

# Breaking Down New Words Worksheet

Studying new words through the elements of the POSSUM acronym—phonology, orthography, syntax, semantics, understanding, and morphology—helps learners solidify their mental representations of the words. Using this worksheet, teachers can guide students (grade 3 and up) through the process of analyzing words through each of these lenses.

This POSSUM acronym is a key feature of the RAVE-O program, authored by Dr. Maryanne Wolf. Check out our blog post [“Explicit Vocabulary Instruction Using the POSSUM Approach”](#) to learn more.

## Part 1: Phonology

The first section of this worksheet aims to help students assess and fully understand the phonological elements of a new vocabulary word.

To begin, educators can assign three words to students for group work. Students who do not need scaffolding can choose three words from a word bank. These vocabulary words can be selected from the students’ core content in social studies and science in order to reinforce their learning, and they should be selected with a standard connection prompt in mind (see Part 5). The students will write each word in the first row of the “Part 1: Phonology” table. For each word, students will identify the number of phonemes in the word, and they will write this number in the “# of Phonemes” row. By having students identify the number of sounds in a word, educators can informally assess if students are accurately discerning phonemes within the context of new vocabulary words. Next, students will identify how many graphemes are in each word, and they will write this number in the “# of Graphemes” row.

## Part 2: Orthography

Next, students will examine the orthography of each word using the “Part 2: Orthography” table. Students will identify the letters in each word that impact the sounds of the other letters in the word, and they will write these letters in the “Impact Letters” row. For example, if the vocabulary word is “century,” students would list the letter “e” because it impacts the “c” by creating the /s/ sound, the “u” because it impacts the “t” by creating the /ch/ sound, and the “r” because it impacts the “u” by creating a vowel distortion. Next, students will count how many syllables they hear in each word and write this number in the “# of Syllables” row. As a scaffold, students could be asked to mark the syllables in each word before they record their findings in the table. This should be done as appropriate with scope and sequence instruction. Next, students will check the types of syllables that appear in the word in the “Syllable Types” row. Syllable types include:

Syllable Type	Definition	Examples
Closed	Closed syllables end in a consonant, digraph, or blend after a single vowel, and	“top,” “fish,” “vol-can-ic”

	typically include a short vowel sound.	
Open	Open syllables end with a long vowel sound, spelled with a single vowel letter.	“go,” “mu-sic”
Silent -e (vowel-consonant-e)	Silent -e syllables appear in words with a vowel-consonant-e pattern. In these words, the -e is not pronounced. Typically, the preceding vowel makes a long sound.	“same,” “plate,” “mis-take”
Vowel team	In a vowel team, or vowel digraph, two or more graphemes are used to represent a single vowel sound.	“soap,” “light,” “res-cue”
R-controlled	R-controlled syllables include one or two vowels followed by an -r. In these words, the vowels take on a new sound, different from their usual long and short pronunciations. Sometimes, this syllable type is described as following the “bossy R” rule, as the consonant r controls the sound of the vowel.	“jar,” “third,” “fe-ver”
Consonant -le (final stable)	As the name suggests, a consonant + le syllable ends in a consonant followed by the letters l e. In these words, the final “e” creates a schwa sound. Because of this, the letters l e make the /ul/ sound.	“bubble,” “uncle,” “sparkle”

To learn more about syllable types, educators can check out our eLearning module “[Teacher Tools for Universally Implementing Structured Literacy Content.](#)”

## Part 3: Syntax

Using the “Part 3: Syntax” table, students will consider which parts of speech each word can serve in a sentence (i.e., noun, verb, adjective, or other). Students will check all boxes that apply. For example, the word “march” can serve as a noun in one sentence (e.g., “The protestors went to the march”), but as a verb in another sentence (e.g., “They will march in the street”). For a word like “march,” the student would check both the “noun” and the “verb” boxes. If a student selects “Other,” they can write the part of speech in the space provided. This is an excellent opportunity for discussion in pairs or small groups.

## Part 4: Semantics (Define It!)

In this section, students define each vocabulary word using their own words or by writing their interpretation of the word's meaning. Through this synthetic activity, teachers can address elements of language and sentence structure. Example instructions could include:

- "Define all three vocabulary words. Each definition should be a simple sentence,"
- "Use 1 compound and 1 complex sentence to define the vocabulary terms in your own words," or
- "Now that you have written your definitions, I want you to go back and add one adjective to each of your sentences."

Through this writing task, teachers can weave in the other skills students are learning.

## Part 5: Syntax and Understanding (Use It!)

In this section of the worksheet, students will write sentences with increasing complexity. First, students will write a sentence containing only one of the vocabulary words. After they have successfully completed this task, they will write a sentence with two, and then three, vocabulary words. Note that it is important that vocabulary words be used properly, (even if content and meaning are a bit silly!). For example, if the vocabulary words were "march," "century," and "baker," a sentence could be: "In the 17<sup>th</sup> century, all of the colonists would march down the street every morning to see the baker and buy bread from him." While this might not be historically accurate, this sentence demonstrates that the student has a clear understanding of the terms and is capable of using them properly in a sentence.

