

Dr Maria Korochkina

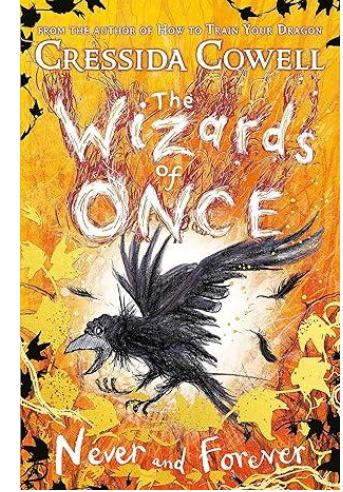
The power of reading for children's outcomes: What every parent needs to know

Tooled Up Education
5 November 2025



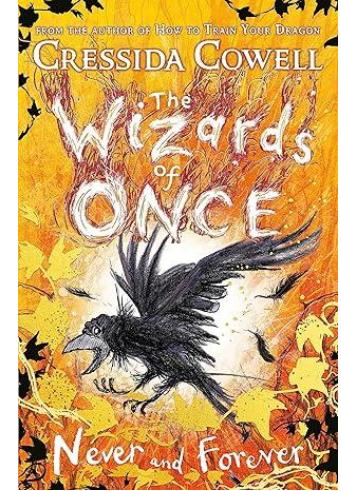
Reading is remarkable

“She glared imperiously through the eyeglass at the entire assembly of assorted creatures and humans, giving them all her hardest stare, and through the glass of the monocle the stare actually stung those it landed on, as if they were being pinched by fairies or bitten by midges, in order to make sure they were truly paying attention”.



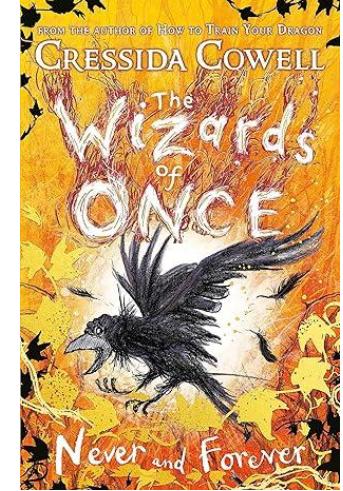
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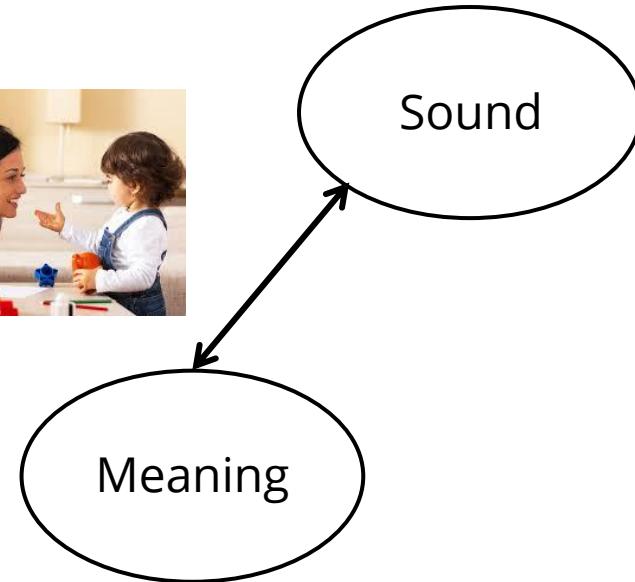
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But it is also complex...

