

Article: Five Research-Based Ways to Teach Vocabulary

Nov 28, 2023 by LD Center in Teacher's Corner

Did you know that typically, only 5% to 10% of instructional time is devoted to vocabulary instruction, yet students, especially struggling students and English learners (ELs), need between 12 and 14 exposures to words and their meanings to fully learn them (Durkin, 1978/79; Roser & Juel, 1982; Scott, Jamieson, Noel, & Asslin, 2003)? Teaching the meanings of important words before learning new content activates students' background knowledge and prepares them for learning and comprehending. In other words, teaching vocabulary provides the "Velcro" for new information to "stick to."

What Research Says About Effective Vocabulary Instruction

Vocabulary instruction must be [explicit](#). Explicit vocabulary instruction includes an easy-to-understand definition presented directly to students along with multiple examples and nonexamples of the target word, brief discussion opportunities, and checks for understanding.

Vocabulary instruction must include [multiple practice opportunities](#) for using words within and across subjects. That is, instruction must be extended over time with opportunities for students to hear, speak, read, and write words in various contexts. This builds students' breadth and depth of vocabulary knowledge.

Vocabulary should be taught [schoolwide and across all subject areas](#). Each subject has a unique set of vocabulary terms, and students need to know their meanings and how to use them in various contexts.

Word Selection

Instructional time is precious, and teachers are not able to address every unknown word students might encounter, so [careful word selection is key](#). When deciding which words to target for explicit instruction, consider words that are

- **essential to understanding the main idea of the text and completing key assessments**
- **used repeatedly or frequently encountered** across domains, and
- **not part of students' prior knowledge.**

ELs may require even more careful word selection and extensive vocabulary instruction because they may be learning conversational language and academic language at the same time. Colorín Colorado provides additional information about [selecting vocabulary words to teach ELs](#).

Comprehension Check: Repair the sentence fragments below to demonstrate your understanding. Write your complete sentences in the blank.

1. need to be explicitly taught

-
2. when choosing words to teach

-
3. in order to learn new vocabulary

-
4. everyone's job
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Strategies for Teaching Vocabulary - From EWHS PL Website

Essential Vocabulary Routines

When students are learning new words, they need four fundamental things to ensure that they understand the word and how to use it. Those things are:

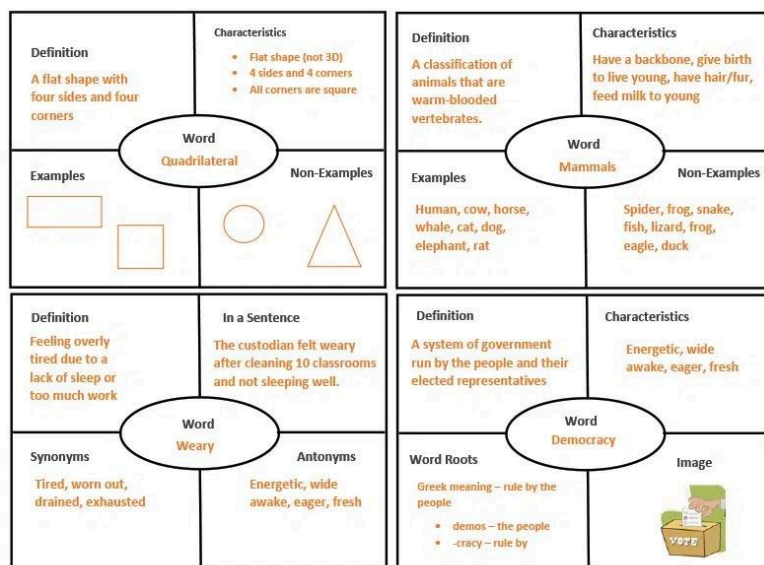
1. **A student-friendly, easy to understand definition** (definitions should not force students to look up additional words). This definition can also provide students with a list of synonyms for the word and images that help clarify or demonstrate parts of the definition.
2. An **oral model** of how to pronounce the word.
3. **Examples of the word used in the context of the course material** so that students can see the way that the word is used in the specific content area in which they are learning it.
4. **Practice** using the word in the course context, both verbally and in writing.

Keeping the **structure** of vocabulary instruction **consistent** helps make it so that students understand what they are expected to do and that you don't need to teach a new routine every time. Here are some example vocabulary routines:

1. Frayer Model

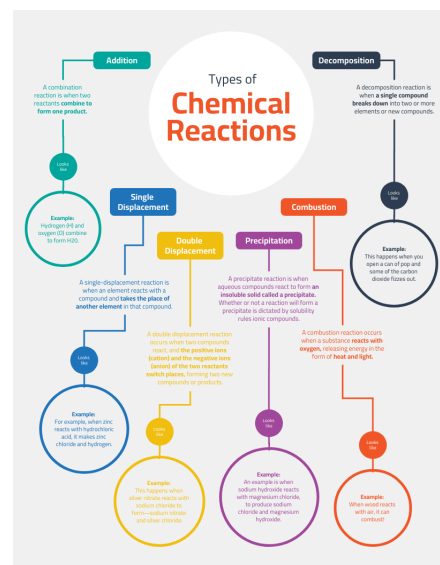
The [Frayer Model](#) is a graphic organizer that helps students think about new words by drawing pictures, providing examples, non-examples, synonyms and other ideas that connect to the new vocabulary word. Frayer models are usually started in the context of **whole-class vocabulary instruction** in which the teacher provides a student-friendly definition and the class works to complete the organizer as a group. Once students are familiar with the structure of the Frayer Model, students can work in pairs or small groups to complete certain parts of the organizer.

