VIVA VOCABULARY!
Practical Ways to Promote Word Consciousness
By Lois E. Huffman, Ph.D.

Each edition of "Viva Vocabulary!" focuses on different word genres. The goal is to help students (re)discover the joy of language and the expressive power of vocabulary.

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Another Follow-Up to Becoming More *Nym*-ble:* Part One of Two (Synonyms, Antonyms, and Homonyms)

"Being a learner and innovator for life is fun, rewarding, and life furthering,"
-Michael Saenz

I continue to learn about the Big Three *-nyms,* which were the focus of several previous Viva Vocabulary! posts:

- "Synonym Power"
- "Opposites Attract Students"
- "What About Homonyms and Their Cousins?"
- "Just Following Up: Lots of Additions" Part One

-NYMS

In this piece, we'll look at additional examples, information, resources, and ideas for increasing students' knowledge of **Synonyms, Antonyms**, and **Homonyms**.

The second article in this series will focus on other common *-nyms*: Aptonyms, Contranyms, Demonyms, Eponyms, Hypernyms, Hyponyms, Metonyms, Pseudonyms, and Uninyms. Are you and your students ready to get more *nym*-ble?!

Synonyms - words with the same or similar meanings

In a post on Wordsmith.org, Anu Garg asks, "What's a synonym for the word synonym? That's not a rhetorical question. There are, in fact, synonyms for the word synonym in the English language: *poecilonym* and *polyonym*, from Greek poecilo- (various) and poly- (many) + -onym (name)." (Italics added.)

I told you about *poecilonym* in the Viva Vocabulary! "Just Following Up: Lots of Additions" Part One, but *polyonym* was new to me. Garg also shared this about synonyms:

"And a synonym is not an idle curiosity. There are times when a synonym can say the same thing, but in a softer, more oblique way. Think *perspire* vs *sweat*. Think *copulate* or *defecate* vs their four-letter synonyms." (Italics added.)

Synonyms allow speakers and writers to create **euphemisms** to describe an action or express an opinion. A euphemism is "a mild or pleasant word or phrase that is used instead of one that is unpleasant or offensive." (merriam-webster.com) In the words of grammarian Tom Stern: "Euphemisms put a happy face on the world's brutishness."

More information on euphemisms is in the following Viva Vocabulary! articles: ["Synonym Power,"](Synonym Power,) ["Euphemisms: Putting a Different Spin on It,"](Euphemisms: Putting a Different Spin on It,) and ["Terminology for Tough Economic Times."](Terminology for Tough Economic Times.)

Here are other online essays about synonyms and words that are sometimes perceived as such:

- ["Variations on Stupid"](Variations on Stupid) Seth Godin points to the importance of precision in language. Identifying what something really is can be a starting point for rectifying a situation (or at least, portraying it honestly!).

- ["Design Dictionary: What's the Difference Between a *Couch* and a *Sofa*?"](Design Dictionary) This *Apartment Therapy* post explains that there is no distinction between a *couch* and a *sofa*, except in connotation. "People tend to prefer the word *couch* when they're talking about a casual, un-stuffy room. A '*couch*' is a place to lie down and veg out. ... Most people use *sofa* when they're trying to be fancy …. A 's*ofa*' is more of a proper place to sit than a lie-down *couch*." (Knowing this distinction may be useful to the budding writers and designers in your class.)
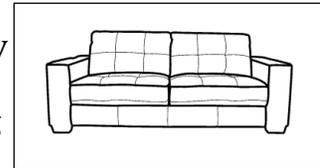
- [*"Sports Jackets* vs. *Blazers* vs. *Suit Jackets*: What's the Difference?"]("Sports Jackets vs. Blazers vs. Suit Jackets: What's the Difference?") (Thanks, Dr. R!) As its author Antonio Centeno points out, "Most men use these terms interchangeably, as do many men's clothing retailers." However, these items of clothing are not the same. The article goes on to explain the differences and why people should take the time to learn them. Students who are interested in fashion-related careers will likely find these distinctions helpful to know.

- ["The *Client* and The *Customer*"](The Client and The Customer) *Customers. Clients. Guests. Patrons. Partners.* All of these words are names that companies use for individuals or businesses who purchase their goods or services. In this piece, Seth Godin explores the distinction between two of the terms. Students might read this before delving into the specific language that various industries and enterprises use to refer to their customers. (strativity.com)

  For example, in corporate materials, "Dollar General thinks of its customers as *BFFs*, *friends*, *acquaintances*, or *strangers,* depending on their level of loyalty to the brand." (clark.com) To guide students' analysis, pose questions, such as: How does the label that's used impact employee attitudes toward and interactions with customers? What are the upsides and downsides of thinking of the people who patronize your establishment as "*guests*"? (Some schools view their students as *guests*.)

