



Virtual Language Alive

*A Student's Guide to
Motivation and Success*

Welcome To VLA!

Dear Student,

What you are reading right now with your very eyeballs is an introduction to a one-of-a-kind vocab-building program called Virtual Language Alive. Many years ago, before I became a Mom, I was a teacher dealing with teenagers in real life who were not good readers or writers. At the time, I did not understand *how a student could study language for nine years (kindergarten through eighth grade) and arrive in high school unable to write a cohesive paragraph*. Let's explore that for a bit and see how and why that still occurs today. But whether you are a language lover or one who merely tolerates language study, I'll show you the difference VLA can make in your overall education going forward.

Mastery Matters

Let's go back to kindergarten for just a minute. In a typical classroom environment, young children are presented with phonics all at the same time regardless of whether or not the individual students are developmentally capable of understanding the very concepts of phonics. The students who happen to be ready do well in phonics and reading classes. The students who are not yet ready tend to score poorly, learning that they are "not good at reading." But that is not the TRUTH!

The truth is that they have very low confidence due to repeated "failures" when they try to learn the complex system of phonics. This spills over into a crummy feeling of shame whenever it is time to read aloud in class or take a spelling test. The "failures" are not failures at all. They are an indication that the student is NOT READY TO MOVE ON to the next level, or perhaps the student needs more time to develop neurologically before even beginning phonics at all.

Very young students in a classroom should not "fail" at anything. When they do not demonstrate mastery of a concept, the correct response is for the teacher to determine the WHY. Often the problem is a lack of readiness. Mastery (or learning to an A-level) is the key to a student's confidence, no matter the age of the student! The teacher's SCHEDULE (not the teacher) is to blame for the lack of mastery in his or her students.

All children do not learn at the same pace. Boys and girls don't learn at the same pace. All educators know this to be a fact, yet in America, we still cling to the classroom system of education which allows for failure and accepts it instead of working individually with children if mastery is not achieved. We don't give teachers the tool of TIME. The youngest of students, especially, need time to soak in language and advance at their own speed and readiness.

Conclusion: the classroom system of learning is nuts! The casualties of the classroom system are all around us. Even home educators tend to immerse their children in the classroom system for high school courses, thinking that this is a necessity in 21st century America. It is not.

How do I know? Because I thought so, too, when my oldest child reached ninth grade, and I popped him into a local education "co-op" for a chemistry class which was all classroom-style learning. I thought he would need this experience to prepare him for college since he had been working independently and to a mastery level up to this point. I wasn't sure that he would be "prepared" for college if I just had him read and do his high school subjects independently, from

a textbook, without a teacher. That worked well for middle school, but shouldn't he be doing more in high school?

About the same time as my high school student enrolled in the co-op, he took the ACT "for fun." He wanted to see how he would do against it. The results came back, and he had scored 35 out of 36, as a rising ninth grader. How could that be when he hadn't had any math prep aside from algebra? How could that be when I had never required him to write me a single paper? I'll tell you why, and it's the same reason all seven of my kiddos who have taken the ACT and the SAT to date have scored either perfectly or nearly perfectly on the English or Verbal sections. (Two out of seven have scored perfectly or nearly perfectly on the entire exams.) All six college graduates (so far) have gone on to attend their first-choice colleges on scholarship.

Adrienne, my most recent high school grad, is earning more than \$7000 per SEMESTER cash back due to her ACT results. That is not unusual for students who have had the privilege of working independently AND to a mastery level before moving on to the next day's lesson. This mastery approach builds success upon success upon success with no "gaps" in one's education. Student number seven is set to take the ACT next Saturday, and she looks forward to playing Beat the Test. She has prepared well for it. As we'll discuss in a bit, ATTITUDE IS EVERYTHING!

