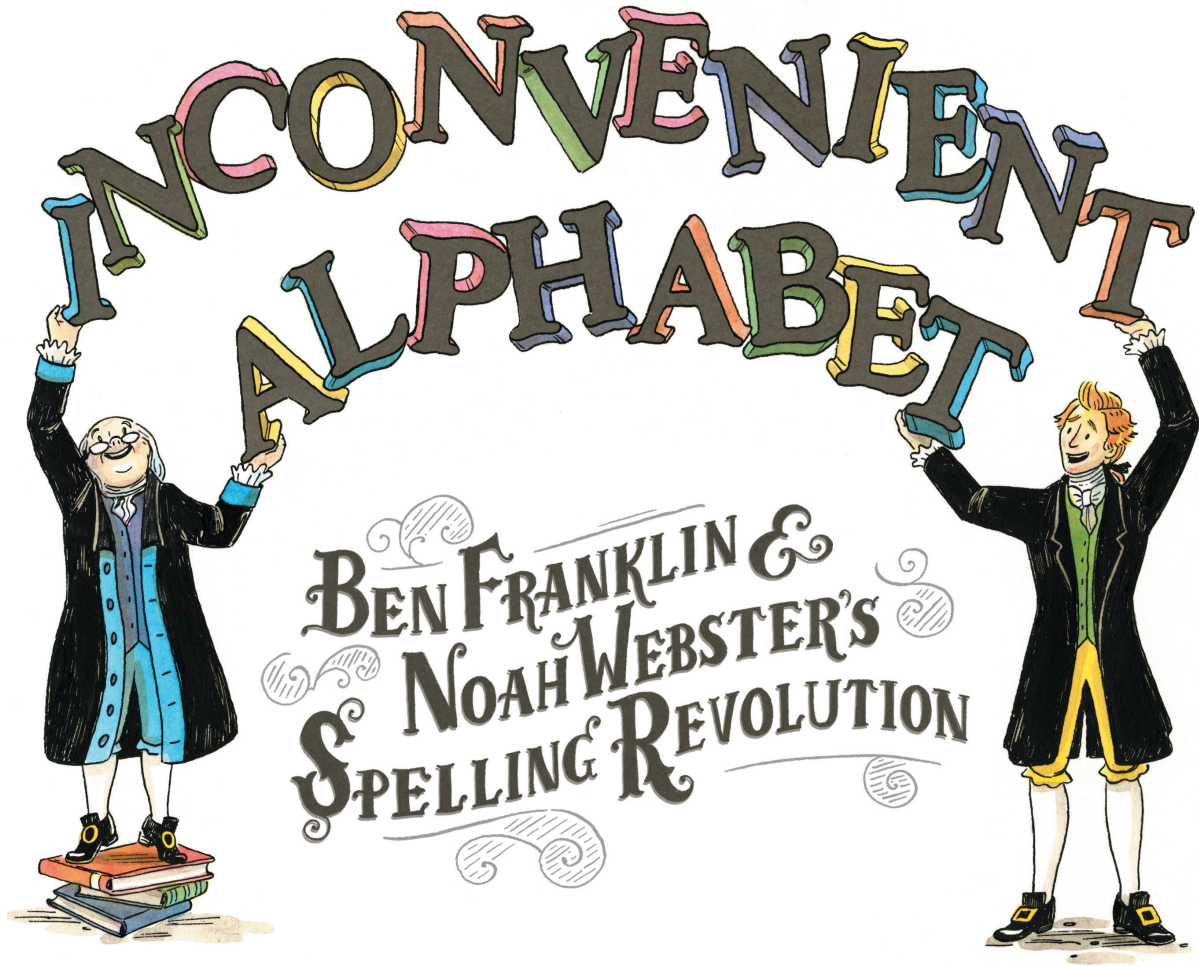


# A CURRICULUM GUIDE TO AN



written by  
**BETH ANDERSON**

illustrated by  
**ELIZABETH BADDELEY**

## ■ BACKGROUND & SUMMARY ■

Ben Franklin and Noah Webster both agreed that there was a problem with the alphabet and that it needed to be changed. Why?

There were only twenty-six letters in the alphabet, but there were forty-four sounds in the English language. This made spelling difficult and pronouncing words a challenge. The alphabet was simply too *inconvenient*. The two men agreed to join forces to change the alphabet. Ben Franklin, a writer and printer, thought that everyone should write down the sounds they heard. Noah Webster, a writer and educator, thought everyone should pronounce words the same way, using the sounds as written.

