

The words they use

What does that word mean here, and who decided?

6 days · 5 books · 244 min in full · 137 min short · Grades 2-3

The idea

Chapter books can teach their own vocabulary, and these five do it openly: words explained on the page, sayings the characters gloss themselves, an idea defined by a character and then used several times, a borrowed name whose story supplies its meaning, and a book with a vocabulary list at the back written for its own narrator.

The unit is about meaning being established in context rather than merely looked up. Across the first five days, the book itself supplies or strongly constrains the meaning, and the class's job is to find where that happens and check the meaning against later uses.

The last day moves into figurative language. A phrase can carry a nonliteral meaning while still drawing on its literal image. That belongs last because the class first needs five days of asking what words and phrases mean in this book before it can explain how a literal image is being used to stand for something else.

The arc

1. A book can explain its own words
2. A saying can be glossed by the people using it
3. A borrowed name carries its story with it
4. An idea defined once can be used many times
5. A book can keep a vocabulary list for its own narrator
6. A literal image can be used figuratively to stand for an attitude or feeling

Where this fits

When to run it. Grades 2-3, any time. The days are self-contained enough to run alongside another unit or as a short sequence of vocabulary lessons.

What it assumes. Children can locate a stated explanation or definition on a page.

What it builds. Locating meaning in the text; checking a definition against later uses; understanding a borrowed name; distinguishing literal from figurative use.

What it leads to. Later work on connotation and on figurative language as its own subject.

The 6 days

DAY 1

Vocabulary in Context: Words from the Sea Work out what doubloon, man-o'-war, grog, burgoo and bilge mean by using the explanation the book puts beside each one.

Why here. First: five sailing words, each explained on the page. The easiest possible version - the definitions are present and the class only has to locate and restate them.

From Captain Jake by Shannon Stewart · Five sailing words, each explained on the page

35 min full · 18 min short · Makes: A list of five sea words with a meaning for each, in the child's own words

DAY 2

Words and Meaning: The Sayings Ben and Jack Share Collect the sayings the two boys use, give the meaning the book supplies for each, and explain why they matter so much to Ben.

Why here. Second: three sayings, two explained by the book. The third has to be worked out from use, which is the first real inference in the unit.

From Ben the Inventor by Robin Stevenson · Three sayings, two of them explained by the book itself
45 min full · 31 min short · Makes: A three-row saying table, and one sentence about why they matter

DAY 3

Words and Meaning: Why They Nearly Renamed the Dog Collect the escapes, and explain where the name Houdini comes from and what the comparison means.

Why here. Third. A borrowed name, explained inside the book and then used as a joke. Meaning arrives with a story attached.

From Bagels Come Home by Joan Betty Stuchner · A borrowed name, explained inside the book and then used as a joke 35 min full · 22 min short · Makes: A four-row escape list, plus what the proposed new name means

DAY 4

Words and Meaning: Signs and Whispers Explain what Lindy means by a sign, and trace each of the boy's carvings back to the experience it came from.

Why here. Fourth: an idea defined by a character and then used several times. The class checks the definition against every later use.

From Soapstone Porcupine by Jeff Pinkney · An idea defined by a character and then reused across the book 43 min full · 22 min short · Makes: A four-row sheet: the carving, and the sign behind it

DAY 5

Words and Meaning: The Words Lark Loves Collect the words Lark loses, the expressions she misunderstands, and what the back of the book says about each.

Why here. Fifth. A book with a vocabulary list at the back connected directly to its narrator. The class asks not merely what a glossary says, but what problem the glossary is solving.

From Lark and the Dessert Disaster by Natasha Deen · A vocabulary list connected directly to the narrator's language 43 min full · 22 min short · Makes: A word sheet in three parts: lost words, misunderstood expressions, and explained words

DAY 6

Figurative Language: Quills Up

Explain how the boy handles the woman on the train, and what the porcupine image helps the reader understand about him.

