

#### Dear Readers of Teaching Reading In Brief,

What a wonderful year this has been for reading in Vermont! We at The Reading League Vermont are so proud to support teachers and other educational leaders in the transition to evidence-aligned structured literacy across our state. We are indebted to the many educators who have volunteered to write for Teaching Reading In Brief and shared their knowledge and skills in phonemic awareness, phoneme-grapheme mapping, orthography, and morphology. Teaching Reading in Brief will continue to amplify the voices of Vermonters who have embraced reading science to improve student reading and writing.

Summer can be a time filled with activities far away from school or with plans for refining one's professional practice... or BOTH! As you look towards the months ahead, we ask you to consider writing for Teaching Reading In Brief. Many thanks to all of you who proposed ideas and/or volunteered to write since we began this project a year ago. However, there is still plenty of opportunity for others to write on other related topics. We have an ambitious roadmap planned in 2025-26, likely taking us through to January 2027. Our topics include:

#### Vol. 4 Assessment for Improving Student Reading

- Assessment essentials\*
- Assessing PA, decoding, and encoding\*
- Assessing vocabulary, comprehension, and writing\*
- Spelling error analysis to inform instruction\*

#### Vol. 5 Building Fluency

1. Oral Reading Fluency (ORF) subcomponents and impacts
2. ORF development, monitoring, and intervention\*

#### Vol. 6 Oral Language and Reading Comprehension

1. Oral language development: Systems for identification and services\*
2. Building background knowledge
3. Teaching vocabulary and semantics
4. Teaching sentence structures
5. Verbal reasoning and literacy knowledge
6. Inferencing\*
7. Phrase structure \*
8. Affective features of reading comprehension\*

#### Vol. 7: Writing Instruction for All Students

1. From handwriting to keyboarding
2. Writing to learn: note taking, paraphrasing, summarizing
3. Microstructure: syntax and sentence writing\*
4. Macrostructure: Organization, text structure, coherence

*\* Topics with an asterisk have an identified writer.*



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the next page.

#### Vol. 8: Vermont Voices on the Transition to Evidence-based Structured Literacy

1. An elementary teacher's perspective
2. A secondary teacher's perspective
3. A literacy coach's perspective
4. A special educator's perspective
5. A reading specialist's perspective
6. An administrator's perspective
7. A higher-education perspective

Writing for a professional organization presents exciting challenges to deepen professional knowledge in an area of great interest and passion. In addition to achieving a valuable professional goal, past contributors have received letters from The Reading League Vermont to verify their 15+ professional hours writing for publication.

If you would like to learn more about the writing process for Teaching Reading in Brief and/or request to write on a specific topic, please contact Dr. Dorinne Dorfman at [dorinnedorfman@gmail.com](mailto:dorinnedorfman@gmail.com) or Dr. Brenda Warren at [brenda@vt.thereadingleague.org](mailto:brenda@vt.thereadingleague.org). Thank you so much for your consideration. Please let us know by June 30, 2025.



#### Building Strong Foundations: Teaching Suffixes in Primary Grades

by Jennifer Fitch, M.Ed., A/OGA

This article will address the following questions:

1. How does morphology instruction improve reading and writing?
2. What are the most common suffixes to teach first?
3. What are some quick and effective teaching activities?
4. How can we differentiate morphological instruction?
5. How can we integrate morphology across the curriculum?

#### Introduction

Early elementary school is a pivotal time for developing reading and writing skills. During these years, students learn to decode, apply spelling rules, and expand their vocabularies. While we can't teach every word they'll encounter, we can equip them with strategies to tackle unfamiliar words and high-frequency word parts.

#### Curious Question:

Students often want to know the longest words in English. Other than highly scientific words, which more common words answer this question?

One powerful strategy—once students have a solid foundation in phonemic awareness and letter-sound correspondence—is explicit instruction in morphology, the study of how words are constructed using meaningful parts such as prefixes, suffixes, base words, and roots.

Although English is often perceived as illogical, research shows it is largely predictable when factors like sound-letter correspondences, syllable patterns, word meaning, and origin are considered (Moats, 2005). “Spelling is not arbitrary.

