child who is experimenting with vowel patterns in words such as CHIAN for *chin* and CREM for *cream.* She is putting an extra vowel in a word that doesn't need it and leaves it out where it is needed. As was discussed in Chapter 2, using but confusing is a signal that students are close to learning something new about the orthography. Take your cue from the students, not the curriculum. Teachers look to see what features are consistently present and correct, to determine what aspects of English orthography the students already

1. Look for what students use but confuse.
2. A step backward is a step forward.
3. Use words students can read.
4. Compare words "that do" with words "that don't."
5. Sort by sight and sound.
6. Begin with obvious contrasts first.
7. Don't hide exceptions.
8. Avoid rules.
9. Work for automaticity.
10. Return to meaningful texts.

**FIGURE 4-6** Principles of Word Study


My Accident

Last year I scrapped my chian. I was shacking and my mom was too. My Dad met us at the docters offises. And I had to have stiches. Then my Dad bout me an ice crem cone. And we went home. I didn't go to schove the neps day. I was to tird.

**FIGURE 4-7** Writing Sample With Examples of Using but Confusing

know. By looking for features that are used inconsistently, teachers determine those aspects of the orthography currently under negotiation. These are the features to target.

2. ***A step backward is a step forward.*** Once you have identified students' stages of developmental word knowledge and the orthographic features under negotiation, take a step backward and build a firm foundation. Then, in setting up your categories, contrast something new with something that is already known. If, for example, you are beginning to introduce a new sound or pattern, be sure to present it in contrast to a familiar sound or pattern. It is important to begin word study activities where the students will experience success. For example, students in the within word pattern stage who are ready to examine long vowel patterns begin by sorting words by short vowel sounds, which are familiar, and long vowel sounds, which are being introduced for the first time. Then they move quickly to sorting by pattern. A step backward is the first step forward in word study instruction.

3. ***Use words students can read.*** Since learning to spell involves achieving a match between the spoken language and the orthography, your students should examine words that they can readily pronounce. Dialect does not alter the importance of this basic principle of word study. Whether one says "hog" or "hawg", it is still spelled *hog*. The consistency is in the orthography, and it is your job as the teacher to make those consistencies explicit. It is easier to look across words for consistency of pattern when the words are easy for students to pronounce. Known words come from any and all sources that the children can read: from **language experience** stories, from recent readings, from poems, and even from old spelling books collecting dust on the shelf. As much as possible choose words to sort that students can read out of context.

4. ***Compare words "that do" with words "that don't."*** In order to learn what a Chesapeake Bay retriever looks like, you have to see a poodle or a bulldog, not another Chesapeake Bay retriever. What something *is* is also defined by what it is *not;* contrasts are essential to students building categories. Students' spelling errors suggest what contrasts will help them sort out their confusions. For example, a student who is spelling *stopping* as STOPING will benefit from a sort in which words with double consonants before adding *ing* are contrasted with those that don't as in Figure 4-8.

5. ***Sort by sound and sight.*** Students examine words by how they sound and how they are spelled. Both sound and visual pattern are integrated into students' orthographic knowledge. Too often, students focus on visual patterns at the expense of how words are alike in sound. The following sort illustrates the way students move from a **sound sort** to visual **pattern sort.** First, students sorted by the differences in sound between hard-g and soft-g. Then students subdivided the sound sort by orthographic patterns. See what you can discover from this sort.

**First Sort by Sound of *G***

| Soft | Hard |
|---|---|
| edge | bag |
| cage | twig |
| huge | slug |
| ridge | flag |
| judge | drug |
| stage | leg |
| badge | |
| page | |
| lodge | |

**Second Sort by Pattern**

| dge | ge | g |
|---|---|---|
| edge | cage | bag |
| ridge | huge | twig |
| judge | stage | slug |
| badge | page | flag |
| lodge | | drug |
| | | leg |

To establish categories, select a **key word** or picture that will label the category clearly. Students read both the key word (or picture) and the new word (or picture) each time a new example is categorized. When the sort is done, have students read down each column of words (or pictures) and explicitly state what sound they have in common. Finally, be sure to have students verbalize what letter or spelling patterns represent that sound. To sort by sight and by sound, students say it, sort it, then say it again.

6. ***Begin with obvious contrasts first.*** Whenever students begin the study of a new feature, teachers choose key words or pictures that are distinctive. For example, when students first examine initial consonants, teachers do not begin by contrasting *M* with *N*. They share too many features to be distinct to the novice. They are both nasals, and they are visually similar as well. Better to begin by contrasting *M* with something totally different at first—*S* for example—then work toward finer distinctions as these categorizations become quite automatic. Move from general, gross discriminations to more specific ones.

Likewise, be wary of two-syllable words for beginners, even if only picture cards are used. *Banana* may start with a *b*, but the first *n* is stressed or pronounced the loudest, and some beginners will be confused.


**FIGURE 4–8** Doubling Sort: Comparing Words "That Do" With Words "That Don't"

**7.** ***Don't hide exceptions.*** Exceptions arise when students make generalizations. Don't hide these exceptions. By placing so-called irregular words in a miscellaneous or **oddball** category, new categories of consistency frequently emerge. For example, in looking at long vowel patterns, students find these exceptions: *give, have,* and *love;* yet it is no coincidence that they all have a *v.* They form a small but consistent pattern of their own. True exceptions do occasionally occur and become memorable by virtue of their rarity.

**8.** ***Avoid rules.*** Avoid telling students spelling "rules." Students discover consistencies and make generalizations for themselves. The teacher's job is to stack the deck and structure categorization tasks to make these consistencies explicit. Instill in students the habit of looking at words, asking questions, and searching for order. Rules are useful mnemonics for concepts already understood. They can be the icing on the cake of knowledge. But memorizing rules is not the way children make sense of how words work. Rules are no substitute for experience.