After writing each sentence, students will "proof" their writing by checking their capitalization, understanding, punctuation, and spelling.

## Standard Connection Prompt

This section of the worksheet provides students an opportunity to tie their knowledge to the content taught in class. It also requires students to use deeper-level thinking and Iowa Core learning. Each time a worksheet is assigned, teachers should create a prompt that requires students to connect classroom learning to core concepts. A prompt should not be a vague restatement of the core standard; rather, it should be explicit and provide students with direction and information on which to base their writing. Through this activity, students demonstrate that they have internalized the educational concepts you have been teaching them.

## Non-Examples

- Describe how geography and location can influence changes over time.
- Understand economic principles and how they affect daily life.

## Examples

- Throughout the process of colonization, the people moving to America had to adapt to new ways of life physically and emotionally. Write about some of the adaptations their new environment would have required of them and reflect on how that is the same or different in relation to a time you have had to adapt to change.
- When the colonists moved to America, they had to learn a new financial system and eventually had to create the beginning of our financial system as it exists today. If you could go back in time and make one big change to our financial system, what would it be and what impact do you think that change would have in your household today?

Students will write their response to the prompt in the space provided. They should utilize all three vocabulary words in their response.

## Part 6: Morphology

In “Part 6: Morphology,” students will explore how their vocabulary words are connected to other words through meaning or structure. The student will select a vocabulary word to focus on, and they will write this word in the first column. In the “Semantic Family Sort” column, they will write other words that have a similar meaning. For example, if the vocabulary word was “century,” the student might write, “decade,” “millennium,” and “epoch.” In the “Morpheme Family Sort” column, the student will write other words that share a morpheme with the vocabulary word. Continuing with the example of “century,” the student might write “percent,” “centimeter,” and “centennial” because they all contain the base morpheme, “cent.” In the “Orthographic Family Sort” column, the student will select one orthographic characteristic to focus on. For example, the word “century” has the soft “c” sound, so the student might write other words with this pattern, such as “cereal,” “center,” and “ceramic.” The morphology table is based on the work of Stone (2023).

## References

Stone, L. (2023, October 2-4). *A 4-step process to making words stick* [Conference session]. The 7<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference of the Reading League, Syracuse, NY, United States

# Breaking Down New Words Worksheet

When learning a new word, it is important to examine it through phonology (sounds), orthography (writing), syntax (word order), semantics (meaning), your own understanding and prior knowledge, and morphology (word parts). This worksheet will guide you through each step.

## Part 1: Phonology

Write your three vocabulary words in the first row. In the row below, write the number of phonemes in each word. In the final row, write the number of graphemes.

	Word 1	Word 2	Word 3
# of Phonemes			
# of Graphemes			

## Part 2: Orthography

In the first row, write the letters of each word that impact the sounds of other letters in the word. Next, count the number of syllables in each word, and write this number in the second row. In the final row, check the syllable types in the word.

	Word 1	Word 2	Word 3
Impact Letters			
# of Syllables			
Syllable Types	<input type="checkbox"/> Closed <input type="checkbox"/> Open <input type="checkbox"/> Silent -e <input type="checkbox"/> Vowel team <input type="checkbox"/> R-controlled <input type="checkbox"/> Consonant -le	<input type="checkbox"/> Closed <input type="checkbox"/> Open <input type="checkbox"/> Silent -e <input type="checkbox"/> Vowel team <input type="checkbox"/> R-controlled <input type="checkbox"/> Consonant -le	<input type="checkbox"/> Closed <input type="checkbox"/> Open <input type="checkbox"/> Silent -e <input type="checkbox"/> Vowel team <input type="checkbox"/> R-controlled <input type="checkbox"/> Consonant -le

## Part 3: Syntax

What part of speech can each word be? Check all that apply. Hint: Some words can be a different part of speech in different sentences. If you check "Other," write the part of speech on the line below.

	Word 1	Word 2	Word 3
	<input type="checkbox"/> Noun	<input type="checkbox"/> Noun	<input type="checkbox"/> Noun

<b>What parts of speech can they be?</b>	<input type="checkbox"/> Verb	<input type="checkbox"/> Verb	<input type="checkbox"/> Verb
	<input type="checkbox"/> Adjective	<input type="checkbox"/> Adjective	<input type="checkbox"/> Adjective
	<input type="checkbox"/> Other: _____	<input type="checkbox"/> Other: _____	<input type="checkbox"/> Other: _____

## Part 4: Semantics (Define it!)

In your own words, write the definition of each vocabulary word.

**Word 1:**

---

---

**Word 2:**

---

---

**Word 3:**

---

---

## Part 5: Syntax and Understanding (Use it!)

Write a sentence using **one** of the three vocabulary words above.

---

---

**Proof it!**    Capitalization    Understanding    Punctuation    Spelling

Write a sentence using **two** of the three vocabulary words above.

---

---

---

**Proof it!**    Capitalization    Understanding    Punctuation    Spelling

Write a sentence using all **three** of the vocabulary words above.

---

**Proof it!**    Capitalization    Understanding    Punctuation    Spelling

## Standard Connection Prompt

Your teacher will provide you with a writing prompt. Write your response in the space below.

