

# SKILLS FOCUS: VOCABULARY

*Word-level lessons in spelling and pronunciation naturally incorporate the teaching and learning of vocabulary items, including both word meanings and usage. A step beyond the word level are lessons in "phraseology" or "phrasing"—the putting together of individual words into meaningful groups. Since some kinds of vocabulary activities systematize the kinds of words to be learned, such lessons can also provide instruction and practice in vocabulary-learning methods, skills, and strategies. The following generic ideas in *Still DOING WITHOUT THE PHOTOCOPIER* focus on the organization, meanings, and usage of vocabulary items:*

- **IDEA EE:** Mystery Phrases
- **IDEA FF:** Four-of-a Kind Card Decks & Games
- **IDEA GG:** Vocabulary Chains, Dominoes
- **IDEA HH:** Dictionary Dealings
- **IDEA II:** Put It in Context

*Would you like more suggestions for the effective teaching and/or learning of language at the word level? The following ideas in the *DOING WITHOUT THE PHOTOCOPIER Creative Idea Book (ISBN 0-9627878-4-1)* also focus on vocabulary acquisition and phrasing:*

- **IDEA R:** Vocabulary Concentration
- **IDEA S:** Word Matching
- **IDEA T:** Vocabulary Picture Chains
- **IDEA U:** Word Play

*And so do these other Authors & Editors titles:*

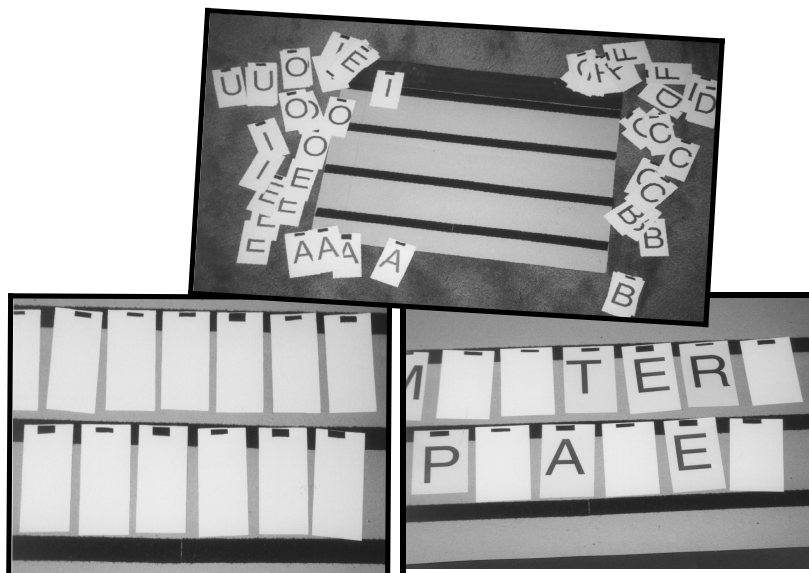
- *What's the Word? Using New Vocabulary in the Real World.* (Student Text) ISBN 1-891077-01-5
- *Picture This! Picture This Too! Vocabulary Puzzles* (Reproducible Masters) ISBN 0-9627878-0-9 and ISBN 0-9627878-1-7
- *Symbol Card Decks A-M & N-Z: Creative Activity Ideas in 26 Content Areas* ISBN 1-891077-16-3 and ISBN 1-891077-17-1
- *Homophones: Instructions for Use of 90 High-Intermediate Word & Picture Cards (with Homophone Card Decks 1-5)* ISBN 1-891077-26-0
- *Creative Card Decks & Games* (Bigger Books of Bright Ideas) ISBN 1-891077-09-0

# EE

## MYSTERY PHRASES

*In one of the best-known and most popular TV game shows in the U.S., contestants try to guess missing letters to figure out the solution to a kind of word puzzle. The most successful players have not only a background knowledge of vocabulary and culture but also a "feel" for the phonics patterns and letter combinations that underlie the English spelling system. Perhaps language learners can continue developing such skills through classroom games in which they compete in guessing mystery phrases.*

- ⇒ **SPECIFIC TOPIC OF THESE INSTRUCTIONS:** Common Food Idioms, Phrases, and Proverbs
- ⇒ **LANGUAGE LEARNING & PROFICIENCY LEVEL:** Low Intermediate Through Advanced
- ⇒ **MATERIALS:** Letter cards with Velcro strips on both sides and a Velcro board, an overhead projector with a screen and transparencies to write on, or simply a chalkboard and chalk and/or paper and pencils.