**9.** ***Work for automaticity.*** Accuracy in sorting is not enough; accuracy *and* speed are the ultimate indicators of mastery. Acquiring automaticity in sorting and recognizing orthographic patterns leads to the fluency necessary for proficient reading and writing. Your students will move from hesitancy to fluency in their sorting. Keep sorting until they do.

**10.** ***Return to meaningful texts.*** After sorting, students need to return to meaningful texts to hunt for other examples to add to the sorts. These hunts extend their analysis to more words and more difficult vocabulary. For example, after sorting one-syllable words into categories labeled *cat, drain,* and *snake,* a student added *tadpole, complain,* and *relate.* Through a simple word hunt, this child extended the pattern-to-sound consistency in one-syllable words to stressed syllables in two-syllable words.

These 10 principles of word study boil down to one golden rule of word study instruction: Teaching is not telling. In word study, students examine, manipulate, and categorize words. Teachers stack the deck so to speak, and create tasks that focus students' attention on critical contrasts. Stacking the deck for a discovery approach to word study is not the absence of directed instruction. To the contrary, a systematic program of word study, guided by an informed interpretation of spelling errors and other literacy behaviors, is a teacher-directed, child-centered approach to vocabulary growth and spelling development.

## GUIDELINES FOR SORTING

When working with picture or word sorts, you will first help your students attend to the targeted feature. Some general guidelines for sorting follow:

1. Use letter cards, letter patterns, or **key words** to head up each category at the top. Select a picture or word to illustrate each category and place it under the corresponding key to start a sorting column. If you are working with sounds, you can emphasize or elongate them by stretching them out. If you are working with patterns, you can think aloud as you point out the spelling pattern. If you are working with syllables, affixes, or derivational relations, you can explicitly point out the unit you are using.
2. Shuffle the rest of the cards and say something like:

   We are going to listen for the sound in the middle of these words and decide if they sound like *map* or like *duck*. I'll do a few first. Here is a *rug*. *Ruuuuug, uuuug, uuuuuuh. Rug* has the /uh/ sound in the middle so I'll put it under *duck, uuuuck, uuuuh.* Here is a *flag*. *Flaaaaag, aaaag, aaaah.* I'll put *flag* under *maaaap.*

3. After modeling several sorts, turn the task over to the students or take turns as you sort the rest of the examples. If students make a mistake at the very beginning, correct it immediately. Simply say: "*Sack* would go under *map.* Its middle sound is /ă/."
4. After the students have completed the first sort under your guidance, immediately ask them to shuffle and sort again, but this time cooperatively or independently. Unless your students are in the last two levels of word knowledge (syllables and affixes or derivational relations), ask them to name each word or picture aloud as they sort. If someone doesn't know what to call a picture, tell them immediately. If someone doesn't know a word, discard it. Don't make reading words or naming the pictures into a guessing game.
5. During the second sort, do not correct your students, but when they are through, have them name the words or pictures in each column to check themselves. If there are misplaced cards students fail to find, tell how many and in which column, and ask the students to try to find them.
6. At the end of the sort, be sure to have students verbalize what all the words or pictures in one column have in common, and how that commonality is represented by the letter, pattern, or key word at the top.

### Making Sorts Harder or Easier

Picture sorts or word sorts can be made easier or harder several ways. One way is by decreasing or increasing the number of contrasts in the sort. If children are young or inexperienced, starting with two columns is a good idea. As they become adept at sorting into two groups, step up to three categories and then four. Even after working with four categories or more, however, you may want to go back to fewer when you introduce a new concept.

Another way to make sorts easier or harder is by the contrasts you choose. The clearer the distinction, the easier the sort. It is easier to sort short-a and short-i, for example, than short-a and short-e. (The reasons for this will be discussed in Chapter 6.) Meanwhile, remember to start with obvious contrasts first, then gradually move to finer distinctions.

The difficulty of sorts can also be increased or decreased by the actual words you choose as examples within each category. For example, adding words with **blends** and **digraphs** and other consonant units to a short vowel sort can make those words more challenging. Ideally, children should be able to read all of the words in a word sort. In

reality, however, this may not always be the case. The more unfamiliar words in a given sort, the more difficult that sort will be. This caveat applies to both being able to read the word and knowing what the word means. A fifth grader studying derivational relations will need easier words to study than a tenth grader, simply because the fifth grader will have a more limited vocabulary. If there are unfamiliar words in a sort, try to place them toward the end of the deck so that known words are the first to be sorted. When new words come up, you can encourage your students to compare the new spelling with the known words already sorted in the columns. In word study you must consider both the word knowledge and the experience of the child.

Finally, the difficulty of a sort can be increased by adding an oddball column and including "exception" words that do not fit the targeted letter-sound or pattern feature.

### *Oddballs*

As students add other words to their sorts, they will undoubtedly encounter **oddballs**—words that are at odds with the consistencies within each category. The word *have,* for example, would be an oddball in a short-a versus long-a vowel sort. The vowel sound of the *a* in *have* is short, yet it is spelled with a long vowel pattern. Oddballs are often high-frequency words such as *have, said, was,* and *again.* Such words become memorable from repeated usage but are also memorable because they are odd. They stand out in the crowd.

The oddball category is also where students may place words if they are simply not sure about the sound they hear in the word. This often happens when students say words differently due to dialectical or regional pronunciations that vary from the "standard" pronunciation. For example, one student in Wise County, Virginia, pronounced the word *vein* as "vine" and was correct in placing *vein* in the oddball column as opposed to the long-a group. To her, the word *vein* was a long-i. Sometimes students detect subtle variations that adults may miss. Students often put words like *mail* and *sail* in a different sound category than *main, wait,* and *paid* because the long-a sound is slightly different. *Mail* may sound more like "may-ul."