While their plans didn't work out the way they wanted them to, they did lead to a very important development: the creation of Webster's American dictionary. This dictionary included standard spellings and pronunciations for American English, even though it used the same inconvenient alphabet. Author Beth Anderson narrates a true story of how language is both resistant to change and open to it. Her author's note explains that while spelling has been resistant to reform, words continue to come, go, and change their meanings.

Illustrator Elizabeth Baddeley combines words and pictures to add information and humor to this story.

# DISCUSSION QUESTIONS & ACTIVITIES

## Key Ideas and Details

The discussion questions and activities below draw on Common Core State Standards for reading informational text (RI) that ask children to ask and answer questions about key details in a text (RI.K.1-RI.3.1), identify the main topic and key details that support it (RI.K.2-RI.3.2), and describe the relationship between a series of events, concepts, or ideas (RI.K.3-RI.3.3).

1. Why did Ben Franklin and Noah Webster want to change the alphabet? Do you agree with their analysis?
2. Describe the new alphabet Ben created. Does it make things easier?
3. Describe Noah Webster's Blue-Backed Speller. How did it teach American English?
4. Stage your own talk show with at least four classmates. Each person should have one of these roles:
  - The host
  - Ben Franklin
  - Noah Webster
  - An American citizen (for example, a merchant, a war hero, a farmer, a bookseller, a newspaperman, or an author)
5. With Ben's approval, Noah developed three plans to change the alphabet—Plans A, B, and C. How did these plans differ from one another? Why didn't any of these plans work?
6. Describe Noah Webster's American dictionary. Why was it more successful than Plans A, B, or C? What did the two learn from their previous attempts?
7. What did the author mean when she wrote these two sentences:  
*"Ben shared his ideas and left them to take their chance in the world."*  
*"And like his old friend Ben, Noah let his idea take its chance in the world."*
8. The subtitle of the book is *Ben Franklin & Noah Webster's Spelling Revolution*. Do you think it was a successful revolution? What makes you think this?

If you have the opportunity to participate with a larger group, add additional American citizens of varying ages and occupations to bring about more diverse responses. Think about how people from different backgrounds might have different viewpoints or ideas.

The host and the American citizen should prepare the questions to ask the other two guests. Here are some things you could ask about:

- The inconvenient alphabet
- Plans A, B, and C
- Spelling and pronunciation
- Sounding out words

When your questions are ready, perform the talk show for your teacher and the rest of the class.



# DISCUSSION QUESTIONS & ACTIVITIES

## Craft and Structure

To learn about craft and structure, the CCSS asks us to help students learn and understand vocabulary words and phrases (RI.K.4-RI.3.4), think about the features of nonfiction text (RI.K.5-RI.3.5), and assess the author's point of view (RI.K.6-RI.3.6). The questions and activities below emphasize these understandings.



9. **Looking at point of view.** Did most people like Ben and Noah's ideas for changing the alphabet? Look for clues in both the words and illustrations to find out.

### Plan A: Adding new letters and removing old letters so that letters match sounds

What do the author's words tell you about the public's thoughts on Plan A? \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

What do the illustrator's words and pictures tell you? \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

How do words and pictures work together? \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

# DISCUSSION QUESTIONS & ACTIVITIES

In city after city, Noah appealed to writers and printers, schoolmasters and penny-pinchers. Without extra letters they'd save time, save paper, save money! Children could learn to read and write in one year instead of four!



He answered questions, explained every detail. Old meanings and spellings didn't matter. "Was 'peace' ever mistaken for 'piecc'; 'pray' for 'prey'; 'flour' for 'flower'? Never . . . no inconvenience," Noah said. Good spellers could learn in a week. Poor spellers could rejoice; they were already doing it right.

## Plan B: One sound for each letter

What do the author's words tell you about the public's thoughts on Plan B? \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

What do the illustrator's words and pictures tell you? \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

How do words and pictures work together? \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

# DISCUSSION QUESTIONS & ACTIVITIES



## Plan C: Drop silent letters

What do the author's words tell you about the public's thoughts on Plan C? \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

What do the illustrator's words and pictures tell you? \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

