


Academic Vocabulary

Focusing on General Academic
Vocabulary to Enhance
Understanding of Complex Texts

Context

- A recent study conducted by Nelson, Perfetti, Liben, and Liben, “Measures of Text Difficulty,” compared all of the quantitative and qualitative variables considered when measuring text complexity.
 - Findings:
 - The features that determine text complexity are very uneven, and not equally important, in their effect on text difficulty
 - The features of complexity most predictive of student performance are **vocabulary and syntax**



“It is widely accepted among researchers that the difference in students’ vocabulary levels is a key factor in disparities in academic achievement... but that vocabulary instruction has been neither frequent nor systematic in most schools.”

(Appendix A of Common Core State Standards for ELA)



Language Anchor Standard 6

“Acquire and use accurately a range of general academic and domain-specific words and phrases ...”

Three Tiers of Words

as described in Appendix A

- **Tier One words** are the words of everyday speech usually learned in the early grades. They are not considered a challenge to the average native speaker, though English language learners of any age will have to attend carefully to them.
- **Tier Two words** (what the Standards refer to as *general academic words*) are far more likely to appear in written texts than in speech. They appear in all sorts of texts. Tier Two words often represent subtle or precise ways to say relatively simple things. Because Tier Two words are found across many types of texts, they are highly generalizable.
- **Tier Three words** (what the Standards refer to as *domain-specific words*) are specific to a domain or field of study and key to understanding a new concept within a text. Because of their specificity and close ties to content knowledge, Tier Three words are far more common in informational texts than in literature. Recognized as new and “hard” words for most readers, they are often explicitly defined by the author of a text, repeatedly used, and otherwise heavily scaffolded.

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Sorting Activity

Place the following words under the appropriate Tier by referring to the descriptions above.

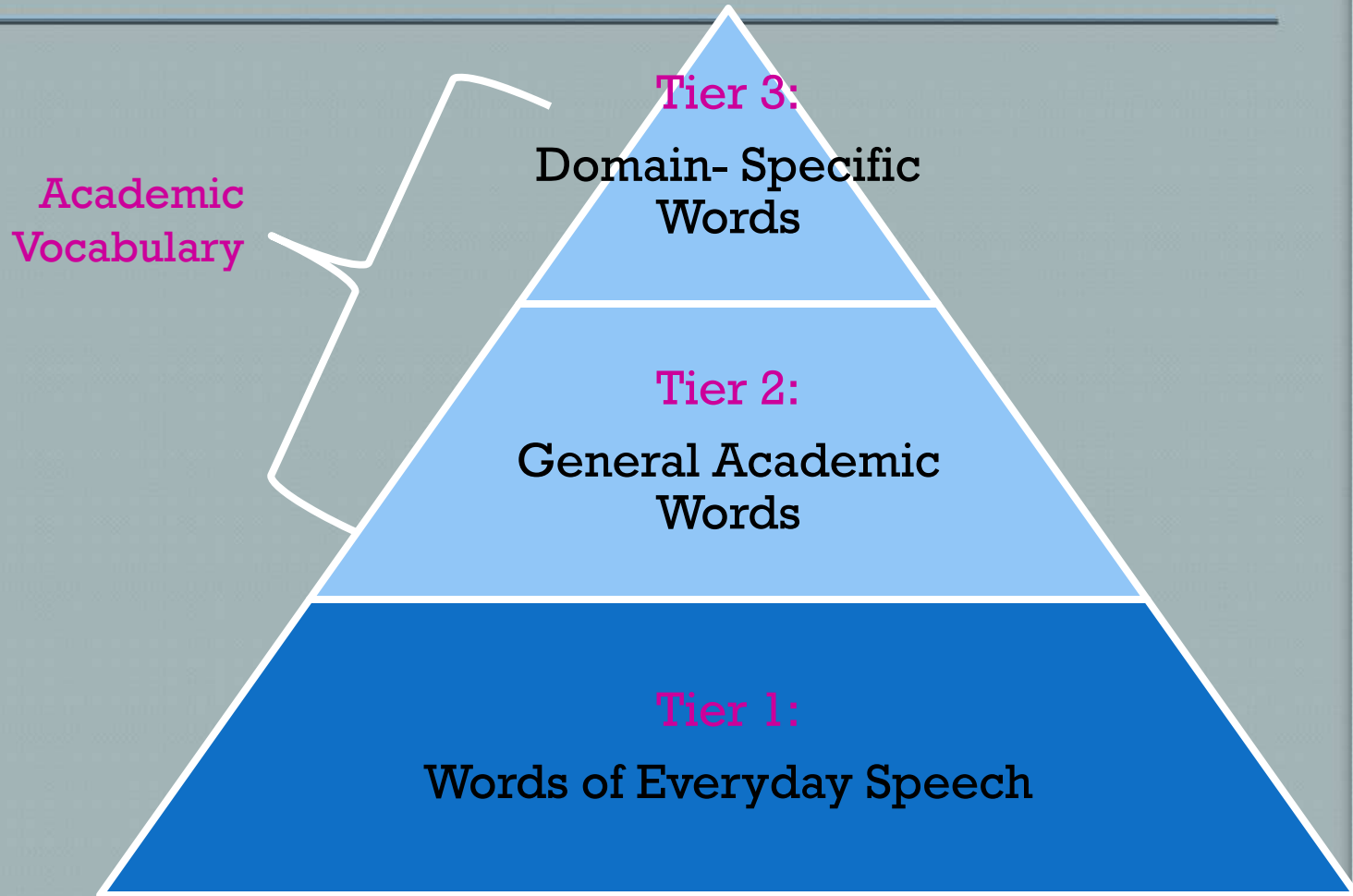
relative cloud accumulate arm misfortune Impressionism
lava carburetor legislature pizza circumference house
school walk expectation filter eclipse sorts
vary friend itemize

