

Seven fun ways to use dictionaries in the classroom to promote literacy

Dictionary games can be a fun and interactive way of improving students' literacy and fostering creativity.

We asked Australian teachers how they use dictionaries to support learning in their classrooms, and here are their top ideas:

1. Use dictionaries as a creative writing tool. Get students to pick three words they don't know and make up their own definitions for two. Other students can guess which is correct.

"As a creative writing starter, dictionaries are amazing. Students find three words they don't know and create their own meanings for two. These are shared and their peers try to identify which is the real definition. It's always fun and builds their vocabulary."

2. Run a competition in which students pick the word with the strangest definition or spelling.

"The current favourite is to find the 'Weirdest Word'. Students find the word that has the most unusual spelling or the wackiest meaning. Giggles and hilarity often ensue."

3. Play dictionary 'celebrity heads', in which a definition is written on a post-it note and the student on whose head it is stuck has to guess the correct word.

"Great for exploring synonyms and specific vocabulary."

4. Run a word origins game, which involves students guessing or revealing (if they already knew) how an everyday word might have originated, and explaining their theory or knowledge to the class, before looking the word up to see if they were correct.

"I remember that the word 'sandwich' was a surprise as it came from a person's name! Students went on to think about the simple, everyday word and give an explanation of why it came about. A simple, imaginative, engaging way to generate interest about known, or possible, origins of a word!"

5. Arrange a dictionary scavenger hunt, in which students race to find a selected word, or the teacher reads out a clue about the word, which students then find.

"It's great for the younger years and my older students love it for a break."

6. Organise a 'tales from the dictionary' game in which the teacher waves a ruler over the dictionary like a magic wand and 6 or 7 chosen words are written on the board. The students create an exciting movie or book teaser, which they present to their class.

"Discussion ensues about hooks, catchy / wow words / which one would you rather go and see? Points are awarded for word length, prefix and suffix use, correct usage. If there is time, movie posters are designed on whiteboards."

7. Dictionary 'I spy' involves the teacher starting with, "I am looking at a word that begins with...", then when they have found the letter in the dictionary, the teacher provides the second letter and reads out the meaning. The students have to find the word and read it out.

What are your favourite dictionary games? Share them with us on Facebook and Twitter.



“ Every time I have to look up a word in the dictionary, I’m delighted. ”

– Vivienne Westwood