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Oral language foundations



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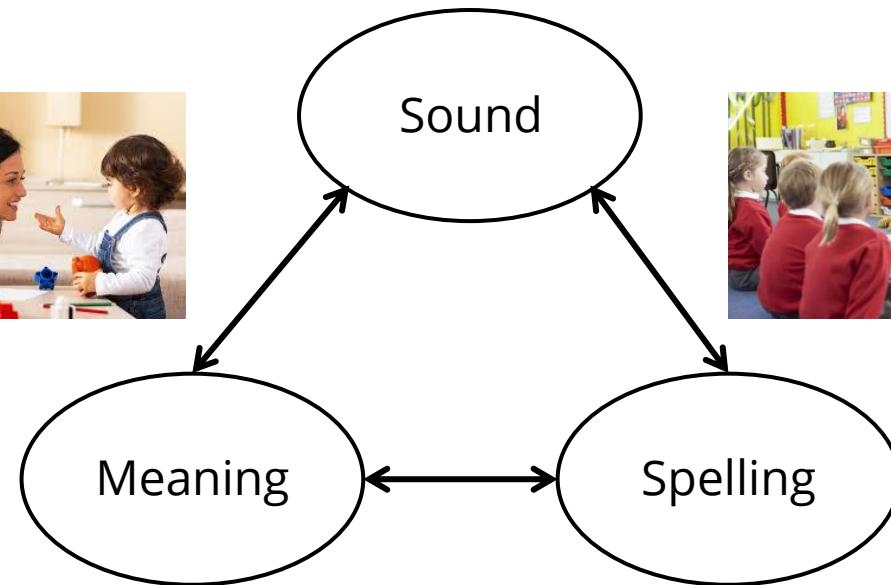


Sound

Phonics instruction

Meaning

Spelling



But it is also complex...

Oral language foundations



Sound



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Text
experience

CYP-LEX

The Children and Young People's Books Lexicon

1,200 **popular** books, 400 books per age band

7-9 years



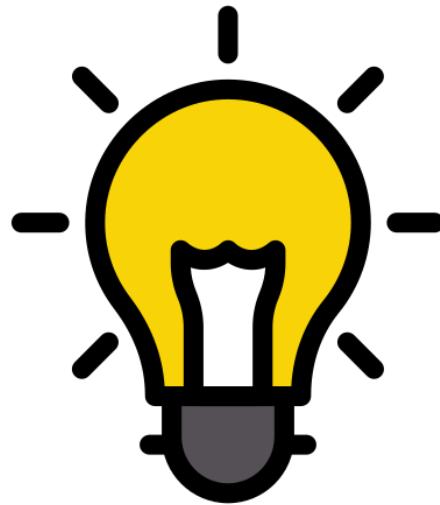
10-12 years



13-16 years



The **lightbulb** moments



Books contain **vast** numbers of words

- Over **70 million words** and over 100,000 *distinct* words in 1,200 books
- **50,000+** distinct words in the 7-9 age band alone
- **Each book** exposes children to **several thousand distinct words**
- **40%** of these words **don't appear on children's TV**
- **21%** of the words in **13+ books** aren't used even in **TV programmes for adults**