What does all of this have to do with YOU, dear student? If you have the privilege of using Virtual Language Alive, you have been given the gift of autonomy which we'll talk about in a minute. KNOW that you possess a unique tool that will yield an ADVANTAGE if used well in your capable hands. Often that advantage takes the form of money for college. How awesome is that? 😊

Back to my oldest child enrolling in the local educational co-op. Guess who could have learned much more just by reading the chemistry book himself at home? Guess who was usually *the only one* prepared for class? Guess who got frustrated because the class moved at the rate of the students who did NOT do the homework versus those who did? The teacher would go over during class time the stuff the other students did learn spend time on at home, so class time was monotonous and boring for anyone who did the work on his own.

Time is precious. Wasting my kids' time doing busy work is insulting to them. Schools give busy work because they have TIME to fill. With VLA, there is no time to fill.

VLA Difference #1

VLA will never give you busy work. I respect you AND your time too much to do that. VLA curriculum provides short bursts of activities in which to engage you each school day. All is necessary. All works together to strengthen your language muscles.

- Reading for an hour each day is vital. Don't skimp here!
- Truth: good readers make good writers! The more time you spend reading enjoyable, quality material, the better your writing will become *without even writing!* Stop. Go back. Read that

sentence to yourself again. Out loud. Good language put into your head via reading yields good language habits that naturally are formed by reading itself. These habits naturally show up in your writing over time.

- **Tip:** choose non-fiction books from your local library. Read up on things that interest you such as countries you'd like to visit, sports, how-to books, areas of study such as archaeology, biology (animals, plants, et cetera), astronomy, photography, cartooning, or other areas of interest to you. Sometimes you don't know you're interested in something until you peruse the shelves of your library's non-fiction area and something catches your eye!
- **Tip:** read the Bible for an hour each day. Not only is it well written, but the Bible contains the very thoughts of God towards YOU! It is the best thing you can ever read and will change your young life every time you read it. Furthermore, studying what God says to you gives benefits that are more valuable than the richest treasure found buried under land or sea. There is no tip I can give you that is more important than to read the Word of God for yourself. Begin in the Psalms and Proverbs. Begin wherever you would like. Lose yourself in the adventures of history! Find out how to know God Himself in the pages of this book of books! Don't worry if you don't understand everything. Just immerse yourself. You're welcome. ☺

VLA Difference #2

VLA works best with the mastery mindset. If you work for a week straight, studying the 15 words carefully, yet you do not achieve a 100% on your quiz, **DO NOT MOVE ON** until you understand what you missed and why you missed it. *Do not take shortcuts* is my advice to you. Don't shrug your shoulders and say, "Well, it was just one word. That's still an A." It may be an A, but there is still something that eluded you. Do you want a vocab word to beat you? lol Nail it down! Make it yours!

Tip: I recommend keeping a notebook for the purpose of recording any words you miss on the quizzes. Write challenging words down along with their definitions, and look over them again and again until you get 'em. This is an excellent habit to develop in all of your subjects, by the way.

More Tips:

- Begin appropriating the mastery mindset to everything you do.
- Work with excellence as a matter of habit.
- Do it for the good feeling you get inside, knowing that you accomplished with excellence everything there is to accomplish today. This kind of motivation is called intrinsic motivation and will serve you well throughout your entire life!
- Also, don't worry about needing to spend extra TIME on something in order to master it. Take time to go back and spend another week on a vocab list if you did not master it!

VLA Difference #3

VLA is designed for independent study. You do NOT need a teacher in order for you to master VLA. Isn't that cool? There is no need for an interpreter between you and your weekly vocab list. I've given you the tools you need to accomplish great things in small increments on your own. You're welcome. ☺

However, you will need to set up a plan for working through the material each week. I will send you a Student Record Sheet that you may print out and fill in yourself, or use the pre-written sheet if you just want to plug in a few numbers. Print out one per week. You may keep your records online, or you may keep them in a notebook. You may write your mini-essays in a Word document and save them in a folder on your computer, or you may write out your mini-essays by hand on the stationery that you'll find in each week's file. Use what works best for you.

How to Motivate Yourself

I want you to understand that my kids are not super, super brainy, but they are SELF- MOTIVATED. They weren't born this way. It doesn't come easily to all of them. Because of our family size, I could not spoon-feed each of them all the way through high school which turned out to be an enormous advantage for them. They had to learn to learn independently once they became old enough to read for themselves. I was always there to encourage and aid in organization and oversight. You know what happened? They became self-motivated BECAUSE they were given freedom to work independently!

