

## Building Academic Vocabulary and Concepts, Brick by Brick

Lori Helman

To do well in school, students must master what Dutro and Moran call "brick and mortar words" (2003). Brick words represent content, such as *decimal* or *censorship*. Mortar words are the glue that holds sentences together, such as the phrases "can be described as ...." Although both brick and mortar words are essential to comprehension, I will focus on simple ways for subject matter teachers to integrate brick words and phrases within content lessons.

As students learn novel ideas, they learn the words to represent them. Often, key words in content area classrooms are new to students, so it is important to intertwine vocabulary instruction and concept development. All students benefit from a focus on vocabulary development, and this is particularly essential for English language learners. When students do not understand the terms for the concepts, they are unlikely to fully understand the material, nor will they be able to build upon foundational ideas and reach advanced levels of learning.

Here are five ways for busy teachers to seamlessly reinforce new vocabulary as they teach. Pull one of these practices out each day, and by the end of the week, your students will have experienced numerous opportunities to use, reflect upon, and compare the meanings of new content words (Nagy & Townsend, 2012).

- **Graphic organizers** are visual displays of relationships—such as webs, maps, or quadrants—that can serve as powerful supports for conceptual learning (Hattie, 2009). Ask students to put a new vocabulary word in the middle of a word web and think of as many related words as they can that emanate out from the new word. Or have students use four quadrants to document four key ideas about the new word. Ideas for graphic organizers are everywhere and can be adapted to the context of almost any content word.
- **Vocabulary notebooks** are sections of a student's binder for keeping track of new words, adding definitions or illustrations of the words, and listing related words. Vocabulary notebooks are especially helpful for students learning English as a new language because students can reference previously learned words and definitions that are written in the student's own language. During your lesson, have students jot down a key word or phrase in their vocabulary notebooks and write a connection to what they have already learned.
- **Multilingual word consciousness** helps students make connections between words they are learning in class and other words they know from outside of school. Keep lists of the way similar ideas are expressed in many contexts. For example, the word hydrate might lead students to think of the words *hidratar* (Spanish) or related words such as *hydrant*, *hydrated*, *hydroelectric*, *dehydrated*, and *carbohydrate*. Collect any and all related words from multiple settings so students can become word investigators.

- **Show it!** Ask students to stop at any point in a lesson and show their understanding by drawing a quick sketch of the key concept. Or invite a volunteer to act out a word for the group.
- **Interactive strategies** provide opportunities for students to engage with others to discuss, question, or practice using a new vocabulary term. Having the time to talk—even for 60 seconds—helps imprint the new language for students. With several opportunities to use—not just hear—the new phrases, students will more readily remember new terms and have access to them in their writing and presentations.

You can easily integrate these five simple strategies into your content area instruction to support your students' content vocabulary learning. Brick by brick, you can help students build a strong foundation of academic vocabulary.

## References

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## Introducing Academic Vocabulary to Students

Michelle Sencibaugh

The Common Core State Standards (CCSS) make academic vocabulary a shared responsibility across all academic domains. Although teachers can often identify the difference between high-frequency academic vocabulary (tier two words) and content-specific vocabulary (tier three

words), many are unsure about the most effective way to introduce academic vocabulary to their students.

[Appendix A of the Common Core State Standards](#) (PDF) explains and provides some examples of tier one, two, and three words. Use this guide to help identify the academic vocabulary students will encounter in the text or lesson you are teaching. Once you identify the tier two words, Archer and Hughes (2011) suggest five steps to explicitly teach these words before students encounter them in a text. This approach will aid students in either building background or activating prior knowledge of vocabulary words.

Here's an example of an academic vocabulary word that I explicitly taught to my students using the five steps: *pronounce, explain, provide examples, elaborate, and assess*. In addition, I also prepare a visual with the vocabulary words and definitions to aid my students' understanding of new words.

1. **Pronounce.** This step allows me to demonstrate word attack skills through segmentation and blending. I also require active participation from my students, so they must say the words with me throughout the lesson.

- *"In this lesson, we will learn a new word called enhance. It is a verb or something that nouns do. Please say the word with me everyone: Enhance. Good, let's pronounce it by syllables: En-hance. Say it again, please: Enhance. Excellent."*

2. **Explain.** Explaining the vocabulary word with a student-friendly definition is crucial to students remembering and using the word in different contexts. The website, [www.learnersdictionary.com](http://www.learnersdictionary.com), is a great online tool to use for easy-to-understand definitions.

- *"The word enhance means to increase or improve something. I might say that the chef wanted to use many different herbs to make the flavor of the pizza delicious; she wanted to (students chorally say enhance) the flavor."*

3. **Provide Examples.** This next step allows the students to see the word used in different contexts so that they can begin making connections to the word.

