John Austin on Word Study

In his article on Austin in *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, J. O. Urmson says this of Austin's interest in the study of words:

> [Austin] believed that in general a clear insight into the many subtle distinctions that are enshrined in ordinary language and have survived in a lengthy struggle for existence with competing distinctions could hardly fail to be also an insight into important distinctions to be observed in the world around us -- distinctions of an interest unlikely to be shared by any we might think up on our own unaided initiative in our professional armchairs. (1: 211)

And later he says this of Austin's preferred method for doing his kind of word study:

> A philosopher or, preferably, a group of philosophers using this technique begins by choosing an area of discourse in which it is interested, often one germane to some great philosophical issue. The vocabulary of this area of discourse is then collected, first by thinking of and listing all the words belonging to it that one can -- not just the most discussed words or those that at first sight seem most important -- then by looking up synonyms and synonyms of synonyms in dictionaries, by reading the nonphilosophical literature of the field, and so on. Alongside the activity of collecting the vocabulary one notes expressions within which the vocabulary can legitimately occur and, still more important, expressions including the vocabulary that seem to be a priori plausible but that can nonetheless be recognized as unusable. The next stage is to make up 'stories' in which the legitimate words and phrases occur; in particular, one makes up stories in which it is clear that one can appropriately use one dictionary 'synonym' but not another; such stories can also be found ready made in documents. In the light of these data one can then proceed to attempt to give some account of the meaning of the terms and their interrelationships that will explain the data. A particularly crucial point, which is a touchstone of success, is whether

one's account of the matter will adequately explain why we cannot say the things that we have noted as 'plausible' yet that in fact we would not say. At this stage, but not earlier, it becomes profitable to examine what other philosophers and grammarians have said about the same region of discourse. Throughout (and this is why Austin so much preferred to work in a group) the test to be employed of what can and what cannot be said is a reasonable consensus among the participants that this is so. Such a consensus, Austin found, could be obtained in an open-minded group most of the time; where such agreement cannot be obtained the fact should be noted as of possible significance. Austin regarded this method as empirical and scientific, one that could lead to definitely established results, but he admitted that 'like most sciences, it is an art', and that a suitably fertile imagination was all important for success. (1:212)

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Austin's Method in a Nutshell

1. Pick the topic

2. Brainstorm the vocabulary necessary to the topic

3. Collect the synonyms of the vocabulary

4. Collect relevant expressions and idioms using the vocabulary and notice the mismatches among the synonyms

5. Make up the 'stories', or exempla, illustrating the usage of the vocabulary and synonyms

6. Account for the usage and the interrelationships among synonyms, watching especially for the mismatches

7. Examine what other experts have said about the vocabulary

In general, work in a group and strive for reasonable consensus on questions of usage.

It seems to me that a simplified version of this method would be useful in the class discussion of things like Word Builds and Word Maps.