### *Dealing With Mistakes*

Mistakes are part and parcel of learning, but not all mistakes are dealt with in the same way. As described in the preceding guidelines for sorting, mistakes made early on in a sort should probably be corrected right away. Sometimes, however, it is useful to find out why a student sorted a picture or word in a particular way. Simply asking, "Why did you put that there?" can provide further insight into a student's word knowledge. If mistakes are made during the second sort, your students will learn more if you guide them to finding and correcting the mistake on their own. If students are making a lot of mistakes it may indicate a need to take a step back or to make the sort easier.

## ORGANIZATION OF WORD STUDY INSTRUCTION

What does a word study classroom look like? What kinds of materials do you need? How much time does it take? What exactly do students do? These questions and more about organizing for word study are answered in the sections that follow.

### Getting the Classroom Ready for Word Study Instruction

Word study does not require a great investment of money or materials since the basic materials are already available in most classrooms. Access to a copier and plenty of unlined paper will get you well on your way. Copies of word sheets or picture sheets like those in Figure 4-9 can easily be created by hand using the templates and pictures in this

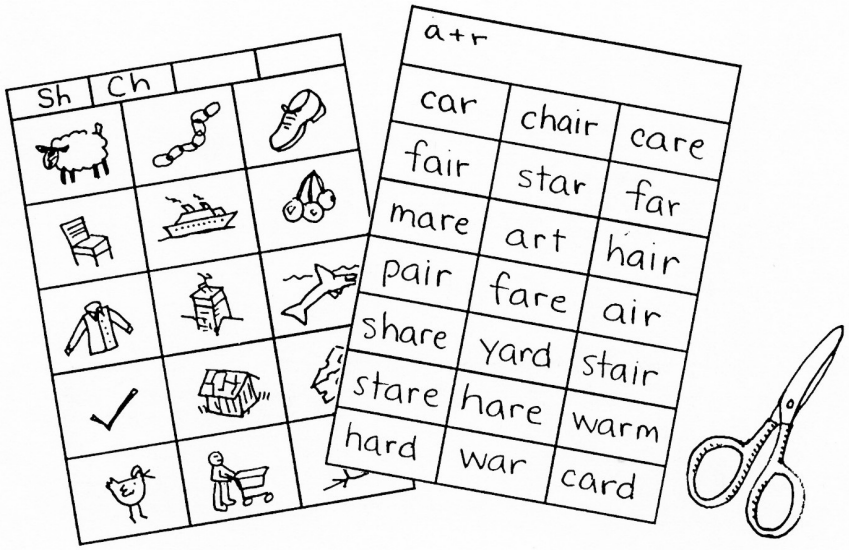



**FIGURE 4-9** Sample Word Study Handouts

book or they can be created by computer (use the tables format and set the margins at zero all around). The copies are given to students to cut apart for sorting activities, the heart of the word study program. Students quickly learn the routine of cutting words apart, sorting them into categories, and storing them in a notebook, library pocket, envelope, or plastic bag. Sturdy manila envelopes are recommended for each child because they can be used over and over for storing their sorts.

Sometimes the cut-up words and pictures are kept to be combined with new words or pictures the following week, sometimes they are pasted into a notebook or onto paper, and sometimes they may be simply discarded. Creating these sheets of pictures or words is the first task teachers need to tackle. Sample sorts and tips for the creation of sorts are given in the following chapters and in the appendix.

Planning how to model the categorization procedure you want your students to use is important. In small groups, you may simply use the same cutout words your students will be using as you model on a table or on the floor. For larger groups you may want to model sorts on the overhead transparency using cut-up transparencies of the words or pictures or use large word or picture cards in a pocket chart. Large picture cards are available commercially or can be made by enlarging the pictures in this book and pasting them on cardstock. Some schools have chart-maker copiers that easily enlarge pictures. Magnetic tape can be attached to the back of pictures and word cards for sorting on a metal chalkboard.

You may also want to make your own special set of pictures for sorting by copying the pictures in this book onto cardstock and adding some color to them. Laminating them is optional as cardstock is quite durable. A set of these pictures can be stored by beginning sounds or by vowel sounds in library pockets or in envelopes. They can then be used for small-group work or for individual sorting assignments. For example, you may find that you have one student who needs work on digraphs. You can pull out a set of *ch* and *sh* pictures, mix them together, and then challenge the student to sort them into columns using the pocket as a header. The **sound boards** in the appendix can be copied, cut apart, and used to label the picture sets. It might be useful to have several of these picture sets, especially for resource teachers who work with individual children or small groups. Resource teachers may also want to create word card sets to be used over and over. Index cards can be cut apart or cards can be purchased to make word cards, but

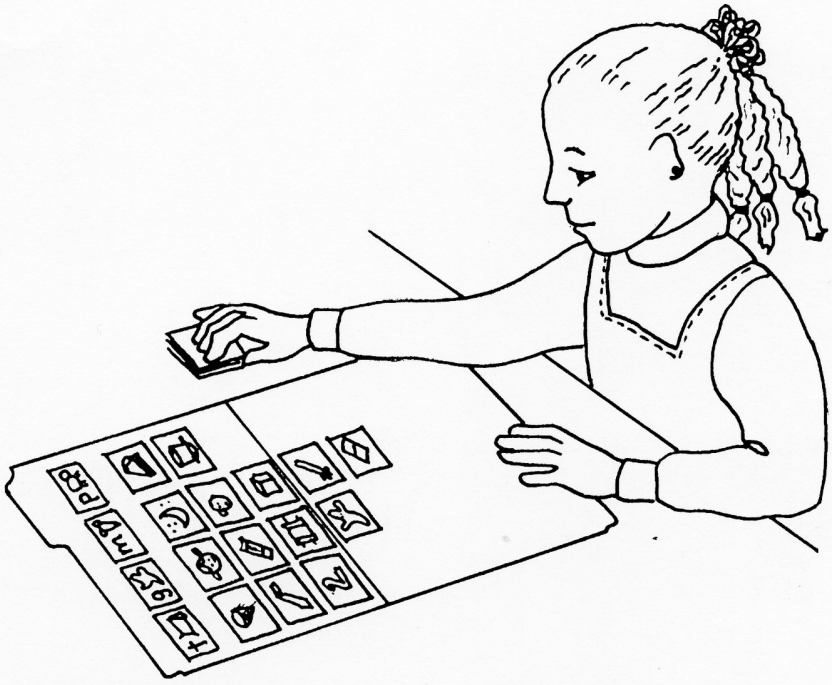


**FIGURE 4-10** Students Can Complete Sorts Independently Using Classification Folders

word sheets that are copied and cut apart by students to sort may still be the easiest way to manage word cards. They can be stored in envelopes and reused from year to year to reduce paper consumption.

