Vocabulary Instruction

An Overview of Evidence-Based Literacy Instruction

Thursday, June 12, 2025
1:30-2:30 pm

Brought to you by
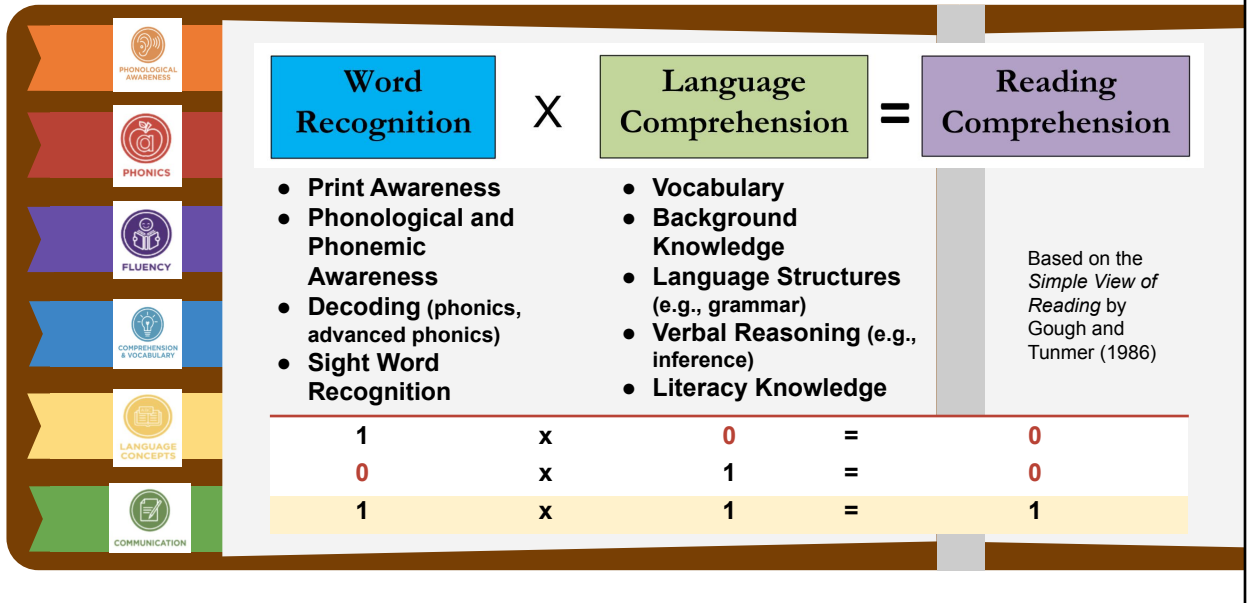*Martin Luther College Open Learning Conference*
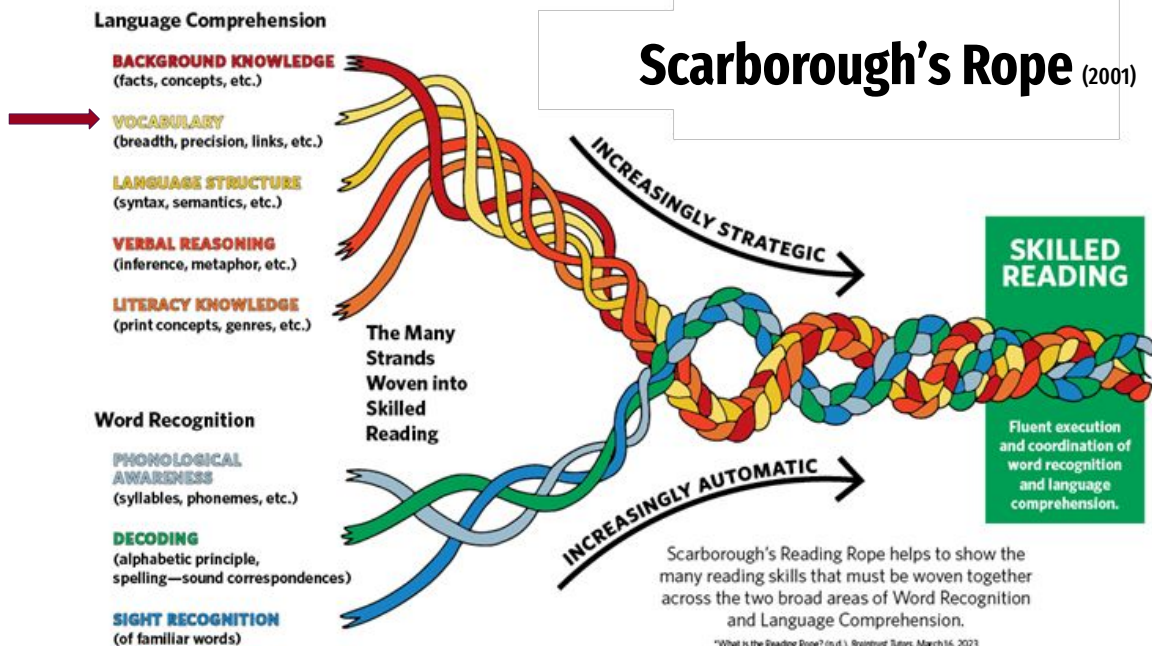
Presenters: Drs. Cindy Whaley & Jon Roux

