

# Word skill and research activities based on the *New Zealand Oxford School Thesaurus*.

Years 8 -10

A thesaurus is most simply described as a dictionary of synonyms, that is, a list of words together with words of similar meanings. The first *New Zealand Oxford School Thesaurus*, published in 2005, includes distinctive New Zealand words and usages, including words from te reo Maori. Most traditional thesauruses are arranged according to context or theme, and have an index. Many modern thesauruses, like this one, have entries arranged in alphabetical order.

What is a synonym? The word synonym is composed of SYN meaning 'similar' or 'same', O which stands for 'of', and NYM which means 'name'.

A thesaurus is used by individuals looking for an alternative term that might be more specific, less specific, less often used, or more often used than the one they know. If you look under 'boat' or 'chair' in this thesaurus, you will find lists of the specific kinds of boats or chairs that you can use. A thesaurus differs from a dictionary in that it does not provide a word's definition. It is also a corpus or body of words that tell us something about our language and the way we use it.

The *New Zealand Oxford School Thesaurus* also includes antonyms for some words. Antonyms are words of opposite meanings to headwords, e.g. joy/despair, cold/hot, wet/dry.

A word with just one syllable is known as a monosyllabic word. e.g., hit, bread, nine. A word with two or more syllables is known as a polysyllabic word. e.g., hitting, breadboard, ninety. You will notice that there are groups of words in the thesaurus that have synonyms or similar meanings, that also have the same number of syllables.

The following activities are for class work or homework. We would be very pleased to see examples of your work at the New Zealand Dictionary Centre. Send it to:

[nzdc@vuw.ac.nz](mailto:nzdc@vuw.ac.nz) or to [dianne.bardsley@vuw.ac.nz](mailto:dianne.bardsley@vuw.ac.nz)

## Activities:

### 1 Prediction and proof:

Will there be a greater number of synonyms in the thesaurus for elderly adult or child/baby? Why, do you think? Look these up in the thesaurus and compare these words with additional ones that you or your group uses. Find out which ones are used most often by members of your group/class or family. Will there be more different senses and uses in the thesaurus under the headwords 'hard' or 'soft'? Why do you expect that?

### 2 Words that relate to strong feelings or emotions:

Look up the thesaurus for synonyms for the headwords 'angry' or 'to become angry'. What do you notice about these words? What do they suggest about New Zealand and Australian English? Find out which of these terms are used in your class or your family.

### 3 Detective work:

*What do you notice about the headwords under letters Y and Z?*

*What do you notice about the words under the entry for 'disorderly'?*

*Which single headword has the largest number of different senses?*

**4** Look at the headwords 'greenstone' and 'mana'. Did you know that these words have such words of similar meaning? Compile a quiz asking members of your group or your family what synonyms or similar words they know for greenstone and mana.

**5** Look at the terms under the headword 'alcohol'. Sort the synonyms into those that have come into recent use and those that have been used for a long period. Ask members of your group or your family which terms they use. Can you see any differences between age groups?

**6** Look at the headword 'beauty'. How many senses and uses does it have? Administer a short survey to find out how many of these are known or used.

**7** Under the headword 'about-face', you will find the term 'flip-flop'. This word is used in several ways. Make a list of the various ways it is used and name a New Zealand politician who has been linked to this term. Ask members of your group or your family:

- a. To list the various usages of 'flip-flop'
- b. To name the politician associated with the word (Clue: he was prominent in the 2005 NZ parliamentary elections.)

**8** The short extract below is taken from the *NZ Herald* September 19, 2005: A4:

“People think he’s a **hobo**. He’s not. He wouldn’t have all this if he didn’t have a bit of **nous**.”

Use a dictionary to check on the meanings of the words in bold type if you don’t know what they mean. Which terms would you look up in the thesaurus to find New Zealand synonyms for **hobo** and **nous**? Which ones are used mainly in New Zealand and Australia? Make a list of all the synonyms for these two terms and survey your class, other classes, your neighbours and family to see which terms are most often used. Place your results in the order from ‘most used’ to ‘least used’. Is there any pattern for age or gender?

### **9 Euphemisms:**

Euphemisms are words that express something distasteful or unpleasant in a more gentle or polite way, e.g. ‘inexpensive’ rather than ‘cheap’. Look at the headword ‘to die’ (verb). Which word do you use for ‘to die’? Which term do you prefer? Why? Find out which words other members of your group or family use.

