

Using Lemony Snicket to Bring Smiles to Your Vocabulary Lessons

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A decade or so ago when teachers embraced the idea that students' vocabularies would increase more through wide reading than through directed teaching, we worried that teachers would dramatically decrease, if not altogether eliminate, the amount of time spent on direct vocabulary instruction. Undeniably, there is a correlation between wide reading and having a good vocabulary, but this relationship is profoundly circular rather than one-directional.

Because of these convictions, we have always worked hard—and intend to keep doing so—to make time in class for the direct teaching of vocabulary. But when we began reading Lemony Snicket's popular Series of Unfortunate Events (actually written by Daniel Handler, who uses Snicket as a pen name), we found ourselves admitting that reading—at least reading these particular books—can go a long way toward teaching not only the meanings of particular words but also the underlying processes of language change, which will increase the ability of readers to figure out the meanings of words they have not previously met and to be creative word users in their own reading and writing.

We hope that even reluctant readers will find all 13 books of the series, as well as *Lemony Snicket: The Unauthorized Autobiography* (2003), fun to read. Thanks to Snicket's style and offbeat sense of humor, not to mention his enthusiasm for Latin-based words, these books do exactly what Michaels (2001) advised when she said that vocabulary instruction needs to show students how the meanings of words “expand over the centuries from literal to figurative” and “from concrete to abstract” (p. 11).

So here is our advice for taking advantage of these wonderful books.

Read the Books

Do whatever you can to get students to read the books. Beg, borrow, buy, or burgle a classroom set (or

two) of the books, make a display, give book talks, or ask your librarian to get multiple copies so that small groups can read the same book and pool their ideas for vocabulary-related activities. We made an introductory PowerPoint presentation, which we would be happy to forward upon request, or you might want to project parts of the official website (www.lemonysnicket.com), play excerpts from the CDs (which are beautifully read by Tim Curry), or show selected clips from the film. Once students are familiar with the basic story, you can concentrate on the language lessons.

Snicket makes it clear that words have more than one meaning. For example, he starts Chapter Seven of *The Grim Grotto* (2004) as follows:

The word *lousy* like the word *volunteer*, the word *fire*, the word *department*, and many other words found in dictionaries and other important documents, has a number of different definitions depending on the exact circumstances in which it is used. (p. 139)

He goes on to explain that *lousy* is commonly used to talk about things that are bad, as when he wrote about the sinister smells coming from *Lousy Lane* and the *lousy* journey the children had while climbing Mortmain Mountain. So far, he says, he hasn't used the medical definition of the word, “infested with lice,” but he may find occasion to use it if Count Olaf's hygiene grows worse. And then there is also the somewhat obscure definition of *lousy*, when it means “abundantly supplied” as is Count Olaf “with treacherous plans,” the *Queequeg* submarine “with metal pipes,” and the whole world “with unfathomable secrets” (p. 140).

A second language concept that Snicket is aware of is the fact that while some words can be defined with quick answers, other words are more complicated and need multiple illustrations. For example, backstage at the play, one of Count Olaf's cronies is in charge of controlling Klaus, who is trying to rescue his older sister, Violet, from having to marry Count

Olaf, and as he takes hold of Klaus, he says, “You and I will stand here for the *duration* of the act. That means the whole thing.” Klaus disgustingly tells the man that he knows “what the word *duration* means,” but he does not object a few lines later when Snicket enters as the story’s narrator and says, “It will be of no interest to you if I describe the actions of this *insipid*—the word *insipid* here means ‘dull and foolish’—play by Al Funcoot [an anagram of Count Olaf], because it was a dreadful play” (p. 141), an idea that is further developed throughout the chapter.

Another example of the way Snicket provides readers with multiple experiences with a word or a concept occurs in *The Ersatz Elevator* (2000b) when he explains that *ersatz* is “a word that describes a situation in which one thing is pretending to be another, the way the secret passageway the Baudelaires were looking at had been pretending to be an elevator” (p. 129). He also describes a villain as being *ersatz* for pretending to be a good person, and a cable made of tied-together strips of cloth as being an *ersatz* rope. Finally, he advises readers who may be imagining a happy ending for the Baudelaires that their “imaginings would be *ersatz*, as all imaginings are” (p. 253).

Snicket’s third technique is to illustrate that words can be defined in quite different, yet still correct, ways. For example, in *The Austere Academy* (2000a), he defines *adversity* as “trouble,” while Klaus defines it as “Count Olaf” (p. 20). In a much longer definition from the same book, he warns readers against making assumptions by explaining,

Assumptions are dangerous things to make, and like all dangerous things to make—bombs, for instance, or strawberry shortcake—if you make even the tiniest mistake you can find yourself in terrible trouble. Making assumptions simply means believing things are a certain way with little or no evidence that shows you are correct, and you can see at once how this can lead to terrible trouble. (p. 187)

In *The Hostile Hospital* (2001a), Snicket plays with the difference between literal and figurative meanings when he has Esmé Squalor arrive at the hospital wearing “a pair of shoes with stiletto heels.” Although dictionaries describe *stiletto heels* as “a woman’s shoe with a very long and narrow heel,” each of Esmé’s shoes “is affixed with a small, slender knife where each heel should be” (p. 116).