Why here. Last: the image of raised quills is used to describe a person's defensive state. Same book as day 4, so the class already knows how carefully this text establishes meaning before it meets a nonliteral use.

From Soapstone Porcupine by Jeff Pinkney · An animal image used to describe a person's guarded or defensive state 43 min full · 22 min short · Makes: A two-column sheet: what she says, and what he thinks or feels

Words to use	
Word	How it is used

defines / explains	Used when the book directly supplies a meaning.
saying	Day 2, for a phrase whose meaning is not simply the sum of its words.
context	The words, events and later uses around an expression that help establish its meaning.
literal	What the words or image ordinarily refer to.
stands for	Day 6, the class's way into figurative language.

What to prepare

- Checkpoint 1 page, one per child
- Checkpoint 2 page, one per child
- A word card per child, definition on one side and three uses on the other

Checkpoints

After day 3 · Find the definition Four words or expressions from books the class has met. For each, the child says what it means in that book and points to where the text established or strongly supported the meaning.

Without a book. No - it needs the pages, which can be photocopied.

Look for. A location for at least three. A correct general meaning with no connection to the text may have come from prior knowledge rather than from contextual reading.

Say to the child. What does each one mean here? Show me what in the book helped you know.

After day 6 · Literal or standing for Six uses of words or phrases from the unit, some literal and some figurative. The child sorts them and rewrites one figurative use in plain language.

Without a book. Six sentences and no book.

Look for. The rewriting. Sorting can be guessed; a clear plain-language rewrite shows that the nonliteral meaning is understood.

Say to the child. Sort these into literal and standing-for uses. Now rewrite one of the standing-for ones in plain words.

The task at the end

The word card

Each child takes one word or saying from any of the five books. On one side, they write the meaning established by the book and where the book establishes it. On the other, they write three uses - two from the book and one of their own.

A partner has to spot the invented use and explain why it still fits the meaning.

Collect. The card, the partner's choice, and the explanation.

Time. One session of about 35 minutes.

Teacher key

- Checkpoint 1: the sailing words in Captain Jake are explained in the sentence or immediately around it. Any accurate location that genuinely supplies the meaning is acceptable.
- Checkpoint 2: "quills up" is a figurative way of describing someone as guarded, braced or defensive. A plain rewrite carrying that sense is a full answer.
- Task: an invented use that the partner cannot distinguish from the book's uses is a strong result when the child can explain why it fits the established meaning.

What a strong answer looks like

Strand	What to see
Meaning	States what a word or phrase means in this text.
Location	Finds where the text establishes or supports the meaning.
Consistency	Checks the meaning against another use.
Figurative	Rewrites a nonliteral use in plain language.

Keeping the daily evidence

Keep each child's definition-and-location pair from day 1 and the literal/figurative rewrite from day 6. The growth to look for is a move from accepting a supplied definition to checking meaning against context and use.

What to pass on

- Children who can give meanings but cannot show where the text established them are relying on prior knowledge rather than textual evidence; note that before later evidence work.
- Days 4 and 6 use the same book and benefit from being reasonably close together, but they do not have to be consecutive.

The books this unit uses

- Captain Jake by Shannon Stewart · 1 lesson
- Ben the Inventor by Robin Stevenson · 1 lesson
- Bagels Come Home by Joan Betty Stuchner · 1 lesson
- Soapstone Porcupine by Jeff Pinkney · 2 lessons
- Lark and the Dessert Disaster by Natasha Deen · 1 lesson

What was considered and left out

65 lessons were available at this grade. These were wanted and not used:

- 7455 · nobody-believes-him — An accurate description under the wrong name. About naming and testimony rather than word meaning; it has no unit in this wave and is recorded.
- 5889 · the-plus-two-code — Two alphabets and a shift of two. A procedure rather than a meaning, and it belongs in the procedures unit.
- 4683 · key-details — The details of the first meeting by the creek. Key details rather than vocabulary, and no unit in this wave is built around that skill.