

# **DO'S AND DON'TS FOR TEACHING VOCABULARY**

**by Anna Geiger, M.Ed.**

Vocabulary is the knowledge of words and their meanings. For many decades, researchers have noted that there is a strong correlation between vocabulary knowledge and reading comprehension. And yet ... Researchers tell us that, traditionally, vocabulary instruction has not been strong ... in far too many classrooms. Believe me, I get it.

As I planned my daily classroom schedule each school year, I thought about everything I had to fit into my day. As I thought about phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, comprehension, and vocabulary instruction ... vocabulary felt the least important. I'm not saying that I neglected vocabulary instruction entirely. I taught a few new words when reading a new selection or when teaching a social studies or science unit ... but I often neglected to teach these words in depth. With my days so full already, I hoped this incidental vocabulary learning would be enough.

## **DON'T forget about vocabulary instruction.**

As tempting as it may be to leave vocabulary instruction in the background, it's important to remember that it has a huge impact on students' comprehension ... which is the goal of reading, after all.

According to Beck, McKeown, and Kucan, in their book, *Creating Robust Vocabulary*:

- In 1999 and 2002, researchers discovered that kindergarten vocabulary knowledge could predict reading comprehension of students two years later in second grade.
- A 1997 study showed that vocabulary knowledge in first grade predicted students' reading comprehension in their junior year of high school! Vocabulary building is just too important to leave to chance.

## **DON'T try to find the perfect list of vocabulary words for your grade level.**

It would be so nice to have a list of the exact vocabulary words that children need to learn by grade. What a handy reference that would be! But no such list exists.

Instead, I recommend following Isabel Beck and Margaret McKeown's system for selecting the words in a text best suited for direct vocabulary instruction. In their system, each word is classified according to its level of utility.

It's called the Three-Tier System.

# The Three-Tier

## SYSTEM FOR CHOOSING VOCABULARY WORDS

Developed by Isabel Beck  
& Margaret McKeown

### TIER 1 WORDS

**Tier 1 words** are the most basic vocabulary words and include words like *warm*, *dog*, *baby*, *talk*, *swim*, *look*, and *play*. Students know these words when they come to school; they aren't words that you need to teach in depth.

### TIER 2 WORDS

**Tier 2 words** are words students may not hear very much in conversation, but they *will* encounter these words in the books they read or in the books you read to them. Examples include *dangle*, *miserable*, *consequence*, and *frigid*.  
TEACH THESE WORDS IN DEPTH.

### TIER 3 WORDS

**Tier 3 words** are words your students will encounter in a particular unit of study. For example, if you're doing a study on whales, they'll learn a word like *baleen*. Teach these words, but save in-depth instruction for Tier 2 words.



Earlier in this series we talked about the power of interactive read-alouds. These are an ideal time of day to teach new vocabulary.

### **DO teach vocabulary within the context of read alouds.**

While reading aloud, you'll have both unplanned and intentional moments for teaching vocabulary.

### **Examples of unplanned vocabulary teaching through read alouds**

By *unplanned*, I mean that you teach the meaning of a word because it's clear that your learners need it defined – and *not* because you planned the instruction ahead of time. When you're reading and it's clear your students need a word defined, you can do one of the following:

STRATEGY 1: Provide a quick, kid-friendly definition and keep reading.

Example: "One night, in a phosphorescent sea, he marveled at the sight of some whales spouting luminous water." (*Amos & Boris*, by William Steig)

*"Phosphorescent" and "luminous" both have to do with light. When Amos looked at the night ocean, it looked like it was glowing. Even though the ocean doesn't make its own light, the light from the moon and stars made the ocean glow.*

STRATEGY 2: Give a quick synonym for the word.

For example: "... Gazing at the immense, starry sky ...." (*Amos & Boris*, by William Steig)

*"Immense" means really big.*

STRATEGY 3: Point to the picture to help your learners understand what the word means.

For example: "Boris the whale was flung ashore by a tidal wave and stranded on the very shore where Amos happened to make his home." (*Amos & Boris*, by William Steig)

*Let's take a look at this picture. Do you see how the whale is on the beach and can't get off? He is stranded. To be stranded means that you are stuck somewhere and you can't leave. Boris is stranded on the beach.*

STRATEGY 4: Act out or demonstrate the meaning of the word.

For example: “He stood with his mouth agape.”

