

## Growing Pains: Recognizing (and Coming to Accept) <bi>

### Beginnings:

My introduction to Structured Word Inquiry was thanks to Lisa Hannum, who put me in touch with Pete Bowers almost 15 years ago. Pete shared his dense, rich (and I'm not going to lie—a bit overwhelming) handout, and I recognized it was a book waiting to happen and helped him with editing, design, and layout input. What he gave me, of course, was far more valuable—an initial introduction into a field of study that is as rich as one chooses to make it.

I don't know everything there is to know about Structured Word Inquiry, not even close. I don't pretend to be an expert. For me, matrices and word sums, in a reciprocal relationship, inform meaning and spelling. They enhance my understanding, rather than undermine it. I use this work to show teachers and students relationships between words. I also enjoy building matrices, both by hand and with Ramsden's Mini Matrix-Maker. Finally, helping students create and understand matrices and word sums can be a powerful tool.

### From <bio> to <bi>:

I think I've known that <bio> meant "life" since high school, if not before. I began teaching it explicitly and directly to students with dyslexia in my twenties.

I taught Richard Wright's *Black Boy*, an autobiography, and we would make a word web, looking at <auto> + <bio> + <graph> + <y>. I still use this word in teacher training, in part because it's a useful multi-morphemic word and in part because I want teachers to know about *Black Boy*.

Several years ago, I hired Pete to help me with a project I was developing. He challenged me to rethink <bio> as <bi> + <o>. I first learned about connecting vowel letter <o> in words of Greek origin (e.g., photogenic, democracy, psychopath) from Diana Hanbury King 30 years ago. It wasn't a huge leap to apply this to biology, but I didn't like it—because I had been teaching <bio> for a long time and, worse, because I was uncomfortable with <bi> meaning "life" in words of Greek origin but "two" in words of Latin origin. Since all the words of Greek origin containing <bi> had an <o> following it, why on EARTH did it matter? I modified the materials I was revising because I understood Pete's logic, but I didn't address the concept actively in my work with teachers or students. It wasn't worth it. I wasn't angry, but I wasn't ready to change. Several summers ago,

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created with Mini Matrix-Maker, at [www.neilramsden.co.uk/spelling/matrix](http://www.neilramsden.co.uk/spelling/matrix)

in preparing for a workshop for high school content teachers, I was ready to rethink. I built a matrix that identified <bi> as the morpheme meaning “life”, showed connecting vowel letter <o>, and also included words such as biopsy (bi + ops + y) and biome (bi + ome), recognizing that the o was not a part of the <bi>, but rather the first letter of the adjacent morpheme. Some found this part interesting, but others said, “But isn’t it okay to just teach <bio>?” to which I said, “Sure it is.” It’s a core philosophy of my teaching—and one that Pete has perfected—sharing good information in as compelling a way as I can manage and asking teachers to engage with it at the level that they’re ready.

On Friday, I was preparing content for day three of a workshop on morphology, and I was getting together a list of words I wanted to explore with them. I included amphibian, which I decided to check using Doug Harper’s fantastic etymonline.com. Here’s the entry from that source:

**amphibian (adj.)**

1630s, "having two modes of existence; of doubtful nature," from Greek *amphibia*, neuter plural of *amphibios* "living a double life," from *amphi* "of both kinds" (see **amphi-**) + *bios* "life," from PIE root **\*gwei-** "to live."

Formerly used by zoologists to describe any sort of animal at home on land and in the water, including crocodiles, walruses, beavers, seals, hippopotami; the restriction to the class of animals between fishes and reptiles with life cycles that begin in water and mature on land is from 1835; *Amphibia* has been used a zoological classification in this sense since c. 1819.

The <bi> in amphibian means life! Why was this important to me? It makes the argument for fully realizing and isolating <bi> in words of Greek origin all the more compelling because there isn’t an o anywhere in the word. The earth rocked, lightning struck, and a rabid <bi> fanatic was born. Soon, I’ll be showing it to five high school science teachers, to deepen our understanding not just of morphology but of the impact of <bi> on a whole group of words. Second, I’ll be showing the group of teachers in a current course how I’ve evolved, not just as a thinker but as a teacher as well.

I’m grateful for how Structured Word Inquiry has enhanced my own teaching, writing, and thinking; I’m grateful for Pete’s kind and engaging approach to the work; I’m grateful to Gail Venable for occasionally answering questions that must sometimes make her roll her eyes; and I’m grateful to have discovered amphibian, quite by accident, because it has expanded my own thinking, and that will impact the work I do with teachers.

Frequently, I tell workshop participants that the 25 people who know the answer aren’t nearly as interesting as the one or two who don’t. It’s not the error that’s useful, but the reasons behind the confusion, reasons that when explored enhance the entire group’s understanding not just of the content but of how best to teach it. That’s how you get the light bulb moments; it’s how you deepen *everyone’s* perspective; it’s how you elicit not just the right answer, but a shift in thinking.

When I’m at my best, this perspective guides my teaching, but it guides my learning as well.

Enjoy and share my <bi> matrix at your whim.

William Van Cleave  
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