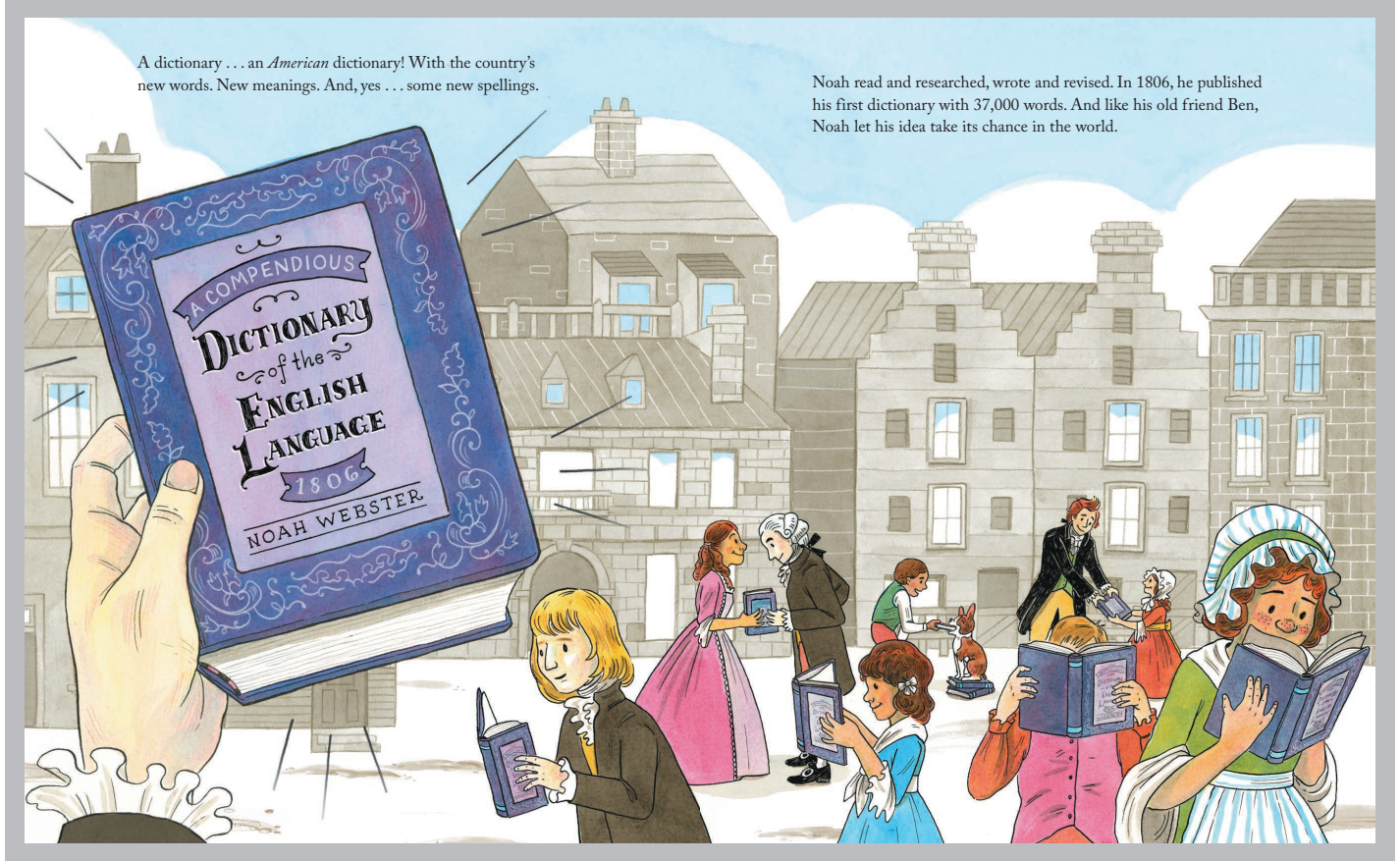
How do words and pictures work together? \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

# DISCUSSION QUESTIONS & ACTIVITIES

A dictionary . . . an *American* dictionary! With the country's new words. New meanings. And, yes . . . some new spellings.

Noah read and researched, wrote and revised. In 1806, he published his first dictionary with 37,000 words. And like his old friend Ben, Noah let his idea take its chance in the world.



## Noah Webster's American dictionary

What do the author's words tell you about the public's thoughts on Noah Webster's American dictionary? \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

What do the illustrator's pictures tell you? \_\_\_\_\_

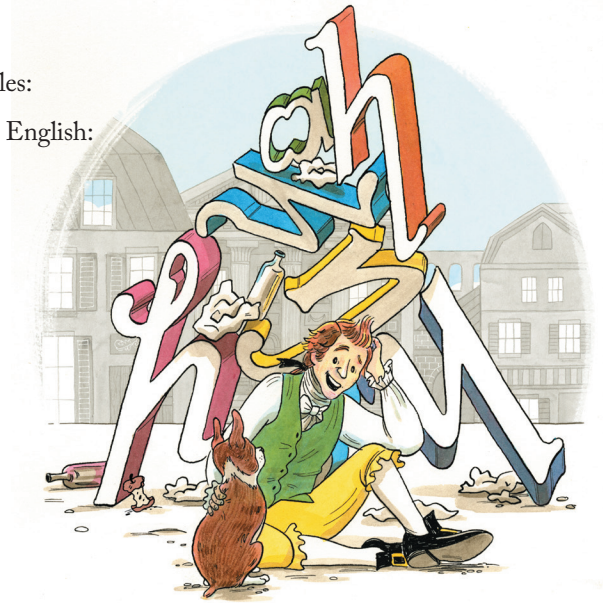
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## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS & ACTIVITIES