- ["Without a Doubt."](Without a Doubt.) *Confidence* and *certainty* may be related terms, but they do not mean the same thing. In another post, Mr. Godin sheds light on ["The Difference Between Confidence and Arrogance."](The Difference Between Confidence and Arrogance.) (Italics added in all examples.)

- [“When Leadership is Lacking,”](#) *Management* and *leadership* “do not describe identical characteristics and skills.” As Steve Keating explains that “all organizations need *management* and *leadership*” in order to thrive.

- [“The Value of Competence and Mastery,”](#) *Competency* and *mastery* are synonyms, yet they have different meanings. Trent Hamm writes about the “Renaissance Ideal,” . . . that is, *competence* in many things is better than *mastery* in one or two areas.

More Teaching Ideas:
1. Have students make Synonym Grids to graphically communicate synonyms for an overused word or an everyday word they especially like. To inspire students, show the grid structures for *NO* and *YES* from [The Same But Different Series](#) by graphic designer Jan Avendano. Make sure students include a QR code in each block to link the word to an example sentence with an image or video that illustrates it. Here is a synonym grid I created for *LOTS*:

BUNCHES	OODLES	GOBS	PLETHORA	CRAPTON
HEAPS	LOAD	LOTS	REAMS	SCADS
WAD	KAJILLION	PROFUSION	BOOCOO	WEALTH

Some other synonymic words and phrases for LOTS that could be in a larger grid: *abundance, a lot, bumper crop, collection, cornucopia, glut, great deal, host, large quantity, masses, massive amount, mass quantity, millions, multitude, piles, plentitude, plenty, scores, stacks, superabundance, surfeit, surplus,* and *tons.* Discuss the various synonyms by posing questions such as:
   - What is the specific meaning of the term? What other images might you use to illustrate the word?
   - What are appropriate contexts of use? (e.g., Is the word okay in an academic or a business setting?)
   - What are the connotations, if any, of the word?

If desired, take this activity a step further (pun intended) by inviting interested class members to design and make doormats with synonyms for hello or good-bye. For hello, synonyms such as *ALOHA, GREETINGS, HI, HOLA, HOWDY, HOW GOES IT, SUP, or WHAT'S SHAKING* could be painted on carpet squares or relatively inexpensive coir mats and given as gifts or used at school. (See illustrations below.) Again, ask questions to help students compare the denotations, connotations, and usage of the words.

GREETS	HEY	WASSUP

(Thanks to the Robeson County Reading Council for inspiring these instructional ideas!)

2. Invite able learners to read one or more of the online essays on synonyms (see above) and then investigate subtle differences between other words that are sometimes used interchangeably but should not be. More examples:

wisdom vs. *intelligence* vs. *knowledge*	*error* vs. *mistake* vs. *miscue*
water resistant vs. *waterproof*	*difficult* vs. *impossible*
washout vs. *sinkhole*	*differ* vs. *vary*
significant vs. *important* vs. *fundamental* vs. *urgent*	*boss* vs. *leader*
resist vs. *prevent*	*authority* vs. *power*
example vs. *exemplar*	*achievement* vs. *accomplishment*

Reiterate the importance of word choice in accurately conveying facts and feelings. Ask students to share examples of their own or others' unintentional misleading word choices. Be careful not to embarrass anyone.

Ask students to also generate a list of examples for each set of confused words. To illustrate what to do, you might display this excerpt from *The Simple Dollar* blog in which Trent Hamm clarifies the difference between *simple* and *easy*.

> **"People often mistake *simple* and *easy*.**
>
> A push-up is *simple*. Lay on the ground, stomach down, push yourself up off the ground until your arms are fully extended, and then lower yourself back to the ground. A push-up isn't *easy*, depending on your fitness level and the exact technique you use.
>
> A solution to a Rubik's Cube is *simple*. When each side of the cube is solid in color, you've solved it. Actually solving the Rubik's Cube, especially with speed, isn't *easy*.
>
> Shooting a basketball is *simple*. Position one hand on the side and one hand on the bottom of the ball. Push off with the bottom hand, using the side hand to guide the ball just as you release it. Of course, actually consistently making baskets isn't *easy*.
>
> Eating healthy is *simple*. Eat mostly plants and not too much. Almost all successful long-lasting diets in the world center around this. Of course, actually doing this with so many tasty and convenient options around us isn't *easy*.
>
> Being a good friend is *simple*. Listen. Laugh. Be there when the person is down. Actually being a good friend, especially during the tough times, isn't *easy*." (Italics added.)