Tip: Understand that your education is YOUR responsibility, not your parents' responsibility. Your parents provide the tools for learning, but they cannot learn FOR you, right? I support and oversee my students, but I don't micromanage them. There have been times when someone was not doing what he or she should have been doing, and the privilege of working independently was temporarily withdrawn. We all mess up, right? Losing the freedom to work independently is not fun. Once you've tasted of it, you don't want to give it up, and you'll work hard to get it back.

I don't know how much control your parents have given you over your school work. I will share with them in the Parent Guide section the importance of giving freedom to students. Ultimately, they know you best. If you show yourself to be capable of working independently without their constant oversight, I bet you will be given more and more freedom to do so, if you don't already have that freedom right now.

Nothing is more motivating to me as an individual than having my boss TRUST ME to do what I am supposed to be doing without constantly asking me, "What did you do today? Did you get that project started? Did you get remember to read over all the bulletins I sent out? Blah blah blah blah." Know what I mean? Yeah, I bet you do! Nobody likes micromanagement! Some people cannot work without it, however. Don't be one of those.

I also like to have the freedom to work in the way I work best. I don't like be told how I should do things when there are multiple ways to accomplish the same thing.

- The freedom to work in a manner that works best for you is a GIFT. If you are extended these freedoms by your parent or parents, work wisely.
- It is unusual to receive the opportunity to work independently, so if you get the opportunity, be responsible with your time.
- Prove yourself worthy by going above and beyond. Be grateful for your parents' trust.
- Realize that you are learning for YOUR benefit, not anybody else's.
- If you have a strong vocabulary and you can write well, you WILL be noticed. Actually, if you have a strong vocabulary and can just SPEAK well, you will stand out in whatever crowd in which you find yourself.

Tip: *Working ahead* is one of the most motivating things you can do for yourself. For example, don't wait until the final moments of the day to do your hour of reading. Can you read two hours today so you don't need to read tomorrow? Sure! Can you read extra on the weekend to get ahead for next week's reading time? Absolutely! If you know you won't have time on Tuesday to read, work ahead the weekend before or double up on your reading on Monday. Just be sure to read with excellence, okay? Don't merely move your eyes over the pages of your book.

Know what's coming up schedule-wise, and plan your week of school work accordingly. You'll thank yourself once you get into this habit!

VLA Difference #4

VLA acknowledges that you already ARE a writer, no matter how you feel about language. I started out this guide by saying that years ago, I didn't understand how students can get to high school without being able to write a cohesive paragraph. Now I see how it happens. It happens slowly. Once I started having my own children, I began to see the importance of something called ATTITUDE.

Attitude involves a feeling. How you *feel* about something most likely will dictate your attitude about that thing. Your attitude will then dictate your thoughts and then your behavior. This could be good or not so good.

For example, I learned that I was "bad at math" as a fourth grader. My attitude about math was painfully created by missing a lot of school that year due to illness, and I didn't learn how to do important operations such as percentages and fractions and long division. I never had the opportunity to master these important mathematical life skills. It wasn't my fault; it was the fault of the system of education in which I was a part. But I *thought* it was my fault. Year after year, percentages and fractions and division came up in math class. Guess what happened? I continued to stink at them. I was ashamed, so I didn't *ask* how to do these things that everyone else seemed to know how to do. Teachers didn't seem to care. I was one of "those" students who "just don't get math."

Because math is the language of the sciences, I struggled with science, too. I barely passed chemistry class in 10th grade, yet I still was in the National Honor Society and graduated with honors. Clearly I wasn't stupid, but inside I secretly felt stupid when it came to math. I had had no confidence in my abilities ever since the fourth grade. That's a long time to *feel* stupid. My ATTITUDE about myself had been formed. This attitude caused me to continue in the behavior of being ashamed and being quiet instead of speaking up and talking about what I needed help with and getting that help. My attitude held me back.