Researchers have estimated that nearly 50% of English words are predictable based on sound-letter correspondences, and an additional 34% are predictable except for one sound. If word origin and word meaning are considered, only 4% of English words are truly irregular” (Joshi et al., 2008, p. 8).

Teaching morphology—including common affixes—strengthens students’ spelling, decoding, and comprehension. As they learn to analyze word structure, their understanding and confidence grow. This article shares practical, easy-to-implement strategies for teaching suffixes in the primary grades, drawn from my years of classroom experience. Educators working with older students who struggle with reading and spelling may also find it a

helpful resource. A future article in this volume will be devoted to teaching prefixes.

### **1. How does morphology instruction improve reading and writing?**

Teaching students about the origins and meanings of words makes spelling more predictable and accessible. In English, spelling is often more closely tied to morphemes than to consistent pronunciation.

As a result, understanding a word’s meaning often provides clearer guidance into its spelling patterns than the sounds of the word.

It is important to understand that phonics and morphology are not the same thing. Phonics relies on letter-sound correspondences while morphology involves the study of morphemes, the smallest meaningful pieces of language. In some cases, a morpheme may be a word by itself, also known as a base word, such as play or bag. In other situations, morphemes must be combined with others to form words (e.g., **-s/-es**, **-ing**, **-ed**).

Prefixes, suffixes, and roots are all classified as bound morphemes as they have meaning but must be combined with other morphemes to form words.

## Examples of Morphemes

Word	Morphemes	Type of Morphemes
horse	horse	base word
backpack	back + pack	base word + base word
played	play + ed	base word + suffix
untie	un + tie	prefix + base word
carefully	care + ful + ly	base word + suffix + suffix
constructive	con + struct + ive	prefix + root + suffix

To be clear, morphemes are composed of phonemes or speech sounds. For example, the prefix un consists of the two phonemes /ŭ/ /n/. This is why morphology instruction for reading and spelling should only begin once students have mastered letter-sound correspondence.

Therefore, it is more accurate to say the English language and its orthography are morphophonemic— an alphabetic language that retains the history of words in its spelling. This is why systematic, explicit, and sequential instruction that incorporates both phonics and morphology in a thoughtfully planned scope and sequence is necessary to unlock reading and writing.

## 2. What are the most common suffixes to teach first?

Suffixes are typically taught in early elementary school. Rather than providing students with a list of suffixes to memorize, instruction can be focused on how the suffix impacts the meaning of the word.

Below is a list of common suffixes, ordered from simple to complex and more common to less common, shared with permission from the Stern Center Orton-Gillingham Institute Scope and Sequence for grades K-2.

## Common Suffixes: Simple to Complex, More Common to Less Common

Suffix	Meaning	Part of Speech	Examples
-s	plural (more than one); added to a verb for subject-verb agreement	noun; verb	cats, desks; runs, jumps
-ing	happening now	verb	jumping, looking
-ed	past tense, already happened	verb	jumped, packed
-er	comparative or more than; one who	adjective; noun	faster, longer; teacher, farmer
-est	superlative or most	adjective	tallest, fastest
-es	same as -s, added at the end of a word ending with -s, -x, -z, -sh, -ch, plural	noun	foxes, wishes
-ful	full of	adjective	joyful, careful
-less	without	adjective	blameless, careless
-ish	somewhat, somewhat like	adjective	childish, bullish
-ness	state, condition of	noun	kindness, lightness
-y	describes a noun	adjective	smelly, windy
-ly	how something is done, describes a verb; describes a noun	adverb; adjective	quickly, softly; friendly, lonely

### 3. What are some quick and effective teaching activities?

Morphology instruction can—and should—take place across the curriculum. When embedded in everyday classroom conversation (e.g., “Did you know the **tri-** in **triangle** means three?”), it can be effective at any age. The intensity and format of instruction may vary based on students’ ages and learning needs.

As an early elementary classroom teacher, one of my professional goals has been to expand my students’ understanding and use of morphology. Through small yet deliberate changes to my daily teaching practices, I have witnessed remarkable growth in my students’ understanding of morphology as a vehicle to grow my students’ vocabulary. It has been rewarding to see how even small changes can make a significant impact on their ability to grasp and apply new words with confidence.