Tier One Words	Tier Two Words	Tier Three Words

Sorting Activity

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cloud arm pizza house school walk friend	relative accumulate misfortune expectation falter vary itemize	Impressionism lava carburetor legislature circumference eclipse aorta

Three Tiers of Words



Access to Complex Texts

Tier Three words often receive the most instructional time and attention because they:

- are unfamiliar to most students
- contain ideas necessary to a new topic
- are important to specific subject areas

Tier Two words are not unique to a particular discipline, therefore are not usually the focus of vocabulary instruction, however they are:

- far less well defined by contextual clues
- far less likely to be defined explicitly within a text than Tier Three words
- frequently encountered in all sorts of texts
- powerful because of their wide applicability to many sorts of reading.
- words that often represent subtle or precise ways to say fairly simple things

The Complexities of Really Knowing A Word

- First, word knowledge is *incremental*, which means that readers need to have many exposures to a word in different contexts before they “know” it.
- Second, word knowledge is *multidimensional*. This is because many words have multiple meanings (e.g., *sage*: a wise person; an herb) and serve different functions in different sentences, texts, and even conversations.
- Third, word knowledge is *interrelated* in that knowledge of one word (e.g., *urban*) connects to knowledge of other words (e.g., *suburban*, *urbanite*, *urbane*).

A Discussion about Academic Vocabulary and It's Place in the Common Core



[SHIFT 6: Academic Vocabulary](#) from [EngageNY](#) on [Vimeo](#).

<http://engageny.org/resource/common-core-in-ela-literacy-shift-6-academic-vocabulary/>



Reflection

- ⦿ Based on this new learning what will we have to change about our practice?
- ⦿ What challenges will we face as we make this shift?

Criteria for Identifying Tier Two Words

- ◉ ***Importance and utility***: Words that are characteristic of mature language users and appear frequently across a variety of domains.
- ◉ ***Instructional potential***: Words that can be worked with in a variety of ways so that students can build rich representations of them and of their connections to other words and concepts.
- ◉ ***Conceptual understanding***: Words for which students understand the general concept but provide precision and specificity in describing the concept.

