

They Still Can't Spell?

Understanding and Supporting Challenged Spellers in Middle and High School

Rebecca Bowers Sipe
with
*Dawn Putnam, Karen Reed-Nordwall,
Tracy Rosewarne, Jennifer Walsh*

Foreword by Kylene Beers

HEINEMANN
Portsmouth, NH

Heinemann

A division of Reed Elsevier Inc.
361 Hanover Street
Portsmouth, NH 03801-3912
www.heinemann.com

Offices and agents throughout the world

© 2003 by Rebecca Bowers Sipe

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, including information storage and retrieval systems, without permission in writing from the publisher, except by a reviewer, who may quote brief passages in a review, with the exception of the reproducible pages, which are identified by a credit line and can be photocopied for classroom use only.

The author and publisher wish to thank those who have generously given permission to reprint borrowed material:

“Candidate for a Pullet Surprise” by Dr. Jerrold Zar in *The Journal of Irreproducible Results*, January/February 1994. Reprinted by permission of the author and Wisdom Simulators, Inc., Cambridge, Massachusetts.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Sipe, Rebecca Bowers.

They still can't spell? : understanding and supporting challenged spellers in middle and high school / Rebecca Bowers Sipe with Jennifer Walsh . . . [et al.] ; foreword by Kylene Beers.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-325-00539-7 (alk. paper)

1. English language—Orthography and spelling—Study and teaching (Middle school)—United States—Case studies. 2. English language—Orthography and spelling—Study and teaching (Secondary)—United States—Case studies. I. Title.

LB1574.S53 2003

428.1—dc21

2003006681

Editor: James Strickland

Production: Vicki Kasabian

Cover design: Night & Day Design

Typesetter: TechBooks

Manufacturing: Steve Bernier

Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper

07 06 05 04 03 RRD 1 2 3 4 5

Contents

<i>Foreword by Kylene Beers</i>	ix
<i>Preface</i>	xii
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	xv
Part I Who Are Challenged Spellers?	
1 Investigating Challenged Spellers	2
Learning from the Available Research	
Seeking Our Own Answers	
2 Getting Started: Learning from Student Spelling Histories	10
Analyzing Students' Written Spelling Histories	
Categories of Errors	
3 Learning from Student Interviews	20
Planning the Interviews	
Student Observations About Spelling Instruction	
The Strategies They Draw Upon	
4 Delving Deeper	27
The Words They Know	
Sense of Self as a Reader and a Writer	
The Role of Visual Memory	
5 Profiles of Challenged Spellers	34
Category One Challenged Spellers	
Category Two Challenged Spellers	
Category Three Challenge Spellers	
Category Four Challenged Spellers	
Synthesizing Information from the Four Categories	

Part II What Do Challenged Spellers Need?

6	Confronting the Dilemma Feelings of Apathy and Embarrassment Core Understandings	50
7	Promoting Reflection About Words Analyzing Their Own Writing Personal Spelling Dictionaries and Lists Using Reflection Logs	57
8	Less but Deeper: Teaching Strategies and Rules That Generalize Word Walls Poetry Walls Human Words Literature Circles Card Sorts Rules Worth Knowing	65
9	Focusing on Other Supporting Strategies Concentrating on High-Frequency Words Using External Resources Appropriately Thinking of Spelling as a Process Helping Students Take Charge of Their Spelling	75

Part III How Does Strategic Spelling Instruction Look in Real Secondary Classrooms?

10	Teachers Talk About Spelling and Change Spelling Instruction in a Workshop Environment Two Classrooms from the Inside	87
11	Approaches to Teaching Spelling Organizing for Instruction Finding Time Evaluating Spelling	99

Part IV How Do You Take Spelling Change to the Home Front?

12	Implementing Spelling Instructional Change That Lasts Planning for Successful Instructional Change	113
13	Thinking About a Policy for Spelling What's to Be Gained?	120

When Spelling Counts
Approaches to Spelling
Accommodating Challenged Spellers
Creating Your Spelling Policy
A Speller's Bill of Rights

Part V You Know It Works When . . .