### **10 Slang:**

Look at the entries under ‘boast’ and ‘boaster’. Write these terms into two lists, one under ‘What word do you use for boast?’ and one under ‘What word do you use for boaster?’ Find out which words are most commonly used in your class or your family. Are there any age or gender differences in the use of these terms? Look at the synonyms under the headword ‘briefs’ for underpants. Which of these terms do you use? Find out which terms are used most often by members of your class, by members of a younger group, and by your family members. What conclusions do you have? Add synonyms that are not listed in the thesaurus. Are there any trademarked terms amongst them?

### **11 Onomatopoeic and phonaesthetic words:**

Onomatopoeic words are those that echo their meanings, or sound like the noise they are conveying, e.g. crash, hiss, Phonaesthetic words are those that have a pleasant sound. Look at the words under the headword ‘chuckle’. Which ones have a pleasant sound? Which ones are onomatopoeic? Do words with a happy meaning sound more pleasant than words that you find under ‘dire’, ‘dejected’ and ‘depressed’? What does this suggest? Are there any other differences? What do you notice about the words under the headword ‘babble’?

Would you class ‘pakaru or puckeroo’ as a phonaesthetic word? Why?

### **12 Bad mood words:**

What do you notice about words that have a negative meaning?

### 13 Antonyms:

Remember, antonyms are words of opposite meaning to a headword in the thesaurus, e.g. for 'firm', an antonym is 'soft'. Rewrite the poem and its title below, using antonyms for as many words as you can. Then comment on the way that a change of words can change the tone.

#### The Patient One

The light room grows dark with  
growing hate,  
The father enters the room,  
Shouts, 'Where's my tea? Must I  
always wait!'  
Mother looks up like a tattered  
scarecrow hung up on her broom,  
'Your tea's on the table,' she hoarsely  
replies.  
'It's stew once again, I'm afraid.'  
She puts down her broom and lets out  
a sigh,  
And sits down to say grace.

(Brian Walsh).

### 14 Look at synonyms under the headwords:

fat (adjective), fiddle (verb), glutton (noun), gooey (adjective), hit (verb), horrible (adjective), humdrum (adjective), jitters (noun), laugh (verb), lean (adjective), liberal (adjective), marsh (noun), measly (adjective), mushy (adjective), nervous (adjective) nestle (verb) and toss (verb). What do you notice about them? From your observation, what general statement can you make about our use of language?

### 15 Find some more synonyms to add to those under the headwords:

coward, crazy, depart, exhausted, fool, large, nonsense. (You could compile a questionnaire survey to see what people of different age groups use.) Write a conclusion about your findings.

**16 Write a paragraph, using the following six words:**

cheerful, cold, get, nice, odd, play.

Now look up these six words in the thesaurus and select six synonyms, one for each headword. Rewrite your paragraph, replacing your original six words with synonyms. (Check that your choices have meanings that are accurate and appropriate.)

- a. Are the new words more specific? Which ones?
- b. Do your new words add more expression or emotion? Which ones?
- c. In your general writing, which words do you overuse? Make a list of them ('nice' might be included!), and add appropriate synonyms that you can use to make your work more fresh, more interesting and more specific.

**17 Group work:**

For groups of six (you can vary the number on the activities here to fit the number of people in your group) Look at the 31 specific words listed under the headword 'boat'. Divide the list so that each person has five words to work with, (one person will have to have 6, or you can leave out one synonym in the list).

- a. Write your own definitions for 2 of the words.
- b. Look up the *NZ Oxford School Dictionary* for meanings for the other 3 words. Write out the definitions.
- c. Now make a list of your 5 words on the page, e.g.:

kayak	a sailing boat
P-class	
tinny	
waka	
yacht	

Jumble your definitions, and place these jumbled or incorrect definitions in the other column.

- d. Swap your work with the others in your group, matching the correct word-definition pairs.

## 18 Describing your environment:

Write a paragraph describing a hilly or mountainous place, perhaps one that is familiar to you. Before you begin, look up the headword 'top' (noun) and select a synonym to use. Do the same with these words:

pretty (adjective, 2)  
valley (noun)  
steep<sup>1</sup> (adjective)  
wind<sup>1</sup> (noun)  
exhausting (adjective)

Use your selected synonyms in your paragraph. Which ones are completely new to you?

**19** Look at the specific terms under 'cake' and 'cap'. Which ones are new to you? Write explanations of all the terms that clearly differentiate each from the others, for somebody new to our country. Do you have any new terms to add? Under which thesaurus headword would you add 'afghan' to a list of types or synonyms?

**20** Look at the 16 synonyms under the headword 'journey'. Write them in a list down your page. Next to each, write three terms that are most closely related to these words. e.g., cruise: canal, South Seas, houseboat.