3. Discuss Mark Twain's observation that "The difference between the almost right word and the right word is the difference between the lightning bug and lightning." Bring up the likelihood that the best word may be a short one rather than a long one. Remind the class that knowledge of synonyms is essential for being able to correctly use "just the right word" for a particular purpose and audience.
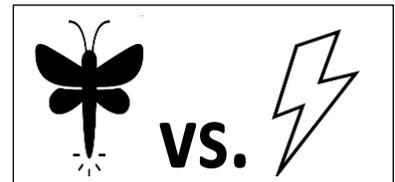
4. Present a situation and a variety of synonyms that might relate to or describe an aspect of that concept or behavior, as shown in the following examples:

Situation	Synonym Choices
A person wearing a suit and carrying a large bag at his/her side heads into an office building on a weekday morning.	*attaché case, briefcase, dispatch bag, messenger bag, murse, portfolio, satchel*
A group of people provide various types of assistance to a famous person when s/he is touring the country.	*assistants, caravan, entourage, crew, posse, "his/her people," retainers, retinue*
The local farmers market offers many kinds of vegetables.	*assortment, conglomeration, cornucopia, farrago, gallimaufry, heap, hodgepodge, jumble, medley, mélange, mess, mishmash, miscellany, mixture, passel, potpourri, ragbag*
A low-lying, uncultivated, water-filled area is teaming with snakes.	*bayou, bog, fen, marsh, marshland, moor, quagmire, swamp, swampland, wetlands* (Thanks, Dr. R and Glen!)

Next, model and discuss how to determine which synonym/s are appropriate for the situation. Share what you think and do and ask class members to also explain how they decide which synonym to use. The process might include several of the following steps:

❑ Consult reliable digital resources (e.g., merriam-webster.com) to delve into the nuanced meanings and usage of various synonyms.
❑ Notice sentences and phrases in which the different words appear. Examples can be found in instructional texts, self-selected reading, and online materials.
❑ Find out specific connotations (if any) of the word options.
❑ Consult people who are well read and have a good ear for language.
❑ Try out various synonyms to determine their impact on the meaning and sound of a sentence. Also consider the purpose, level of formality, and recipients of the communication.

As a class, develop your own list of steps for HOW TO CHOOSE THE BEST SYNONYM FOR THE JOB. Post the guidelines in your classroom and on your class website to help students internalize the process.

5. Reinforce the importance of word choice and the difference between words that are sometimes construed as synonyms by telling students that in an episode of the TV show *Bull,* a lawyer stated that his client had done nothing *illegal*. Point out that the lawyer did not say his client had done nothing *wrong* or that the client had not *made a mistake* or *committed a wrongdoing*. Ask students to think about the difference in meaning among the phrasings and why the lawyer chose his language carefully. (He wanted to avoid any suggestion of culpability.)

6. Read aloud the following excerpt from the Newberry Honor book *Paperboy* by Vince Vawter (Delacorte, 2013):

> "The funny way I talk is not so much like fat pigs in cartoons as I just get stuck on a sound and try to push the word out. Sometimes it comes out after a little pushing but other times I turn red in the face and lose my breath and get dizzy circles going around in my head. There's not much I can do about it except think of another word or keep on pushing." (p. 1)
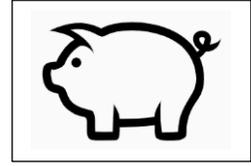
Then explore how knowing lots of synonyms might be helpful to someone like the protagonist in this story. Students should also find out if substituting an easier-to-pronounce synonym is a recommended practice for an individual who stutters.

Make sure learners are sensitive to what fellow students or community members who have this speech disorder might experience. Draw on information from [The Stuttering Foundation.](#) This site also includes a list of famous people who do not let stuttering stand in their way. Vince Vawter, the author of *Paperboy,* is another example to add to the list. Before writing this Newberry Honor book and subsequently visiting many schools around the country, Mr. Vawter had a long, successful career as a newspaper editor and publisher.

7. Let the class know that some people equate the terms *tourist* and *traveler*. Share the following article ["Don't Be a *Tourist*. Be a *Traveler*"](#) (Italics added.) and ask students to explain the difference between the two words. Then ask students to share examples of each from movies, literature, and real life. Also discuss the negative connotations of the word *tourist* and why this perception may have come about despite the thriving tourism/travel industries in many locales.

5. Invite students to look for synonymic idioms and phrases, as shown in the table below. Talk about the differences in meaning among the expressions as well as times when each might be used.

English Expression	Indicates . . .
blow one's stack, go ballistic, hit the roof, pop one's cork	anger
happy camper, like a dog with two tails, on cloud nine, over the moon	happiness
down in the dumps, have the blues, have a lump in the throat	sadness

6. As a class, investigate **scesis onomaton** (a.k.a. accumulatio, replication, purposeful pleonasm), "a successive series of words or phrases whose meanings are generally equivalent."([americanrhetoric.com](#)) Examples:
   - "America is about opportunity. That's why my parents came to America more than 40 years ago. And that's why most of your parents came here generations ago in search of an *opportunity*, a *chance*, a *fair shake*." -Bobby Jindal, Former Governor of Louisiana ([americanrhetoric.com](#))

- "We're all *dispensable*, Bug. *Dispensable*, *disposable*, and *expendable*." -Dr. Garrett Macy, character on TV show *Crossing Jordan*
- "The MRI shows no sign of residual tumor. *None. Zero. Zippo. Zilch.*" -Dr. Marina Blaize, character on *The Good Doctor* TV show

Talk about why writers and speakers sometimes use this type of repetition: 1) To emphasize an idea; 2) To clarify their meaning; or 3) To impress others. Make sure that students know that, if used in an appropriate context to get a point across, a scesis onomaton can be beautifully poetic and effective. (coursenotes.org)

Help students contrast a **scesis onomaton** with a **pleonasm**, which is using more words than necessary to convey meaning (e.g., *the man he said, burning fire, pick and choose, PIN number*) (merriamwebster.com). As with a scesis onomaton, a pleonasm may be done for deliberate effect or to draw attention. However, most pleonasms are the result of poor editing or saying something out of habit.