Many teachers use manila file folders to hold materials and to help students sort their words or pictures into categories as shown in Figure 4-10. Classification folders are divided into three to five columns with key words or pictures for headers glued in place. Words or pictures for sorting are stored in the folder and students sort directly in the columns. Once the folders have been developed, teachers can individualize word study fairly easily by pulling out the folders that target the exact needs of their students. When there is little room in a class for centers, teachers use these folders as a place to store the activities that students can take back to their desks.

Games are appealing for children and encourage them to practice in more depth and apply what they have learned in a new situation. This book contains many ideas for the creation of games, and you will want to begin creating these to supplement the basic word or picture sorts. Look for generic games first since many of them can be used with a variety of word features you will study across the year. For example, the follow-the-path game being played by the boys in Figure 4-11 can be laminated before labeling the spaces and then new letters substituted as they become the focus of study. Label the spaces with a washable overhead projector pen. Over time you can create more specific games.

Word study does not require any dramatic changes to the physical setup of most classrooms. Storage space is needed for the word or picture sheets, large word cards, and games you create but most of these can be stored in folders in a filing cabinet. Word study notebooks might be stored in a common area such as a plastic file box or tub to make it easy for the teacher to access them when checking student work.

Space is needed for group work, individual work, and partner work. Separate areas for word sorting and discussion are needed to convene a group on the floor or at tables in one part of the classroom while other children continue to work at their desks or in


**FIGURE 4–11** Board Game for Initial Consonants

other areas of the room. Students' desks provide a surface for individual word sorting. In addition, centers or work stations can be set up where students work individually or with a partner to sort or play a game. A stopwatch is a part of some word study activities and can be placed in the word study center. Many teachers also post chart-size sound boards in this area. Table 4-1 summarizes what you might need, depending on the age and range of developmental word knowledge in your classroom.

## Scheduling the Day for Word Study Instruction

The second step to organize word study instruction is to set up a schedule and to develop weekly routines. There are many ways to organize word study. Some teachers conduct word study lessons as part of their reading groups. Other teachers work with two to three separate word study groups and may rotate their students from **circle time** with the teacher to individual **seat work** and **center times.** There may also be settings in which teachers conference individually with children in a workshop routine. In all settings, the focus of word study should be upon active inquiry and discovery where students take much of the responsibility for their own learning. There are a number of things to consider when scheduling word study in your classroom:

1. ***Develop a familiar weekly routine with daily activities.*** Routines will save you planning time, ease transitions, and make the most of the time you devote to word study. Several weekly routines described in this chapter will give you ideas about how to create your own. Include homework routines as well. When parents know what to expect every evening they are more likely to see that the work gets done.

2. ***Schedule time for group work.*** Students at the same developmental level should work with a teacher for directed word study. During this time, teachers model new sorts, guide practice sorts, and lead students in discussions that stimulate thinking and further their understanding. Chapter 3 offers suggestions for grouping students for instruction.

3. ***Keep it short.*** Word study should be a regular part of daily language arts, but it need not take up a great deal of time. Teacher-led introductory lessons may take 15 to 20 minutes, but subsequent activities should last only about 10 minutes a day. Since much

**TABLE 4–1 Word Study Materials**

| From the Supply Room | From the Bookstore | From Printing Services |
|---|---|---|
| copy paper for sorts | student dictionaries | photocopied picture cards |
| cardstock | rhyming dictionary | photocopied word cards |
| word study notebooks | etymological dictionary | student sound boards |
| manila folders | homophone books | poster sound boards |
| gameboard materials | alphabet books | |
| spinners and dice | phonics readers | |
| storage containers | | |
| library pockets | | |
| chart paper | | |

of word study can take place without the teacher's immediate attention, it can fit easily into odd bits of time during the day. Children can play spelling games right before lunch or sort their words one more time before they pack up to go home.

4. ***Plan time for students to sort independently and with partners.*** Students need time to sort through words on their own, and they need time to search for the orthographic features they are studying. Teachers build this independent work into seat work, center activities, and games that students play together. Word study lends itself nicely to many cooperative activities.

## Progressive Skill Development

One of the most important decisions a teacher makes is how to schedule activities over the course of a week. Betty Lee, a renowned first grade teacher of 30 years, developed a general progression in word study activities. In this progression, students recognize, recall, judge, and apply their growing word knowledge through the activities.

### *Recognize*

Students are presented a particular feature to consider. With **key pictures** and key words, teachers guide the students as they compare words. For example, when students analyze initial consonants, they compare the picture of a *man* with the key picture of a *mouse.* Students compare the pictures for sound, and the written words for sounds and patterns. They recognize that the words *man* and *mouse* begin with the same sound. To recognize is to be aware of a new orthographic feature. Sometimes it is helpful to post on the wall a record of key words used in sorting. Children can look for similar words throughout the day.

