

dictionary  
thoughtful

science  
scientist

*vocabulary*  
*instruction*



# vocabulary instruction

Vocabulary refers to the words we must know to communicate effectively. In general, vocabulary can be described as oral vocabulary or reading vocabulary. Oral vocabulary refers to words that we use in speaking or recognize in listening. Reading vocabulary refers to words we recognize or use in print.

Vocabulary plays an important part in learning to read. As beginning readers, children use the words they have heard to make sense of the words they see in print. Consider, for example, what happens when a beginning reader comes to the word **dig** in a book. As she begins to figure out the sounds represented by the letters **d, i, g**, the reader recognizes that the sounds make up a very familiar word that she has heard and said many times. Beginning readers have a much more difficult time reading words that are not already part of their oral vocabulary.

Vocabulary also is very important to reading comprehension. Readers cannot understand what they are reading without knowing what most of the words mean. As children learn to read more advanced texts, they must learn the meaning of new words that are not part of their oral vocabulary.

## Types of vocabulary

*Researchers often refer to four types of vocabulary*

*listening vocabulary*—the words we need to know to understand what we hear.

*speaking vocabulary*—the words we use when we speak.

*reading vocabulary*—the words we need to know to understand what we read.

*writing vocabulary*—the words we use in writing.

# What does scientifically based research tell us about vocabulary instruction?

The scientific research on vocabulary instruction reveals that (1) most vocabulary is learned indirectly, and (2) some vocabulary must be taught directly. The following conclusions about indirect vocabulary learning and direct vocabulary instruction are of particular interest and value to classroom teachers:

**Children learn the meanings of most words indirectly, through everyday experiences with oral and written language.**

Children learn word meanings indirectly in three ways:

## They engage daily in oral language.

Young children learn word meanings through conversations with other people, especially adults. As they engage in these conversations, children often hear adults repeat words several times. They also may hear adults use new and interesting words. The more oral language experiences children have, the more word meanings they learn.

## They listen to adults read to them.

Children learn word meanings from listening to adults read to them. Reading aloud is particularly helpful when the reader pauses during reading to define an unfamiliar word and, after reading, engages the child in a conversation about the book. Conversations about books help children to learn new words and concepts and to relate them to their prior knowledge and experience.

## They read extensively on their own.

Children learn many new words by reading extensively on their own. The more children read on their own, the more words they encounter and the more word meanings they learn.

### Indirect vocabulary learning

Students learn vocabulary indirectly when they hear and see words used in many different contexts—for example, through conversations with adults, through being read to, and through reading extensively on their own.

### Direct vocabulary learning

Students learn vocabulary directly when they are explicitly taught both individual words and word-learning strategies. Direct vocabulary instruction aids reading comprehension.

SPECIFIC WORD  
INSTRUCTION

WORD LEARNING  
INSTRUCTION

**Although a great deal of vocabulary is learned indirectly,  
some vocabulary should be taught directly.**

Direct instruction helps students learn difficult words, such as words that represent complex concepts that are not part of the students' everyday experiences. Direct instruction of vocabulary relevant to a given text leads to better reading comprehension.

Direct instruction includes:

- (1) *providing students with specific word instruction; and*
- (2) *teaching students word-learning strategies.*

### Specific word instruction

Specific word instruction, or teaching individual words, can deepen students' knowledge of word meanings. In-depth knowledge of word meanings can help students understand what they are hearing or reading. It also can help them use words accurately in speaking and writing.

In particular:

**Teaching specific words before reading helps both vocabulary learning and reading comprehension.**

Before students read a text, it is helpful to teach them specific words they will see in the text. Teaching important vocabulary before reading can help students both learn new words and comprehend the text.

**Extended instruction that promotes active engagement with vocabulary improves word learning.**

Children learn words best when they are provided with instruction over an extended period of time and when that instruction has them work actively with the words. The more students use new words and the more they use them in different contexts, the more likely they are to learn the words.

**Repeated exposure to vocabulary in many contexts aids word learning.**

Students learn new words better when they encounter them often and in various contexts.