7. Have learners consider the value of synonyms beyond writing assignments and speaking in school. For example, people in marketing and public relations must possess extensive knowledge of synonyms in order to choose words that will connect with the people they are trying to influence.

   As pointed out in the post ["Marketing Communications Word Choice and Voice: Your Corporate Persona's Inner Khakis or Suit,"](#) some words sound more formal and less appealing to the general public. For example, advertising copy writers are advised to substitute emotional words for intellectual ones (e.g., *speed up* rather than *accelerate*). (See the list: ["Shift Word Choice Toward Emotion."](#))

   Students should also look into words such as the following to determine people's emotional or psychological associations with each:
   - *activity, exercise, drill, practice, problems*;
   - *adversary, antagonist, challenger, competitor, contender, enemy, foe;*
   - *aid, assist, facilitate, help, support*;
   - *home learning, homework, take-home learning tasks*;
   - *blemish, damage, harm, hurt, impair, injure, tarnish, spoil, wound*; and
   - *attendant, server, waiter, waitperson, waitstaff.*

   Remind the class that "Absolute synonymy is rare." (oxfordjournals.org) Reiterate how using one synonym instead of another can alter meaning and influence perception.

8. (Re)introduce your learners to fun or useful synonyms from days gone by. (Some of these may still be used in areas of the U.S. or crop up in visual, audio, or written products set in the past.) To illustrate:

addled = confused	*josh* = to joke
aught = nothing or zero	*lavatory* = restroom
britches = pants	*penmanship* = handwriting
cloakroom = coat closet	*roughage* = fiber

comportment = behavior	*shillyshally* = to be indecisive
eventide = evening	*skedaddle* = to leave quickly
expecting = pregnant	*sundries* = various small items
false face = mask	*thrice* = three times
fetching = attractive	*toil* = hard work
frock = dress/garment	*unmentionables* = underwear
hutch = cabinet for storage	*vamoose* = to leave quickly

Let the class know that the best writers have a voluminous vocabulary so they can use the right word for a character or setting, regardless of the era or action. One source of words from the past is the *Dictionary of Old-Fashioned Words: Vocabulary Building* by Manik Joshi (Google Play, 2014). An online source is "100 Whimsical Words". (Thanks to the members of the Lee County Reading Association who reminded me of the value of "old words".)

9. Bring up American **regionalisms** (a synonym subtype)**,** which are differences in pronunciation and word choice in various parts of the U.S. Draw on the maps and information in Josh Katz's book *Speaking American: How Y'all, Youse, and You Guys Talk, A Visual Guide* (HMH, 2016). Some of the maps from the book can be found at BusinessInsider.com and Rd.com. (BTW, Dr. Katz created these maps when he was a Ph.D. student at NC State University.)

Ask students if the information about words used in their region rings true. For example, do North Carolinians typically call "finely chopped cabbage with vinegar or mayonnaise dressing" *slaw* rather than *coleslaw*? Do most people in NC refer to a generic carbonated beverage/soft drink as *coke* or *soda* rather than *pop*?

(More information on regionalisms is in the Viva Vocabulary! article "Different Name, Same Thing: Regional Vocabulary in American English.")

Antonyms - words that have opposite meanings

Word opposites seem to be highly appealing to many students. One reason for the popularity of antonyms may be the deceptive simplicity of dichotomies (e.g., *problem ↔ solution, happy ↔ sad, good ↔ bad*).

As noted in the Viva Vocabulary! post "Opposites Attract Students," students likewise enjoy exploring **oxymorons**, which are figures of speech that juxtapose contradictory terms. Some people call them "compressed paradoxes." Here are some oxymorons from my recent personal and professional reading:

collaborative competition	*new tradition*
compassionate conservatism	*organized random* (*randomly organized*)
creative control	*paid volunteer*
cultivated wildflowers	*passive listener*
ethical hacking	*preemptive defense*
explorer in residence	*prospective hindsight*
honest cheater	*seriously funny*
humanitarian war	*serious play*

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giant miniature world   *showed up missing*
living dead   *tough liberal*
narcissistic altruism (*altruistic narcissism*)

A contemporary resource on oxymorons is *Oxymoronica: Paradoxical Wit and Wisdom from History's Greatest Wordsmiths* by Mardy Grothe (Harper, 2015). (As I noted in a previous Viva Vocabulary! article, Grothe lives in Southern Pines, NC.) The book is a collection of quotations that include incompatible or incongruous elements, such as: "*The more things change, the more they stay the same.*" "*Acting is happy agony.*" and Dolly Parton's "*You'd be surprised how much it costs to look this cheap.*" Grothe reminds us that "many oxymoronic observations stretch our minds and expand our thinking."