In my second and third grade classroom, I dedicate a specific time of day to what I call *word study*, which often includes morphology. Whole-group word study lessons are designed to encourage students to think critically about words and find joy in playing with language. During this time, we explicitly study phonics and spelling patterns.

But studying words is not limited to our word study time; I intentionally integrate “word play” into activities throughout the day. I also utilize small-group instructional time to differentiate instruction. Some students require additional instruction and repetition, while others benefit from extending the concept to more advanced words or patterns.

Below is a list of teaching strategies. Some can be applied broadly, and others are specific to some suffixes.

#### a. Word Sort

A powerful strategy for teaching word recognition is a word sort, which helps students categorize words. Students can be guided to categorize words according to syllable type, meaning, and, for the purpose of our discussion, according to parts of speech, tense, or suffixes vs. prefixes.

#### b. Teaching Suffix -s

When suffix -s is added to a noun, it indicates more than one or plural; it is also added to a verb for subject-verb agreement. This is often the first suffix introduced in most scope and sequences taught in first grade.



We recommend formally teaching this suffix for reading and spelling after closed syllables, digraphs, and consonant blends to ensure beginning students have adequate practice reading and spelling one-syllable words with 3-5 sounds with accuracy and increasing automaticity. While this suffix seems quite simple, several important concepts must be taught with suffix **-s**, including the concept of a *base word* (a word that can stand alone or holds meaning all by itself), *suffix*, *singular*, and *plural*. Another consideration with suffix **-s** is that the sound can be /s/ as in *cats* or /z/ as in *dogs*. When you introduce suffix **-s**, we recommend avoiding asking students to spell words where suffix **-s** = /z/. However, in later review lessons, you can teach students using guided discovery to hear (and feel with a hand over one's voice box) if suffix **-s** says /s/ (unvoiced phoneme) and /z/ (voiced phoneme). A class word sort can be a helpful reading activity.

Suffix <b>-s</b> = /s/ The base word ends in an unvoiced phoneme.	Suffix <b>-s</b> = /z/ The base word ends in a voiced phoneme.
grips pants bluffs splits plucks	flags clams hands crabs plans