**10. Looking at language.** Find and discuss examples of how the author uses well-crafted language to discuss Ben Franklin and Noah Webster's plans to revolutionize spelling. Samples of two techniques—alliteration and repetition—are given below. Read each example aloud and discuss how the language makes you think and feel about the topic. Then find additional examples of each technique.

**Alliteration** is the repetition of initial consonant sounds. Here are some examples:

- The author describes the book Noah Webster wrote to teach American English:  
“Page after **p**age of **p**ronunciation **p**ractice.”
- The author describes Plan C:  
“**S**imple,  
sensible,  
only **s**lightly inconvenient.”
- The author describes the way Noah Webster revised his dictionary:  
“Noah **r**ead and **r**esearched, **w**rote and **r**evised.”



Additional examples: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**Repetition**, or recurring words and phrases, provides emphasis and rhythm. Here are some examples:

- The author emphasizes people's resistance to changing their language:  
“American people were **unwilling** to change old habits, **unwilling** to be bothered, **unwilling** to take liberties with their language.”
- The author emphasizes the newness of the dictionary:  
“A dictionary...an *American* dictionary! With the country's **new** words. **New** meanings. And, yes...some **new** spellings.”

Additional examples: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Try using alliteration and repetition. What effect do these devices have on your writing?

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS & ACTIVITIES

**11. Looking at the author's note.** In "A Note from the Author," Beth Anderson tells us more about Franklin, Webster, and the alphabet. What does she tell us about the following:

- Soundalike words
- Quotes by Ben Franklin
- Webster's dictionary
- How American English changed in Ben and Noah's time, and how it continues to change in our time.

The author also tells us the story of how she wrote *u-v* instead of the word *of* when she was in the fifth grade. Did you notice how the illustrator used *u-v* in one of her illustrations? See if you can find it.

**12. Looking at the illustrator's note.** In "A Note from the Illustrator," Elizabeth Baddeley tells us more about her images.

- Why did she include a dog and cat in her illustrations? Do you think it was a good idea?
- She reports that she likes to sneak things into the illustrations that make her smile. Can you find things in her illustrations that make you smile? Explain what you find.

### Hints:

- Look at the portrait of Ben Franklin that hangs over Noah Webster's desk. How does it change over time?
- How does the wallpaper in Ben Franklin's and Noah Webster's houses tell more about their personalities and what they care about?
- What do you notice on the headboard of Ben's bed?





# DISCUSSION QUESTIONS & ACTIVITIES

## Writing

CCSS emphasizes writing informative and explanatory text in the early grades. The writing activities below provide experience writing to give an opinion (W.K.1-W.3.1), to inform (W.K.2-W.3.2), and to explain a sequence of events (W.K.3-W.3.3).

**13. What do you think?** Should there be a new spelling revolution? Should changes be made to the alphabet? Write down all the reasons you can think of for answering “Yes” and “No” in the table below.

YES	NO

## CONCLUSION

Now, after thinking about both sides of the situation, circle your best answer. Explain your reasoning and why you found one side more compelling than the other. \_\_\_\_\_

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# DISCUSSION QUESTIONS & ACTIVITIES

**14. Soundalike words.** The author claims that soundalike words like “one” and “won” are a little inconvenient. Show how well you can explain the differences between two or more of the soundalike word groups below. Use both drawing and writing to show the meanings of these words.



What about sound-alike words?  
We won't know the difference between  
**ATE** and **EIGHT**  
if they look the same.

## Two Sound-alike Words

ate/eight

sea/see

cell/sell

hare/hair

flu/flew

toe/tow

wail/whale

## Three Sound-alike Words

I'll/aisle/isle

cent/sent/scent

rain/reign/rein

road/rode/rowed

there/their/they're

to/too/two

right/write/rite

And what about  
words that are spelled alike  
but pronounced differently?  
Like **BOW** and **BOW**?



