

How to do a Word Study

Word studies are explorations that reveal key traits about common words **and** how **they** relate to many other less common words. Doing word studies is a great way for students to quickly expand their working vocabulary and become more skilled communicators, readers, and writers.

To do a word study is to go through the process of answering these 4 questions related to a word:

1. What does it mean?	Define the word.
2. What are the letters doing?	In the English language, every letter has a job. Is every letter in the word to be pronounced? If not, what is its job?
3. How is it built?	Write out the word sum.
4. What is its family?	Going back to question 3, what are all the other words that share the same base?

Word studies on words that are free bases are relatively simple, so let's continue using the word "act."

1. What does it mean?

Act: the idea of doing something

2. What are the letters doing?

We pronounce each letter in the word "act."

3. How is it built?

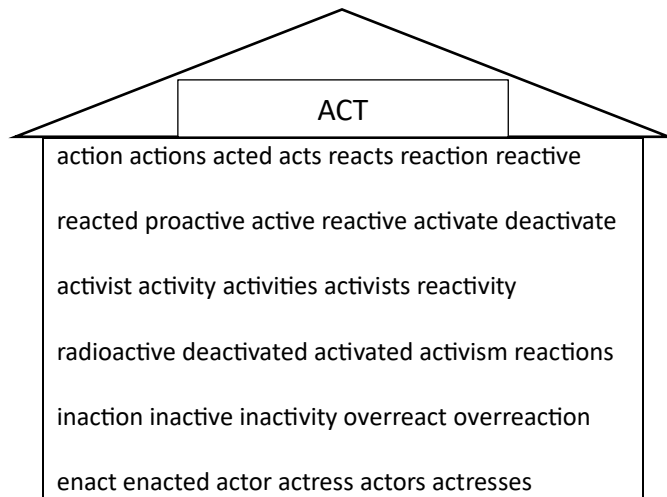
Act is a free base, so it's just one morpheme. The word sum would be act → act. In math terms, it's like saying $1 = 1$.

4. What is its family?

This is the key question of word study. Sometimes, it's useful to actually draw a house with the key word on the roof and all of its relatives in the house itself. Answering question #4 for "act" might look like this:

These four questions don't necessarily have to be answered in this exact order.

Words used in word studies should be familiar enough for students to define with their own words. The real learning occurs once bridges are built between more and less familiar words which is what word studies aim to accomplish.



Answering question #4 is really just experimenting with the different prefixes and suffixes that can be attached to the working base.

Word studies on words with bound bases can be more complicated such as with the word “emotion:”

1. What does it mean?

Emotion: An instinctive feeling derived from mood or circumstances

2. What are the letters doing?

Every letter in “emotion” is pronounced acceptably until we arrive at the “io.” The “i” and the “o” do not represent unique sounds. Rather, the “o” is representing a sound while the “i” is dictating the pronunciation of the “t.” Note how words with the letter combinations “tin” and “ton” carry different pronunciations of the “t” than words with “tion.”

3. How is it built?

To determine word sums of words with multiple morphemes, first look at the end. Are there any commonly recognizable suffixes at the end of “emotion?”

After isolating the -ion suffix, we would look for a second suffix to peel off, but in this case, there is none, so now we have:

emot(e) + ion → emotion

Are there any commonly recognizable prefixes that can be isolated? The prefix e- is also seen in words like elect, eject, and evaluate, so the proper word sum for “emotion” is as follows:

e + mot(e) + ion → emotion

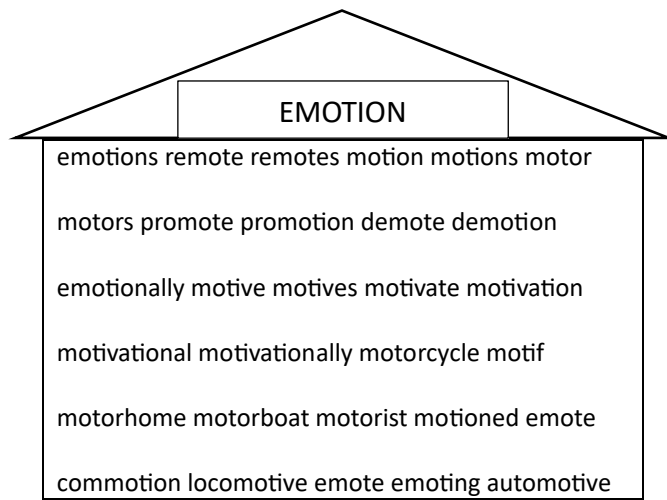
All of the words in a family must be built using the same working base. In other words, just because a word has the letters a-c-t consecutively does not mean it's part of the family of “act.” Words like Factor, Impact, and Contract are not part of the family of “act” because they are built using different working bases.

Fact + or → Factor
 Im + pact → Impact
 Con + tract → Contract

A suffix that is often overlooked is the “s” suffix which carries the meaning of plurality. Simply by attaching the “s” suffix after a base drastically changes the meaning of the word.

The most frequent way the English language makes the sound we typically associate with the letters “sh” is actually with the letter “t” due to how often words use the letter combinations “tio” as in emotion, “tia” as in partial, or “tie” as in patient.

4. What is its family?



There are more, but this is a good list. Students can brainstorm on their own or as a class before the entire list is revealed. Bases are units of meaning too. All of these words share not just similar spellings, but similar meanings in that they all convey the feeling of moving or movement which is what the bound base “mot(e)” means. See here the relationship between the words “emotion” and “motor” just for example

Finishing a word study is the launching point to other activities that more meaningfully explore all the words in a family. There are more in the family of “act” than the ones listed above, but brainstorming a good faith list is sufficient. Seeing just how many words come from a word as simple as “act” can be illuminating.

Take another look at the family of “act.” How many of these words are recognizable and definable to students but not part of their daily working vocabulary? Often, drawing relationships between routinely used words and familiar but unused words is the quickest way to comfortably expand working vocabulary on the way to become a more skilled communicator, reader, and writer.

A word study on “emotion” can quickly be connected to a lesson on emotional appeals or persuasion.