More Teaching Ideas:
1. Present the short but thought-provoking post ["Showing vs. Telling"](#) and have students respond in writing to questions such as the following:
   - What is the difference between the two behaviors, **THINK ABOUT IT** and what is the role of each in modern society?
   - Do you agree or disagree with the author's stance? Are the two things opposites?
   - Are you a *talker* or a *doer*? Please explain.

   Ask students to give examples and specifics to flesh out their points. Hold small-group discussions so students can share what they've written and get reactions from peers.

2. Present this micro-post "[Everyone and No One](#)" from Seth Godin:

   > Rarely true.
   > "*Everyone* loves it."
   > "*No one* wants to be my friend…"
   > More effective and accurate to replace these words with, "someone."

   After pointing out the antonyms in the post, ask students to consider the problems with overgeneralizing. (Child telling parent, "*Everyone* does it." "*Everyone* is going.") What specific examples can students provide of this type of thinking and instances that disprove such assertions? What are the drawbacks or dangers of viewing situations and people in extremes or unrealistically? (e.g., over-confidence, delusion, disappointment, anger, anxiety).

3. Have class members consider the nature of another commonly used antonymic pair, *always ↔ never*. In what contexts are these words seen or heard? What are the connotations of each word? (e.g., *Never* suggests certainty that cannot be disputed, but it also may invite a challenge.) Are the terms as dogmatic as they appear? How do you or others respond to statements or imperatives that include the terms? How do the words compare with the antonymic pair, *usually ↔ seldom*? (The latter might be more realistic or accurate.) Draw on information at [quickanddirtytips.com](#).

4. As a class, compile a list of items in the same general category that are "totally opposite of one another." Brainstorming contrasting entities can be especially useful when writing descriptions or conveying differences. These examples might help students get started:

Category	Opposites	
airplanes	*Piper J-3 Cub*	*F-16 Fighter*
boats	*pontoon boat*	*cigarette boat*
climate zones	*Sahara Desert*	*Amazon Rain Forest*
shelters	*yurt*	*palace*
vehicles	*Volt*	*Maserati*

5. Make the article "More and Less" available to the class. Invite students to reflect on some of the ideas in the piece: "*More* leading, *less* following." "*More* patience, *less* intolerance." "*More* writing, *less* watching." (Italics added.) Possible questions to raise:
   - How might you apply these statements to your life in and out of school?
   - What would our world be like if more people took these ideas to heart?
   - What other *more-less* dichotomies could serve as useful reminders to people today?

For example: *More* sleep, *less* irritability. *More* mindfulness, *less* thoughtlessness. *More* saving, *less* spending. *More* wisdom, *less* foolishness. *More* reusable packaging, *less* waste. (A Less/More list can be found at thefunnyplace.org.) Have students write an essay in which they make a case for the benefits of one of their *more-less* phrases.

(Another post from Seth Godin that focuses on opposites is "Losing by Winning." Help students explore this relationship by asking: Are *winning* and *losing* truly antonyms? Is a "non-winner" different from a loser? Have there been times in your life when you *won* but actually *lost* or vice versa? Can you think of any such instances in books, movies, or TV shows? What happened? What does the expression, "*winning* the battle but *losing* the war" mean and how does this concept relate to your experiences or Godin's ideas?)

6. Invite older students to read the article "Simple and Hard" from *The Simple Dollar* blog and then discuss their reactions to Trent Hamm's contention that many things in life (e.g., personal finance, weight control, exercising) are *simple* in many respects but also *hard*. Encourage students to give other examples from their personal experiences (e.g., resisting peer pressure, being on time).

7. Discuss *leading* and *following* and when each might be the wisest course of action. Share the observation that in regard to leadership, "each of us is *under* some and *over* others."

Then talk about situations in students' lives that exemplify this contrast. (Thanks, Leslie!)

8. Remind the class that authors sometimes present opposite ideas to make a point or for poetic effect. An example that some students may be familiar comes from the *Prayer of St. Francis*: "Lord, make me an instrument of your peace: where there is *hatred*, let me sow *love*; where there is *injury, pardon*; where there is *doubt, faith*; where there is *despair, hope*; where there is *darkness, light*; where there is *sadness, joy*...." (Italics added.) (Thanks, Virg and Anita!) Encourage students to share other instances in which this literary device is used and analyze how it impacts the writing and its message.

