10 Key Vocabulary Practices
for All Schools

—with strong evidence of effectiveness from high-quality research—

10 Key Vocabulary Practices for All Schools

—with strong evidence of effectiveness from high-quality research—

Academic vocabulary refers to words that are common across the curriculum and subject areas but less common in oral language. These words may be related to words that are familiar to students (e.g., *kind*, *benevolent*) or specific to subject areas such as science, social studies, and math (e.g., *parasite*, *inalienable*). In this document, **academic vocabulary** also refers to high-level words that are used and understood by mature language users (e.g., *tariffs*, *introspective*).

1 **Teachers provide a language-rich classroom environment by intentionally and regularly using academic vocabulary and supporting students' use of academic vocabulary.**

Teachers in all grades are responsible for enhancing their classroom environment to support students' vocabulary learning. Unlike reading and math, skills that need to be directly taught, vocabulary growth flourishes in a language-rich environment that provides students with multiple opportunities for hearing and using academic words. Direct instruction of a word's meaning is necessary but not sufficient. Teachers are also intentional about using academic vocabulary regularly and consistently so that students hear words in context (e.g., "You were getting a little **raucous** in the cafeteria. Let's work on being **calm** and **tranquil**."). Only when students encounter new words in varied and meaningful contexts can they begin to understand and use them correctly.

Vocabulary instruction is essential throughout all grades, and instructional practices vary as students expand their academic vocabulary knowledge and increase their reading skills. Early elementary teachers are aware of the discrepancies in vocabulary knowledge among students entering school. A student's vocabulary level in the early grades is highly predictive of their reading, language development, and overall academic achievement across the age span. Elementary teachers are systematic and mindful about using and introducing high-utility academic vocabulary in their teaching and everyday routines to provide a foundation for rich vocabulary knowledge and continued vocabulary growth.

Teachers in the later grades find ways of incorporating academic vocabulary naturally into their own lessons while making sure that the students fully understand the meaning of these words (e.g., "Patrick Henry was particularly **adept** at **oration**.")

Schoolwide emphasis on vocabulary learning can be powerful in creating an environment that celebrates the importance of learning new words. Once adopted, the practice of using specific academic vocabulary instead of basic vocabulary becomes natural and fun for teachers and students.

2   Teachers identify academic vocabulary to teach and use in their daily instruction.

Across all grades, teachers intentionally and thoughtfully choose specific words to teach each week and carefully plan how to provide students with multiple experiences encountering and using those words.

Teachers in the early grades read aloud texts that contain more mature vocabulary than students are able to access through their own independent reading. They also encounter unknown vocabulary from their social studies, science, English, and math curricula (e.g., *pollen*, *roots*). During read-alouds and other learning activities, elementary teachers make word learning engaging and fun by having students use new vocabulary in relevant and meaningful ways.

In the upper grades, teachers continue to identify and teach more difficult academic words and content-specific vocabulary, helping students comprehend their increasingly complex and content-specific texts, write more precisely, and have dynamic discussions with newly learned words.

Meet Ms. Rodriguez, a second-grade teacher. She chooses 6 to 10 words to teach each week from narrative or nonfiction texts that she reads aloud. She chooses books that are one to two levels above her students' independent reading levels so that there are plentiful opportunities to encounter rich vocabulary. This week, she is planning to read *Sylvester and the Magic Pebble* to her class. As she plans her lessons, Ms. Rodriguez scans the book to select academic words that may be unfamiliar to her students. For this book, she chooses the following words to teach explicitly: *hobbies, cease, soothe, inquire, helpless, hopeless, bewildered*, and *embrace*. She divides the book into three passages and chooses three to five words to explicitly teach each day. A few students in her class are familiar with some of the words, but all of the students will gain deeper knowledge.

Meet Mr. Davies, a middle school teacher. He chooses weekly words that are specific to the text and content he is teaching that week in his American history class. His students have varying levels of reading ability, vocabulary, and background knowledge of American history. He knows that if he preteaches vocabulary before the students read the text, all students will better comprehend the content and the text. At the beginning of the week, he identifies 7 to 10 words and concepts to focus on for review and repetition throughout the week. For his unit on the American Revolution, he chooses the following words: *siege, revolution, inalienable rights, mercenaries, loyalists, patriots, tyranny, decree, renounce*, and *liberty*.