The more children see, hear, and work with specific words, the better they seem to learn them.

When teachers provide extended instruction that promotes active engagement, they give students repeated exposure to new words. When the students read those same words in their texts, they increase their exposure to the new words.

*An example of  
classroom  
instruction*

**Teaching specific words:** A teacher plans to have his third-grade class read the novel *Stone Fox*, by John Reynolds Gardiner. In this novel, a young boy enters a dogsled race in hopes of winning prize money to pay the taxes on his grandfather's farm.

The teacher knows that understanding the concept of *taxes* is important to understanding the novel's plot. Therefore, before his students begin reading the novel, the teacher may do several things to make sure that they understand what the concept means and why it is important to the story. For example, the teacher may:

- *engage students in a discussion of the concept of taxes; and/or*
- *read a sentence from the book that contains the word taxes and ask students to use context and their prior knowledge to try to figure out what it means.*

To solidify their understanding of the word, the teacher might ask students to use *taxes* in their own sentences.

## Word learning strategies

Of course, it is not possible for teachers to provide specific instruction for all the words their students do not know. Therefore, students also need to be able to determine the meaning of words that are new to them but not taught directly to them. They need to develop effective word-learning strategies. Word-learning strategies include:

- (1) how to use dictionaries and other reference aids to learn word meanings and to deepen knowledge of word meanings;
- (2) how to use information about word parts to figure out the meanings of words in text; and
- (3) how to use context clues to determine word meanings.

### Using dictionaries and other

**reference aids.** Students must learn how to use dictionaries, glossaries, and thesauruses to help broaden and deepen their knowledge of words, even though these resources can be difficult to use. The most helpful dictionaries include sentences providing clear examples of word meanings in context.

An example of  
classroom  
instruction

## Extended and active engagement with vocabulary

A first-grade teacher wants to help her students understand the concept of *jobs*, which is part of her social studies curriculum. Over a period of time, the teacher engages students in exercises in which they work repeatedly with the meaning of the concept of *jobs*. The students have many opportunities to see and actively use the word in various contexts that reinforce its meaning.

The teacher begins by asking the students what they already know about jobs and by having them give examples of jobs their parents have. The class might have a discussion about the jobs of different people who work at the school.

The teacher then reads the class a simple book about jobs. The book introduces the idea that different jobs help people meet their needs, and that jobs either provide goods or services. The book does not use the words *goods* and *services*, rather it uses the verbs *makes* and *helps*.

The teacher then asks the students to make up sentences describing their parents' jobs by using the verbs *makes* and *helps* (e.g., "My mother is a doctor. She helps sick people get well.")

Next, the teacher asks students to brainstorm other jobs. Together, they decide whether the jobs are "making jobs" or "helping jobs." The job names are placed under the appropriate headings on a bulletin board. They might also suggest jobs that do not fit neatly into either category.

The teacher might then ask the students to share whether they think they would like to have a making or a helping job when they grow up.

The teacher next asks the students to talk with their parents about jobs. She tells them to try to bring to class two new examples of jobs—one making job and one helping job.

As the students come across different jobs throughout the year (for example, through reading books, on field trips, through classroom guests), they can add the jobs to the appropriate categories on the bulletin board.

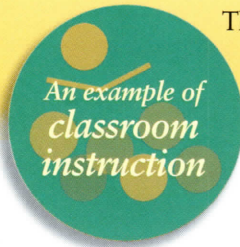


**Repeated exposure to words:** A second-grade class is reading a biography of Benjamin Franklin. The biography discusses Franklin’s important role as a scientist. The teacher wants to make sure that her students understand the meaning of the words *science* and *scientist*, both because the words are important to understanding the biography and because they are obviously very useful words to know in school and in everyday life.

At every opportunity, therefore, the teacher draws her students’ attention to the words. She points out the words *scientist* and *science* in textbooks and reading selections, particularly in her science curriculum. She has students use the words in their own writing, especially during science instruction.

She also asks them to listen for and find in print the words as they are used outside of the classroom—in newspapers, magazines, at museums, in television shows or movies, or the Internet.