Example 1: *Volcanoes*

(Grades 4-5 Text Complexity Band)

Simon, Seymour. *Volcanoes*. New York: HarperCollins, 2006. (2006)

In early times, no one knew how volcanoes formed or why they spouted red-hot molten rock. In modern times, scientists began to study volcanoes. They still don't know all the answers, but they know much about how a volcano works.

Our planet is made up of many layers of rock. The top layers of solid rock are called the crust. Deep beneath the crust is the mantle, where it is so hot that some rock melts. The melted, or molten, rock is called magma.

Volcanoes are formed when magma pushes its way up through the crack in Earth's crust. This is called a volcanic eruption. When magma pours forth on the surface, it is called lava.

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Excerpt

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Of the **Tier Two words**, which word is the most important to the overall meaning of the excerpt?

- An understanding of the word **layers** is necessary both to visualize the structure of the crust (“the top layers of solid rock are called the crust”) and to grasp the notion of the planet being composed of layers.
- Perhaps equally important are the word **spouted** and the phrase **pours forth**; an understanding of each of these is needed to visualize the action of a volcano.
- The same could be said of the word **surface**.
- Both **layers** and **surface** are likely to reappear in middle and high school academic texts, which would justify more intensive instruction in them in grades 4–5.

Example 2: *Freedom Walkers*

(Grades 6-8 Text Complexity Band)

Freedman, Russell. *Freedom Walkers: The Story of the Montgomery Bus Boycott*. New York: Holiday House, 2006. (2006)

From the Introduction: "Why They Walked"

Not so long ago in Montgomery, Alabama, the color of your skin determined where you could sit on a public bus. If you happened to be an African American, you had to sit in the back of the bus, even if there were empty seats up front.

Back then, racial segregation was the rule throughout the American South. Strict laws—called "Jim Crow" laws—enforced a system of white supremacy that discriminated against blacks and kept them in their place as second-class citizens.

People were separated by race from the moment they were born in segregated hospitals until the day they were buried in segregated cemeteries. Blacks and whites did not attend the same schools, worship in the same churches, eat in the same restaurants, sleep in the same hotels, drink from the same water fountains, or sit together in the same movie theaters.

In Montgomery, it was against the law for a white person and a Negro to play checkers on public property or ride together in a taxi.

Most southern blacks were denied their right to vote. The biggest obstacle was the poll tax, a special tax that was required of all voters but was too costly for many blacks and for poor whites as well. Voters also had to pass a literacy test to prove that they could read, write, and understand the U.S. Constitution. These tests were often rigged to disqualify even highly educated blacks. Those who overcame the obstacles and insisted on registering as voters faced threats, harassment. And even physical violence. As a result, African Americans in the South could not express their grievances in the voting booth, which for the most part, was closed to them. But there were other ways to protest, and one day a half century ago, the black citizens in Montgomery rose up in protest and united to demand their rights—by walking peacefully.

It all started on a bus.

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Back then, **racial segregation** was the rule throughout the American South. Strict laws-called “**Jim Crow**” laws-enforced a system of **white supremacy** that **discriminated** against blacks and kept them in their place as **second-class** citizens.

People were separated by race from the moment they were born in **segregated** hospitals until the day they were buried in **segregated** cemeteries. Blacks and whites did not attend the same schools, **worship** in the same churches, eat in the same restaurants, sleep in the same hotels, drink from the same water fountains, or sit together in the same movie theaters.

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Criteria for Choosing Tier Two Words to Teach

Choosing Tier Two Words for Focused Instruction	
Criteria:	Tier Two Words
Word is central to understanding the text	<i>determined</i>
Word choice and nuance are significant	<i>obstacle</i>
Students are likely to see this word frequently	<i>disqualify</i>
Word is a more mature or precise label for concepts already known to students	<i>harassment</i>
Word lends itself to teaching a web of words and concepts around it	<i>segregation</i>