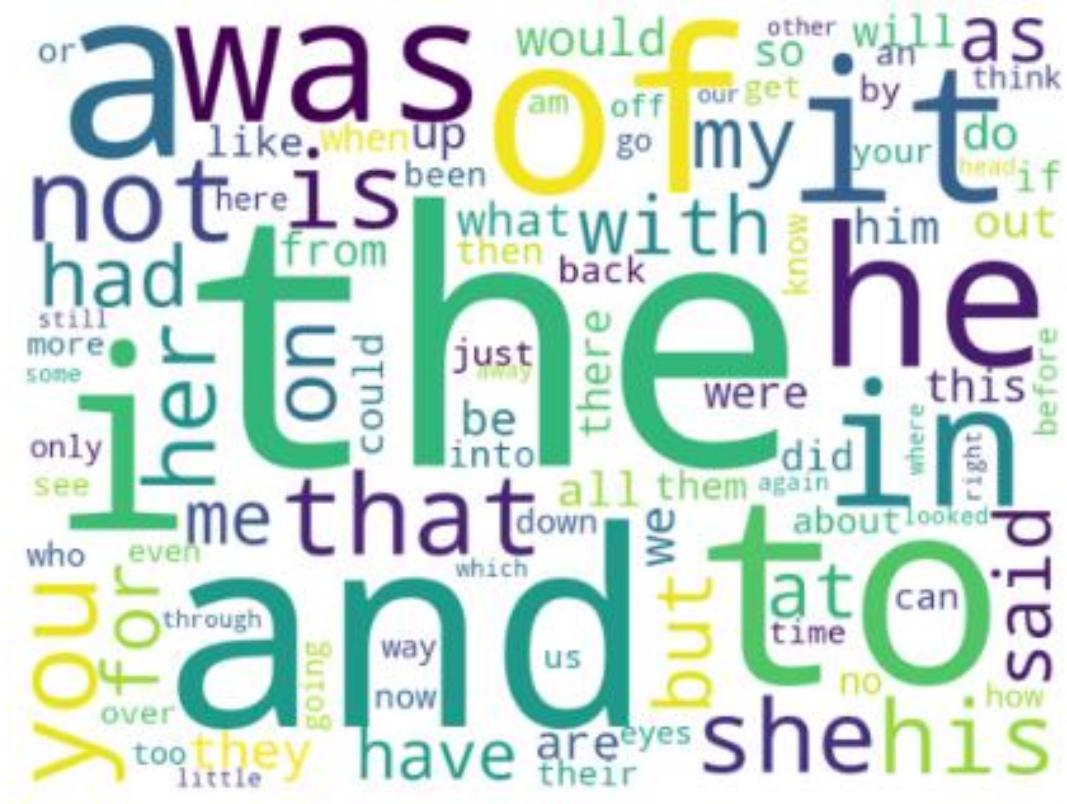


- A rich vocabulary boosts learning, thinking, communication, and predicts academic and life success
- The best way to build vocabulary is **through reading**

Few words are used repeatedly

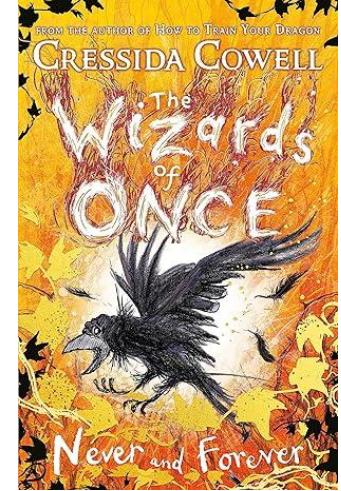
The **most common 100 words**
make up about **54%** of the text

That's about **37 million words**...



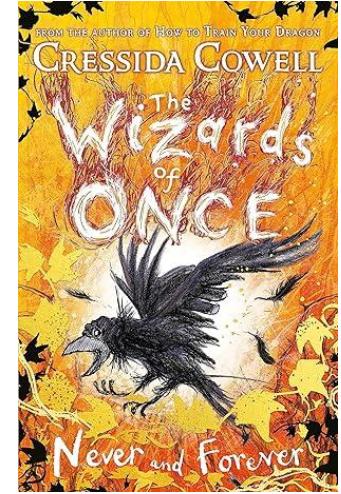
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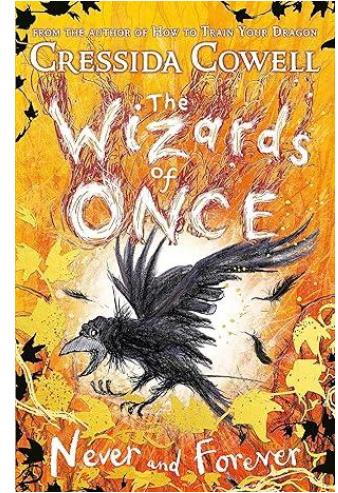
Few words are used repeatedly

"She through the
at the of
and , them all her
, and through the of the
the those it
on, as if they were being by
or by , in to
they were ".



Few words are used repeatedly

“She glared imperiously through the eyeglass at the entire assembly of assorted creatures and humans, giving them all her hardest stare, and through the glass of the monocle the stare actually stung those it landed on, as if they were being pinched by fairies or bitten by midges, in order to make sure they were truly paying attention”.



- Reading is a vehicle for experiencing **words beyond the ordinary**
- **Gaining repeated exposure** needed for learning **is not trivial**

Books vary greatly in the words they use

- In each age band, 30% of distinct words appear in **1 book out of 400**
- Most of these words are used **once** in that book
- **Low similarity** in vocabulary **across the individual books**
- Books for younger children are **less similar to one another** than those for older kids



Each book contains **many words that are not encountered in any other book**



- **Each book introduces new vocabulary**, especially for the youngest children
- But to maximise learning, it's important to **read widely**

Understanding how words work

- Most English words are built by **recombining** small units of meaning - **morphemes**
cleaner, cleanly, unclean
teacher, banker, builder
- Morpheme knowledge enables rapid access to the meanings of **familiar** words
- It is also crucial for computing the meanings of **unfamiliar** words
brightify = bright + -ify
- Limited time for explicit instruction, so children **must rely on their reading experience** to acquire morpheme knowledge

Lots of morphology in children's books

- **Half** of distinct words are made up of **multiple morphemes**
 - Books for older children contain **increasingly more** complex words
 - **Many** of these words are **never used on TV**



Lots of morphology in children's books



- Books are a **far richer source of morpheme exposure** than everyday spoken language
 - Strong **morpheme knowledge supports reading and overall language skills** — and **reading is key** to developing it



A closer look at the 13+ books

32 prose books from the AQA and EdExcel specifications for English Literature GCSE



How do these books compare to the popular books?