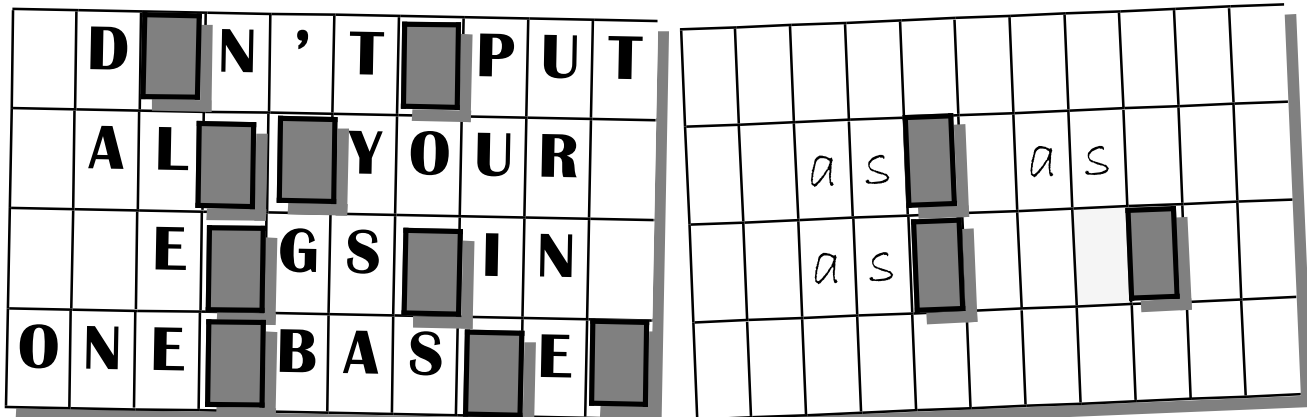


The steps and rules of the popular TV game show, *Wheel of Fortune*—or the children's game *Hangman* that the show is based on—can be replicated in the classroom in several ways, ranging from elaborate pre-prepared materials (shown here) to the simplest of setups—a chalkboard and chalk or paper and pencil. No matter what the form, the object of the game is to be the first to supply the letters needed to solve a puzzle, revealing a "mystery phrase."

# INSTRUCTIONS: How to Create and Play “Mystery Words & Phrases”

- CREATING THE PUZZLES.** The content of the word and phrase puzzles is at the core of “Mystery Phrase Games,” and the items to be discovered can vary widely. Before creating the puzzles in any form, collect items from previous language lessons, from class texts and materials, from a second-language learner’s dictionary, and/or from students themselves. You might want to choose a topic category that fits in with the kind of language the class is currently studying. For example, here is some possible content—idioms and proverbs that include the names of food, in both phrase and sentence form:

a club sandwich	a shrimp cocktail
the apple of my eye	the top banana
pie in the sky	a coffee break
a piece of cake	as easy as pie
chicken out	cool as a cucumber
butter someone up	nutty as a fruitcake
Take it with a grain of salt.	packed in like sardines
Life is just a bowl of cherries.	comparing apples and oranges
Don’t put all your eggs in one basket.	Bread is the staff of life.
It’s no use crying over spilt milk.	Too many cooks spoil the broth.



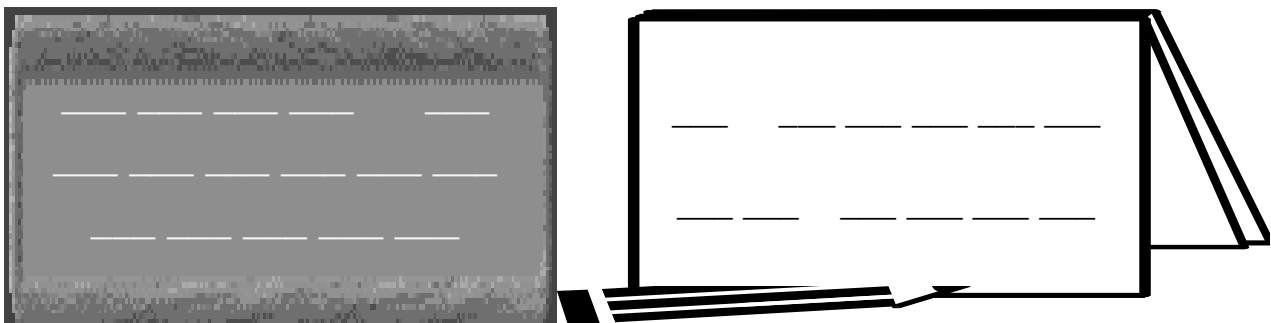
Instead of Velcro-backed cards and a board for Mystery Phrase Puzzles, an overhead projector can be used with transparencies. If the transparencies are easily obtained, you can print each puzzle phrase on a separate one. In placing the puzzle on the projector, cover each space and each letter with a separate card—to be removed when the letter is guessed correctly—as in the sample to the left above. Alternatively, you can produce *one* “master puzzle form” on a single transparency. For each puzzle, cover the spaces between words with cards. As competitors guess letters correctly, they can be printed in the appropriate boxes with an erasable marker—as in the right sample. For the next puzzle item, the letters can be erased and the grid reused.

2. **PRODUCING THE MYSTERY PHRASE MATERIALS.** Like so many reusable teaching and learning materials, the materials for *Mystery Phrase Games* can range from elaborate and impressive to very basic—and easily produced. Here are some options, listed in order from the most complex to the simplest:

- Make a set of at least a hundred one-sided letter cards, with more vowel letters than consonant letters, perhaps in the same ratio to one another as the tiles in a classic Scrabble game. (See page 17 for a listing of numbers of letters according to their frequency of occurrence in common English words.) The cards can be the same as those made for **IDEA CC: LETTER LINKS**. At the top of both sides of each letter card, glue a strip of Velcro that will stick to the covering of a large wooden or card stock board. If the entire board cannot be covered with appropriate adhesive material, there should be at least several rows of it, one under the other, with enough space between them to stick on the letter cards.

For each phrase puzzle, the letter cards can be attached to the board in order, turned face down so that the blank sides are visible, with spaces between the words. As competitors guess letters correctly, they can be turned over to reveal the letters of the mystery phrase.

- Instead of letter cards and a *Mystery Phrase Puzzle Board*, print the words of each puzzle to figure out in large letters on an overhead transparency. At the start of each guessing game, cover the letters, with blank cards of the appropriate size. With the transparency on the overhead projector, the cards can be removed from the letters that participants guess correctly—one by one so that everyone will see the newly uncovered letters at the same time.
- A simpler option is to produce a large letter grid on one “master” transparency. The grid must contain enough spaces to accommodate the longest *Mystery Phrase Puzzle*. For each phrase game, indicate spaces between words by covering the appropriate lines with cards. Then as participants correctly guess letters, they can be written with erasable markers where they belong in the grid.
- The simplest alternative of all requires no advanced preparation. At the beginning of each puzzle game, the letters of the phrase or sentence are indicated by blank lines or boxes drawn on the chalkboard or paper. As letters are guessed correctly, they are written in the appropriate spaces.



The simplest way to present “Mystery Phrase Puzzles” is on the chalkboard or on paper. Each blank line represents a letter to be guessed, and there are spaces between words. The solution to the first sample puzzle above might be to “take a coffee break.” The second example could be “a piece of cake.”



Teaching  
Tips:

Preparing  
to Guess  
Mystery  
Phrases

One way to add competitive excitement to quiz games is to present the real originals in connection with the classroom versions you have developed. Of course, few classes can conveniently attend an actual taping of a show like *Wheel of Fortune* (in Culver City, California, or on the road). On the other hand, if a TV set is available at the appropriate time, or if the program can be taped for classroom viewing, the class can watch one or more half-hour episodes of the game together, attempting to guess the puzzle solutions along with the contestants. If the show is on tape, it can be stopped when necessary for explanation of the procedures and rules. The class can rewind the tape to see important parts more than once and/or can see an entire game or episode two or three times—even after they have seen the answers. Alternatively or additionally, perhaps as a homework assignment, learners can be asked to watch the show on their own outside of class. The general purpose of having them observe a real event or watch it on TV is to motivate them to participate fully and to learn well from the corresponding classroom simulation.

3. **GUESSING THE MYSTERY PHRASES.** The whole class can participate at the same time in a mystery-phrase puzzle game. Students divide into teams of approximately the same size. Those that created or know the answer to each puzzle can present it to everyone else, or the class can be divided into two teams—each group presenting their mystery phrases to the others in turn. The puzzle is set up as described above—either on a Velcro board, on an overhead transparency, or on the chalkboard.
4. The first competitor (individual or team working together) begins by guessing a letter of the alphabet. If that letter appears one or more times in the mystery phrase, the “host(s)” and/or “hostess(es)” turn over the appropriate card(s) on the Velcro board, uncover or fill in the appropriate spaces on the overhead transparency, or fill in the appropriate boxes or blanks on the chalkboard with the correctly-named letter. Participants that guess a letter correctly get another turn—and another, and another, until they incorrectly name a letter. Then it becomes the next competitor’s turn.
5. As letters are named correctly, more and more of the phrase puzzle is revealed, so it becomes more likely that participants will figure out the solution. An individual or team may venture a guess as to the mystery phrase at any time after correctly placing a letter. The letter guessing continues until one person or group correctly tells the content of the puzzle by saying the phrase aloud. That competitor receives an agreed upon number of points. The process is repeated with other puzzles as long as there is time and/or interest. The competitor that figured out and had a chance to tell the most puzzle solutions is the winner.

# ***Levels = High Beginning to Advanced (How to Adapt)***

- ⇓ To make puzzles easier to figure out, choose only phrases that participants are likely to know or have encountered in their studies or everyday life. For the lowest-level students, provide a list of answers before beginning the guessing games. You might want to go over the phrases with the whole class, allow students time to study the list, and/or make the list available on the board or on paper before or while playing *Mystery Phrase Games*.
- ⇓ If game materials include letter cards, use different colors for letters that spell vowel and consonant sounds. The letters *w* and *y* can appear on “vowel-colored” and/or consonant-colored” cards because they spell both kinds of sounds.
- ↑ Begin with simple or short puzzles, but progress to longer and/or more difficult phrases. The more challenging the phrase puzzle, the higher its point value can be—and the more points the successful contestant (an individual or a team) can receive for getting it.
- ↑ Assign a category to each puzzle and announce what it is before the guessing begins. Here are suggestions for categories, some from the TV show *Wheel of Fortune* and some designed for language lessons: “an Everyday Object,” “an Animal Idiom” or another kind of idiomatic expression, “a Phrasal Verb Phrase,” “a Small-Talk Expression,” “a Compliment or Insult” or another phrase common in a notional-functional grouping, “A Famous Person,” “A Place in the Community”, A Geographical Place,” A Subject of Study,” etc.
- ↑ Competitors can score points for correctly-guessed consonant letters. Points can be subtracted from their accumulated scores when they “buy vowels”—that is, when they ask for opportunities to fill in vowel letters. There can be “bonus puzzles” for the winner(s). These can be short phrases with some letters already supplied. Contestants have a specified length of time in which to venture guesses as to the solutions.

## ***VARIATIONS & OTHER AREAS OF APPLICATION***

***To ensure more student participation, mystery-phrase guessing games can be played by pairs of students instead of the whole class at the same time. Each person receives or creates a different puzzle phrase, printed in clear letters with spaces between words. Keeping the puzzle hidden, to his or her partner, each player describes the puzzle format with sentences like***

- There are four words with three spaces between them.
- The first and third words have two letters each. The second word has four letters, and the last word has five.

***As soon as the partner has produced a grid of blanks or boxes to work with, he or she begins guessing letters. The first person must tell which letters are correct and where they occur in the phrase. If the partner correctly solves the puzzle within a pre-specified number of guesses or length of time, he or she wins the round. The game can be repeated many more times, with the partners changing roles each time.***