For more information on selecting words to teach and grade-level word lists, see:
https://meadowscenter.org/resource/academic-vocabulary-in-the-elar-and-mathematics-teks-a-teacher-resource

3 Teachers introduce academic words in context by giving brief student-friendly definitions and clear examples.

Vocabulary definitions can include oral, written, and picture descriptions, as well as concrete examples and nonexamples. Elementary school teachers engage students by acting out words, providing pictures or tangible objects, and giving interesting and relevant examples. Upper-grade teachers may introduce complex concepts by using pictures or video. Students should be given an opportunity to define the words themselves and practice using them in meaningful ways soon after words are introduced and explained.

Step 1: Select story and vocabulary words. Ms. Rodriguez has divided the book *Sylvester and the Magic Pebble* into three passages to read aloud to her class over 3 days. She has identified three to five vocabulary words to target in each passage and has made word cards with the printed word, a student-friendly definition, and a picture. For example, for the word *cease*, she includes a picture of a stop sign and the definition "to stop all at once."

Step 2: Preview story and vocabulary words. Ms. Rodriguez introduces the book by showing students the front and back cover and asking what they think it is about. She then introduces each vocabulary word by showing a word card, giving the student-friendly definition, and asking students to repeat each word. She also gives a relevant example or acts out the word (e.g., "When we have announcements, you **cease** talking."). She tells students to listen for the words as she reads and give a thumbs-up if they hear one. She places the word cards on the board so that they are visible.

Step 3: Read the passage and lead student retell. Ms. Rodriguez reads the first passage without stopping so the students can focus on meaning and enjoy the story. Then, she tells her students: "Turn and talk with your partner about what just happened. Challenge yourself to use some of these new words that you heard." She uses her students' responses to write a main idea statement on the board.

Step 4: Reread the passage. Ms. Rodriguez instructs her students to put their thumbs up if they hear a vocabulary word as she rereads the passage. She stops at each word and has the students give their own definition so she can check for understanding. She guides the students to make their own sentences with each word as they turn and talk with their partner.

Step 5: Extend language and comprehension. Ms. Rodriguez models her own connection between the story and her own experiences and then asks students to turn and talk with a partner to do the same: "I feel **bewildered** when I run across something strange that I can't understand. I was **bewildered** when I came home and saw that my dog had escaped outside! Turn and talk with your partner about a time in which you felt **bewildered**." She encourages students to use the vocabulary words in their responses. Ms. Rodriguez wraps up by briefly reviewing main events and the vocabulary words and asks students to listen for and use the vocabulary words throughout the day. Before introducing the new vocabulary for the next passage, she reviews the vocabulary from the previous day's reading.

For additional information on read-aloud routines to build vocabulary and comprehension, see: **https://meadowscenter.org/resource/teachers-read-aloud-routine-for-building-vocabulary-and-comprehension-skills**

Mr. Davies preteaches vocabulary words before students read text containing these words. The goal of preteaching is to give students initial understanding of vocabulary and related background knowledge so that students have foundational knowledge and are better prepared to comprehend the text. For each word, Mr. Davies prepares a graphic organizer called a vocabulary map that contains the word, a student-friendly definition, and a picture representation. Mr. Davies knows that images and short movie clips can make the new vocabulary more engaging and understandable, particularly to students who lack background knowledge of these concepts. He presents these images on his digital white-board as he leads his students through each graphic organizer. During his lesson planning, he finds captivating images of the vocabulary.

For example, for the word *siege*, he finds a picture of the Siege of Boston and a modern-day example. To reinforce that *siege* means "surrounding a fortified area to cut off supplies," he tells the students that the word *siege* is from the Latin root "to sit." He also asks them to discuss how a **siege** is similar to and different from economic sanctions, a topic they had covered the previous morning while watching a daily news segment. Mr. Davies knows that if his students are able to connect words to modern-day topics and experiences, they will be more likely to remember and use the new words.

For an example lesson plan using a vocabulary map and a customizable template, see: **https://meadowscenter.org/project/strategies-for-reading-information-and-vocabulary-effectively-strive**

4   **Students are given multiple opportunities to encounter and use academic vocabulary in natural contexts through listening, reading, speaking, and writing.**

When students are given opportunities to use a new word in a variety of ways, they are more likely to remember the meaning and use it correctly. They also gain a "deep," or more complete, knowledge of the word by encountering it in different contexts. Teachers intentionally plan opportunities for their students to use and hear the vocabulary words repeatedly in rich discussions, natural and incidental exposures, and in writing. In addition, teachers review previously taught target words throughout the school year. Many of these opportunities are embedded in daily routines and do not require additional planning time or materials. Words are collected in a prominent place in the classroom such as a word board or in a student's vocabulary log so they can be easily accessed.

Listening: Ms. Rodriguez regularly incorporates weekly target vocabulary from her read-alouds and lessons into her classroom in meaningful and natural situations ("Please **cease** talking. Recess has **terminated**." "During our morning meeting, **inquire** about a friend's favorite snack.").