Then, as they read the biography, she discusses with students in what ways Benjamin Franklin was a scientist and what science meant in his time.



**Using word parts.** Knowing some common prefixes and suffixes (affixes), base words, and root words can help students learn the meanings of many new words. For example, if students learn just the four most common prefixes in English (un-, re-, in-, dis-), they will have important clues about the meaning of about two thirds of all English words that have prefixes. Prefixes are relatively easy to learn because they have clear meanings (for example, un- means not and re- means again); they are usually spelled the same way from word to word; and, of course, they always occur at the beginnings of words.

Learning suffixes can be more challenging than learning prefixes. This is because some suffixes have more abstract meanings than do prefixes. For example, learning that the suffix -ness means “the state or quality of” might not help students figure out the meaning of kindness. Other suffixes, however, are more helpful.



### ***Using dictionaries and other reference aids:***

As his class reads a text, a second-grade teacher discovers that many of his students do not know the meaning of the word *board*, as in the sentence, “The children were waiting to board the buses.” The teacher demonstrates how to find *board* in the classroom dictionary, showing students that there are four different definitions for the word. He reads the definitions one at a time, and the class discusses whether each definition would fit the context of the sentence. The students easily eliminate the inappropriate definitions of *board*, and settle on the definition, “to get on a train, an airplane, a bus, or a ship.”

The teacher next has students substitute the most likely definition for *board* in the original sentence to verify that it is “The children were waiting to get on the buses” that makes the best sense.



For example, *-less*, which means “without” (hopeless, thoughtless); and *-ful*, which means “full of” (hopeful, thoughtful). Latin and Greek word roots are found commonly in content-area school subjects, especially in the subjects of science and social studies. As a result, Latin and Greek word parts form a large proportion of the new vocabulary that students encounter in their content-area textbooks. Teachers should teach the word roots as they occur in the texts students read. Furthermore, teachers should teach primarily those root words that students are likely to see often.

## Word parts

Word parts include *affixes* (prefixes and suffixes), *base words*, and *word roots*.

*Affixes* are word parts that are “fixed to” either the beginnings of words (prefixes) or the ending of words (suffixes). The word *disrespectful* has two affixes, a prefix (*dis-*) and a suffix (*-ful*).

*Base words* are words from which many other words are formed.

For example, many words can be formed from the base word *migrate*: *migration*, *migrant*, *immigration*, *immigrant*, *migrating*, *migratory*.

*Word roots* are the words from other languages that are the origin of many English words. About 60% of all English words have Latin or Greek origins.

### Using word parts:

- A second-grade teacher wants to teach her students how to use the base word *play* as a way to help them think about the meanings of new words they will encounter in reading. To begin, she has students brainstorm all the words or phrases they can think of that are related to *play*. The teacher records their suggestions: *player*, *playful*, *playpen*, *ballplayer*, and *playing field*. Then she has the class discuss the meaning of each of their proposed words and how it relates to *play*.
- A third-grade teacher identifies the base word *note*. He then sets up a “word wall,” and writes the word *note* at the top of the wall. As his students read, the teacher has them look for words that are related to *note* and add them to the wall. Throughout their reading, they gradually add to the wall the words *notebook*, *notation*, *noteworthy*, and *notable*.

An example of  
classroom  
instruction

**Using context clues.** Context clues are hints about the meaning of an unknown word that are provided in the words, phrases, and sentences that surround the word. Context clues include definitions, restatements, examples, or descriptions. Because students learn most word meanings indirectly, or from context, it is important that they learn to use context clues effectively.

Not all contexts are helpful, however. Some contexts give little information about a word's meaning. An example of an unhelpful context is the sentence, “We heard the back door open, and then recognized the buoyant footsteps of Uncle Larry.” A number of possible meanings of buoyant could fit this context, including heavy, lively, noisy, familiar, dragging, plodding, and so on. Instruction in using context clues as a word-learning strategy should include the idea that some contexts are more helpful than others.