Highly dense vocabulary in the GCSE books



- GCSE books are **half as long as** popular books, but contain a **similar number of distinct words**
- GCSE books are much **less homogenous** in the words they use



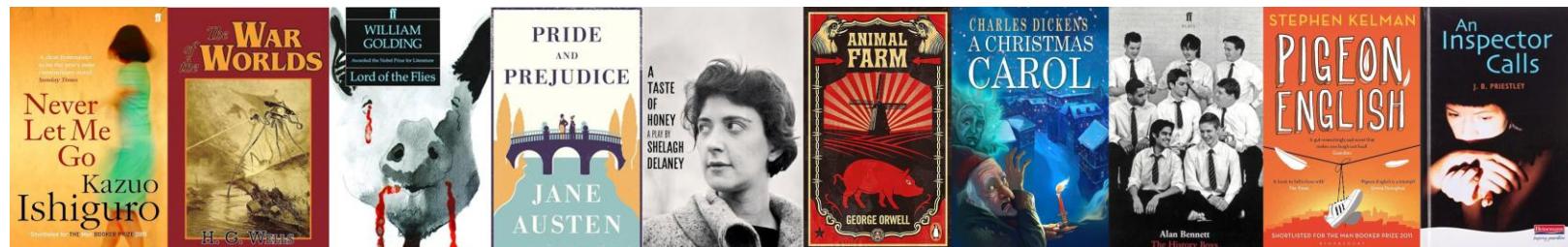
- Books are **not equally effective** for learning new words
- **More vocabulary** through **less text** in the GCSE books

Many unfamiliar words in the GCSE books

- Only **33%** of the distinct words **occur regularly** in popular books
- The remaining **67% are used sparsely**
- **3,000** distinct words **never used on 9 BBC TV channels over 3 years**
 - *poulterer, bonneted, dowerless, bedight, sepulchre, catechize*
 - *brusquely, docilely, imploringly, beatifically, superciliously*



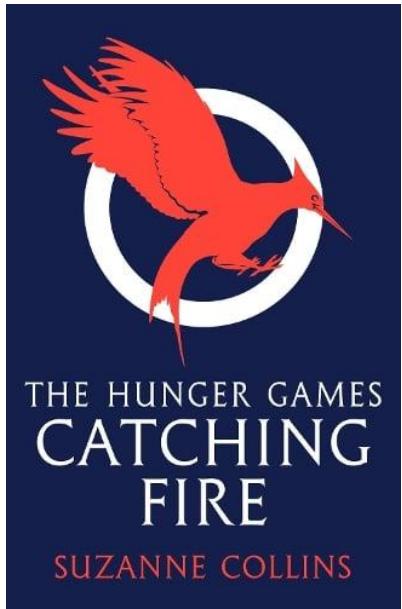
- GCSE texts will stretch **even those who read widely**
- Reading **empowers only when skills and support are in place**



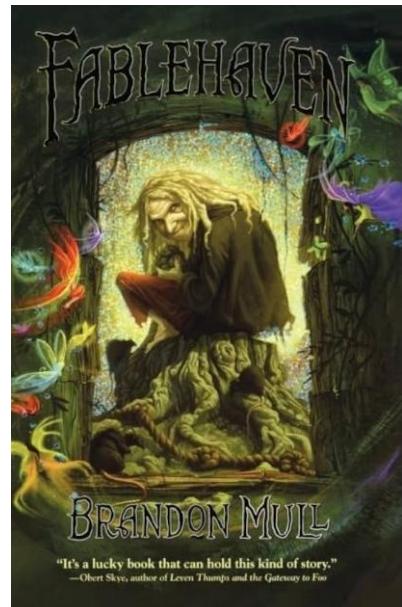
Many of the new GCSE words are **new roots**