14	Evidence of Success	128
	Observed Changes	
	Student Self-Reports	
	Student-Generated Products	
	A Note About Standardized Tests	
	Forward Glances	

Part VI Tools, Resources, and Information

Appendix A	Exploring Your Spelling History	135
Appendix B	Error Analysis Chart	136
Appendix C	Spelling Conference Log	137
Appendix D	Spelling Log A	138
Appendix E	Spelling Log B	139
Appendix F	Prefixes, Suffixes, and Roots	140
Appendix G	Writing Rubric	144
Appendix H	Root Word Web	145
Appendix I	High-Frequency Words	146
	High-Frequency Writing Words	152
Appendix J	Spelling Rules Worth Knowing	157
	Ideas for Teaching Spelling Rules	159
Appendix K	Frequently Confused Homophones	162
Appendix L	Annotated Bibliography of Helpful Resources	164
	<i>Works Cited</i>	168
	<i>Index</i>	171

8

Less but Deeper *Teaching Strategies and Rules That Generalize*

To provide deeper opportunities for our students to learn information about words that will generalize to other words, we make use of a variety of strategies that are ongoing parts of our classroom structure. Many of the reflective strategies that promote word awareness are ones that have a natural place in our classrooms. Word walls, literature circle word study, human words, card sorts, and investigation into spelling rules all provide opportunities for students to think about how a particular feature may be useful in remembering the spelling of many different words.

Word Walls

Building word walls is one effective technique for encouraging word study. Whether we are looking for words that reflect a particular principle, words that illustrate clusters of synonyms, or words that build vocabulary for particular types of content-specific writing, word walls are interesting ways to engage students in active participation through finding and displaying words. What types of word walls have we found effective? Figure 8–1 offers a glimpse at the variations we have used.

In Karen's classroom, an alphabetical word wall is hung around the room from the very beginning of the school year and features words that are frequently used and frequently misspelled. The words *poem*, *know*, *there*, *congratulations*, *tomorrow*, and *sincerely* might be examples of words on this list. On another list Karen places signal cards next to homophones; these help students know which word is actually spelled a particular way. For instance, *no* might be up on the wall with the signal card *yes* right next to it to let students know it is the word that means an answer, not the word that refers to thinking or recognizing a person.

In Karen's class, words are added to the word wall when students bring them up in class or when a word is frequently misspelled in a majority of papers. Though

- words that illustrate a particular rule, like doubling a final consonant when adding *-ing* in words like *plan/planning*, *ban/banning*, *can/canning* or using a silent *e* in single-syllable words that reflect a CVC pattern, like *rule* and *cute*
- clusters of words that take the place of tired, overworked words like *nice*, *good*, and *happy*
- words that build from a common root, like *-spect* building to *inspect*, *inspection*, *prospect*, *introspect*, *spectrograph*, and others
- words associated with a theme we are exploring in our literature, in a content-related interdisciplinary unit, or in our writing (For example, when reading about diversity, we might build a wall filled with words associated with racism, sexism, individualism, and class differences. When reading *Harry Potter*, we might look for words we've found in the text or words associated with magic that we find in other types of print.)
- words that give students the most trouble along with tips for spelling them

Figure 8–1. Types of Word Walls

some word walls are teacher- and student-generated, others come from published sources. For example, Carson-Dellosa Publishers provides a handy collection of high-use words and homophones that Karen draws from at the onset of the school year. Words are on a blue background and appear in shape boxes to help students visualize the way each word looks. As the year progresses, she simply adds to the list other words that seem to give her students continuous trouble.