Math teachers tell us that we use math every day. What my math teachers didn't know is that there would be these things called computers that can handle complex calculations for non-math me. I have invested time as an adult learning how to do percentages and fractions, and teaching my own young children has sharpened my skills. It still is not second nature, but I CAN do math. 😊

Language, however, IS something you use and will use every day of your life.

But maybe you feel like you're "not good" at language for one reason or another. Perhaps you avoid reading whenever possible because it is harder for you to do than other things are.

If you think you are "not good at reading" or "not good at writing," I've got news for you! ***You already are a writer.*** If you can talk or think, you can write down those words or thoughts. You may need a little help with the rules of writing, but as you spend time reading good books at your own pace, you will begin to naturally absorb good sentence structure and good spelling and good punctuation. It will begin to come naturally for you.

One of my goals with VLA is for every student to begin *wherever they are*, skills-wise. No apologies necessary. You are not "behind." You are where you are, and that is absolutely fine! You are not going at anyone else's speed, just your own. KNOW that it's okay not to know everything about punctuation right now or grammar right now. You'll learn on your own as you read for yourself, a little bit at a time.

I don't care how rotten a writer you *feel* you are, VLA will show you that in truth, you are *not* a rotten writer!

Here are some things that if you do regularly, you will most definitely reap a reward:

- Give reading time your full attention.
- Study the vocab words faithfully and work through all the exercises.
- Write your mini-essays regularly. No one is going to criticize your writing, so WRITE! Have fun! Construct some awesome little pieces, or just use your words in individual sentences. It does not matter to me. Just write using your vocab words in short little sequences of time throughout each week.

I hope you will find that VLA is not overwhelming. At the end of the semester, you will have a portfolio of all the writing that you've done, little pieces of writing at a time. Be prepared to amaze yourself when you look back at all you've written and learned!

At first, you may have to FORCE yourself to get going. VLA is not an instant fix for those who dislike language. It's not an instant program for those who love language either. If you want to be strong physically, what do you do? You do certain things each day such as take your vitamins, eat well, spend some time in exercise each day. Over time, you develop muscles as you USE them. If you don't work out, you will not reap the benefits of those who do work out.

For Language Lovers

If you already ***are*** an avid reader and writer, VLA will be a fun tool that hones your skills and builds your vocab muscle. You are probably the type who stays up until 2 a.m. reading books, right? That's great! Just remember that doing the little things such as learning new words week by week is worth your time. Nothing happens without constant effort and attention to details, right? Right.

Getting Started

Virtual Language Alive is *not* a writing program. It is a vocabulary-building program that incorporates daily reading and vocab study coupled with writing little, small, short, brief, "mini-essays" two or three times per week which yields language and growth.

VLA doubles as a proven SAT and ACT prep course when used by design.

Test your knowledge:

Virtual Language Alive is not a _____ .

It is a _____ - _____ program that incorporates _____ and _____

_____ coupled with _____ little, small, short, brief, "mini-essays" two or three times per week.

Why do I emphasize that VLA is not a writing program?

1. VLA is a unique way of processing language, by breathing it in each day through reading. My goal for you is to grow in your reading skills. I emphasize reading over writing in VLA. Why? Because it's a fact that good readers make good writers.
2. VLA gives you a simple way to increase your vocabulary over time.
3. VLA provides a fun and personal way to practice your writing skills.
4. Over the course of time, you will naturally be overly prepared for the Verbal section of the SAT and the English and Reading sections of the ACT. Again, this is over the course of time; at least four semesters of VLA is necessary for this benefit to be realized.

I hereby challenge you to use your new vocab words in your daily conversations with family and friends. Dazzle 'em! I dare you!

Okay. Now we can get started. ☺

Weekly Strategy

No matter what level you are using, each week's file will have certain components. Let's discuss them briefly.