## Part 6: Morphology

Choose one of the three vocabulary words and write it in the first column. Write 3-5 words that have a similar meaning to the vocabulary word in the second column. Identify a morpheme (word part) in the vocabulary word, and in the third column, write 3-5 words that include that morpheme. Identify an orthographic (spelling) pattern in the vocabulary word, and in the third column, write 3-5 words that share that pattern.

Vocabulary Word	Semantic Family Sort	Morpheme Family Sort	Orthographic Family Sort



Iowa Reading  
Research Center

--	--	--	--



# Breaking Down New Words Example Worksheet

When learning a new word, it is important to examine it through phonology (sounds), orthography (writing), syntax (word order), semantics (meaning), your own understanding and prior knowledge, and morphology (word parts). This worksheet will guide you through each step.

## Part 1: Phonology

Write your three vocabulary words in the first row. In the row below, write the number of phonemes in each word. In the final row, write the number of graphemes.

	Word 1	Word 2	Word 3
	<i>march</i>	<i>century</i>	<i>baker</i>
# of Phonemes	3	6	4
# of Graphemes	3	6	4

## Part 2: Orthography

In the first row, write the letters of each word that impact the sounds of other letters in the word. Next, count the number of syllables in each word, and write this number in the second row. In the final row, check the syllable types in the word.

	Word 1	Word 2	Word 3
Impact Letters	<i>r</i>	<i>e, u, r</i>	<i>e, r</i>
# of Syllables	1	3	2
Syllable Types	<input type="checkbox"/> Closed <input type="checkbox"/> Open <input type="checkbox"/> Silent -e <input type="checkbox"/> Vowel team <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> R-controlled <input type="checkbox"/> Consonant -le	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Closed <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Open <input type="checkbox"/> Silent -e <input type="checkbox"/> Vowel team <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> R-controlled <input type="checkbox"/> Consonant -le	<input type="checkbox"/> Closed <input type="checkbox"/> Open <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Silent -e <input type="checkbox"/> Vowel team <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> R-controlled <input type="checkbox"/> Consonant -le

## Part 3: Syntax

What part of speech can each word be? Check all that apply. Hint: Some words can be a different part of speech in different sentences. If you check "Other," write the part of speech on the line below.

	Word 1	Word 2	Word 3
What parts of speech can they be?	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Noun <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Verb <input type="checkbox"/> Adjective <input type="checkbox"/> Other: _____	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Noun <input type="checkbox"/> Verb <input type="checkbox"/> Adjective <input type="checkbox"/> Other: _____	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Noun <input type="checkbox"/> Verb <input type="checkbox"/> Adjective <input type="checkbox"/> Other: _____

## Part 4: Semantics (Define it!)

In your own words, write the definition of each vocabulary word.

**Word 1:** *When people march, they walk in a group with a shared purpose.*

---



---

**Word 2:** *A century is a period of 100 years.*

---



---

**Word 3:** *A baker is a person who makes bread, cake, and pastries.*

---



---

## Part 5: Syntax and Understanding (Use it!)

Write a sentence using **one** of the three vocabulary words above.

*The children marched in the parade.*

---



---

**Proof it!**   X Capitalization   X Understanding   X Punctuation   X Spelling

Write a sentence using **two** of the three vocabulary words above.

---

*The baker marched down the street to deliver the cake.*

---

**Proof it!**   X Capitalization   X Understanding   X Punctuation   X Spelling

Write a sentence using all **three** of the vocabulary words above.

---

*In the 17th century, all of the colonists would march down the street every morning to see the baker and buy bread from him.*

---

**Proof it!**   X Capitalization   X Understanding   X Punctuation   X Spelling

## Standard Connection Prompt

Your teacher will provide you with a writing prompt. Write your response in the space below.

Prompt:

Throughout the process of colonization, the people moving to America had to adapt to new ways of life physically and emotionally. Write about some of the adaptations their new environment would have required of them and reflect on how that is the same or different in relation to a time you have had to adapt to change.

---

*When colonists came to America, they had to adapt to a new environment with different kinds*

---

*of plants and animals. They had to learn how to grow and cook new kinds of food. They had to learn*

---

*how to grow crops in a place with a different climate and an unfamiliar landscape. When I moved to*

---

*Iowa from New Mexico, I had to get used to a new climate and different food. However, unlike the*

---

*colonists, I can still get a lot of the foods I like at the grocery store.*

---

## Part 6: Morphology

Choose one of the three vocabulary words and write it in the first column. Write 3-5 words that have a similar meaning to the vocabulary word in the second column. Identify a morpheme in the vocabulary

word, and in the third column, write 3-5 words that include that morpheme. Identify an orthographic (spelling) pattern in the vocabulary word, and in the third column, write 3-5 words that share that pattern.

<b>Vocabulary Word</b>	<b>Semantic Family Sort</b>	<b>Morpheme Family Sort</b>	<b>Orthographic Family Sort</b>
<i>century</i>	<i>decade</i> <i>millennium</i> <i>epoch</i>	<i>percent</i> <i>centimeter</i> <i>centennial</i>	<i>cereal</i> <i>center</i> <i>ceramic</i>