Karen is able to help students focus on new words that have suddenly become high-use words in content area study. Since Karen teaches in a team, she often includes words students have problems with in other classes, too. Because content-related words are often also new words for students, she links the words thematically. This helps students make meaning as they easily access the new words for inclusion in their writing. The back bulletin board in Karen's classroom functions as a thematic word wall. When students are engaged in their integrated study of the moon, for example, that month's word wall features moon-related words such as *lunar*, *waxing*, *waning*, and *illuminate*. When they are engaged in a study of poetry, the language arts word wall includes words such as *simile*, *metaphor*, and *personification* as new focuses for study. Clearly, this bridges spelling and vocabulary development across the curriculum.

Organization of the word walls is very important if they are to be effective tools for students who are looking for particular words. It is too confusing to have

words just placed anywhere within the classroom. Karen makes a heading for each group of words and classifies them in the correct columns or alphabetically so her students can find the words easily when they are writing. For example, under the letter *B*, Karen might include problem words such as *basement*, *beautiful*, *beginning*, *bibliography*, *blockade*, and *break*. The more practice students get at spelling a word correctly, the more they will improve.

The word wall shown in Figure 8–2 serves multiple purposes for Dawn’s high school students. Because she has chosen to develop it with different colors of Post-it Notes, she is able to ask students to provide information about each of the words they add to the wall. In this case, colors stand for various parts of speech. As a word is considered, students note its use and choose the appropriate color for it.

Poetry Walls

Poetry walls are a natural extension of word walls. Filling walls with interesting words invites the creation of “motion” poetry, formed by manipulating the words available on the wall. For example, when studying nature writing, I pass out Post-it Notes to students, asking each of them to bring in five to ten interesting words, phrases, or clusters of words to add to our word wall bank. Words may be selected from published materials or may be ones students think about as they observe nature settings. Students work individually or in small groups selecting words from the word wall bank to rearrange into poems that are left up for a day or two before they are rearranged into new poems. These motion poems are made richer by the constant replenishing of new words. In Dawn’s classroom, where words are coded by their part of speech, this activity reinforces the appropriate use of a rich array of vocabulary words. Clearly, motion poetry places a focus on words, promotes play with language, and breaks down barriers to poetry for reluctant readers and writers. Continuously revisiting words helps students focus on both spelling and meaning.

Other possibilities for word walls are endless. For example, word walls can be set up as graffiti boards on which students simply write or attach words that they find in environmental print, newspapers, books they are reading, and materials from other content area classes. Playful competition among groups to find particular types of words and to create poems that other students enjoy serves as a great motivator for students to search for words in all kinds of places.

Human Words

After teaching a rule, pattern, or generalization, Jennifer encourages her students to engage in active learning by asking them to help create “human words.” For example, after teaching the silent *e* rule, she passes out a letter card—a piece of