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Planning Explicit Instruction			
1. Set a purpose for learning.	2. Identify critical details that define the new concept	3. Use highly specific examples and non-examples	4. Connect new concepts to previously learned material
It is used in different contexts within the text. Explain that this word was chosen because it is central to understanding the text.	In first sentence: <i>determined</i> means dictated, decided. Overall use of the word throughout the text suggests: fighting for what is important, perseverance, conviction, persistence	Examples: Not allowing anything to get in the way of what is worth fighting for, having courage to stay strong and not relent Non Examples: Hesitating, weak, yielding, submissive	Remind students about historic figures they learned about in history class who demonstrated determination. Why were they determined? How did they show determination?
Explain to students that the nuance of the word is important. If they think of another meaning of the word that was not intended, they will miss out on the deeper levels of understandings in the text.	Difficulty, hindrance, prevention	Examples: Something that gets in the way, an impediment Non Examples: obstacle course	Was there a time when you faced certain obstacles in your life? Are there certain groups who have had to face more obstacles than others?

Academic Vocabulary's Critical Role in a Close Reading

- “Given how crucial vocabulary knowledge is for academic and career success, it is essential that these high value words be discussed and lingered over during the instructional sequence.”
(www.achievethecore.org)
- An effective set of text-dependent questions used during a close reading will guide students in extracting the key meanings or ideas. These sets of questions typically begin by exploring the most powerful academic words in the text and then examining the impact of those words on the text as a whole in order to build comprehension.

Examining a Series of Questions

Text Under Discussion	Text-Dependent Guiding Questions
<p>"Four score and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent, a new nation, conceived in Liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal."</p>	<p><i>What does Lincoln mean by "four score and seven years ago"? Who are "our fathers"?</i></p> <p><i>What does conceived mean?</i></p> <p><i>What does proposition mean?</i></p> <p><i>What is he saying is significant about America? Is he saying that no one has been free or equal before? So what is new?</i></p> <p><i>When was "four score and seven years ago"?</i></p> <p><i>What does Lincoln tell us in this first sentence about what happened 87 years ago?</i></p>
<p>"Now we are engaged in a great civil war, testing whether that nation, or any nation so conceived and so dedicated, can long endure."</p>	<p><i>What impact does starting the sentence with "now" have on its meaning?</i></p> <p><i>When Lincoln says the nation was "so conceived and so dedicated" what is he referring to?</i></p> <p><i>What is the point including the phrase "or any nation so conceived and so dedicated" – what would the sentence mean without it?</i></p> <p><i>The impact of a word choice: What if Lincoln had used the verb "start" instead of "conceive"?</i></p>
<p>(Review entire speech)</p>	<p><i>Look carefully at Lincoln's speech; which verb does he use the most (sometime he uses it in the past tense)? Circle the verb each time it appears in the text.</i></p>
<p>"Four score and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent, a new nation, conceived in Liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.</p> <p>Now we are engaged in a great civil war, testing whether that nation, or any nation so conceived and so dedicated, can long endure."</p>	<p><i>What does the word "dedicate," mean the first two times Lincoln uses it, and what other verb is closely linked to it the first two times it appears?</i></p>
<p>"We have come to dedicate a portion of that field, as a final resting place for those who here gave their lives that that nation might live. It is altogether fitting and proper that we should do this.</p> <p>But, in a larger sense, we can not dedicate—we can not consecrate—we can not hallow—this ground."</p>	<p><i>How is "dedicate" used the next two times, and how does it relate to the word consecrate? Who is now doing the dedicating?</i></p>



Increasing and Strengthening Academic Vocabulary Instruction

- ◉ Be deliberate when choosing general academic words to teach explicitly.
- ◉ Consistently provide multiple opportunities for students to learn and practice the words, rather than the traditional approach of introducing words at the beginning of a lesson.
- ◉ Incorporate general academic vocabulary instruction within close reading lessons to deepen word and text understanding.
- ◉ Provide active engagement in learning tasks so that learning is effective.



Reflection

- ⦿ How will this stronger focus on general academic words impact learning in your classroom or at your school?
- ⦿ What are some ways you might begin implementing this focus?