“Agape” means to have your mouth wide open like this (demonstrate). Can you show me what it looks like to have your mouth agape?

Those are all quick examples. We provide the definition, and we move on. We don’t want the reading interrupted for a long period of them.

Even when we do *intentional* vocabulary teaching through read alouds, our goal is to *get in and out quickly*. That is, we don’t want our vocabulary teaching to interfere with our learners’ enjoyment of the story.

How to do planned vocabulary teaching through read alouds

- Before reading, choose 4-5 tier 2 words to focus on.
- Decide how you’re going to teach the words. Will you provide a definition, give a synonym, use the picture, or act them out?
- Have a kid-friendly definition *ready*. I like to use Miriam Webster’s online dictionary for kids as a reference.
- Mark the pages with a small sticky note flag so you don’t forget to call attention to the featured words.

As you can see, it doesn’t have to be difficult or complicated to teach vocabulary in the context of read-alouds. Many times, it makes sense to give a quick definition and move on.

And yet ... It’s also helpful to *go deep* with our vocabulary instruction. To help our learners really make new words their own, we’ll need to do more than share a definition during read-alouds.

**DO teach new words in depth.**

We’ve talked about how to choose the Tier 2 words you’re going to teach your students. We’ve talked about how to briefly introduce them before reading, or perhaps during reading. Now it’s

time to talk about how to tackle these words after reading. How do we teach these words in depth?

The authors of *Bringing Words to Life* recommend the following.

1. First, review the story context for the word by rereading the sentence in which the word appears.
2. Explain the meaning in a child-friendly way.
3. Have your students repeat the word back to you.
4. Use the word in another context, different from the one used in the story.
5. Ask your students to provide their own examples of ways to use the word.
6. Have them repeat the word once more.

Anita Archer is the go-to expert for explicit instruction. Check out this quick video to see how she expertly introduces new vocabulary words to a group of second graders.

(<https://youtu.be/fr7yRYegjb8>)

Teaching words in detail like before or after hearing them in a read aloud is an important beginning, but for the words to really stick and become part of our students' vocabulary, we must revisit these words throughout the week.

The following infographic provides a few ways to do that.

# EXAMPLES OF IN-DEPTH VOCABULARY INSTRUCTION

## EXAMPLE / NONEXAMPLE

If I say something that sounds PLEASANT, say "pleasant." If not, say nothing.

- Sitting at the table eating your favorite food (pleasant)
- Standing outside on a cold day without a jacket
- Standing in a field under the hot sun, getting bitten by mosquitoes
- Climbing into a cozy bed after a long day (pleasant)

## WHICH ONE IS / WHICH WOULD?

Which is something that would make you GASP: finding a stick on the sidewalk, or opening a present to find exactly what you were hoping for?

Which is something that would make you GASP: remembering that you left your homework at home, or breaking the tip of your pencil?

## WORD ASSOCIATIONS

The words are PERMITTED, INSISTED, AND RESIST. Which word matches each sentence?

- My mom let me spend my allowance on a bag of chocolate. (permitted)
- When I tried to take my dog for a walk, she didn't let me put her on her leash. (resist)
- I didn't want to do my report, but my dad said that I had to. (insist)

## REVIEW MEANINGS WITH QUESTIONS

- Would it be PLEASANT to sleep on the cold, hard freezing ground? (no)
- Would it be PLEASANT to sit down in a big, soft chair? (yes)
- Would it be PLEASANT to have a cup of hot chocolate after coming in from the cold? (yes)
- Would it be PLEASANT to take a bite of cold mashed potatoes? (no)

REFERENCE: CREATING ROBUST VOCABULARY, BY ISABEL BECK, MARGARET MCKEOWN, & LINDA KUCAN



Let's sum up!

- **DON'T leave vocabulary building to chance.** In order for reading comprehension to take place, students need strong vocabulary knowledge.
- **DON'T look for the perfect list of vocabulary words for the grade you teach.** Instead, learn to choose Tier Two words for instruction.
- **DO teach new vocabulary words within read alouds.**
- **DO teach new words in depth.**

Thank you so much for joining us for this in-depth series about the Big Five!

If you're ready to learn more, you're invited to check out our online course, Teaching Every Reader. The doors will open for one week on October 4, 2021. Please feel free to send your questions to [hello@themeasuredmom.com](mailto:hello@themeasuredmom.com)