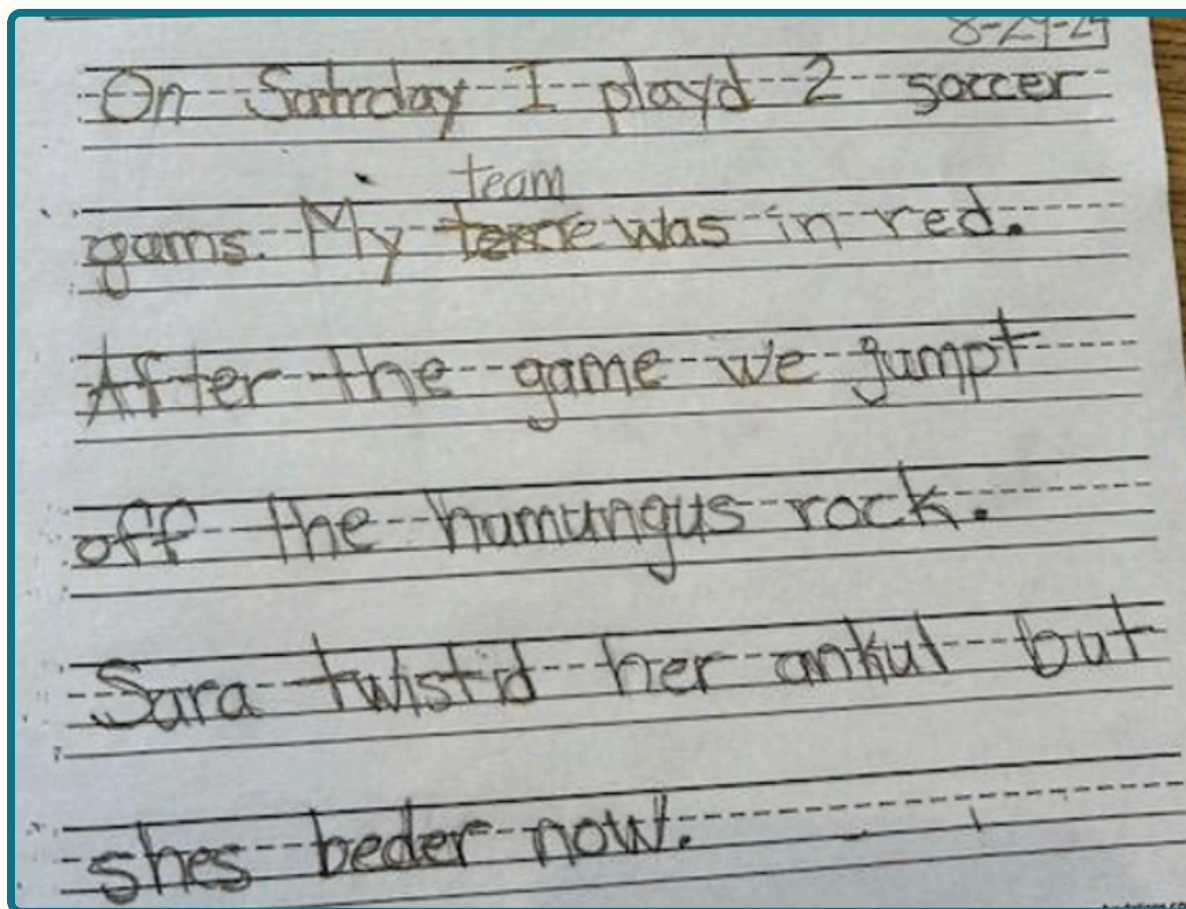
Depending on the scope and sequence you are following, you might later teach suffix **-es**. Suffix **-es** serves the same function as suffix **-s** and is used if the base word ends with the sounds /s/, /z/, /ks/, /sh/, /ch/ as in *gases*, *kisses*, *buzzes*, *axes*, *mashes*, *lunches*, *matches* for ease of pronunciation. Suffix **-es** sounds more like /iz/ than /es/, which makes this suffix more challenging to spell. Before beginning an introductory spelling activity with suffix **-es** (or any suffix), it can be helpful to remind students, "If you hear /iz/ at the end of a base word, how will we spell it?... suffix **-es**!"

### c. Teaching Suffix **-ed**

Another commonly taught suffix, often taught in first grade, is the suffix **-ed**, which indicates past tense when added to a verb. The suffix **-ed** can represent one of three sounds in English: *rented* /id/, *jumped* /t/, and *played* /d/. Without an understanding of morphology, students can struggle with spelling. This leads to common errors like "fisht" for *fished* and "yeld" for *yelled*. Teaching students to recognize that **-ed** signals the past tense enables them to apply this pattern consistently in their writing. I find that students are very responsive to being asked, "When did this happen? How do we indicate something happened in the past?" Given these simple prompts, students typically can correct their spelling mistakes.

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Beginning of second grade writing sample. Notice that the errors with the past tense - playd/played; jumpt/jumped and twistid/twisted.

This student will benefit from review and practice with the three sounds of the suffix **-ed**.

The suffix **-ed** can be pronounced in three different ways, making explicit instruction crucial. Begin by introducing the concept orally, then reinforce it through reading and spelling practice before expecting students to utilize it in their writing. In this section, I share a couple of instructional activities for teaching this suffix.

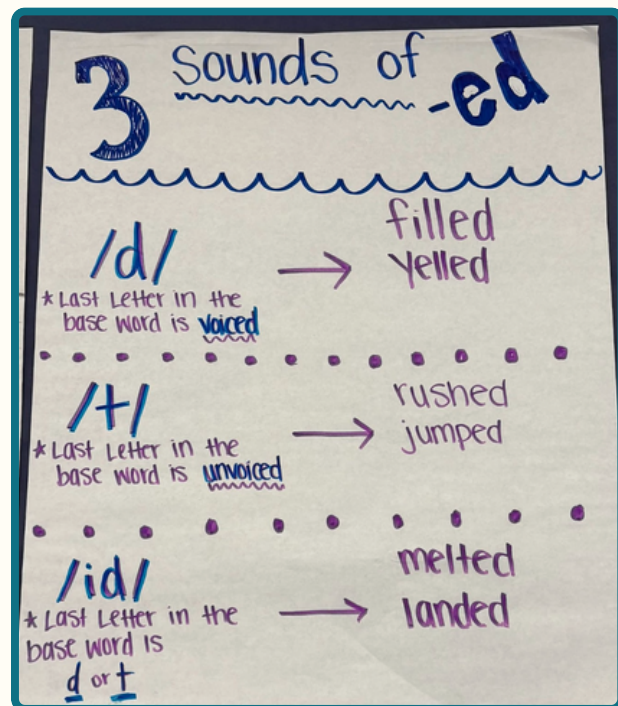
A helpful strategy is to have students box or circle the **-ed** suffix, identify the base word, and then read the word aloud. Once they've had isolated practice with **-ed** as a suffix, introduce mixed practice by including words like *bled* or *mised*, where the letters **ed** are not a suffix.

This kind of interleaving—also called “spiraling back” in many Orton-Gillingham circles—provides important cumulative review. When teaching the three sounds of **-ed** (/id/ as in *tilted*, /t/ as in *stumped*, /d/ as in *filmed*), encourage students to sort words based on the sound of **-ed** followed by practice spelling words with the different sounds of **-ed**. These interactive sorts before spelling practice strengthen decoding, spelling, and vocabulary.



## Sample of Word List for the Three Sounds of Suffix -ed

Suffix -ed = /id/ The base word ends in /d/ or /t/ sound.	Suffix -ed = /t/ The base word ends in an unvoiced phoneme.	Suffix -ed = /d/ The base word ends in a voiced phoneme.
acted melted tended lifted handed	lumped blinked fished stuffed pinched	buzzed yelled filled banged filmed



Anchor chart created by Ellie Kiel

## Listening for the Different Sounds of Suffix -ed

An activity that I enjoy using with my students to reinforce listening for the sound of the suffix **-ed** is a physical sort. I label all four corners of the room with a keyword and sound of the suffix **-ed**: **texted** /id/, **jumped** /t/, and **played** /d/. The fourth corner is labeled none. I then state a word (often using it in a sentence). The students repeat the word and move to the corner that matches the sound of the suffix **-ed**. I include a few non-example words, such as **red**, **twist**, and **bed**, to ensure students are listening for the suffix, not just the ending sound of the word. After students find the correct corner of the word, I show them the word on the board, and the class reads the word. This way, students are initially listening to the word, but they are also

given an opportunity to read the word.

## d. Identifying Base Words and Suffixes

For this activity, the teacher creates note cards with base words. All the words contain syllable types and word patterns that your students have already been taught. In addition to the base word deck, there is another set of cards with previously taught suffixes (e.g., **-s**, **-ing**, **-ed**). I typically use a different color ink or a different color card for suffixes to scaffold the activity. In pairs, students sort the cards into base words and suffixes. Then, they select a base word and match it to as many suffixes as possible to create real words.

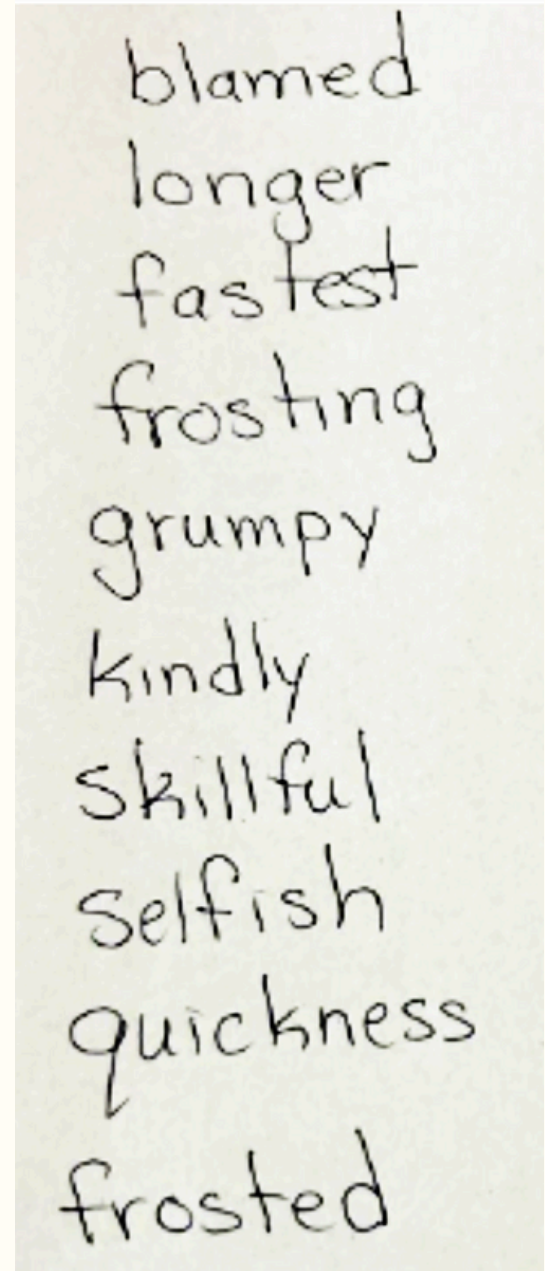
They record their list and share it with the class. I am mindful to choose base words and suffixes that do not require spelling changes, such as the 1-1-1 doubling rule (**hop** to **hopping**), if that rule has not yet been taught.