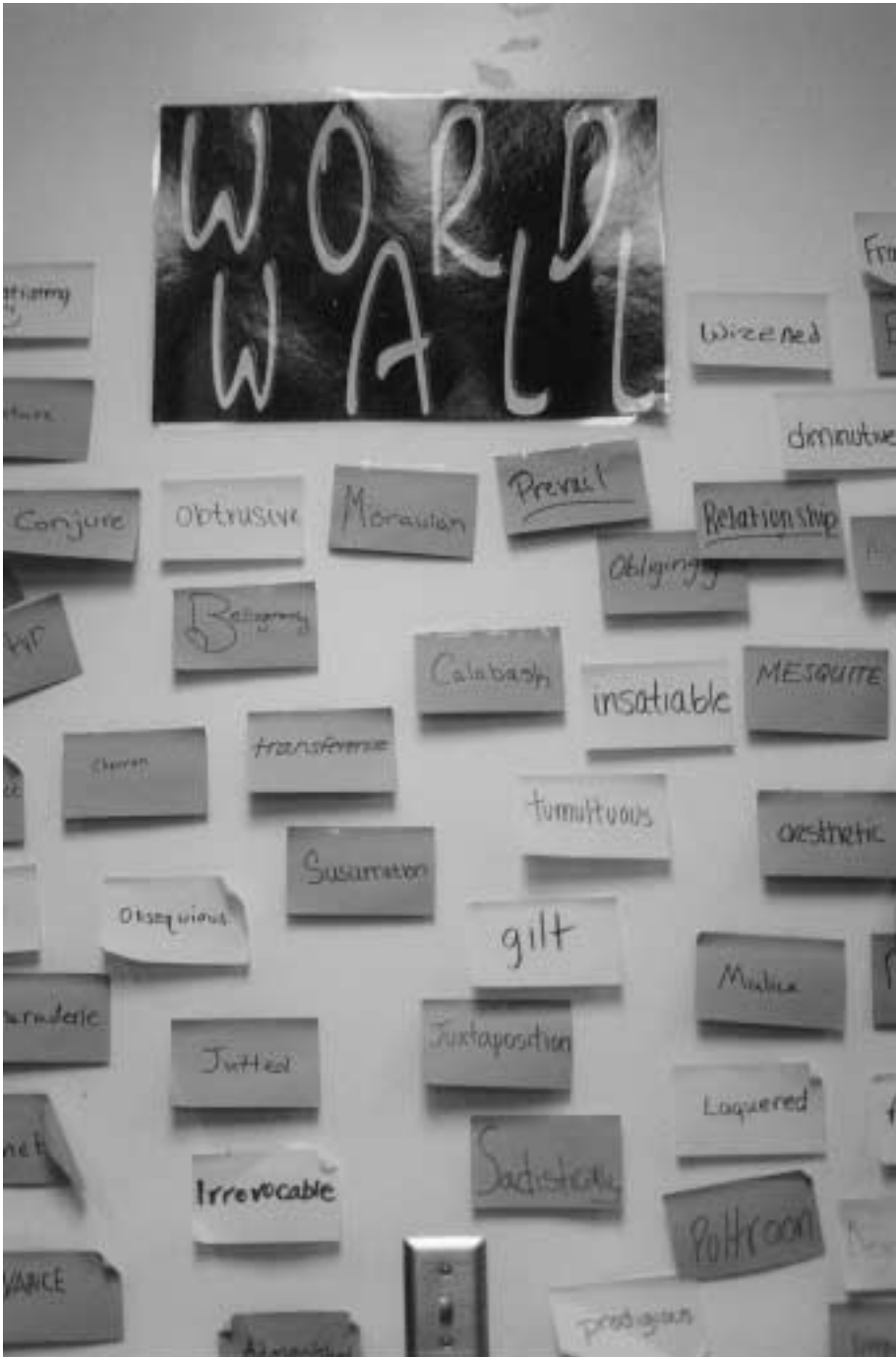


Figure 8-2. Word Wall from Dawn's Classroom

construction paper with an individual letter written on it—to each student in the class. When she calls out a word, students who have the letters in the word stand at the front of the classroom and arrange themselves in the proper order to spell the word correctly. For example, if she calls out *slide*, all students with one of those letters come to the front of the room to spell S-L-I-D-E. Then if she calls out *sliding*, the students, particularly the one holding the silent e, must decide whether to stay or to go when the suffix is added.

Active participation is the important factor in human words. This activity encourages thinking about words, reflecting on the use of a rule or pattern, and making decisions about the application of a rule or pattern; and, since middle schoolers have a tough time sitting still all period, the movement creates an interesting way to promote reflection and learning.

Literature Circles

Many of us have tried literature circles, or a variation of them, in our classes. As described by Daniels (1994), literature circles support focused discussion through the use of assigned roles. Frequently, one of our literature circle roles encourages students to focus on new words, interesting words, or words used in unusual ways in their reading. The word wizard role, for example, helps students think not just about new words or hard words but also about interesting ways everyday words are used by good authors. We've found that the more our challenged spellers look at words and think about them, the more they are likely to develop investment in words in their own writing.