9. Have student pairs choose an oxymoronic saying or phrase to investigate (e.g., In the summer of 2017, "the *hot cool* drink [was] Burger King's Lucky Charms shake (usatoday.com)). Once students learn about the expression's origin, meaning, and use, invite them to present their findings to the class via social media or a web tool of their choice. Here is an example adapted from Grothe (2015):


Less is More

Origin and Meaning: "Coined by Robert Browning (in his poem, "Andrea del Sarto") and popularized by the German-born American architect Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, nothing could be further from the literal truth. But when people use this expression, they are not speaking logically, they're using self-contradictory phrasing to describe an important principle—keeping things simple and avoiding unnecessary detail often improves things. Yes, one could say "Simpler is better," but such a bland observation wouldn't attract our attention like Browning's more provocative observation."
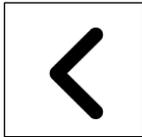
Usage: This expression is frequently applied to simple living and to minimalism in architecture, decor, design, makeup, music, speaking, writing, etc.

If relevant, encourage students to consider alternative perspectives regarding the oxymoronic saying. For instance, in the design world, some say "Less is bore!" Graphic designer Milton Glaser (creator of the I♥NY logo) also wrote:

"**LESS IS NOT NECESSARILY MORE**.

Being a child of modernism, I have heard this mantra all my life. *Less is more*. One morning upon awakening I realized that it was total nonsense, it is an absurd proposition and also fairly meaningless. But it sounds great because it contains within it a paradox that is resistant to understanding. But it simply does not obtain when you think about the visual of the history of the world. If you look at a Persian rug, you cannot say that less is more because you realize that every part of that rug, every change of color, every shift in form is absolutely essential for its aesthetic success. You cannot prove to me that a solid blue rug is in any way superior. That also goes for the work of Gaudi, Persian miniatures, art nouveau and everything else. However, I have an alternative to the proposition that I believe is more appropriate. 'Just enough is more.'"(miltonglaser.com)

As needed, bring up people, places, things, situations, or events that relate to the oxymoron under study. For *ugly cute*, you could share the sentence, "An *ugly cute* 'puppy-monkey-baby' toddles into a living room." ([npr.org](npr.org)) Students might also enjoy ["Awesome Animals So Ugly They're Cute"](#) from *National Geographic Kids* or *Mashable's* ["20 Animals So Ugly They're Cute."](#) These photos are likely to enrich the class discussion of how something can be simultaneously *ugly* and *cute*. More insights on this *ugly-cute* phenomenon are at ["This is Why We Find 'Ugly' Animals Cute."](#)

10. Invite students to look for antonyms in the books they read. For example, in Ecclesiastes 3:1-8 of the *Bible* (also in the1960's hit song, "Turn! Turn! Turn! To Everything There Is a Season" by The Byrds), there are many opposites: *plant ↔ reap; kill ↔ heal; laugh ↔ weep; rend ↔ sew*; and *love ↔ hate.* Students should then consider how these contrasting terms affect readers' comprehension. What role do the antonyms play in communicating concepts or behaviors? What is the stylistic impact of these contrasting terms? (Thanks, Mr. Leach and *The Mirror* staff.)
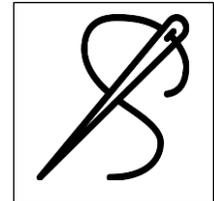
11. Ask students to take photos or screenshots of "Antonyms for Our Times." Post them to your class website, [Padlet](#), [Lino](#), [Pinterest](#), or even a physical bulletin board that is made interactive through QR codes. Use the examples below to illustrate the kind of things students should look for.

EXAMPLES of Antonyms from Our Modern World
• Store Hours by *Appointment* or *Happenstance* (amymeierdesign.com)
• "Can You Be Grateful for Both *Blessings* and *Challenges*? A Practice of Radical Gratitude" by Dr. Lissa Rankin (positivelypositive.com)
• "*Bloom* and *Bust*" article in *[Washington Monthly](#)*
• "The *[Express](#)* and the *[Local](#)*" post by Seth Godin
• Clickbait title of an online article about pharmaceuticals: *Branded* or *Generic*?
• *Splurge* or *Steal* Make-up board on Pinterest
• Do you *support* (or *thwart*) someone else's efforts to keep healthy habits? ([Gretchen Rubin on Heleo.com](#) (Italics added in all examples.)

12. Have the class read the post ["The *Short Run* and the *Long Run*."](#) (Italics added.) Talk about being future oriented and making decisions with an eye on long-term consequences. Ask students to bring up examples from their lives and those of people they know to illustrate contrasts described in the post.