The 5+1 Pillars of Reading Instruction

Phonemic Awareness Instruction

Phonics Instruction

Vocabulary Instruction

Fluency Instruction

Text Comprehension Instruction

MOTIVATION

The Simple View of Reading (SVR)

Word Recognition	X	Language Comprehension	=	Reading Comprehension

- **Print Awareness**
- **Phonological and Phonemic Awareness**
- **Decoding** (phonics, advanced phonics)
- **Sight Word Recognition**

- **Vocabulary**
- **Background Knowledge**
- **Language Structures** (e.g., grammar)
- **Verbal Reasoning** (e.g., inference)
- **Literacy Knowledge**

Based on the *Simple View of Reading* by Gough and Tunmer (1986)

1	x	0	=	0
0	x	1	=	0
1	x	1	=	1

Scarborough's Rope (2001)

Language Comprehension

BACKGROUND KNOWLEDGE (facts, concepts, etc.)

VOCABULARY (breadth, precision, links, etc.)

LANGUAGE STRUCTURE (syntax, semantics, etc.)

VERBAL REASONING (inference, metaphor, etc.)

LITERACY KNOWLEDGE (print concepts, genres, etc.)

Word Recognition

PHONOLOGICAL AWARENESS (syllables, phonemes, etc.)

DECODING (alphabetic principle, spelling—sound correspondences)

SIGHT RECOGNITION (of familiar words)

INCREASINGLY STRATEGIC

INCREASINGLY AUTOMATIC

The Many Strands Woven into Skilled Reading

SKILLED READING

Fluent execution and coordination of word recognition and language comprehension.

Scarborough's Reading Rope helps to show the many reading skills that must be woven together across the two broad areas of Word Recognition and Language Comprehension.

What Is the Reading Rope? (n.d.). Braintrust Tutors. March 16, 2023
https://braintrusttutors.com/what-is-the-reading-rope/

How Vocabulary Ties In

PRINT CONCEPTS
(e.g., I can point to one word)

PHONEMIC AWARENESS
(e.g., I can hear the sounds /c/ /a/ /t/ and blend them to say the word *cat*)

ALPHABET and SOUND-SPELLING KNOWLEDGE
(e.g., *t* represents the sound /t/)

DECODING
(applying phonemic isolation, segmentation, and blending + sound-spelling relationships to recognize a word)

ORTHOGRAPHIC MAPPING
(spelling, pronunciation, and meaning)

AUTOMATIC WORD RECOGNITION

"Vocabulary knowledge (semantics) is about knowing the right words to engage successfully in conversation or understand a text."

from Lindsey, J. (2022). *Reading above the fray*. Scholastic. 40-42

The Role of Orthography

We see a **printed** word

Our brain uses **letter sound relationships** PLUS our knowledge of **phonemes** to segment and blend spoken sounds.

With multiple exposures and practice, our brains map the letter sequence to long term memory. It becomes a a **sight** word!

h a t
/h/ /ă/ /t/
hat

Phonics supports learning the letter-sound knowledge needed.

bead
/b/ /ē/ /d/
bead

The "ea" pattern in "bead" may be **temporarily irregular** until this pattern is taught.

said
/s/ /ĕ/ /d/
said

The "ai" pattern in "said" is **irregular.** Draw children's attention to the parts of the word that is <u>regular</u>.
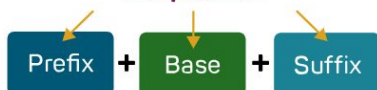
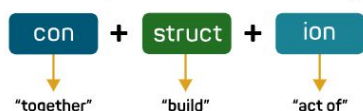from www.readingrockets.org (with permission)

The Role of Morphology

1. Improves vocabulary
2. Enhances reading comprehension
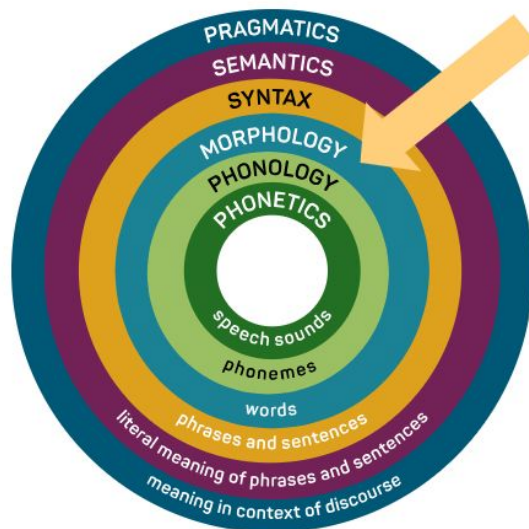3. Supports spelling skills
4. Promotes critical thinking

Words are made up of **morphemes**

| Prefix | + | Base | + | Suffix |

Each morpheme carries meaning.

| con | + | struct | + | ion |

"together"   "build"   "act of"

Construction means the act of building things together.