In addition to incorporating weekly target vocabulary, Ms. Rodriguez uses academic vocabulary throughout the day in regular routines. She collaborates with the other second-grade teachers and learning specialists to make a list of second-grade routines (e.g., lunchtime, snack time, line walking, group time, gathering materials) and associated vocabulary. They identify important basic words and create sophisticated synonyms for those words, many of them from a second-grade academic word list.

For example, after her students learn line-walking routines and basic vocabulary associated with the routines, Ms. Rodriguez replaces basic words (*next to*, *close*, *slow down*, *come forward*) with academic vocabulary (*adjacent*, *proximity*, *reduce your pace*, *proceed*). As she introduces each word, she provides a one-word synonym. For example, she says: "Jason, please stand **adjacent to**—that means 'next to'—Ophelia."

Speaking: Ms. Rodriguez and her students enjoy a short word game every day before lunch. One of the class favorites is the game "Would you rather…" Ms. Rodriguez looks on her word board to make "Would you rather" questions quickly and spontaneously (e.g., "Would you rather feel **bewildered** or **hopeless**? Would you rather **cease** eating broccoli or desserts?). The students have to explain their reasoning for their answer. The students are soon able to form their own "Would you rather…" questions.

Writing: After reading the text, Ms. Rodriguez places the new vocabulary words on a board in the classroom. The students then record the words in their vocabulary log books and write a sentence with each word. Later in the week, Ms. Rodriguez asks the students to write a four-part sequence for the story of *Sylvester and the Magic Pebble* using at least two new vocabulary words.

Reading: Ms. Rodriguez uses new words in her morning message to the class. ("Good morning, class! What is your **hobby**? Write your favorite **hobby** on a sticky note and place it on the board.").

Mr. Davies has his students complete their vocabulary maps after they read the text. He guides the students in making word associations, providing two example sentences with the words and engaging in a turn-and-talk activity using the word. His students collect all of their word maps in a binder, which becomes their vocabulary log and reference for their reading, writing, and small-group and classwide discussions.

In addition to targeting content-specific vocabulary related to American history, Mr. Davies teaches general academic words that are common across content areas (e.g., *cite*, *critique*, *resolution*).

At the beginning of the year, he meets with a team of other eighth-grade teachers and learning specialists to identify specific academic words based on their state's standards and eighth-grade curriculum. By working together to target vocabulary words across the curriculum, teachers can provide students with repeated and rich experiences with the words. Mr. Davies uses academic words in written instructions and writing prompts so that the students become comfortable reading them (e.g., "**Cite** four reasons why the colonists wanted to rebel."). He also deliberately uses academic vocabulary when he asks questions or gives oral instructions (e.g., "What can you **infer** about Patrick Henry's **allegiances** from this quote?"). Because all teachers use the same list of words, the special education teacher, English language learner teacher, and speech-language therapist can provide additional explicit instruction in small-group sessions for students who are struggling with reading and language. Mr. Davies also places these words on a vocabulary learning website so that students can access the words at home for practice.

5 Teachers help students to understand associations between words.

Discussing relationships between words allows students to actively engage with the words and gain a deeper understanding of their meaning. Teachers regularly demonstrate how words are related so that students can begin to form their own connections between words. These discussions can be integrated spontaneously before and after text reading.

As they learn academic words, **Ms. Rodriguez** shows students how they can arrange the words into different groups. For example, students may group words by parts of speech (noun, verb), by initial letter, by similar word endings (suffixes), by similar word beginnings (prefixes), or by number of syllables. She also helps students to compare and contrast pairs of words to better understand subtle differences: "Sylvester felt both **hopeless** and **helpless**. Are these positive or negative feelings? How are these feelings different? How are they similar?" By forming associations between words, students can elevate their language to be more precise.

Mr. Davies groups his weekly words in U.S. history by the content that they are studying that week. As the students complete their vocabulary maps, Mr. Davies helps them make meaningful connections between words through turn-and-talk discussions and writing prompts (e.g., "How are the terms *liberty* and *inalienable rights* related?").

For more information on using the turn-and-talk instructional routine in vocabulary instruction, see: **https://meadowscenter.org/resource/turn-and-talk-an-evidence-based-practice-teachers-guide**

6 Students learn a variety of word learning strategies to independently identify the meaning of new words.

All students should be equipped with multiple strategies for figuring out the meaning of words on their own. First, students are taught to self-monitor while they read and identify words they do not recognize or fully understand. Once students identify a word they do not know the meaning of, they can apply "fix-up" strategies to help determine the meaning of the word. One fix-up strategy is to divide words into morphemes (the smallest units of meaning). Another fix-up strategy is to determine the meaning of a word through context clues in the sentence or surrounding text.

