

Mistakes to avoid when teaching vocabulary

by Anna Geiger, M.Ed.



Read this blogpost on [themeasuredmom.com](https://www.themeasuredmom.com):

<https://www.themeasuredmom.com/mistakes-to-avoid-when-teaching-vocabulary/>

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If you have questions about teaching new vocabulary words to learners in grades K-5, you're in the right spot! This post kicks off a series with everything you need to know!

Phonemic awareness. Phonics. Comprehension. Fluency.

Am I missing something? What's another key element to reading instruction?

Oh, yeah. Vocabulary.

Isn't that how it often works? We think of vocabulary as that thing we get to – *if we have time.*

But we're making a mistake.

Words are the tools we use to access our background knowledge, express ideas, and learn new concepts. The words children know will determine how well they can comprehend texts, in the upper elementary grades, in middle and high school, and in college. Reading is far more than recognizing words and remembering their meanings, but if the reader does not know the meanings of a sufficient proportion of words in the text, comprehension is impossible."

Stahl & Nagy, [Teaching Word Meanings](#)

Let's take a look at 10 mistakes to avoid when teaching vocabulary.

› Mistake #1 – Choosing the wrong words

Choosing the vocabulary words that you'll teach is something of an art. It *doesn't* mean buying a Word of the Day book and following it without deviation. It also doesn't mean choosing a big word just because it's big and impressive.

We need to make sure we're choosing mostly Tier 2 words – words that our students will encounter and use in their reading, speaking, and writing. Not sure how to choose these words? Check out my post [How to Choose Words for Vocabulary Instruction](#).

› Mistake #2 – Having your students look up words and copy their dictionary definitions

This is arguably one of the worst ways to "teach" new vocabulary. All of us know how *unhelpful* the dictionary can be when trying to grasp the meaning of a new word. We must go beyond this out-of-date teaching method.

Provide a kid-friendly definition instead. [Collins Cobuild Advanced Learner's English Dictionary](#) is my favorite resource for those.

› Mistake #3 – Only having students write the word in a sentence

This is a step in the right direction, but it's just a step. And I don't know about you, but I've seen too many sentences that *still* didn't show that my learners understood the meaning of the sentence.

For example:

She *inquired* a question.

I *collided* my little sister.

› Mistake #4 – Failing to go beyond a surface understanding

Having students copy definitions from the dictionary (please don't) and having them write the word in a sentence (a good start, but just a start) will not get our learners very far. There's *so much more* we can do to help them make the words their own. We need to help them write kid-friendly definitions, come up with synonyms and antonyms (or examples and nonexamples), and more.

› Mistake #5 – Having a hit or miss approach

I completely and fully understand how hard it is to squeeze *another* thing into your day. It's only when we grasp the vital importance of vocabulary growth that we choose to make time for it.

But it must be more than hit or miss – something we do just once a week or only when we find extra time. We must make it a regular part of our days. If you're concerned about how on earth you'll fit in something else, take a good hard look at everything else. Where can you cut or substitute?

Then – design a regular routine for your vocabulary lessons to make them as efficient as possible. That brings me to mistake #6.

› Mistake #6 – Neglecting to have a solid routine for teaching new words

It's important to think through exactly how you're going to introduce and reinforce new vocabulary words. How will your learners really *own* those words?

Try the 5-step routine shown here.

STEPS FOR TEACHING A NEW VOCABULARY WORD

1

Display the word. Read it. Have students repeat it. Use the word in a sentence.

2

Give a kid-friendly definition of the word.

3

Provide additional contexts for the word.

4

Share different words in the same family.

5

Give students multiple opportunities to interact with the word.



› Mistake #7 – Having a “set it and forget it” mindset

If we teach the word on Monday – a “word of the week” approach – and refer to it halfheartedly throughout the week (or, some weeks – let’s be honest – not at all), we haven’t accomplished much.

Our students need more than a quick introduction and an encouragement to use the word. They need *active vocabulary learning*. That brings us to mistake #8.

› Mistake #8 – Making vocabulary instruction boring

It may be hard to imagine how learning new words could be fun – especially if you were subject to copying word definitions and writing endless sentences when you were in school (as I was). But the fact is that there are many, many ways to turn vocabulary learning into a game.

Do you have my book yet? [Chapter 7](#) will equip you with engaging ways to teach and review vocabulary words.

› Mistake #9 – Losing track of your ultimate goal

As you know, our ultimate goal is to have students do well on the vocabulary quiz at the end of the week.

No! No it isn’t!

Certainly we want our students to show their understanding by performing well on our assessments, but our *ultimate* goal is that our students use the words in their reading and writing. This is the true test.

› Mistake #10 – Forgetting to celebrate word learning

In [Word Nerds](#), by Overturf, Montgomery, and Smith, the authors have classroom celebrations at the end of each vocabulary cycle. They combine vocabulary review with a small class party.

Even if you don’t feel ready for that, keep an ear open for good vocabulary use all day long – whether that’s at recess, in the lunchroom, or during a social studies lesson. Get excited about those big brain words your students are using – and praise them for it!

More resources for you

- Get the book, [Reach All Readers](#)
- Sign up for the [Reach All Readers online course](#)
- Join our [membership for K-3rd grade teachers](#)