### *Recall*

In this second step in the progression, students recall examples of the features they have studied. A key word or key picture is provided to remind students of the types of words they are trying to recall as they endeavor to generate other examples. After sorting, young children may **draw and label** pictures of things that begin with *m* using the key word *mouse* to stimulate recall. If students' immediate recall stalls, they might be encouraged to look through alphabet books to trigger recall. Students in a later stage of orthographic development may generate rhyming words that follow a specific orthographic pattern. If the key word is *beat,* students might be shown how they can find other words by dropping the beginning consonant and adding another to obtain *seat, neat,* or *meat.* These words can then be recorded on a chart or in their word study notebooks.

## Judge

In judgment activities, students hunt through word books or picture books for words that match the features they are studying. In a **word hunt,** they make judgments as to which words fit in the categories established in the previous recognize and recall lessons. For example, students studying short-a will have to judge the sound of every *a* word they come to in scanning back through familiar texts. These words are copied into columns under the appropriate category header. Children in the emergent stage may hunt through catalogs or magazines to cut out pictures of things that have a particular sound and paste these into sorts.

## Apply

There are many application-type activities. Students apply what they have learned to create something new. Open sorts are application activities because students find and proclaim their own categories. For example, students who have studied the various patterns for long-e can apply this information to sort long-o words. Another form of application involves guided proofreading. Many teachers have children return to their writing folders to look for words they may have written earlier that follow the sound or pattern they have just sorted. Board games and card games that match and categorize word features also provide opportunities for application in an enjoyable context.

One first grade teacher, Susan Smith, has her children "teach a word" at the end of each week. One child, who chose the word *floor,* stood up with an illustrated picture of a house with floors on one side, and the words *floor* and *door* on the other. As he taught the word, he held up his picture and said "first floor, second floor." Then he flipped the card and held up word cards and said "*floor* rhymes with *door.*" Clearly, this student made a creative application of his newfound word knowledge!

As students become wordsmiths, you'll be surprised by the lists of words they create. One class created an illustrated homophone dictionary in a "big book" format (see Figure 4-12). By the end of the year, 250 homophone pairs had been collected, illustrated, and arranged in alphabetical order. The children's spelling and vocabulary were enhanced by this cooperative project.

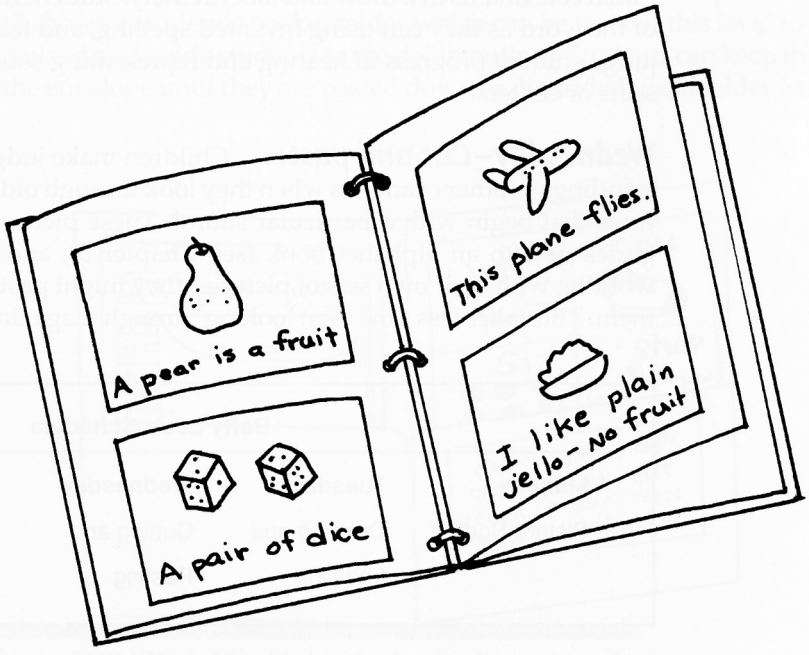



**FIGURE 4-12** Class Homophone Book

## Word Study Schedules

Many teachers plan their weekly word study routine around these progressive skills. In the following examples, teachers begin with a directed word study session in which they introduce the categories. Betty Lee's plan works well for children who are in the emergent to early letter name–alphabetic stage where sorting is done with pictures and children cannot be expected to read or spell the printed words.

### *Betty Lee's Routine for Emergent to Early Letter Name-Alphabetic Spellers*

In her first grade class, Betty Lee organized her word study program around a circle-seat-center rotation format. She introduced her spelling concepts with a picture sort at circle time, working with about a third of the class who were at the same developmental level. A second third of the class worked at at their seats drawing and labeling pictures of words they recall from a previous lesson. The remaining students were stationed at different centers where they worked at cutting and pasting, or playing games with a partner. Activities can be organized in a 5-day routine as summarized in Figure 4-13 and described in the following paragraphs, or this routine can be shortened into a 3-day plan for students who are reviewing and need to move more quickly.

***Monday–Picture sort.*** The teacher models the categorization routine using picture cards and helps students recognize the sounds and letters they are studying. Sound categories are established using a letter card and a key picture which is used repeatedly to help students develop a strong association between the beginning sound of the word and the letter that represents it. Each picture is named and compared to the key picture to listen for sounds that are the same. The sort might be repeated several times in the circle. During their center time the children do the same picture sort on their own or with a partner, or they may have their own set of pictures to sort at their seat.

***Tuesday–Draw and label.*** Students recall the feature introduced on Monday in drawing and labeling activities. The examples in Figure 4-14 show a student's recall of initial consonants in a draw and label activity. Students are encouraged to write as much of the word as they can using invented spelling, and teachers can use these spellings to judge student progress in hearing and representing sounds. Students may sort again at seats or centers.

***Wednesday–Cut and paste.*** Children make judgments and extend their understandings to other examples when they look through old catalogs and magazines for pictures that begin with a particular sound. These pictures are cut out, pasted into categories or into an alphabet book (see Chapter 5), and labeled. If children have been working with their own sets of pictures, they might paste these into categories and label them. This takes less time than looking through magazines but it is also less challenging.