PRAGMATICS
SEMANTICS
SYNTAX
MORPHOLOGY
PHONOLOGY
PHONETICS

speech sounds
phonemes
words
phrases and sentences
literal meaning of phrases and sentences
meaning in context of discourse

from www.readinghorizons.com (with permission)

The Importance of Vocabulary

- **Vocabulary knowledge is one of the best indicators of verbal ability**
  (Sternberg, 1987; Terman, 1916)
- **Vocabulary knowledge contributes to young children's phonological awareness, which in turn contributes to their word recognition**
  (Goswamin, 2001; Nagy, 2005)
- **Vocabulary knowledge in kindergarten and 1st grade is a significant predictor of reading comprehension in the middle and secondary grades**
  (Cunningham & Stanovich, 1997; Scarborough, 1998)
- **Vocabulary difficulty strongly influences the readability to text**
  (Chall & Dale, 1995; Fitzgerald, Ellmore, Relyea-Kim, Hiebert & Stenner, 2021)
- **Teaching vocabulary can improve reading comprehension for both native and non-native English speakers**
 (Beck, Perfetti, & McKeown, 1982) and English learners (Carlo, et at., 2004)
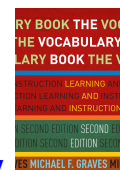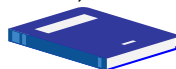
The Importance of Vocabulary
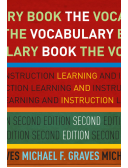
- **Growing up in poverty can seriously restrict vocabulary children learn before beginning school and make attaining at adequate vocabulary a challenging task**
  (Fernald et al., 2013; Hart & Risley, 1995)
- **Disadvantaged students are likely to have substantially smaller vocabularies than their more advantaged classmates**
  (Templin, 1957; White et al., 1990)
- **Learning English vocabulary is one of the most crucial tasks for English learners**
  (August, Carlo, Dressler, & Snow, 2005; Nation, 2014b)
- **Lack of vocabulary can be a crucial factor underlying the school failure of disadvantaged students**
  (Becker, 1977; Bergland, 2014)
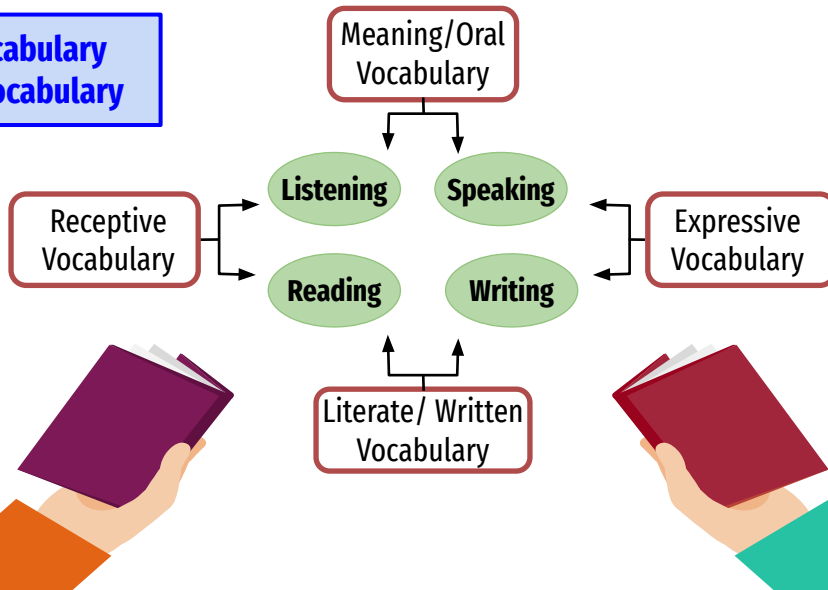
Critical Facts about Vocabulary
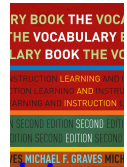
- **Vocabulary learning is enormous!**

- **There are far more words to be learned than we can possibly teach is not an argument that we should not teach any of them**
  (Beck, McKeown, & Kucan, 2013; Blackowicz, Fisher, Ogle, & Watts-Taffe, 2013; Graves, 2014; Neuman & Wright, 2013; Stahl & Nagy, 2006)

- **Instruction on individual words and instruction that prompts a child's ability and propensity to learn words on their own are very worthwhile**
  (Baumann & Kame'enui, 2004; National Reading Panel, 2000; RAND Reading Study, 2002; Stahl & Nagy, 2006)