This activity often fosters a sense of friendly competition and collaboration, which many students find motivating. Additionally, it encourages meaningful discussions about words. For example, a recent group discovered the words **longing** and **successfully**, and the group persuaded their classmates that these were, indeed, real words.



Students sort word cards based on suffixes.

*Photo courtesy of Jennifer Fitch*



A list of words created by students during the suffix and base word activity

## Word List for Combining Base Word and Suffix Activity

Base Word	Suffix
kind	-ly
child	-ish
blame	-less
fast	-est
grump	-y
stump	-ed
skill	-ful
long	-ing
quick	-er
frost	-y

### e. Morphology Practice During Morning Meeting

I also use a variation of this activity as a morning meeting greeting. I provide each student with one card, either a suffix or a base word. They must then find their partner. As a class, there is often a lot of discussion around real words and nonsense words, as some of the cards will have more than one correct partner. If students create a nonsense word, ask them to explain what the word means and to use the word in a sentence. Then guide the students to realize that this is not a real word, but it can be changed to create a real word we can use when we talk and write. This is a great illustration that teaching suffixes requires teaching vocabulary and grammar.

### 4. How do we differentiate morphology instruction?

The combining base words and suffixes activity can be made more challenging by adding additional morphemes such as new prefixes (e.g., **untimely**) and/or additional suffixes (e.g., **hopelessly**). If students are not ready to read and spell words with suffixes, they can practice reading the base words and be prompted to then orally add the suffix.

### 5. How can we integrate morphology across the curriculum?

In a recent third-grade math lesson, we had a meaningful discussion about the word **inverse**. Some students were struggling to remember and understand that multiplication and division are inverse or opposite operations. We began to explore the vocabulary as we often do with unfamiliar words. Students brainstormed a list of words that they had heard that held the morpheme **verse**, such as **reverse**, **versus**, **conversation**, and **traverse**.

With teacher facilitation, they were able to arrive at the understanding of **verse** means to move or turn. This entire mini-lesson was less than seven minutes yet resulted in students developing a more concrete understanding of the word **inverse** and the

word's connections to words with the same Latin root.

This entire mini-lesson was less than seven minutes yet resulted in students developing a more concrete understanding of the word **inverse** and the word's connections to words with the same Latin root. Later in the day, a student brought to my attention the word **universe** from their book on space and wanted to know if it, too, was related to **inverse**. This type of curiosity and attention to word parts is one of the ways that students demonstrate the impact of teaching morphology.

### Recommendations for Morphology Instruction:

1. Teach more common morphemes before less common morphemes, following an established scope and sequence (Goodwin, Lipsky, & Ahn, 2012).
2. Explicitly and systematically teach how morphemes affect word meaning. Understanding that a morpheme carries meaning and how some suffixes change the part of speech is important (Carlisle, 2010). Immediate teacher feedback and error correction of individual students during suffix instruction can improve oral reading performance, especially for struggling readers (Henderson & Shores, 1982).