- *"The students decided to add colorful graphics to their science project. They wanted to improve their project or \_\_\_\_\_ (students say enhance) it."*

- *"Rachel decided to go back to school for her master's degree in business. Rachel wanted to \_\_\_\_\_ (students say enhance) her business skills."*

4. **Elaborate.** The students elaborate on selected topics to deepen their understanding of the vocabulary word. This allows students to share ideas with their classmates and use the vocabulary words in context. English language learners or students who struggle may need sentence stems to begin using the words in a new context.

- "Imagine you are asked to review a popular video game. Come up with two ways to enhance the video game."

- "Your teacher gave you a survey asking for suggestions or ways to enhance the school lunch menu. Come up with two ways to enhance the menu."

5. **Assess.** Teachers check students' understanding of the vocabulary word. Depending upon the students' responses, the teacher may need to review the word again or continue with the next vocabulary word.

- "Joseph wanted to enhance the surprise birthday party for his parents, so he \_\_\_\_\_."

- "The teacher wanted to enhance her knowledge of history, so she \_\_\_\_\_."

After a teacher explicitly introduces the vocabulary words, it is extremely important to review the words multiple times so that the words can become part of a student's receptive and expressive vocabulary. Word knowledge and learning comprehension go hand-in-hand. Using a layered approach to vocabulary instruction equips students to excel in both.

#### Reference

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#### Words in the Wild

Brett Vogelsinger

A marine biologist will learn far more from observing sharks in the wild than in an aquarium. Likewise, to truly absorb new vocabulary and make it their own, students need repeated practice observing words in real-world contexts and then using words repeatedly in contexts they create themselves. Worksheets and bullet lists are like aquariums, not quite allowing words to exist as indigenous species. Donalyn Miller's book *Reading in the Wild* encourages teachers to see students as "wild readers" and design instruction that respects their freedom. So how can teachers

structure learning so that students experience the joys and challenges of working with words "in the wild"? I've found a combination of two strategies makes this possible.

### "Webstalking the Word"

[Google News](#) is an invaluable source for discovering vocabulary words in their native environment. Searching within Google News for a vocabulary word turns up abundant results in the headlines that demonstrate current usage of the word connected to current events. The "Ctrl+F" command can be used to dig deeper and find examples of how the word is used within the article beyond the headlines.

Here's how I would structure learning so that students can share their discoveries about new terms observed in their native environment: On individual devices, or in a computer lab, students search for selected or assigned words in Google News. Taking screenshots of headlines and sentences, students collect examples of how the word is used in news items. These examples are added to and shared on Slideshow in Google Drive. (In your Google account, select Google Drive and then click on Create and select Presentation.) These slideshows quickly become powerful study guides, with all students benefitting from one another's hard work. As a class, we affectionately call this collaborative investigation and discovery "webstalking the word."

In a recent adventure webstalking the word *prodigious*, a student discovered, collected, and shared these headlines and quotes:

- "Prodigious CEOs Who Died in 2013 Leave Legacies"
- "As a writer, his output was prodigious"
- "At 6–3, with a wingspan of 32-inch wingspan, he is long, lean, and a prodigious leaper who employs a strategy of backing off just a little to bait quarterbacks."

These three lines alone—and he found several more—demonstrate how this strategy can provide greater nuance for word definitions, pulling in various meanings and uses. Some of the best learning happens when students think they know a word and then find an example where a professional writer uses the word in a surprising way that challenges existing schemas. This strategy invites students to grapple with vocabulary in profound and authentic ways.

### Vocab Vouchers

Once students have observed and compiled examples of how a word is used, they are ready to practice using the word themselves. To get students to use the words we've studied, I provide motivational "vocab voucher opportunities" on a weekly basis. In my classroom, students compile lists of vocabulary words that we study throughout the year. At the end of the year, there is a test on all of these words. However, students know that I value actual usage of the word **far** more than I value their ability to answer questions about a word. Ultimately, the world will judge students by how well they can use vocabulary, not whether they can label the part of speech for each word they speak. That's where vocab vouchers come in. Throughout the year, I offer opportunities to earn vouchers, little coupons that can later be traded in for exemptions from

questions on the end-of-year vocabulary test. For example, if a student earns 18 vocab vouchers throughout the year, they get to skip 18 questions on the end-of-year test.

To initiate a vocab voucher opportunity, I offer a surprising or challenging prompt like, "Who can tell me something about an animal using our words for this week?" or "Talk to me about the saddest celebrity moments you've ever seen using the vocab words from this week." The hands fly up. The kids seize the opportunity to ease the pressure of the big test. But more importantly, by listening to one another's ideas, they are exposed to an even greater diversity of contexts in which the words can be used.

Whether you have the opportunity to try these two strategies in a classroom or not, never forget the underlying principles: learning new academic vocabulary requires repeated exposure to the words, and **all** vocabulary study should involve a measure of play and creativity. If we want words to stick, let kids be marine biologists for a while and swim with the sharks in the wild. I guarantee you—they won't get hurt.

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