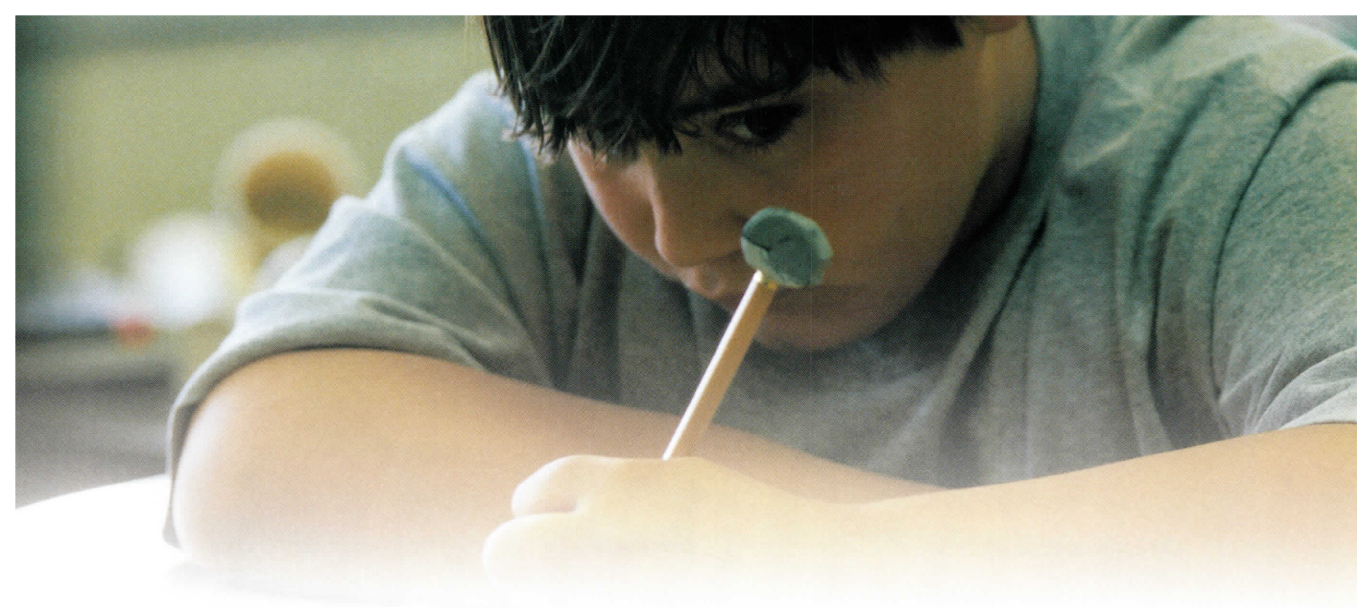
An example of  
classroom  
instruction

**Using context clues:** In a third-grade class, the teacher models how to use context clues to determine word meanings as follows:

**Student (reading the text):** When the cat pounced on the dog, the dog jumped up, yelping, and knocked over a lamp, which crashed to the floor. The animals ran past Tonia, tripping her. She fell to the floor and began sobbing. Tonia's brother Felix yelled at the animals to stop. As the noise and confusion mounted, Mother hollered upstairs, “What's all that *commotion*?”

**Teacher:** The context of the paragraph helps us determine what *commotion* means. There's yelping and crashing, sobbing, and yelling. And then the last sentence says, “as the noise and confusion mounted.” The author's use of the words *noise* and *confusion* gives us a very strong clue as to what *commotion* means. In fact, the author is really giving us a definition there, because *commotion* means something that's noisy and confusing—a disturbance. Mother was right; there was definitely a *commotion*!





## *Questions you may have about vocabulary instruction*

### **How can I help my students learn words indirectly?**

You can encourage indirect learning of vocabulary in two main ways. First, read aloud to your students, no matter what grade you teach. Students of all ages can learn words from hearing texts of various kinds read to them. Reading aloud works best when you discuss the selection before, during, and after you read. Talk with students about new vocabulary and concepts and help them relate the words to their prior knowledge and experiences.

The second way to promote indirect learning of vocabulary is to encourage students to read extensively on their own. Rather than allocating instructional time for independent reading in the classroom, however, encourage your students to read more outside of school. Of course, your students also can read on their own during independent work time in the classroom—for example, while you teach another small group or after students have completed one activity and are waiting for a new activity to begin.