**Betty Lee's Schedule**

| Monday | Tuesday | Wednesday | Thursday | Friday |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Picture Sorting | Drawing and Labeling | Cutting and Pasting | Word Hunts<br>Word Banks | Games |

**FIGURE 4-13** Betty Lee's Weekly Schedule of Word Study With Pictures

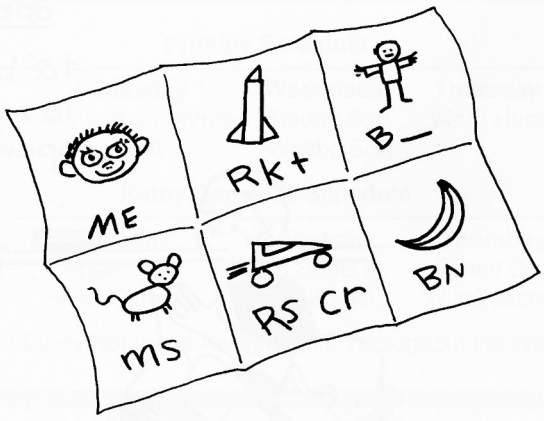



**FIGURE 4-14** Draw and Label Activity

Large retail-store catalogs are particularly useful because the index is arranged alphabetically. Teachers can tear out several pages and place them in a folder for students to look through as they search for pictures to cut and paste and then label.

***Thursday—Word hunts.*** Children apply what they have learned as they look for more words through word hunts, word bank activities, and other tasks. Children reread nursery rhymes and jingles and they circle words that begin with the same sounds they have been categorizing all week. These words are added to their sorts. (Word bank activities are described in more detail in Chapter 6.)

***Friday—Game day.*** Children delight in the opportunity to play board games, card games, and other games in which the recognition, recall, and judgment of spelling features are applied.

In Betty Lee's plan, most of the teaching falls into the focus achieved during the recognition and recall activities planned for Monday and Tuesday. The children move on to judgment and application on their own throughout the latter part of the week. Figure 4-15 shows a student's pocket folder which can be used at this level to keep materials organized and guide students to the daily routines. Students can keep their cutout words in the envelope until they are pasted down or discarded. Each folder has a **sound**

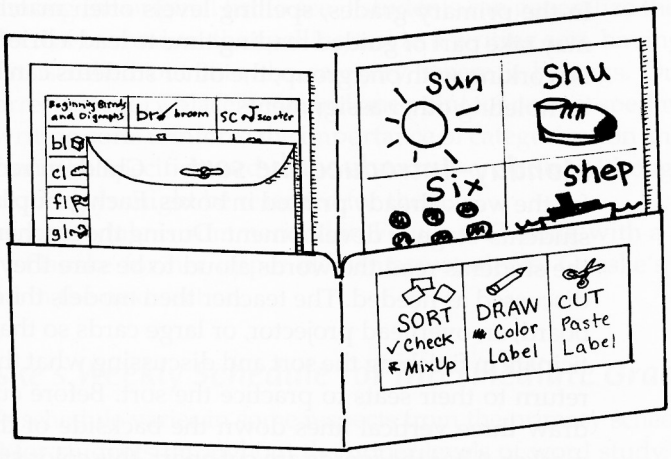



**FIGURE 4-15** Pocket Folder for Organizing Materials

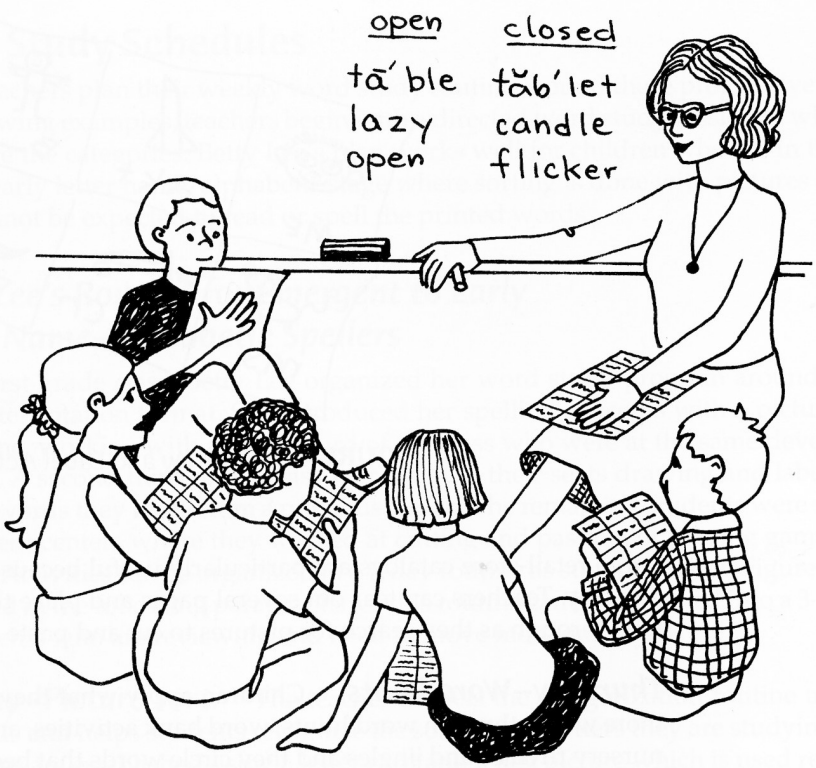



**FIGURE 4-16** Students Gather With Weekly Word Lists for an Introductory Sort

**board** (one of three sound charts which can be found in the appendix) to use as a reference and a record of progress. Students can simply color the boxes lightly with crayon to indicate that they have worked with that sound.

## A Weekly Schedule for Primary Children in the Letter Name-Alphabetic to Within Word Pattern Stage

The next routine works well for children who are readers and able to spell entire words. In the primary grades, spelling levels often match reading levels closely and teachers may take part of guided reading time to lead a brief word study lesson. While the teacher is working with one group, the other students can be reading independently, writing, or completing other assignments.