- Vocab list of 15 words
 - (1) Every six weeks or so, you'll have a list of words from previous lists for review.
 - (2) Examine carefully what part of speech each word is to be used as.
- Sentences using each word
 - (1) Read each sentence and underline the vocab word it contains.
- Activity I: varies throughout the semester*

- Activity II: word find puzzle*
- Activity III: crossword puzzle*
*Each of these 3 short activities are important, as they provide you with opportunity to manipulate your vocab words each day. They are exercises, never busy work.
- Matching quiz
 - (1) No answer key needed. Simply check your work yourself.
 - (2) Keep track of your scores on the Student Record Sheet.
- Stationery for writing three mini-essays
 - (1) Don't be overwhelmed by how big the stationery sheets are! You will probably only ever use about half of each, maybe even less.
 - (2) You may type out your mini-essays in a Word doc and save to a file, if preferred.
 - (3) You may write two mini-essays containing half the vocab words in one essay, and the others in the second essay, OR write three mini-essays using five vocab words per mini-essay.

Sample Mini-Essays

I want to give you two essays to look at. I've had students who wrote much more than either of these two essays, and I've had students who wrote less. Write what you'd like! The key is to make sure you understand what part of speech each word is to be used as. The part of speech will determine how you use the word itself. More on this in a minute.

Remember, it is not the length of your writing that is important, it is *how well you have used your vocab words*. Write with your own style, your own flair. Write to prove that you thoroughly understand each word. Give each of your mini-essays a title, and underline the vocab words you've used in each one.

Essay Sample #1

Note: this essay was typed into a file, not handwritten.

Porky's Trip to the Fair

It was a bright Saturday morning when Farmer Jenkins came in the barn. It was time for the annual county fair, and I was very excited. Once we arrived at the fair, everything was in such havoc.

There were many boisterous people there.

This made me very excited because I was not used to being around that many people. After we got settled into our pens, I realized I was a very ravenous little piggy. Bessi the cow and I decided to go look

for some food. We escaped out of our pens and went on an adventure. While we were on our journey for food, we came upon an obsolete building. We went inside, and there were mounds and mounds of food.

After our bellies were full, we found some water and had a thirst that needed to be quenched. After our little adventure, I told Bessie that we should go back to our pens before Farmer Jenkins found us missing. When we got back, nobody noticed that we had been gone. A few moments later, after we were settled back in our pens, Farmer Jenkins came in with the judges and I tried to impress them with my looks as much as I could. That afternoon the judges announced that I was the winner, and boy was I happy! I slept soundly that night knowing that I had made Farmer Jenkins proud of me.

Essay Sample #2

Chicken Parmigiana

The chef on the cooking show told the audience to mince the chicken and allocate the fat. Then mix the sauce and grated cheese altogether. The chef then put the sauce and cheese onto the chicken, and put the meal into the oven. After 15 minutes, she took the food out of the oven and adorned the top with garnish. I tried making it myself, but I didn't like the nuance of flavor of the parsley. All in all though, it was a good meal.

The Key

It is important to use each vocab word according to the part of speech given in its definition. Some students are going to learn a lot about parts of speech through VLA while for others this will merely be a review. Again, it doesn't matter the degree of understanding you have of the English language when you begin this course. What matters is taking the time to learn as you go.

What do I mean by part of speech? Each word you are given will be either a **noun**, **verb**, **adjective**, **adverb**, or **preposition**.

Some words can act as more than one part of speech. For example, the word *eclipse* can be either a noun or a verb. Study its use in each of these two sentences:

We saw the solar eclipse at 12:30 today. (noun)

The soprano's singing eclipsed that of the other contestants, and she easily won the competition. (verb)

So when you are reading over your new list of words, you may think that you already know all the words given. However, sometimes the word will be used in a different way than you are used to. A

common word when used as a noun is not always common when used as a verb, as you see in the *eclipse* example above.

I am going to assume that students know what these five parts of speech are. If you do not, please talk to your parents and get a thorough understanding of each one. It shouldn't take long to brush up on these essentials. Google can be your best friend.

Tip: if you come across a difficult word or two or three during the week, make yourself flashcards! Grab some index cards and make yourself up some flashcards to increase word retention. Go the extra mile to ensure your mastery!