### **What words should I teach?**

You won't be able to directly teach your students *all* the words in a text that they might not already know. In fact, there are several reasons why you should *not* directly teach all unknown words.

- The text may have a great many words that are unknown to students—too many for direct instruction.
- Direct vocabulary instruction can take a lot of class time—time that you might better spend on having your students read.
- Your students can understand most texts without knowing the meaning of every word in the text.
- Your students need opportunities to use word-learning strategies to learn on their own the meanings of unknown words.

You will probably be able to teach thoroughly only a few new words (perhaps eight or ten) per week, so you need to choose the words you teach carefully. Focus on teaching three types of words:

**Important words.** When you teach words before students read a text, directly teach those words that are important for understanding a concept or the text. Your students might not know several other words in the selection, but you will not have time to teach them all. Of course, you should prepare your students to use word-learning strategies to figure out the meanings of other words in the text.

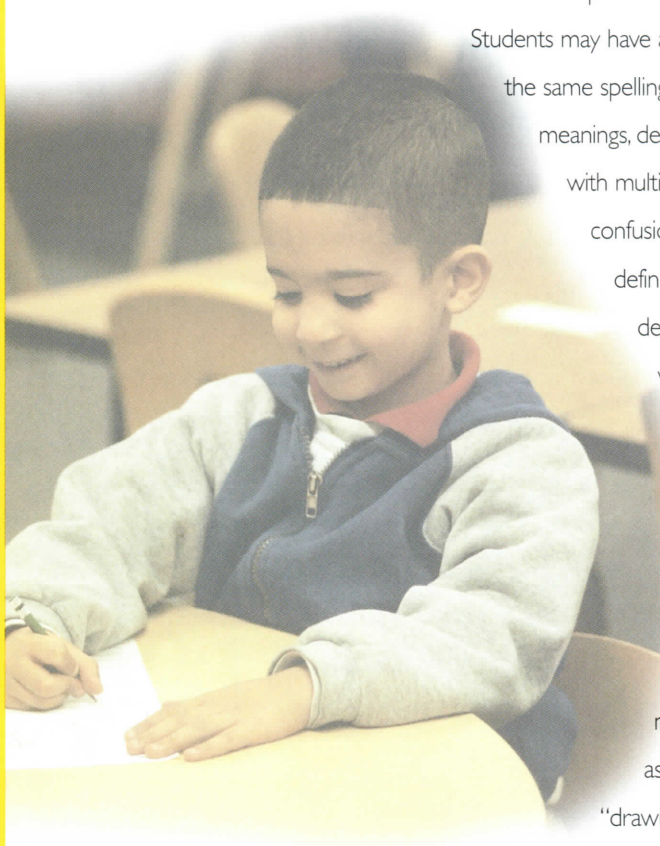
**Useful words.** Teach words that students are likely to see and use again and again. For example, it is probably more useful for students to learn the word *fragment* than the word *fractal*; likewise, the word *revolve* is more useful than the word *gyrate*.

**Difficult words.** Provide some instruction for words that are particularly difficult for your students.

Words with multiple meanings are particularly challenging for students.

Students may have a hard time understanding that words with the same spelling and/or pronunciation can have different meanings, depending on their context. Looking up words with multiple meanings in the dictionary can cause confusion for students. They see a number of different definitions listed, and they often have a difficult time deciding which definition fits the context. You will have to help students determine which definition they should choose.

Idiomatic expressions also can be difficult for students, especially for students who are English language learners. Because idiomatic expressions do not mean what the individual words usually mean, you often will need to explain to students expressions such as “hard hearted,” “a chip off the old block,” “drawing a blank,” or “get the picture.”