***Monday–Introduce the sort.*** Children receive a word study sheet with words for the week already printed in boxes. Each group has different words, depending on the students' stage of development. During the teacher-guided lesson shown in Figure 4-16, the students read the words aloud to be sure they are known. Word meanings are also discussed as needed. The teacher then models the beginning of the sort using the blackboard, an overhead projector, or large cards so that everyone can see. The children participate in finishing the sort and discussing what the sort reveals about words. They then return to their seats to practice the sort. Before cutting their words apart, they should draw three vertical lines down the backside of their paper using a crayon or colored marker. After the words are cut apart, this color stripe will distinguish their word cards from others as the children work together. The teacher then repeats this procedure with the next guided reading group focusing on a different feature.

**Primary Schedule**

| Monday | Tuesday | Wednesday | Thursday | Friday |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Introduce Sort in Group | Re-sort and Write Sort | Buddy Sort Writing Sort | Word Hunt | Testing and Games |

**Kathy Ganske's Schedule**

| Monday | Tuesday | Wednesday | Thursday | Friday |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Introduce Sort in Group | Speed Sort With Partner | Word Hunts in Trade Books | Speed Sort With Teacher | Testing |

Word Study Notebook Assignments Throughout the Week

**FIGURE 4-17** Two Schedules for Use When Students Sort Words

***Tuesday—Practice the sort and write it.*** On Tuesday, group by group, students bring their words to sort under the teacher's supervision again. Troublesome words may be discussed, and eliminated if necessary. Children are assigned a writing sort for seat work or for homework.

***Wednesday—Buddy sorts and writing sorts.*** On Wednesday, students work in pairs to do buddy sorts as described earlier in this chapter. After each partner has lead the sort, the pair might do a writing sort in which the partners take turns calling words aloud for the other to write into categories. This can also be a homework assignment in which the parents call the words aloud.

***Thursday—Word hunts.*** Word hunts are conducted in groups, with partners, or individually. Students search through current reading material to find additional words that fit the categories for the week. When other words are found, they are added to the bottom of the columns created earlier in the week during written word sorts. This can also be homework.

***Friday—Assessment and games.*** A traditional spelling test format can be used for assessment. If you have two or three groups, simply call one word in turn for each group. This may sound confusing but children will recognize the words they have studied over the week and rarely lose track. It isn't necessary to call out every word studied during the week (10 may be enough) and teachers may even call out some bonus words that were not among the original list to see if students can generalize the principles. It is particularly effective to conduct the spelling test as a writing sort, having students write each word as it is called out into the category where it belongs. One point can be awarded for correct category placement, and one point for correct spelling. Spelling tests conducted as writing sorts reinforce the importance of categorization and force students to generalize from the specific word to the system as a whole. Although games can be played anytime, Fridays might be reserved for them.

This primary schedule is summarized in Figure 4-17 along with a schedule developed by Kathy Ganske for her upper elementary students. Ganske's schedule is described in detail in the next section.

## Kathy Ganske's Weekly Schedule for Intermediate Grades

Kathy Ganske's schedule varies in some respects from the primary schedule. This schedule works well for students throughout the upper levels of word study. There is a good deal of small-group work, and **word study notebooks** (see Figure 4-4) become an important part of the word study scene. Word study notebooks are used in five basic activities:

**Word Study Notebooks**

**Weekly activities for this notebook include:**
1. Written sorts
2. Draw and label
3. Sentences
4. Words from word hunts

**You are expected to:**
1. Use correct spelling of assigned words
2. Use complete sentences
3. Use your best handwriting
4. Make good use of word study time

**You will be evaluated in this manner:**
* Excellent work
√ Good work but could be improved
R You need to redo this assignment

**FIGURE 4-18** Expectations for Word Study Notebooks

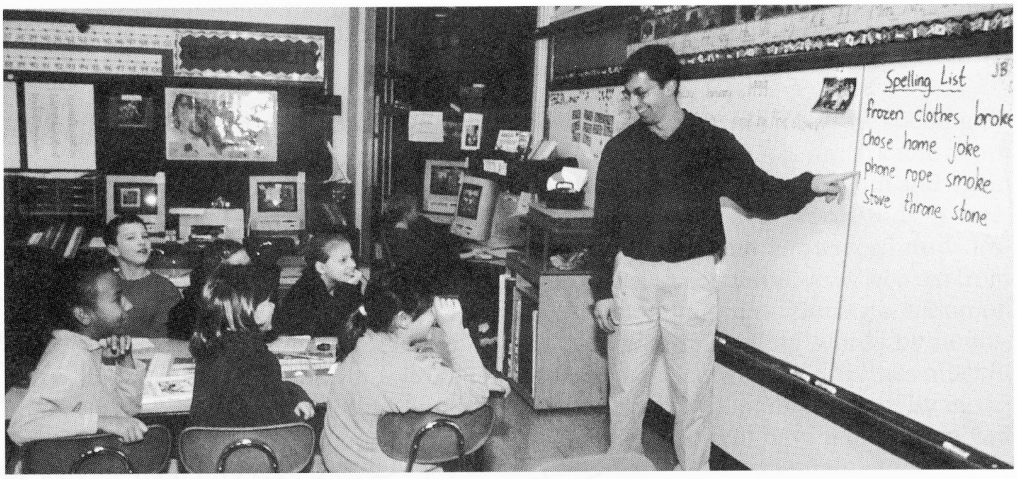
1. *Writing word sorts.* Students write the words into the same categories developed during hands-on sorting. Key words are used as headers for each column.
2. *Selecting 10 words to draw and label.* Even older students enjoy the opportunity to illustrate words with simple drawings that reveal their meanings.
3. *Changing a letter (or letters) to make new words.* Initial letter(s) might be substituted to create lists of words that rhyme. For example, starting with the word *black* a student might generate *stack, quack, track, shack,* and so on.
4. *Selecting 10 words to use in sentences.* This is especially important as children begin the study of homophones, inflected words (*ride, rides, riding*), and roots and suffixes where meaning is an issue.
5. *Doing word hunts in trade books and response journals.* Students add these words to the written sorts in their notebooks as shown in Figure 4-4.

