

Welcome to Word Ladders!

How do Word Ladders work?

Let's say our first Word Ladder begins with the word *wet*. The directions will tell children to change one letter in *wet* to make a word that means "not dry." The word children will make, of course, is *wet*. The directions for the next word will then ask children to make a change in *wet* to form another word—perhaps *pet* or *set*. Children will form new words as they work up the ladder until they reach the top rung. If children get stuck on a rung along the way, they can come back to it, because the words before and after will give them the clues they need to figure out the word. Of course, you can also provide additional clues to help them figure out difficult words.

How do Word Ladders benefit children?

Word Ladders are great for building children's decoding, phonics, spelling, and vocabulary skills. When children add, take away, or rearrange letters to make a new word from one they have just made, they must examine sound-symbol relationships closely. This is just the kind of analysis that all children need to do in order to learn how to decode and spell accurately. And when the Ladder adds a bit of meaning in the form of a definition (for example, "what you make when you sit down"), it helps extend children's understanding of words and concepts. All of these skills are key to children's success in learning to read and write. So even though Word Ladders will feel like a game, children will be practicing essential literacy skills at the same time!

How do I teach a Word Ladder lesson?

Word Ladders are incredibly easy and quick to implement. Here are four simple steps:

1. Choose a Word Ladder to try. Each teaches a particular phonics lesson, like short-a words or *r*-controlled vowels.
2. Make a copy of the Word Ladder for each child.
3. Choose whether you want to do the Word Ladder as a whole class, or have children work alone, in pairs, or in groups. If children are emergent readers, you might read the clues to them and use a think-aloud method to model how to complete the activity. In addition, you might display a copy on an overhead projector to demonstrate how to fill in the word on each rung. As their skills develop, kids can work on the ladders independently.
4. At each new word, children will see two clues: the changes they need to make to the previous word ("change the first letter," "add a letter to the end," and so on), and a definition of or clue to the meaning of the word. Sometimes this clue will be a sentence in which the word is used in context but is left out for children to fill in. Move from word to word in this way, up the whole Word Ladder. Feel free to add clues if the word is challenging—letter position of the change; other sentence clues; or just tell students the word.

That's the lesson in a nutshell! It should take no longer than ten minutes to do. Once you're done, you might extend the lessons by having children sort the words into various categories. This can help them deepen their understanding and use of the words. For instance, you could sort them into:

- Grammatical categories (Which words are action words? Which words name people, animals, places, or things?)
- Word structure (Which words end with a silent *e*? Which words contain a consonant blend?)
- Word meaning (Which words express what a person can do or feel? Which do not?)

Tips for Working With the Ladders (Try these tips to give children extra help in doing Word Ladders.)

- List all the "answers" for the ladder (that is, the words for each rung) in random order on the board. Have children choose words from the list to complete the puzzle.
- Add your own clues to give children extra help as they work through each rung of a ladder. A recent event in your classroom or community could even inspire clues for words.
- If children are stuck on a particular rung, you might simply say the word aloud and see if they can spell it correctly by making appropriate changes in the previous word. Elaborate on word meanings as children move up the ladder.
- Challenge children to come up with alternative definitions for the same words. Many words, like *bat*, *pet*, *ball*, and *lot*, have multiple meanings.
- Once children complete a ladder, add the words to a word wall. Encourage children to use the words in their speaking and writing.

Answers!

Cup of Tea (page 58)

cup, cup, teap, teape, teak, teak