Do you agree with the author that these words are a little inconvenient? What do you think might have happened if Ben and Noah were successful in their attempts to create one spelling for similar sounding words with multiple meanings? Think about how you use context to determine the meaning and pronunciation of homographs like *bow* and *bow* and multiple meaning words such as *spell*.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS & ACTIVITIES

15. Pretend you are Noah Webster and write a diary entry telling how you tried to convince people to change the alphabet. What did you do first, second, and third? What conclusion did you make?
16. **Write a one-page play.** With a partner, write a one-page play for two characters. Write down what each person might say to one another. Here are some topics to consider when constructing your one-page play:
- When Ben and Noah first met, they spoke for hours.
  - Noah explained Plan A to the people, which included adding new letters and removing old ones. How did people respond to this idea?
  - Noah introduced his new dictionary. How did people respond?

Here is an example of how a one-page play could begin:

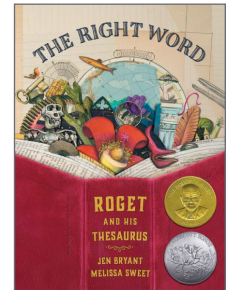
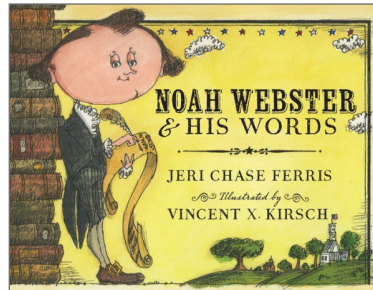
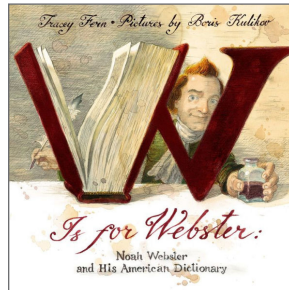
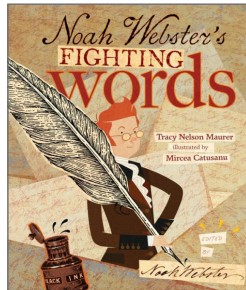
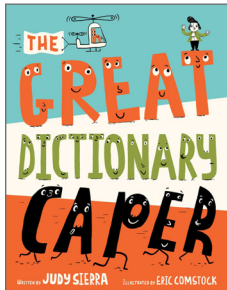
*Noah: I am so happy to meet you. I know you share my lack of patience with our alphabet. We need to change it.*

*Ben: Welcome to my home. I do share your feelings. It bothers me that people are spelling words in all different ways. The way they spell them does not match the sounds they hear.*

Practice reading your one-page play with your partner, and then share with the class.



## EXTENDING THE EXPERIENCE



### Read books related to language and story

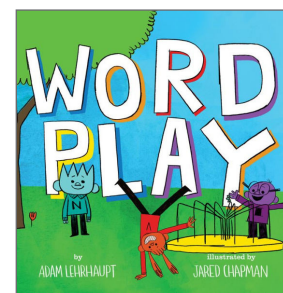
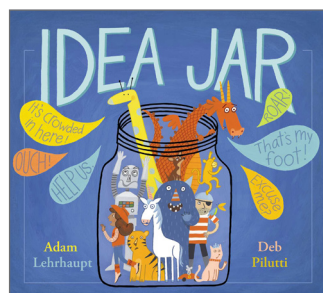
*The Great Dictionary Caper* by Judy Sierra

*Noah Webster's Fighting Words* by Tracy Nelson Maurer

*W Is for Webster: Noah Webster and His American Dictionary* by Tracey Fern

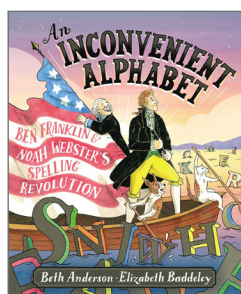
*Noah Webster and His Words* by Jeri Chase Ferris

*The Right Word* by Jen Bryant



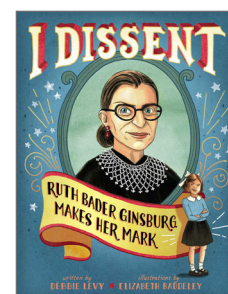
### Books about writing and language by Adam Lehrhaupt

*Idea Jar* ■ *This Is a Good Story* ■ *Word Play*



### Learn more about Beth Anderson

Visit the author's website at [BethAndersonWriter.com](http://BethAndersonWriter.com) for activities related to *An Inconvenient Alphabet*, and to learn about the inspiration for this book and how she worked to revise the manuscript.



### Learn more about Elizabeth Baddeley

Visit the illustrator's website at [EBaddeley.com](http://EBaddeley.com) to see more of her artwork, especially her illustrations for *I Dissent: Ruth Bader Ginsburg Makes Her Mark*, a book written by Debbie Levy.

Guide written by Myra Zarnowski, a professor in the Department of Elementary and Early Childhood Education at Queens College, CUNY.

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