- **Many English learners and many children raised in poverty enter school with vocabularies much smaller than those of their middle-class and native English-speaking classmates**
  (August et al., 2005; Becker, 1977; Bergland, 2014; Fernald et al., 2013; Hart & Risley, 1995; Rodriguez & Tamis-LeMonda, 2011; White et al., 1990)
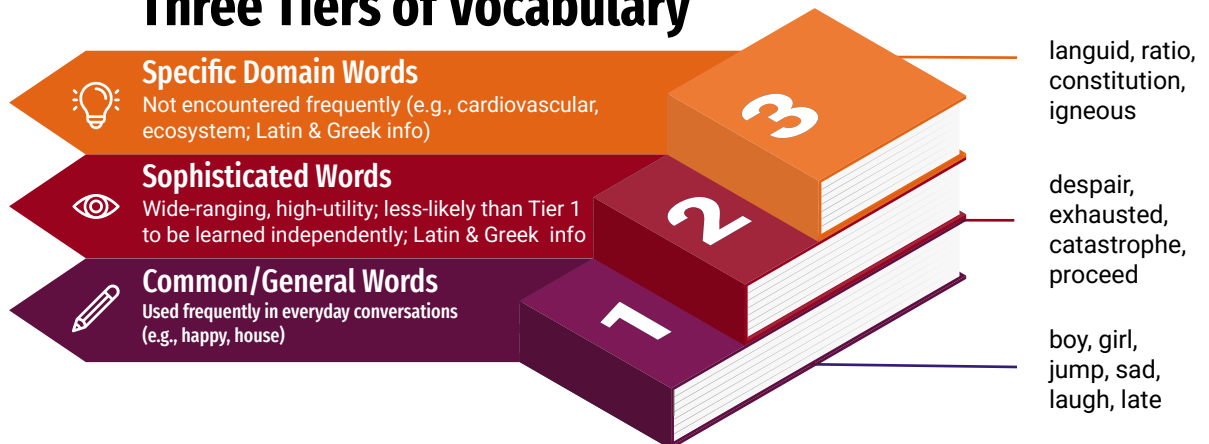
Types of Vocabulary
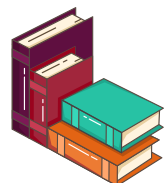
Active Vocabulary
Passive Vocabulary

Meaning/Oral Vocabulary

Listening   Speaking

Receptive Vocabulary

Reading   Writing

Expressive Vocabulary

Literate/ Written Vocabulary

Three Tiers of Vocabulary

Specific Domain Words
Not encountered frequently (e.g., cardiovascular, ecosystem; Latin & Greek info)

3

languid, ratio, constitution, igneous

Sophisticated Words
Wide-ranging, high-utility; less-likely than Tier 1 to be learned independently; Latin & Greek info

2

despair, exhausted, catastrophe, proceed

Common/General Words
Used frequently in everyday conversations (e.g., happy, house)

1

boy, girl, jump, sad, laugh, late

Tier 1	Tier 2	Tier 3
General	*Specialized*	*Technical*
Common or General Academic Words		*Domain-Specific Vocabulary*

Beck et al., 2013

Vacca & Vacca, 2007

When to Work with Vocabulary

Pre-Reading (Before)
Most common/traditional, but maybe not always the most effective; done to make unfamiliar words available for students when they encounter them; alleviate comprehension difficulties, especially if reading independently

During Reading
Great when reading together - tackle the word when it comes up

Post Reading (After)
Focus changes from comprehension to vocabulary development; make use of additional text and activities to enrich, transfer/apply learning

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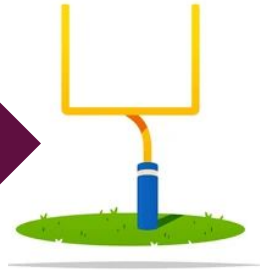
Selection of Vocabulary Words

1. Word lists
2. State, local, and content area standards
3. Tiered vocabulary
   ↪ Utility to the words
      ✓ Unknown
      ✓ Important
      ✓ Will it be encountered in other texts?
      ✓ Deep vs. shallow processing
      ✓ Generative activities
4. Background of students
5. Critical attributes of the words

Beck, I.L., McKeown, M.G., & Kucan, L. (2013)
Chovanes J. & Sharp, E. (2025)

Word Lists to Consider

1. **The First 4,000 Words**
   (Graves, Sales, & Ruda, 2008)
2. **The Vocabulary of Core Reading Programs**
   (Graves, Elmore, et al., 2014)
3. **The Vocabulary of Elementary Level Content-Area Texts**
   (Fitzgerald, Elmore, & Stenner, 2015)
4. **A List of Content-Area Words**
   (Marzano, 2004)
5. **The Middle School Vocabulary Lists**
   (Greene & Coxhead, 2015)
6. **The Academic Word List**
   (Coxhead, 2000; in a lot of expository texts, not textbooks)
7. **The Academic Vocabulary List**
   (Gardner & Davies, 2013)
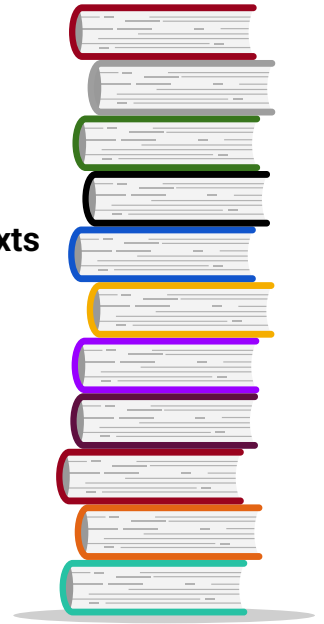
Seven Principles For Maximizing Your Students' Vocabularies