- In popular books, many of the unfamiliar words contain **multiple morphemes**
→ Meanings **can be derived** from the words' constituents: [mourn] + [-ful] + [-ly]
 - In GCSE books, most “new” words are **new roots**
→ Meanings **cannot be derived** from the words' structure
 - *aspidistra, crimplene, beseech, coccidia, gambol*
-  • Pupils **must rely on context or instruction** to understand these words
 - Deriving meaning from context requires **advanced language and reading skills**

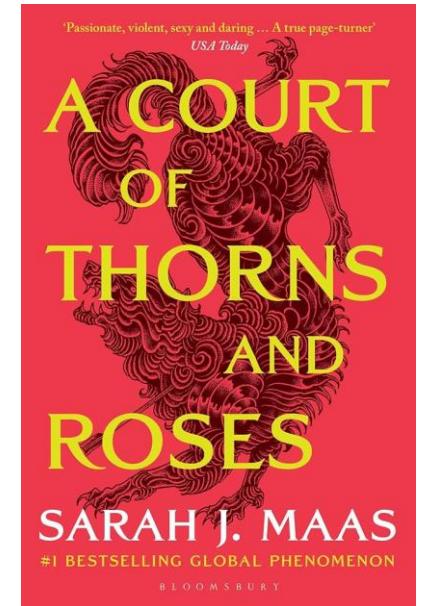
Books as windows to self and others



“One of them came up to Meg and squatted down on its huge haunches beside her, and she *felt utter loathing and revulsion* as it reached out a tentacle to touch her face”



“Even as he said my most private thoughts, even as I *burned with outrage and shame*, I trembled at the grip still on my mind”



“The speed, the cold wind in her face, the *exhilaration of swift turns and sudden dives*, all combined to fill Kendra with surprising joy”

Books as windows to self and others

*... felt utter **loathing** and revulsion...*

*... burned with **outrage** and shame...*

*... the **exhilaration** of swift turns and sudden dives...*

- Books provide input that **props the formation of emotional categories** over time
- Frequent readers have **better** understanding of both **personal and others' emotional states**
- Higher emotional intelligence is linked to **better mental wellbeing**



Reading and **future thinking**

The ability to anticipate, plan for, and consider possible outcomes or scenarios in the future

Reading and **future thinking**

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The link between **reading** and **future thinking**

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Promotes **cause-and-effect reasoning and imagining possibilities beyond the immediate moment**

One sentence, lots going on

New roots

Nuanced
emotion
language



Enriching and challenging at the same time!

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New
combinations of
familiar elements

Metaphors

Complex
sentence
structure

Reading is **powerful** when done right

- 💡 Access to **language beyond everyday use**
- 💡 Wonderful **opportunity to develop vocabulary**
- 💡 Plenty of **new morphological combinations**, but also **new roots**
- 💡 Reading helps develop **emotional intelligence & future thinking**

...However, the other side of the coin is that...

- 💡 Children **need strong phonics skills** to access popular books
- 💡 Building vocabulary & reading proficiency requires **reading widely**
- 💡 **Support is essential** for children to make the most of what reading can offer

There is a **virtuous cycle between reading skills and reading motivation**



Further reading

Quarterly Journal of Experimental Psychology
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<https://doi.org/10.1177/17470218241229694>

Original Article

The Children and Young People's Books Lexicon (CYP-LEX): A large-scale lexical database of books read by children and young people in the United Kingdom

Maria Korochkina  1, Marco Marelli  2, Marc Brysbaert  3, and Kathleen Rastle  1

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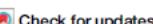
Article



<https://doi.org/10.1038/s41539-025-00313-6>

Morphology in children's books, and what it means for learning

Maria Korochkina & Kathleen Rastle



 Maria Korochkina & Kathy Rastle
Mar 12, 2024 · 5 min read · 

What Words do Children Encounter When They Read for Pleasure?

The ability to read opens up worlds. Reading enables children to progress into post-primary education and provides the basis for lifelong...

<https://www.rastlelab.com/blog>

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What can children learn about morphology from reading for fun?

What makes GCSE English lit so hard for students? <https://www.tes.com/magazine>

New research has analysed GCSE literature texts against popular fiction – and found three key reasons why so many young people struggle with the qualification



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Thank you!

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