Work in the word study notebooks is done independently and graded. Kathy Ganske makes her expectations clear by pasting a chart such as the one in Figure 4-18 on the inside cover of the notebook. Composition books with stiff cardboard covers and sewn pages last all year.

One typical year, Kathy Ganske had a fourth grade class of 25 children who exhibited a wide range of instructional levels in reading and spelling. By administering her own spelling-by-stage assessment during the first few days of school, she grouped her pupils into three stages of developmental word knowledge (Ganske, 1994). One group was so large, however, that it was divided in two, making a total of four word study groups that she scheduled for regular small-group meetings. Her weekly schedule follows:

***Monday–Introduce the sort.*** On Monday morning, every child finds a word study sheet on his or her desk. Different spelling groups get different words for the week. Children sort the words before school even begins in anticipation of the categories they might be sorting later on. These spontaneous, open sorts are interesting for the teacher to observe. They tell her what students already know.

While the rest of the class settles down for independent reading and journal writing, the teacher works with small groups one at a time on the floor or around a table. Everyone brings their cutout word cards with them. The very first thing the teacher does is go through her own stack of words one at a time, pronouncing each one, and talking about meaning. Students also give examples of each word's meaning and share their knowledge of where they have heard or seen the word before.




This teacher presents a weekly word list that will lead to a new sort.

Next the teacher establishes the key words that guide the sorts. She asks students what they think the categories might be and why they think so. In many cases, students have already seen the consistencies in sound or pattern as they cut out the words, and they have anticipated the sort. Nevertheless, the teacher carefully models the sorting, comparing each word to the key word. In each case, the word on the card is pronounced, placed under a key word, and compared to the pronunciation of the key word. In order for the word to be placed in a column, it must match the key word by sound, pattern, or both.

Once the word sort has been demonstrated and discussed, students sort their own word cards in front of the teacher, saying each word aloud. When they are finished, they learn to read through the words in each column to see if there are any changes they would like to make. The teacher checks the sorts and asks students to explain why they grouped the words the way they did. Misconceptions are corrected, and the sorting is remodeled if needed. Afterward, students return to their desks to write the sort in their word study notebooks. Students take their word cards home to practice in anticipation of the speed sorts scheduled for the next day. After all students from the first group have been guided in their first sort of the week, the teacher calls the next groups in turn to work with a different batch of words. At their desks, students work in their word study notebooks, and then return to other reading and writing assignments.

***Tuesday—Speed sorts.*** On Tuesday there is no teacher-directed word study. Instead, students pair for speed sorts, and follow a posted schedule of times and partners. Throughout the day, partners go back to the "sorting table" at 10-minute intervals to sort their word cards for accuracy and speed. One child times the other with a stopwatch kept at the table and then checks for correctness against an answer sheet. Partners work together to solve any discrepancies between their sort and the answer. The partners return to their seats to do additional work in their word study notebooks and then pick up where they left off with other assignments.

***Wednesday—Word hunts.*** On Wednesday, all four word study groups convene at the same time in their respective groups. Students bring the books they are currently reading, and they gather around a large piece of chart or butcher paper spread on the floor. A leader is appointed and the same key words used on Monday and Tuesday are written across the top of the large sheet of paper. Students skim and scan pages in their books that they have already read, looking for words that match the key words according to the feature under study. As examples are found, students share their words. Much discussion may ensue as to whether or not a word contains the spelling feature in question. Often the dictionary is consulted, particularly to resolve questions of stress,


**FIGURE 4-19** Cooperative Group Word Hunt

syllabication, or meaning. Once a consensus is reached, the leader writes the word on the paper under the proper key word. The word hunt continues in this cooperative group format for a specified amount of time, and usually several examples are found for each column (see Figure 4-19).

During word hunts, the teacher circulates from group to group and comments on the frequency of one pattern over another. Some patterns are found in virtually every text again and again, whereas others are harder to find. The teacher asks group members to provide reasons for the agreed upon groupings. After this activity, the word hunt is recorded in each member's word study notebook. For homework that night, students find additional examples to add to their notebooks from the books they are reading at home. It is important, however, that students not confuse skimming for word patterns with reading for meaning. The teacher asks her students to use the trade books they have read or are currently reading for word hunts.

***Thursday—Speed sorts with teacher.*** Thursday is the children's favorite day. If they wish, students can race the teacher in sorting their word cards. Students who are interested in this activity practice the night before. As students meet in their word study groups to practice sorting for speed and accuracy, the teacher circulates from group to group and sorts the word cards while being timed. For the next few minutes, group members try to beat her time. Those who succeed get to put their name on the blackboard, and some special prize or privilege is awarded at the end of the day.

***Friday—Evaluation and monitoring progress.*** Friday completes the cycle for the week. Each group is tested on the spelling features they have examined through their hunting and sorting tasks all week. Not every word is tested, however—only a random sample of words sorted over the week. In this way, the discriminating orthographic feature is emphasized, as opposed to rote memorization of a given list of words.

Knowledge of particular orthographic patterns can also be checked in the form of nonsense words. Students may be asked to spell the word *remblete*, for example, and then the teacher asks what key word they thought of to guide their spelling (*complete*). In this way, she gauges the degree that the studied features generalize to unknown words.

Results of the Friday test as well as observations made during the week influence the teacher's plans for the next week. She may decide that students need to revisit a feature, compare it to another feature, or move on to new features. Group membership may also change depending on a given child's pace and progress.