- **Vocabulary is learned best when it is based on real, concrete experiences**
- **Pictures and other visuals help solidify word meanings**
- **To truly own a word, you must use that word in talking and writing**
- **Sets of essential words, including academic subject-area vocabulary, should be directly taught**
- **Because most new words are learned through reading, teacher read-aloud and independent reading time should be scheduled into every elementary student's day**
- **Teach strategies for learning new words independently from reading, including instructions, word parts, context, and effective use of the dictionary**
- **Include activities that develop word wonder and exclude ineffective, de-motivating activities such as [always] copying and memorizing definitions and writing vocabulary words in sentences**

adapted from Cunningham, P. (2014). *What Really Matters in Vocabulary*

Quality Vocabulary Instruction

Intentional
Select words worth teaching (technical, specialized, words that may change meaning); scaffold the learning opportunities

Transparent
Systematic and explicit instruction; teacher-modeling word-solving and word-learning strategies

Transferable
Focus on high-frequency prefix, suffix, and root words (Morphology); work with word families and shared meanings

Usable
Use words to "own" words; offer multiple opportunities (authentic and collaborative activities) to use words - not simply copying down definitions; incorporate discussion and authentic writing

Personal
Learn words through personal reading and tasks requiring students to consolidate learning; novel situations; building word consciousness; stress usage/integration of words across the curriculum
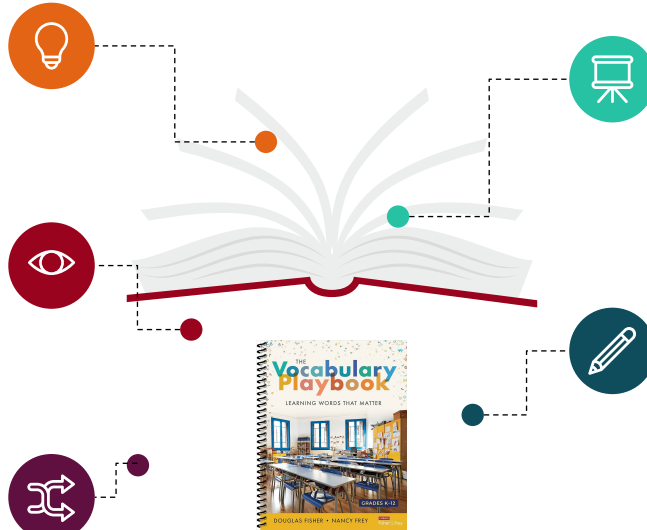
Adapted from: Fisher & Frey, *The Vocabulary Playbook* (2023)

Reminders for Effective Instruction

1. Read and pronounce the word
2. Present the word in context
3. Provide a student-friendly definition
4. Provide additional context for the word
5. Provide more opportunities to process and use / apply the word

- Be intentional
- Be systematic, follow a routine
- Be direct & explicit
- Be multi-modal

Word Matrix - Multiple Meanings

Prefix

Suffix

Root

Base Word

Cognate

Word Family

Prefixes

trans sub

un de

a

in pre

Base

scrib/script

Meaning

to write

Suffixes

-ion -ure

-er -able

-ed -ive

un

sur

real

realis

"actual"

i | ty | es

ism
ly
ty

ist | ic | al | ly
s

ize | able
ed
es
ing

ate | ion

Word	Word Parts and Meanings	Similar Words	Summaries of Multiple Meanings	What They Have in Common
			1.	
			2.	
			3.	

Common Latin Roots

ROOT	DEFINITION	EXAMPLES	ROOT	DEFINITION	EXAMPLES
ambi	both	ambiguous, ambidextrous	mit	to send	transmit, admit
aqua	water	aquarium, aquamarine	port	to carry	portable, transportation
cent	one hundred	century, percent	rupt	to break	bankrupt, disruption
ject	throw	project, reject	voc	voice, to call	vocalize, advocate

Common Greek Roots

ROOT	DEFINITION	EXAMPLES	ROOT	DEFINITION	EXAMPLES
auto	self	autobiography, automobile	logy	study of	biology, theology
dyna	power	dynamite, dynamic	micro	small	microbe, microscope
graph	writing	graphic, paragraph	phobia	fear	claustrophobia, arachnophobia
hydro	below, beneath	project, reject	tele	far off	telescope, telephone

The Frayer Model

Definition:
Student-friendly description of the term (generally provided by the teacher).

Characteristics:
Feature that help students to recognize, identify, or distinguish the term.