This continuous search for words sometimes extends beyond our reading to awareness of environmental print. Trips to the grocery store, time spent with a favorite magazine, and routine correspondence all offer opportunities to rediscover words as they are being used in innovative ways. We make time to talk about quirky and interesting uses of language in our classes, and, yes, these words often make their way on to word walls or graffiti boards. As noted earlier, we want to marinate the students in language in everything that we do.

Card Sorts

Both Karen and Jennifer work with inductive reasoning strategies in their middle school classes. Karen has found it really effective to create decks of cards from which students study clusters of words to determine the governing pattern or rule that is represented by each of the words in the deck. Students find it liberating when they can figure out the rules that make words work and are able to own those rules and transfer them to new words.

Karen gives small groups of students stacks of three-by-five-inch cards with words written on them. Each stack represents one spelling rule or pattern. Students examine the words, investigate how they are spelled, and determine what makes them similar. Groups then compose a rule using a complete sentence that explains the common feature of the words. For example, one stack of cards might contain words like the following:

nice	nicest
cute	cutest
state	statement

These words ending in silent *e* are ones in which the *e* is kept when a suffix beginning with a consonant is added.

After the groups have determined the rules, they put the rules and sample words on poster paper to display on the wall. They add additional words to their posters that fit the rules they have discovered. This way, the students are surrounded by words and the logic behind their spelling. By thinking about words together and making decisions about the type of spelling pattern or rule at work, students develop ownership for their knowledge of the pattern and may then extend application of that knowledge beyond the words given to identify new words that reflect it. For challenged spellers, engagement with spelling in a fun setting with words that are accessible creates the opportunity for them to feel successful. Resources for other spelling activities are annotated in Appendix L, including *Words Their Way* (Bear et al. 2000), which contains a trove of information on word sorts.

Rules Worth Knowing

The secondary school day overflows with important things to do. For strategies or rules to be worth our instructional time, they must help students internalize patterns or rules that generalize to other applications. In so doing, students can focus not only on those situations where the rules and patterns hold but on the exceptions as well.

Challenged spellers need rules that work most of the time (see Figure 8-3). Students need time to experiment with words for which these rules work as well as with words that are exceptions to the rules. Teaching a narrowly applied definition, as Dan described earlier regarding the *-ly* rule, leaves challenged spellers in no better shape than they were before the lesson began.

Despite the fact that there are exceptions to most rules that govern English spelling, a few rules are worth the time and effort of reteaching because of their

Rules for prefixes

Generally when a prefix is added to a word, do not drop a letter from either the base word or the prefix (*dis + approve = disapprove*). Exceptions include *ad-*, *com-*, and *in-*, which can be absorbed by the base word so that the last letter in the prefix changes to match the beginning consonant of the base word (as in *illegal* instead of *inlegal*).

Rules for *i* before *e*

Write *i* before *e* (*fiery, friend*) except after *c* or when sounded like *a* as in *neighbor* and *weigh*. When the *ie* or *ei* is not pronounced *ee*, it is usually spelled *ei* (*reign*).

Rules for plurals

When forming the plural of most words, just add *s*.

When forming the plural of a word that ends with a *y* that is preceded by a vowel, add *s* (as in *monkeys, turkeys*).

When forming the plural of a word that ends in an *o* that is preceded by a vowel, add *s* (as in *patio/patios*).

When forming the plural of a word that ends in an *o* that is preceded by a consonant, add *es* (as in *tomato/tomatoes*).

Rules for suffixes

When a one-syllable word ends in a consonant preceded by one vowel, double the final consonant before adding a suffix that begins with a vowel (as in *run/running*).

In a word with two or more syllables that ends with a consonant-vowel-consonant, double the final letter before adding a suffix beginning with a vowel if the final syllable is stressed (as in *commit/committed*). If the final syllable is not stressed, do not double the final letter (as in *cancel/canceled, blanket/blanketed*).