Go ahead and download your first VLA file. It will all make sense as you begin and work through your first week. Print out this Student Guide as well, and highlight the tips that you wish to remember and apply.

Finally, remember that you are working for your own benefit, not the benefit of anyone else. This is YOUR education and your opportunity to use VLA to give yourself a tremendous advantage.

All the best,
Mrs. Calderwood

VLA Parent Guide

First of all, I want to thank you for the opportunity to work with your students via Virtual Language Alive. I hope you have taken the time to carefully read through the first part of this guide which is written directly to your student.

I have a few items to add as best practices for parents.

- 1) VLA is a self-teaching curriculum for students to use independently.
 - VLA operates under the assumption that each student understands five parts of speech: noun, verb, adjective, adverb, and preposition. If you are not sure if your student understands these already, you'll need to review them to be sure. One of my favorite websites for all things language is Purdue OWL. I would start there.
 - I understand that you know your student better than anyone on the planet knows him or her. With that said, if you don't already incorporate self-teaching, I hope you will consider allowing him or her to work independently with the VLA curriculum. That means talking over the course before your student begins, setting your expectations for him or her. Better yet is helping your student set expectations for himself.

Motivation comes from freedom to work independently with the trust and confidence of one's superiors. In the case of our kids, freedom from being under our watchful eyes needs to be earned. After all, with freedom comes responsibility, right?

Talk over ways that your student may need oversight when beginning this course. Perhaps he feels he needs you to check in with him every day to see if he is doing the right thing each day. Perhaps he wants you to read his mini-essays and correct them. That's fine. Begin with the level of oversight he thinks he needs, and if it is a good bit, back off as the semester goes on.

Ninth graders should be able to manage VLA on their own with minimal parental assistance. If she does not want any oversight as she works, keep tabs at first, loosely and informally. Know what books she is reading. Offer trips to the library.

- 2) No, you do not need to read their mini-essays each week. Once you know they are on the right track, let 'em write. ☺ I have found that most students prefer to write their own mini-essays without oversight. **AND THAT IS FINE AND SHOULD BE ENCOURAGED** unless there is a particular reason why you need to be reading them. Kids hate seeing red pen marks on their work because it is criticism of their most personal creative abilities. Writing is a creative and personal process. VLA seeks to encourage writing for writing's sake.
- 3) Quality reading time is more important than whether or not your student uses every vocab word correctly in his mini-essays. If you have read over the Student Guide carefully, you might remember me saying that good readers naturally make good writers. Quality of reading material is important. I give some ideas for what to read in the Student Guide section. Students who learn to enjoy reading

are the students who are given freedom to choose their own books, although you have the final say- so on what is read. Trust your instincts while giving freedom in this area. 😊

In most states, high school students have a literature requirement. I allow my high schoolers to count their literature reading assignments as part of their one-hour VLA reading requirement.

- 4) Your student already is a writer! VLA provides your student with a reason to write. She may have a lot of room to grow from the point she is at right now, but that is okay. Your job is to help carve out reading time and make sure quality reading time happens. The writing side will happen naturally over time.
- 5) Setting boundaries is important. Again, make sure your student has an hour to read each day in a quiet location, away from interference from any and all interruptions, if possible. This includes interruptions from media and anything screen-oriented. Feel free to say, "Mrs. Calderwood suggests that you turn off all electronics before you start reading every day. We're going to do that." I mandate certain things for my high school kids where screens are concerned. They have thanked me time and time again for setting up boundaries FOR them.
- 6) Time is your student's most valuable resource, and learning to use it wisely is one of the best lessons he can learn at home. The best way he can learn is by observing you managing your time wisely. Give your young adult room to fail at time management. Let them make their own mistakes so that they can problem-solve in this area before they are out on their own.
- 7) Again, your student's essays do NOT have to be read by you. What I do is check in on my students' writing about once a month. I'll ask if I can read their essays for fun! I love reading what they have written, and I compliment them on different aspects of their writing. I do not criticize it overtly. Ever. That is a cardinal rule.

Should there be questions that arise which may not have been expressly addressed here, please don't hesitate to email me.

Warmly,
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