13. Present interesting but useful antonym pairs (e.g., *accelerate ↔ decelerate, acceptance ↔ rejection, altricial ↔ precocial, anterior ↔ posterior, assets ↔ liabilities, borrow ↔ lend, bury ↔ exhume, chaos ↔ order, challenger ↔ defender, depreciation ↔ appreciation, freeloader ↔ freegiver, give ↔ take, growth work ↔ grunt work, headboard ↔ footboard, home ↔ away/visiting, inflation ↔ deflation, positivity ↔ negativity, praise*

↔ *pan, pride* ↔ *humility, rebuke* ↔ *praise, spirit* ↔ *flesh, thriver* ↔ *diver, victory* ↔ *defeat*) and ask students to list a/n context, entity, event, situation, or behavior that each of the pairs might relate to.

Class members should also explain the connections and differences suggested by the antonyms. When looking at the antonyms, *freeloader* ↔ *freegiver*, the post "The Opposite of The Freeloader Problem" might be a catalyst for an in-depth discussion and investigation of charity or generosity to others. Bring students' attention to the notion of effective altruism, as explained by ethicist Peter Singer in the TED Talk "The Why and How of Effective Altruism." (Please be aware that the talk does contain graphic footage.)

14. Have students discuss or write about what *pushes* or *pulls* them toward certain decisions, behaviors, activities, or careers. Raise questions such as: What is the difference between a *push* and a *pull*? Which one spurs you? In what situations? (The notion of *push* vs. *pull* is explored at boardcertified teachers.org. This piece might be useful reading for you prior to guiding your students' thinking about the *pushes* and *pulls* in their lives.)

15. Encourage students to investigate continuums and think about where they would place themselves in relation to the polar opposite endpoints (e.g., a spending spectrum, ranging from *skinflint* to *spendthrift,* as discussed on thesimpledollar.com). Other trait continuums that students might reflect on are *slovenly* ↔ *tidy; tardy* ↔ *punctual; trendy* ↔ *old-fashioned, covetous* ↔ *content, liberal* ↔ *conservative, shy* ↔ *gregarious, easy going* ↔ *high strung.*

16. Extend your learners' thinking about idiomatic expressions by taking a closer look at ones that contain opposites. Examples: *Actions* speak louder than *words.* Come *apart* at the *seams.* One man's *trash* is another man's *treasure.* What *goes* around *comes* around. While the *cat's* away, the *mice* will play. Talk about the meaning of each idiom and the role of the opposites.

(Idioms are discussed in detail in the Viva Vocabulary! article "Idio(ma)tic Expressions: Go Figure!" Proverbs, which are a type of idiom, are the subject of the Viva Vocabulary! piece "Proverbial Wisdom?")

17. Delve into the antonyms *big screen* and *little screen*. What does each refer to? What are the advantages and disadvantages of each? Which do your students prefer? With streaming, has the line between the two blurred?

18. Bring up the recent trend of *fire and ice* vacations. These are trips to places like Argentina or Iceland so travelers can experience both hot and cold climates. Have students brainstorm the pluses and minuses of such vacations. Students should also research the impact of sudden drastic temperature changes on the human body. To extend the learning, invite students to look into our fascination with the *fire* and *ice* duality. For example, students might read and discuss Robert Frost's poem Fire and Ice.

19. Ask students to respond in writing to quotations that contain antonyms or that are about opposite concepts, as in the examples below. Then have students share their responses in small groups. (This could be used as a bell ringer activity.)

- "Listen to your elder's advice. Not because they are always *right*, but because they have more experience being *wrong*." -Unknown
- "*Lose* yourself to *find* yourself." -Gretchen Rubin
- "*Pride* is concerned with who is right. *Humility* is concerned with what is right." -Ezra Taft Benson
- "The *present* enables us to understand the *past*, not the other way around." -A.J.P. Taylor
- "There are two ways of exerting one's strength: One is *pushing* down, the other is *pulling* up." -Booker T. Washington   This quote ties in with the concepts of *push* and *pull* discussed in item # 13 above. Make sure students consider these actions in the social and political arenas as well as the physical world.
- "There never was a *good war* or a *bad peace*." -Benjamin Franklin
- "*Live* as if you were to *die* tomorrow. Learn as if you were to live forever." -Mahatma Ghandi
- "English is the *easiest* language to learn but the *hardest* to learn well." -Source Unknown
- "*Hard* work is often the *easy* work you did not do at the proper time." -Bernard Meltzer
- "*Words* are plentiful. *Deeds* are precious." -H. Ross Perot
- "There is virtue in *work,* and there is virtue in *rest*. Use both and overlook neither." -Alan Cohen
- "*Timidity* can be as dangerous as *rashness*." -Poul Anderson
- "We are not given a *good* life or a *bad* life. We are given life. And it's up to us to make it *good* or *bad*." -Ward Foley (Italics added.)

Homonyms - words that sound the same but are spelled differently and have different meanings

Homonyms are used in many jokes and cartoons. They are fun and troublesome at the same time. The dialogue in this "Pearls Before Swine" strip by Steven Pastis illustrates the humor (and frustration) that homonyms contribute to our world:

Rat: I hear you went to the Dodgers/Giants game. What was the score?
Pig: Giants one. Dodgers two.
Rat: How can they both win?
Pig: They didn't. I said the Giants had one.
Rat: And the Dodgers, too?
Pig: Right.
Rat: That makes no sense. Did you at least happen to see how many runs the Padres scored in their game?
Pig: Four.
Rat: For my bet. I have big money on them.
Pig: Then I hope that's the number you needed.
Rat: *What's* the number I needed?