If a word ends with a silent *e*, drop the *e* before adding a suffix that begins with a vowel (as in *give/giving, take/taking*).

When adding a suffix to a word where *y* is the last letter in a word and the *y* is preceded by a consonant, change the *y* to *i* before adding any suffix except those beginning with *i* (as in *happy/happiness, happily*).

When adding the suffix *-ly* or *-ness*, do not change the spelling of the base word unless it ends in *y* (*careful/carefully, fond/fondness, gay/gaily*).

Figure 8-3. Rules Worth Knowing

-ible and -able

If a root is not a complete word, add *-ible* (as in *visible, edible, illegible*).

If a root is a complete word, add *-able* (as in *suitable, dependable, workable*).

If a root is a complete word that ends in a silent *e*, drop the *e* and add *-able* (as in *advisable, likable, valuable*).

Exceptions to the *-ible/-able* rule occur when the final sound is the hard *g* or *c*. Then the suffix used is *-able* (as in *apply/applicable*).

-ion

If the root ends in *ct*, add *-ion* (as in *select/selection*).

If the root ends in *ss*, add *-ion* (as in *discussion/discussion*).

If the root ends in *te*, drop the *e* and add *-ion* (as in *educate/education*).

If the root ends in *it*, change the *t* to *s* and add *-ion* (as in *permit/permission*).

If the root ends in *vowel-d-e*, drop the *e*, change the *d* to *s* and add *-ion* (as in *explode/explosion*).

Note: see Appendix J for additional resources

Figure 8–3. (continued)

high level of reliability. When offering instruction in spelling rules, Karen reminds us that less is better. We focus on six rules, shown in Figure 8-3, and provide plenty of time for students to play with words that fit each one. If we have time, or if students demonstrate a need, we extend beyond these to rules that are less in demand or that work less consistently.

Jennifer reminds us that it's "imperative to give middle school students the same information about fifty times and in fifty ways"—good advice at almost any level. Students told us repeatedly that they were unsuccessful when bombarded with too much, too fast, and strategies that were too narrow, so Jennifer teaches spelling rules slowly, sometimes covering no more than two rules by Thanksgiving, and draws upon visual strategies like word walls, kinesthetic strategies like human words, and other strategies that require the active involvement of students.

Jennifer displays rules prominently on a bulletin board so they constantly surround students. She keeps a word wall in the back of the room as well, covered with all the words they have worked on. Word cards and posters fill her room. Karen's classroom is filled with word walls that illustrate particular spelling patterns or rules. The idea is to immerse our students in language, to intrigue and tease them with words.