Examples:
Synonyms, concrete applications or relevant illustrations of the characteristics.
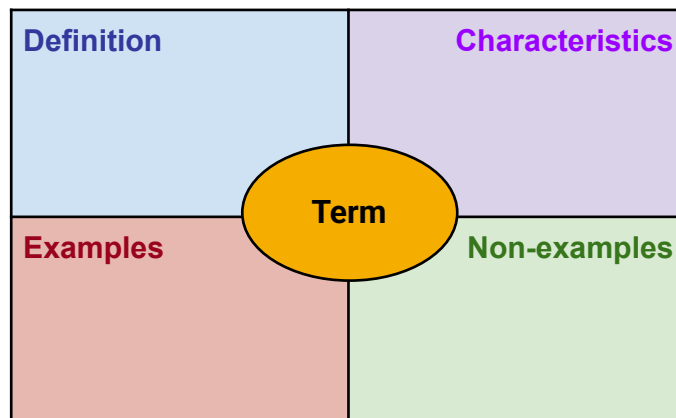
Non-examples:
Antonyms, inappropriate applications or relevant illustrations that do not fit the characteristics.

Definition	Characteristics
Examples	Non-examples

Term

Vocabulary Bank Notes

VOCABULARY BANK NOTE

Examples of the Word	Word (or Phrase)	Why This Word Is Important:
	Name	$
Meaning in Sci., S.S., Lit., Math	President Vocab U. Lary	Sentence Using the Word:
Other Meaning(s)?		

BUILDING READING
COMPREHENSION HABITS
IN GRADES 6-12
A Toolkit of Classroom Activities

Jeff Zwiers
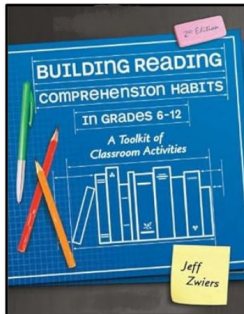
True wealth is a rich vocabulary.

VOCABULARY BANK NOTE

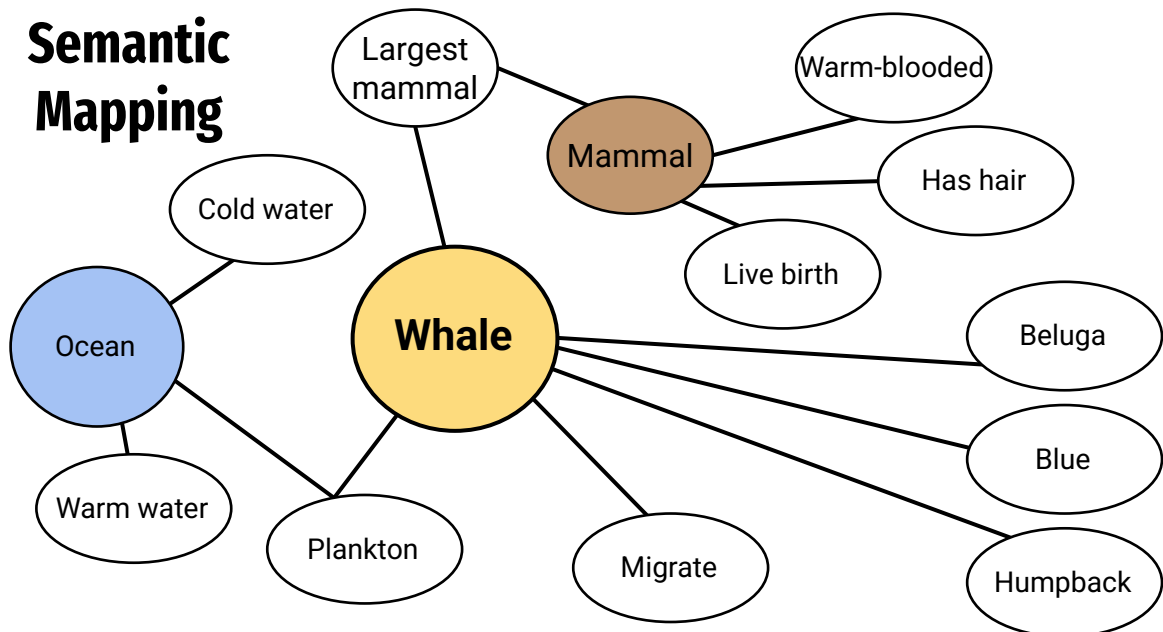| Word Parts (Prefixes, Suffixes, Roots) That I Recognize and Their Meanings	Word (or Phrase)	Synonyms	Antonyms
	How to Remember It: (Rhyme, Mnemonic, Drawing, etc.)		
Related Words:			

This note is valid for all trade and commerce where accepted.
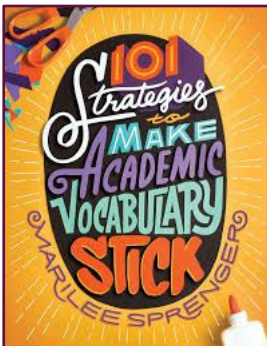
Semantic Mapping