One thing you will notice when you look at different [Frayer Model templates](#) is that the titles in the three boxes that do not include the definition often change, although Frayer Models usually have an examples box



2. Concept Maps:

Concept maps are a great tool for teaching **terms that describe complex ideas or relationships between interconnected components**. Concept maps can include mini-application activities (like drawing pictures or providing real-world examples) that can be completed as whole-class ("we do") activities within the guided release model. After you provide students with a concept map, **they need to practice using the concept map to help them answer questions that require them to apply their understanding of the vocabulary word to course content**.



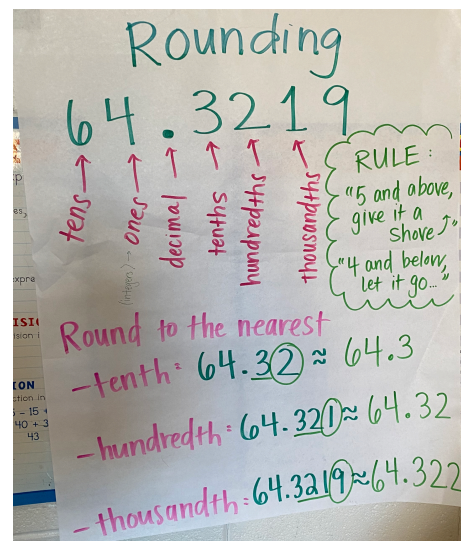
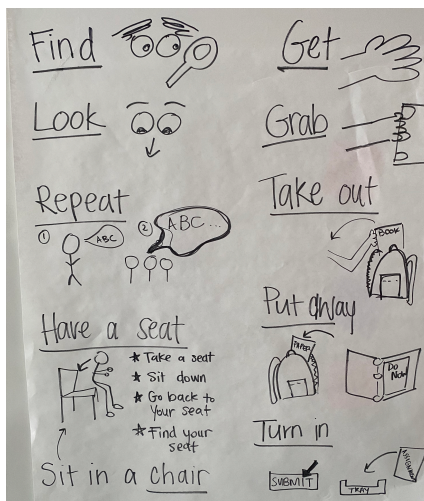
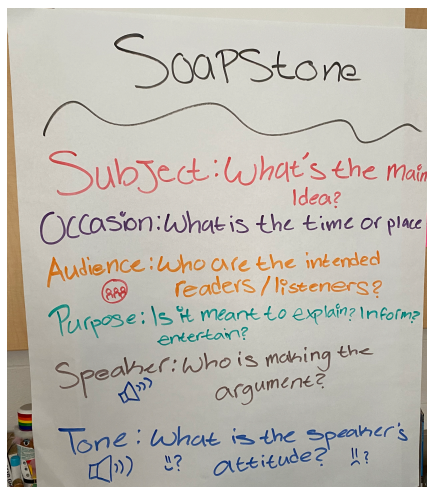
3. Multi-Component Vocabulary Lists:

Vocabulary lists are a useful tool for teachers to think about the vocabulary students will need to know in order to perform well on a test, project, or other assessment. The most useful vocabulary lists give students examples of the word used in context, images, and other additional information provided in graphic organizers like a **Frayer Model** or **Concept Map**. The value of having all of these things on a vocabulary list is that it helps provide students with a **reference** or **study guide** for final assessments. Teachers can also provide vocabulary lists with certain boxes missing and have students complete these boxes as they encounter the words during the unit.

4. Word Walls and Anchor Charts

Once students have explicitly been taught a vocabulary term, teachers can add the term, definition, and possibly examples and an image to a designated space on the classroom wall, known as a **Word Wall**. This then provides students with a location in the classroom to which they refer when they are answering open-response questions. (Vocabulary lists, Frayer Models, and concept maps organized in binders also serve this purpose, but depend on students keeping themselves organized.)

Example Anchor Charts From BCPS



Name: _____ Date: _____ Period: _____ V1

Year-Long US History Vocabulary List

Year-long Essential Questions:

1. What is the American Dream?
2. Who has benefited and who has suffered from the idea of the American Dream? How? To what extent?

The American Dream	
Class Definition	Image
The American Dream is the idea that freedom, wealth, safety, and happiness are available to people in America who work hard.	

Important Concepts

Word	IMAGE	DEFINITION	EXAMPLE	Impact (why the concept is important)
race (n) racial (adj)		A socially constructed category based mostly on skin color and other physical features.	White, black, biracial, South Asian, Latino	
ethnicity (n) ethnic (adj)		A shared cultural background in a group of people	Italian-American, Chicano/a, African American, Zulu, Cherokee	
culture (n) Cultural (adj)		The way of life (symbols, language, beliefs, values, rituals, and artifacts) shared by a social group.		
social class (n) socioeconomic (adj)		A person's position in society based on social, educational, and economic status	Upper class, Wealthy elite, Working class	
gender (n)		A socially constructed category based on ideas of masculinity and femininity	Male, female, agender, genderqueer etc	
institution Institutional (adj)		an organization or system that exists in society	School system, criminal justice system, bank	

Reflect on what you learned today and create a set of next steps for your practice.

My Next Steps: