



The Meadows Center  
FOR PREVENTING EDUCATIONAL RISK



# Evidence-Based Practices for Vocabulary Instruction



## What Is STRIVE?

The **Strategies for Reading Information and Vocabulary Effectively (STRIVE)** professional development (PD) model was developed through funding from the Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education. As part of this research project, a cadre of upper-elementary school teachers worked closely with researchers at The University of Texas at Austin and Texas A&M University to design evidence-based practices for social studies instruction in grades 4 and 5. The STRIVE PD model featuring these practices was refined through researcher-practitioner collaboration, the latest developments in reading research, and the results of pilot studies. **Several efficacy trials have reported positive outcomes in teacher quality and student vocabulary and comprehension development** as a result of participation in STRIVE PD.<sup>1,2,3</sup>

This research brief provides in-depth descriptions of the **STRIVE evidence-based vocabulary practices**.

## Vocabulary Learning in the Upper-Elementary Grades

The upper-elementary grades are a critical time in students' academic learning, as they transition from **learning to read** to **reading to learn**. By fourth grade, standards for reading extend beyond foundational aspects (word reading and fluency) to include identifying how **meaning is used** both explicitly and implicitly within complex texts.<sup>4</sup> Also, upper-elementary readers engage with **an increasing amount of informational texts** and are expected to access important academic ideas, concepts, and vocabulary from these texts—all essential to developing knowledge in different subject areas.

To comprehend texts effectively, students need to continue developing their knowledge of **vocabulary and language structures** encountered **across subject areas**.<sup>5,6,7</sup> Researchers have examined the **reciprocal relationship** between word and concept knowledge and reading comprehension.<sup>8,9,10</sup> Studies show that students' knowledge of vocabulary concepts and content-specific ideas supports their broader reading comprehension skills and that, conversely, reading comprehension supports students' acquisition of content-specific vocabulary concepts. For these reasons, it is critical that instructional time is devoted to vocabulary development—not only in language arts, but also **across content areas** such as science, math, and social studies.

## Social Studies and Vocabulary: What Educators Need to Know

Learning social studies involves learning the **language** of social studies. Social studies, like other fields of study, requires the understanding of **specialized vocabulary** related to complex topics, such as the development of human society, history, and government.<sup>11</sup> For example, specific language concepts represented by terms such as *emancipation*, *indigenous*, and *boycott* are key to students' understanding of historical events, participants in those events, and the causes and effects of those events.

In addition to highly specialized vocabulary, **general academic vocabulary** concepts (e.g., those frequently encountered across subject areas) are essential to academic learning.<sup>12</sup> Words such as *examine*, *bias*, and *justify* are used to communicate ideas both in social studies and across subject areas. Knowledge of these **high-utility vocabulary concepts** is important to students' broad academic literacy development and, thus, is important to address during instruction.

Given the importance of vocabulary instruction in the content areas, how can educators effectively and efficiently integrate vocabulary teaching within their regular classroom instruction? Systematic and ongoing attention to vocabulary, through meaningful exposure and practice, is key to students' successful language development. Therefore, establishing routines helps to ensure that **evidence-based, high-impact vocabulary practices** are incorporated regularly to promote students' vocabulary development.

### Features of STRIVE Instruction

The STRIVE instructional practices occur **before, during, and after reading to support students' development of vocabulary and comprehension skills** necessary to learn new information from text. Teachers explicitly explain and model each practice, engage in guided practice with students, and provide corrective feedback. As students master new skills, teachers provide meaningful opportunities for students to use the strategies independently until the strategy use becomes habit. A unique feature of STRIVE is that students are introduced to the strategies over time across multiple social studies units, with opportunities to practice initial strategy use before being introduced to others.

# High-Impact Vocabulary Practices in Social Studies Instruction

STRIVE practices align with the most up-to-date research available on effective vocabulary instruction. The STRIVE model is a framework for **integrating multiple evidence-based practices** that support vocabulary learning within content areas.<sup>2,3,13</sup> Teachers use the STRIVE practices to promote students' **active engagement**, a critical component of vocabulary instruction.<sup>14,15,16</sup> The practices provide students with multiple opportunities to use and practice new vocabulary, as **multiple exposures to new words** and **meaningful practice opportunities** are essential to language development.<sup>17</sup> Evidence-based practices that educators implement **before, during, and after reading** are described below, along with implementation guidance.

