Semantic Gradients

What
Semantic gradients are a way to broaden and deepen students’ understanding of related words. Students consider a continuum of similar words by order of degree, or with antonyms at either end of a continuum.

Why
While direct vocabulary instruction is critical to developing readers and writers, the sheer volume of words paired with the limits of instructional time restricts the number of words that can reasonably be introduced, and often students’ transfer and retention of these new words is low. Semantic gradients are a way to introduce many more words in a way that leverages time and increases retention and transfer.

Semantic gradients
- Allow students to make connections between known and new vocabulary, building mental “hooks” that aid in retrieval of the new words
- Help broaden and deepen students’ understanding of related words
- Help students distinguish between shades of related word meanings
- Greatly enhances students’ vocabulary, increasing both reading and writing abilities

How
While you could use semantic gradients in any number of ways, here are a few suggestions:

- Select a pair of antonyms
- Generate 3-5 synonyms for each antonym and write them on index cards, sentence strips, sticky notes or other “mobile” medium
- Have students work in pairs or small groups to arrange the words to “bridge” from one antonym to the other. For example, if the pair is happy and melancholy, the continuum might include elated, happy, glad, content, blue, sad, melancholy, despondent
- Have students discuss their rationale for placing words in the order they chose; encourage conversation about the subtle differences among the words

OR
- Select a specific vocabulary word or words you want to introduce
- Create a list of semantically similar words, either ahead of time or with students. It may be useful to think of your target word as being in the center of the continuum. For example, if your target word is “stone” you might have the continuum consist of grit, pebble, stone, rock, boulder
- Follow the last two steps above

OR
- Have students generate words related to a topic or theme and create semantic gradients in pairs or small groups, then have pairs and groups exchange words and put them in continuums; compare what the creating group intended and what the receiving group produced

For increased retention, revisit the gradients; post them on walls, add new words to them and be intentional about regular use and repetition of the gradient words in everyday activities.