- Largest mammal
- Warm-blooded
- **Mammal**
- Has hair
- Cold water
- Live birth
- **Ocean**
- **Whale**
- Beluga
- Warm water
- Blue
- Plankton
- Migrate
- Humpback
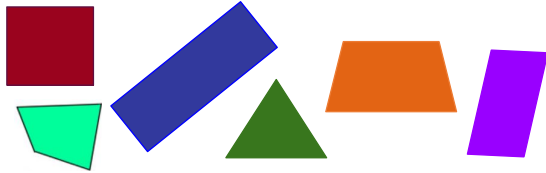
Semantic Feature Analysis

	Convex	Equilateral	Equiangular	4 sided	Opposite sides parallel
square	X	X	X	X	X
rectangle	X		X	X	X
triangle	X				
quadrilateral				X	

(Baldwin et al., 1981; Johnson & Pearson, 1984)

Vocabulary Association Triangle

101 Strategies to Make Academic Vocabulary Stick — MARILEE SPRENGER

peculiar

generosity

fragile

It was **peculiar** for Uncle Ted to show such **generosity**.

Because of her headache, she felt too **peculiar** to handle misbehaving children. **fragile**

The **peculiar** old woman expressed her **generosity** for the sick, **fragile** people.

Through the generosity of others, the child's life felt less fragile.

Silver, Dewing, & Perini, 2012

Developing a Nation of Word Learners

- Preteach vocabulary
- Lemmas (single words), Lexemes (word families), and sets of words
  - ↪ *sell: selling, seller, sold, and sells*
- Word Cards/Word Rings (Spider Maps)
- Word Walls and Labeling (bilingually)
- First-Language Reminders
  - ↪ "concrete words" with sensory application
  - ↪ Teach cognates (beware of false cognates)
  - ↪ There isn't always a 1-to-1 correspondence
  - ↪ Provide repetitions
  - ↪ Frequent use of dictionaries

went   **goes**

go
(lemma)

going   **gone**
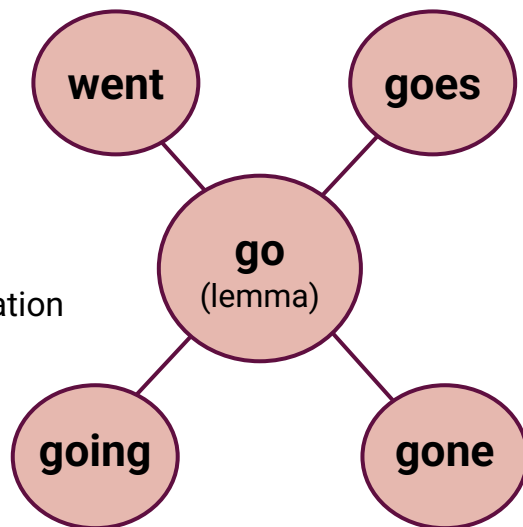
from: Lems, Soro, & Charles (2024)

Developing a Nation of Word Learners

The Vine Consortium https://vineconsortium.sites.ucsc.edu/	Lesson plans for word-conscious activities (collecting words, word sorts, predictions, vocabulary walks, morphology)
Exceptional Expressions for Everyday Events and Super Synonym Sets for Stories https://textproject.org/teachers/vocabulary-instruction/e4/	E4 Complete Edition - lessons tying together English + Spanish cognates; additional resources easily tailored to a classroom/tutoring setting
Word Generation https://www.serpinstitute.org/wordgen	Programs for g4+ semantically rich contexts for learning a predetermined set of words; classroom activities (word-learning strategies, word awareness, multiple exposures to words)
Teaching Linguistics - Western Washington University https://teachling.wwu.edu/	Lesson plans and many linguistic resources (especially for middle and upper grades)

Resources

- **Beck, I.L., McKeown, M.G., & Kucan, L. (2013).** *Bringing words to life: Robust vocabulary instruction (2nd e)*. **Guilford Press.**
- Bear, D. (2019). "Best Practices for Developmental Word Study in Phonics, Vocabulary, and Spelling." In Morrow & Gambrell, eds.), *Best practices in literacy instruction* (6th e, pp. 175-198).
- Blevins, W. (2023). *Phonics from A to Z - A a practical guide* (4th e). Scholastic.
- Blevins, W. (2023). *Teaching phonics & word study in intermediate grades.* Scholastic.
- Cárdenas-Hagan, E. (2020). *Literacy foundations for English learners - A comprehension guide to evidence-based instruction.* Brookes.
- Chovanes, J. & Sharp, E. (2025). *Structured literacy: Teaching K-12 students to read using the science of reading and explicit instruction.* Rowman & Littlefield.
- **Cunningham, P.M. (2014). W***hat really matters in vocabulary: Research-based practices across the curriculum***. Pearson.**
- Fisher, D. Frey, N., & Lapp, D. (2023). *Teaching reading: A playbook for developing skilled readers through word recognition and language comprehension, grades PreK-6.* Corwin.
- **Fisher, D. and Frey, N. (2023).** *The vocabulary playbook: Learning words that matter*. **Corwin.**
- Ganske, K. (2019). "Best Practices in Vocabulary Instruction." In Morrow & Gambrell, eds., *Best practices in literacy instruction* (6th e, pp. 199-220).
- **Geiger, A. (2024).** *Reach all readers: Using the science of reading to transform your literacy instruction*. **Jossey-Bass.**