**MULTIPLE-MEANING WORDS THAT CAN BE DIFFICULT FOR STUDENTS:**

**EXAMPLES**

Words that are spelled the same but are pronounced differently

**sow** (a female pig); **sow** (to plant seeds)  
**bow** (a knot with loops); **bow** (the front of a ship)

Words that are spelled and pronounced the same, but have different meanings

**mail** (letters, cards, and packages); **mail** (a type of armor)  
**ray** (a narrow beam of light); **ray** (a type of fish);  
**ray** (part of a line)

## How well do my students need to “know” vocabulary words?

Students do not either *know* or *not know* words. Rather, they know words to varying degrees. They may never have seen or heard a word before. They may have heard or seen it, but have only a vague idea of what it means. Or they may be very familiar with the meaning of a word and be able to use it accurately in their own speech and writing. These three levels of word knowledge are called **unknown**, **acquainted**, and **established**.

As they read, students can usually get by with some words at the unknown or acquainted levels. If students are to understand the text fully, however, they need to have an established level of knowledge for most of the words that they read.

LEVEL OF WORD KNOWLEDGE	DEFINITION
Unknown	<i>The word is completely unfamiliar and its meaning is unknown.</i>
Acquainted	<i>The word is somewhat familiar; the student has some idea of its basic meaning.</i>
Established	<i>The word is very familiar; the student can immediately recognize its meaning and use the word correctly.</i>

## Are there different types of word learning?

### If so, are some types of learning more difficult than others?

Four different kinds of word learning have been identified:

- learning a new meaning for a known word;
- learning the meaning for a new word representing a known concept;
- learning the meaning of a new word representing an unknown concept; and
- clarifying and enriching the meaning of a known word.

These types vary in difficulty. One of the most common, yet challenging, is the third type: learning the meaning of a new word representing an unknown concept. Much of learning in the content areas involves this type of word learning. As students learn about **deserts**, **hurricanes**, and **immigrants**, they may be learning both new concepts and new words. Learning words and concepts in science, social studies, and mathematics is even more challenging because each major concept often is associated with many other new concepts. For example, the concept **deserts** is often associated with other concepts that may be unfamiliar, such as cactus, plateau, and mesa.

TYPE OF WORD LEARNING	EXPLANATION
<i>Learning a new meaning for a known word</i>	The student has the word in her oral or reading vocabulary, but she is learning a new meaning for it. For example, the student knows what a <b>branch</b> is, and is learning in social studies about both <b>branches</b> of rivers and <b>branches</b> of government.
<i>Learning the meaning for a new word representing a known concept</i>	The student is familiar with the concept but he does not know the particular word for that concept. For example, the student has had a lot of experience with baseballs and globes, but does not know that they are examples of <b>spheres</b> .
<i>Learning the meaning of a new word representing an unknown concept</i>	The student is not familiar with either the concept or the word that represents that concept, and she must learn both. For example, the student may not be familiar with either the process or the word <b>photosynthesis</b> .
<i>Clarifying and enriching the meaning of a known word</i>	The student is learning finer, more subtle distinctions, or connotations, in the meaning and usage of words. For example, he is learning the differences between <b>running, jogging, trotting, dashing, and sprinting</b> .

### What else can I do to help my students develop vocabulary?

Another way you can help your students develop vocabulary is to foster *word consciousness*—an awareness of and interest in words, their meanings, and their power: Word-conscious students know many words and use them well. They enjoy words and are eager to learn new words—and they know *how* to learn them.

You can help your students develop word consciousness in several ways. Call their attention to the way authors choose words to convey particular meanings. Encourage students to play with words by engaging in word play, such as puns or palindromes. Help them research a word's origin or history. You can also encourage them to search for examples of a word's usage in their everyday lives.

## Summing up

### **Vocabulary refers to**

- the words we must know to communicate effectively.
- **Oral** vocabulary refers to words that we use in speaking or recognize in listening.
- **Reading** vocabulary refers to words we recognize or use in print.

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### **Vocabulary is important because**

- beginning readers use their oral vocabulary to make sense of the words they see in print.
- readers must know what most of the words mean before they can understand what they are reading.

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### **Vocabulary can be developed**

- **indirectly**, when students engage daily in oral language, listen to adults read to them, and read extensively on their own.
- **directly**, when students are explicitly taught both individual words and word learning strategies.