Pig: I just told you. If you don't believe me, ask my German friend, Hans.
Rat: Fine. Do you know how many runs the Padres scored?
Hans: Nein.
Rat: You said it was four something.
Pig: *You* said it was for something.
Rat: Dude, just gimme the right Dodgers/Giants score and I'll buy you your stupid lunch unless you already had food at the game.
Pig: Ate nothing.
Rat: Who had nothing?
Pig: Me.
Rat: Ahhhhhhhh.
Pig: I was too upset the Dodgers had won.
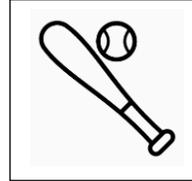
More Teaching Ideas:

1. Invite students to develop skits centered around the different meanings of homophones (See homonym examples in the chart below.). Focus on the silly misunderstandings that can occur when using such words. If desired, one group might bring to life the "Pearls Before Swine" strip included above. Record the comedic performances and post them on YouTube or Vimeo.

boarder, border	hue, hew	rapped, rapt, wrapped
bow, beau, Bo/Beau	kill, kiln	revue, review
cannon, canon	literal, littoral	right, write, wright
cash, cache	marry, merry, Mary*	role, roll
cite, sight, site	metal, medal, meddle	roomy, roomie, rheumy. Rumi
coarse, course	mince, mints	royal, roil
crewel, cruel	palate, palette, pallet	rye, Rye (NY), wry
diffuse, defuse	peak, peek, pique	Sue, sue, Sioux
duty, doody	peal, peel	suede, swayed
eary, eerie, Erie	peddle, pedal	surf, serf
fair, fare, faire	prays, praise, preys	taut, taught
feat, fete, feet	purchase, perches	vail, vale, veil
floe, flow, Flo	rabbit, rabbet	war, wore
grate, great	rain, rein, reign	way, weigh, whey
horde, hoard	rap, wrap	

(Adapted from *Between You and Me* by Mary Norris   Thanks, Carolyn!)
*These words are often not pronounced the same in Massachusetts, Long Island, and New Jersey as well as parts of Pennsylvania (businessinsider.com).

For each skit, require class members to identify all the homophones (plus their spellings and meanings) that lead to the humorous confusion. To inspire students, share one or more of the following, and as a class, analyze how the homophones impact the conversations.

- Clip from the classic Abbot and Costello comedy routine "Who's On First"
- *Late Night with Jimmy Fallon* skit "Who's on First? The Sequel," starring Jimmy Fallon, Billy Crystal, and Jerry Seinfeld
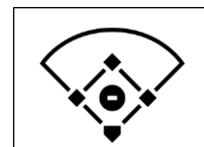
- Scene from *Galaxy Quest* movie "in which the crew visits a strange planet in search of a beryllium sphere they need to repair their ship. They encounter a band of tiny, childlike aliens who appear to be mining the planet's beryllium. The dialogue is as follows:
  - **Alexander:** Could they be the miners?
  - **Fred:** Sure. They're like three years old. (*Everyone looks at Fred.*)
  - **Alexander:** Miners, not minors.
  - **Fred:** You lost me. (impertinentremarks.com)
- Volkswagen commercial about their [Model Year End *Clarence* (*Clearance*) Event](#)

2. Encourage students to make note of other homonyms that are used to bring humor to movie or television scenes (see the *Galaxy Quest* example above). Keep a list of these on the class website along with an explanation of the homonyms' different meanings. Provide an example such as the following so students understand what to do.

> MOVIE: *Tenured*
> SCENE: Play practice at an elementary school
>
> **Teacher:** It's good. I just think maybe you're not totally grasping the *stakes* of the scene.
> **Student:** I'm a vegan.
>
> EXPLANATION: The student thinks the teacher is talking about *steaks*, the plural form of *steak* which refers to a high-quality cut of meat. The student probably doesn't know the word *stakes,* which in this context, means something that can be won or lost. It's likely that the student is also not aware that the teacher is hoping to use the play to win back his estranged wife.

3. Share Seth Godin's short, thought-provoking post ["Taking It for *Granite*."](#) After reading, ask students to list some things in their world that they take for *granted*. Why do they do this? Are these things (living or nonliving) made of "*granite*" in the figurative sense? What are the consequences of taking each for *granted*? At an appropriate point in the discussion, reinforce the difference between *granite* and *granted* and how Mr. Godin has cleverly played on the similarity of the words' pronunciations to make his point.

It is my hope that you found useful resources and instructional activities in this Viva Vocabulary! article. The next article in this two-part series will focus on other kinds of *-nyms* that are common in our culture.

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