Resources

- **Graves, Michael. (2016).** *The vocabulary book* (2nd e). **Teachers College Press.**
- **Graves, Michael. (2009).** *Teaching individual words: One size does not fit all.* **Teachers College Press.**
- Honig, B., Diamond, L., Gutlohn, L. (eds.). (2018). *Teaching reading sourcebook* (3rd e). CORE Learning.
- Hennessy, N.L. (2020). *The reading comprehension blueprint - Helping students make meaning from text.* Brookes.
- Kemeny, L. (2023). *Seven mighty moves - Research-based, classroom tested strategies to ensure K-3 reading success.* Scholastic.
- Lems, K., Soro, T., & Charles, G. (2024). *Building literacy with multilingual learners - Insights from linguistics* (3rd e). Guilford.
- Lindsey, J. (2022). *Reading above the fray: Reliable, research-based routines for developing decoding skills.* Scholastic.
- **McKeown, M.G., Deane, P.D., Scott, J.A., Krovetz, R., & Lawless, R. (2017).** *Vocabulary assessment to support instruction: Building rich word-learning experiences.* **Guilford Press.**
- **Sprenger, Marilee. (2017).** *101 strategies to make academic vocabulary stick*. **ASCD.**
- Such, C. (2021). *The art and science of teaching primary reading.* Corwin.
- **Templeton, S., Bear, D., Invernizzi, M, et al. (2024).** *Word instruction - Word study with middle and secondary students*. **(2nd e).Pearson.**
- Young, C., Paige, D., & Rasinski. (2022). *Artfully teaching the science of reading.* Routledge.
- **Zwiers, J. (2010).** *Building reading comprehension habits in grade 6-12: A toolkit of classroom activities* (2nd e). **IRA.**

Online Resources

Vocabulary.com - www.vocabulary.com/about
Learn That Word - https://www.learnthat.org/
TextProject - https://textproject.org/
Vocabulary Spelling City - https://www.spellingcity.com/
WordWorks Literacy Centre - https://www.wordworkskingston.com/WordWorks/Home.html

General Reference
Reverso Dictionary - https://dictionary.reverso.net/
Online Etymology Dictionary - https://www.etymonline.com/
OneLook Dictionary Search - https://www.onelook.com/
The General Services List - http://jbauman.com/aboutgsl.html
New General Service List Project - https://www.newgeneralservicelist.com/ (click on "Wordlists")
The Academic Word List - https://www.wgtn.ac.nz/lals/resources/academicwordlist - Prof. Averil Coxhead)
Word Families - https://www.enchantedlearning.com/rhymes/wordfamilies/index.shtml
Lexipedia - https://www.lexipedia.com/ (visual thesaurus)
Wornik - https://wordnik.com/
AudioEnglish - https://www.audioenglish.org/
My Vocabulary Size - https://my.vocabularysize.com

Online Resources

A Word a Say (AWAD) Sites
A.Word.A.Day - https://wordsmith.org/awad/
Merriam Webster's Word of the Day - https://www.merriam-webster.com/word-of-the-day

Word Games and Puzzles
Stickels Frame Games - https://www.puzz.com/stickelsframegames.html - (Perplexors, idioms)
Idioms By Kids - https://www.idiomsbykids.com/
Hinky Pinkies (Hink Pinks) -- https://www.educationworld.com/a_lesson/TM/WS_sponges.shtml
Wordcloud Generator - https://www.wordclouds.com/
Tagul Word Clouds - https://secure.smore.com/n/am4dq-tagul-word-clouds
Turn Words into Stunning Art - https://wordart.com/
Word Sift - https://wordsift.org/

Background Information (and activities)
Ling Holic - https://lingholic.com/ - cultural information and strategies
Linguist-Educator Exchange (LEX) - https://linguisteducatorexchange.com/ - linguistically accurate resources for teachers and English learners
English Radar - https://www.englishradar.com/category/english-vocabulary/

Picture Book Resources

- Banks, K. (2006). *Max's words.* Farrar, Straus & Giroux (collecting words)
- Bell, Cece. (2019). *You loves ewe!.* Clarion
- Broach, E. (2010). *Gumption!* Atheneum BfYR (understanding "big" words)
- Curtis, J.L. (2008). *Big words for little people.* Joanna Cotler Books (very expressive vocabulary words)
- Edwards, Nicola. (2018). *What a wonderful word.* Kate Miller Books
- Fleming, D. (1995). *In the tall tall grass.* Scholastic (rhyme with expressive vocabulary)
- Frasier, D. (2000). *Miss Alaineus: A vocabulary disaster.* Harcourt
- Gwynne, F. (1970). *The king who rained*. Windmill Books (humorous homonyms and homophones)
- **Heller, Ruth.** (series on each part of speech). Grosset & Dunlap
- O'Connor, J. (2006+) *Fancy Nancy* series. HarperCollins
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