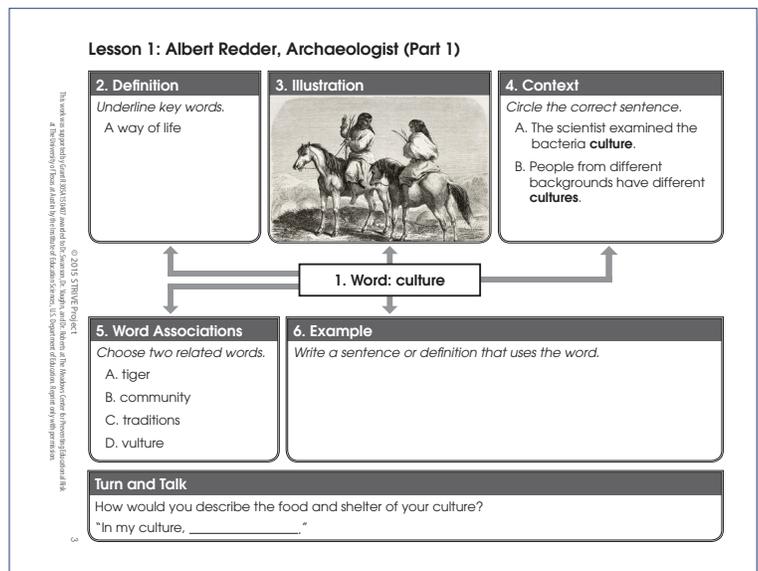
## Before Reading

### Preteach Vocabulary Words Essential to Understanding the Text

Successful vocabulary instruction involves thoughtful planning. Before students engage with a text, educators should familiarize themselves with the text and identify a set of vocabulary concepts to explicitly teach. Educators should use their professional judgment and select words that are both **new to students** and are of **high utility**, meaning that students' understanding of the word is critical to their comprehension of the specific text.

To implement this practice, educators can use **vocabulary maps** for explicit vocabulary instruction. As shown at right, vocabulary maps integrate multiple strategies that engage students in deeper learning of the word. STRIVE vocabulary maps incorporate the following prereading activities:

- Provide a **student-friendly definition** of the new word.
- Provide **visual representations** to support understanding.
- Use examples of the **new word in different contexts** (distinguishing the word's meaning in social studies from other correct uses of the word).



### Vocabulary Map

Before reading, students engage with the information in activities 1–4, revisiting the map after reading to complete activities 5 and 6 and the turn-and-talk activity.

## During Reading

### Teach Word-Learning Strategies

Educators cannot teach all of the words students need to comprehend the texts they encounter. Instead, teachers can explicitly teach **word-learning strategies** to support students in acquiring new vocabulary during reading. One important strategy educators can teach is using context clues to promote word learning during reading.<sup>18</sup>

The CLUE strategy (**C**heck, **L**ook, **U**se, **E**xpand) is taught before reading, and students use and practice the strategy during reading. Over several lessons, teachers provide **explicit instruction on three types of context clues**: (1) definition clue: the word is defined in the text, (2) synonym clue: a word

with the same meaning is used in the sentence, and (3) general clue: the meaning of the word is implied in the sentences around the word.<sup>13</sup> They also teach students how to use the four steps of the strategy, as shown at right. During reading, students use the CLUE strategy to begin learning academic vocabulary independently while reading.

## After Reading

### Deepen and Refine Vocabulary Knowledge

After students are exposed to new words, they deepen and refine their understanding of vocabulary through multiple exposures to the new word and different forms of it and through **using** the word in authentic contexts.

To deepen and extend vocabulary learning beyond the text, educators **revisit vocabulary maps**. STRIVE lessons incorporate the following after-reading activities:

- Use **word-building boxes** to deepen students' understanding of the word's morphology (roots, affixes) and other forms of the word (noun, verb, adjective).
- Engage students in **word associations** to deepen their understanding of the meaning of word.
- Provide space for students to **create their own example, phrase, or definition** of the word.
- Include a **"turn-and-talk" prompt**. This routine supports students in using the new vocabulary through meaningful interaction. Also, it provides an opportunity for students to **connect their existing knowledge to new word meanings**, deepening their understanding of the word.

## Context CLUE Strategy

**Check** for words that are bold or highlighted.

**Look** for and read the sentences around the word to see whether there are clues to its meaning.

**Use** the word in the sentence to see whether you understand the meaning of the word. If not, expand your resources.

**Expand** your resources by using a glossary or asking a friend or teacher.



## The Takeaway

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Vocabulary acquisition is a critical component of learning as students advance through school and engage with a range of subject-specific concepts and ideas. Content area teachers can support students' development in vocabulary by using a cohesive set of instructional practices, such as STRIVE.

## References and Further Reading

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