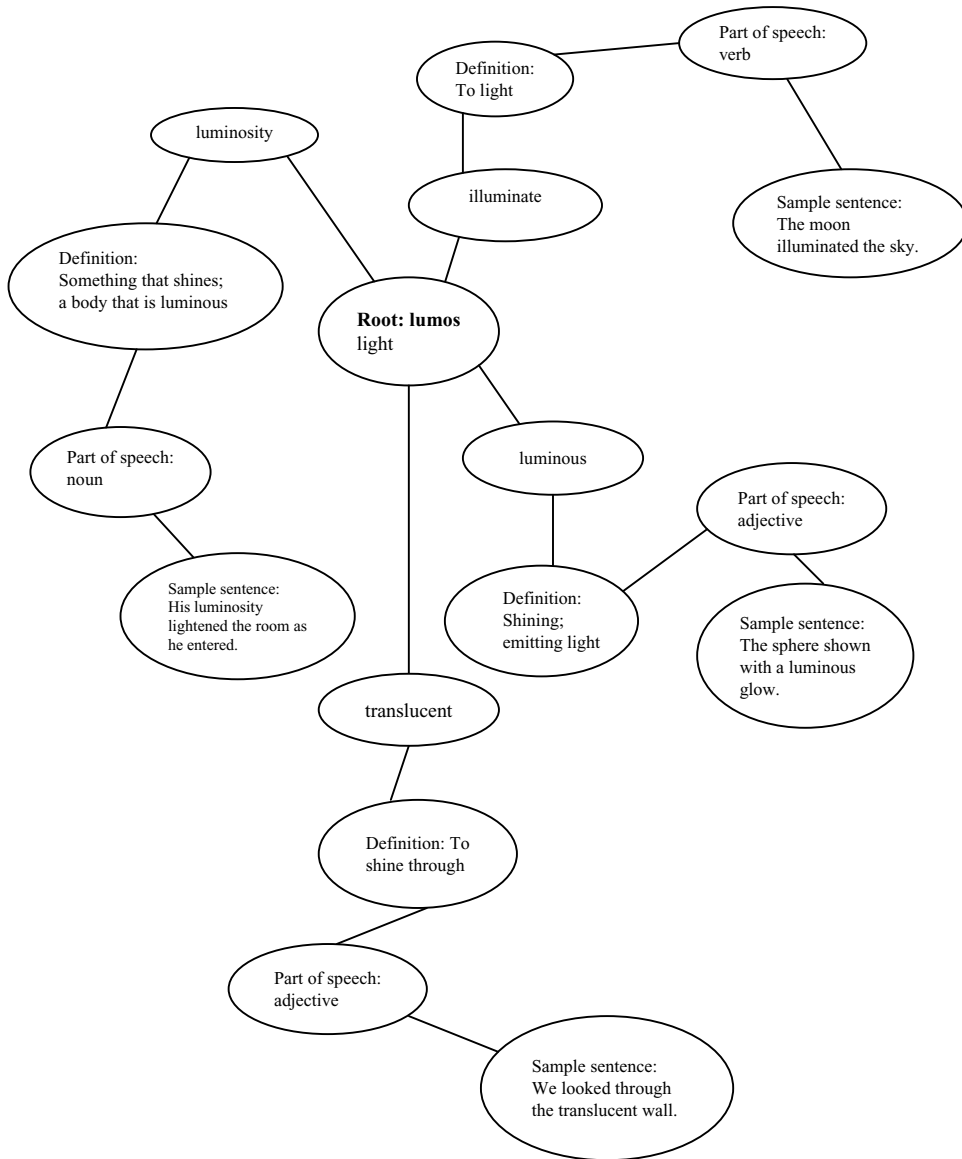


Figure 8-4. Word Web

Karen, Jennifer, Tracy, and Dawn all spend time with challenged spellers discussing roots, suffixes, and prefixes. And, though visual aids for thinking about the ways words are built vary, Figure 8-4 illustrates one type of device we use: a word web. Jennifer describes how the root *lumos* came to interest her students after

reading *Harry Potter*. From *lumos* as a root, students generated *luminous*, *illuminate*, *illuminated*, and finally, *luminosity*.

Karen says her students seem comforted by the knowledge that words build on and from each other—that if they know one root, it will help them know and spell many others. She presented *aud* (to hear) and sent students on a search for words that related to this base. They found words like *auditorium*, *audible*, *audience*, and *audio*; then individuals or small groups created word webs on poster paper. Posters were hung around the room as tools for spelling and as encouragement to try out new vocabulary in their writing.

In these examples, each strategy is intended to be built upon over the course of an entire semester or year. Instead of jumping from one spelling activity to another, each of these strategies is intended to provide a deep structure that can function unobtrusively as a platform for word study within middle and high school settings. To be successful, they must be built, rebuilt, and adapted so that students absorb a metacognitive sense about their language.

As teachers of challenged spellers, our own excitement about words is supremely important. When we highlight words from our own reading, display our own curiosity about words, put words up on the board for students to examine and question, and encourage students to weave those words into their own writing, we are helping them begin to see that language is rich, interesting, and fun rather than something that is always academic, testable, and painful.