Snicket’s most surprising illustration occurs in *The Carnivorous Carnival* (2002), where the divider page

of Chapter Five includes the heading and a drawing of an exotic circus tent, along with this definition:

If you have ever experienced something that feels strangely familiar, as if the exact same thing has happened to you before, then you are experiencing what the French call “*déjà vu*.” Like most French expressions—“*ennui*,” which is a fancy term for severe boredom, or “*la petite mort*,” which describes a feeling that part of you has died—“*déjà vu*” refers to something that is usually not very pleasant, because it is curious to feel as if you have heard or seen something that you have heard or seen before. (p. 100)

Readers then turn the page and see the exact same heading, illustration, and words. It is only when they read down to the 10th line that they find any difference in wording. At this point they begin to realize that they have been tricked. The printers did not make a mistake; instead, Lemony Snicket figured out a clever way to have his readers experience *déjà vu*.

Provide Opportunities for Activities

Rather than having students write a book review after reading one of the books, encourage them to discuss the words and meanings that they discover in the books by having them make a poster illustrating one of Snicket’s definitions. They can write out the word or phrase and create a Snicket-style definition, which is typically wordier but also lots more fun than regular dictionary definitions.

For posters, we have found that students exert themselves more if we provide cardstock and felt tip pens, and if we allow them the option of printing out their definitions in a large, boldface font. We encourage illustrations because experts agree that when students create an illustration to go along with a meaning, they will remember the word longer, but for most students it feels artificial to draw pictures just for themselves and so they resist. Having an ever-changing Lemony Snicket Word Wall gives a purpose to the posters and, even more important, gives students an opportunity to explain their posters and talk about their words or phrases when they put their posters up.

Of course, it is easiest to make assignments and send students home to prepare their posters, but as Allen (1999) explained, when students talk together about words, they activate prior knowledge and use

Uncle Monty (who we suspect is named for Monty Python) interrupts Klaus's explanation by explaining that he studies snakes, and one of his most dangerous snakes is the *Mamba du Mal*. The *mal* part of the snake's name comes from Latin *malus*, meaning bad. Here a teacher can guide students to make a poster to use in teaching their fellow students such words as *maladjusted*, *malcontent*, *malfeasance*, *malnourished*, *malodorous*, and *malignant*. To play a joke on fellow members of the Herpetological Society, Uncle Monty names one of his most harmless snakes the Incredibly Deadly Viper, which he explains is a *misnomer*, or wrong name. Readers, if they are trained to think about such parts of words, can illustrate the *mis-* part of the word with such cognates as

After a few weeks of working with basic Lemony Snicket words, you can change the Snicket Word Wall to the more sophisticated task of having students explain the literary allusions that Snicket makes. Students will come away with new appreciation for the facts that famous names carry their own sets of connotations and that readers who do not know about the people whose names Snicket uses miss out on much of the fun.

In references to Herman Melville, when a worker gets his leg mangled in *The Miserable Mill* (2000c), his fellow workers give him a coupon for 50% off a cast at the Ahab Memorial Hospital in Paltryville. In *The Wide Window* (2000d), the hurricane that sweeps Aunt Josephine away is named Herman, while in *The Grim Grotto* (2004), the children have to escape in a miniature submarine named the *Queequeg*. In *The Austere Academy* (2000a), the Baudelaires are on a school team that wears Herman Melville shirts, while the villain, Count Olaf, wears an Edgar A. Guest shirt.

For the amusement of adult readers, Snicket makes intriguing references to a whole host of adult authors, including J.D. Salinger, T.S. Eliot, Virginia Woolf, Vladimir Nabokov, William Congreve, George Orwell, Franz Kafka, Oscar Wilde, Lewis Carroll, Sappho, Dante Alighieri, Gustave Flaubert, James Thurber, and Robert Frost. If you include *Lemony Snicket: The Unauthorized Autobiography* (2003), you can show that Snicket's fellow shipmates, on one of his many travels to track down information on the Baudelaires, are all children's book authors.

- Snicket, L. (2000c). *The miserable mill: Book the fourth*. New York: HarperCollins.
 Snicket, L. (2000d). *The wide window: Book the third*. New York: HarperCollins.
 Snicket, L. (2001a). *The hostile hospital: Book the eighth*. New York: HarperCollins.
 Snicket, L. (2001b). *The vile village: Book the seventh*. New York: HarperCollins.
 Snicket, L. (2002). *The carnivorous carnival: Book the ninth*. New York: HarperCollins.
 Snicket, L. (2003). *Lemony Snicket: The unauthorized autobiography*. New York: HarperCollins.
 Snicket, L. (2004). *The grim grotto: Book the eleventh*. New York: HarperCollins.

Some Tips to Get Started

Even teachers who do not have class time or the needed resources to follow our suggestions of using the Snicket books to teach vocabulary can incorporate Handler's techniques by doing the following:

- Develop an awareness of the magic and fun of language.
- Include vocabulary study as part of the larger picture of linguistic processes.
- Rather than restricting the study of vocabulary to 20 minutes on Mondays (when you pass out the list) and 20 minutes on Fridays (when you give the quiz), stop whatever you are doing and give a vocabulary minilesson whenever an interesting word happens to come up.
- Extend such lessons by teaching the word and its relatives, because the meanings of related words will reinforce students' learning and memories.
- Enjoy yourself.

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Lesson Link

For a related lesson plan, visit ReadWriteThink.org to find

► [Acquiring New Vocabulary Through Book Discussion Groups](#)

References

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- Snicket, L. (1999). *The reptile room: Book the second*. New York: HarperCollins.
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