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A World of Words

LANGUAGE IS EVERYWHERE

Reading, writing and speaking are such a huge part of human culture that most of us take language for granted. But stop for a minute and think. What if words did not exist? How would we communicate? What would we be missing? Imagine that you are a tiny baby, just born into the world with no way to understand or be understood. How different would your life be?

Language allows us to share thoughts, feelings and important information with one another. It is a huge part of what makes us human.

Writing is one way we communicate. Once something is written down, it might be around for other people to read for a long, long time.

What Do Words Do for You?

How much do you use language over the course of a day? To get an idea, make a quick list of everything you plan to do today—including making the list! How many of the items on your list involve words? If you didn't have words, could you do these things? How?

(Would you know how to get where you were going if there weren't street signs? If you didn't have a map, or directions, would you be able to find your way to a friend's house for the first time? Would you be safe getting there without stop signs? School would certainly be different! What on Earth would you do all day? And don't forget, without words, we wouldn't have telephones, radios, newspapers, computers or TVs!)

First Words

Think about how you learned language: to speak and read and write. Ask your parents if they can remember the very first real word you ever said. At what age did you first speak? In full sentences? When did you learn to read? The first word you learned to recognize or sound out? Do you remember the first book you ever read? When did you learn how to print? How to write? Look at some of the very first things you ever wrote. What did you write about? What were you communicating?

A Day Without Words Is Like . . .

See how long you can go without words. No talking. No listening to other people's conversations. No reading. No writing. Try it in your classroom (with your teacher's permission!), in the yard at recess, or at home after school. How long did you last? How did it make you feel? Was it even possible?

Word Search

Challenge your students to an after-school word search. Ask them to make a list of at least 10 things they read on the way home from school (street signs, store signs, notices, advertisements, personalized license plates, etc.) and 10 things they read in their own homes once they got there (envelopes, labels, newspapers, fliers, instructions, recipes, toy labels, book titles, etc.). Compare lists the next morning in class. Ask students to talk about what they would not have known or been able to do without the words on their lists.

SECRET SYMBOLS

Did you know there are secret symbols all around you? It's true, and until you know the code, you can't decipher them. These secret symbols are called letters and once you understand the way they work and their special abilities you can unlock one of the most magical doors in the known universe: the door to reading and writing.

People in some other countries have a different set of secret symbols, but we use an alphabet of 26 letters in different combinations to make all of the wonderful words we use every day. We mix and match these words to make sentences. We use the sentences to communicate with one another: simple information like our names, ages and addresses, or complex thoughts such as the way we feel when we eat ice cream and imaginary things, like the smell of a dragon's breath or the whisper of fairy wings. Just 26 secret symbols—26 letters—make it possible for us to speak and write and understand one of the richest and most complex languages in the world.

Once you have learned how to decipher the code, you can start to read and write: to understand the meaning of signs and messages; to pen letters and instructions that let other people know how you are thinking and feeling; to transmit and receive information that will keep you safe, healthy and happy; to enjoy books, magazine articles and stories that expand your mind and increase your understanding of the world around you.

What Is an Alphabet?

An alphabet is a complete standardized set of letters—basic written symbols—each of which roughly represents one sound of a spoken language. The word *alphabet* comes from *alpha* and *beta*, the first two symbols of the Greek alphabet. Most of the alphabets in use today are linear, which means they are “made up of lines.” Some exceptions are the Braille alphabet and Morse code.

<i>Alphabet</i>	A B C D E F G H I J K L M N O P Q R S T U V W X Y Z
	a b c d e f g h i j k l m n o p q r s t u v w x y z