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3. After explicitly introducing targeted morphemes, provide opportunities for students to practice assembling and deconstructing words using these common prefixes and suffixes (Bowers, Kirby, & Deacon, 2010).

4. When selecting example words for your lesson, begin with words that students are familiar with and build on those. For example, students in K-2 might explore words with the suffix **-ful**, like **hopeful** and **harmful**, and older, advanced, more advanced readers might explore more words like **uneventful** and **impactful**. Remember, you should not ignore or omit discussion of the word's meaning when teaching morphemes (Nagy, Carlisle, & Goodwin, 2014).

5. Integrate morphology lessons across the curriculum and in everyday conversation when discussing vocabulary, not just during your literacy block. Teaching students to analyze words during content lessons can help students understand new words and encourage an interest in words (Kieffer & Lesaux, 2012).

### Conclusion and Reflection

By integrating word study into daily instruction, educators can provide students with essential tools to navigate the complexities of English. But remember, morphology instruction for reading and spelling should only begin once students have learned phonemic awareness and phoneme-grapheme correspondence.

Engaging activities, discussions, and targeted instruction help students see patterns in words, strengthening their vocabulary and overall literacy skills. Students who understand the structure of words are more able to decode unfamiliar vocabulary, improve their spelling accuracy, and understand words at a deeper level, which leads to improved comprehension.

Reflecting on my teaching practice, I have noticed how strategies that once required deliberate inclusion have now become automatic. One of the most significant shifts has been my consistent use of terms like base word, suffix, and prefix. Previously, I reserved these terms for explicit instruction, using them only within the context of specific literacy lessons. Now, I incorporate them throughout the day – during read-alouds, writing conferences, and even in math and science discussions. I regularly ask students questions such as, “What suffix indicates this happened in the past?” or “Is this word related to any words that we know?” My approach to morphology instruction has evolved from isolated lessons to continuous immersion.

I have found that my enthusiasm for morphology and word structure is contagious, with most students developing an interest in words. Whether or not students feel my same excitement, they all benefit from repeated exposure and reinforcement. By making morphology an integral part of daily instruction, I am helping all students build a stronger foundation in literacy.



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## Meet the Writer and Editors

### Jennifer Fitch, M.Ed., A/OGA

**Jennifer Fitch** has been working in education for more than 25 years. She received her Master's in Education with a concentration in Reading and Early Literacy from the University of Vermont in 2000. Jennifer has worked both as a classroom teacher and as a literacy specialist. She has taught every grade level from first through sixth grade, although she admits that her passion is working with students in the early elementary years. She earned her Orton-Gillingham Associate Level certification in 2023 with the Stern Center for Language and Learning. Jennifer is currently enjoying teaching a second- and third-grade multiage classroom at East Montpelier Elementary School.



### Peggy Price, M.Ed., F/OGA

**Peggy Price** is the Director of the Stern Center Orton-Gillingham Institute, the only Orton-Gillingham Academy (OGA) accredited training program in Vermont. She leads a talented team of OGA Fellows and Clinical Supervisors who provide a wide range of courses and workshops, district-wide consulting, and in-depth mentoring for educators seeking OGA certification. Peggy has taught Orton-Gillingham to students ages 5 to 44 and finds joy in watching both students and educators grow as they learn the structure of English. She holds a Master's in Special Education from Georgia State University and a Bachelor's in Psychology from Binghamton University. Peggy believes every child has the right to read—and every teacher deserves the training to make that possible.



### Dorinne Dorfman, Ed.S., Ed.D., OG/A

Dorinne Dorfman has served as a teacher and principal for nearly 30 years in Vermont schools. After completing her undergraduate studies at Goddard College, she earned her Master's and Doctorate in Educational Leadership at the University of Vermont. As a postdoctoral Fulbright Scholar, she taught at the Technical University of Berlin and conducted research on democratic education in Germany. Since completing an Education Specialist Degree in Reading and Literacy Instruction at Bay Path University, Dr. Dorfman teaches evidence-aligned literacy at Barre Town Middle School.



**Answer to this issue's Curious Question:  
abovementioned, abracadabra, acknowledgment**

*Kress, J. E. & Fry, E. B. (2016). The reading teacher's book of lists. Jossey-Bass, p. 175*