Ms. Rodriguez calls her students' attention to prefixes, suffixes, and root words as she is teaching new words and adding new words to her board. She models how to be a "word detective" by breaking apart words and putting them together again. After reading a book, she asks her class: "What do you notice that is similar about the words *hopeless* and *helpless*? After students point out that they both contain the word *less*, she says: "The suffix *-less* means 'without.' How is *hopeful* different from *hopeless*?"

Mr. Davies teaches the meaning of the word *loyalist* before his students read a text on the American Revolution. He shows students how to take apart the word as he introduces it: "Look at the word *loyalist*. Do you see a word that can stand alone?" When the students identify *loyal*, he says, "That's right! *Loyal* means 'showing constant support for someone or something'." He asks students to generate other words that have the ending *-ist*. They come up with *artist*, *novelist*, and *protagonist*. The class discusses what these words may have in common and decide that *-ist* may mean 'a person.'

They look up the definition and add it to their class list of prefixes and suffixes. Mr. Davies then asks the students to add other prefixes and suffixes to *loyal* to form other words (e.g., *disloyal*, *loyalty*) and they discuss the meaning of these related words.

For additional examples of morphology lessons, see Chapter 7 of this publication: https://meadowscenter.org/resource/effective-instruction-for-middle-school-students-with-reading-difficulties-the-reading-teachers-sourcebook

Mr. Davies also provides practice in recognizing words through context, frequently modeling this strategy as he reads a text. For example, as his class reads a Patrick Henry speech, Mr. Davies demonstrates the following steps to figure out the meaning of the word *arduous* in this sentence: "Is this the part of wise men, engaged in a great and **arduous** struggle for liberty?"

Reread the sentence: Mr. Davies has a student reread the sentence aloud and asks whether students can find clues in the sentence to help them figure out the meaning of *arduous*.

Find clues: Mr. Davies says, "I see that *arduous* is describing *struggle*, so it will probably be a negative word."

Infer: Students make an inference based on clues found in the text that *arduous* may mean "hard" or "difficult."

Try it out: Mr. Davies says, "Let's replace *arduous* with *difficult* and see whether that makes sense: 'Is this the part of wise men, engaged in a great and **difficult** struggle for liberty?' Does that make sense?" The students agree that *difficult* makes sense in that context, and Mr. Davies confirms by demonstrating how to look up *arduous* in an online dictionary.

7 When learning new words, students are made aware of both orthographic and phonological characteristics.

Students often need to say aloud a new word slowly and then at a more natural speed before they can pronounce it correctly. It is also important for students to have access to the written word when they are first introduced to a new word.

When **Ms. Rodriguez** teaches her second-graders a new word, she always has them say it after her. If the word is multisyllabic, she has the students clap the syllables as they say it slowly and then repeat the word at a more natural speed. As they write the word in their vocabulary logs, Ms. Rodriguez points out any familiar or unfamiliar letter combinations: "*Cease* has the *ea* combination that we have been learning."

Mr. Davies knows that most eighth-grade vocabulary words are multisyllabic and that students sometimes have difficulty pronouncing the words as they read. When he introduces a new word, Mr. Davies always writes the word on the board and helps the students (a) divide the word into parts, (b) pronounce the parts in order, and (c) say the parts quickly and fluently. His students also write two sentences with each vocabulary word on their vocabulary maps so that they become more familiar with the spelling of each word. They place their maps in a binder for reference during discussions and writing assignments.

8   Teachers create a classroom environment that supports word consciousness.

Teachers know that if students are excited about recognizing and learning new words, they will learn more words independently. "Word consciousness" refers to students' interest in and attention to noticing and learning new words, including those beyond the vocabulary words that are directly taught. Teachers can promote word consciousness by explaining the importance of word learning, praising students for using new words and recognizing word meanings, and helping students make personal connections with new words.

Ms. Rodriguez regularly encourages her students to notice and use new words they have learned (e.g., "Great job noticing that word!"). During class discussions, she adds a marble to an incentive jar if students notice her using a vocabulary word or if they use one correctly themselves. In her weekly parent newsletters, Ms. Rodriguez sends home a list of the vocabulary words that her students are learning for the week. She encourages parents to talk about these words with their children and try to incorporate them in their everyday routines.

Ms. Rodriguez also encourages students to discover new words on their own. She reads books to her class about characters who delight in learning new words and praises students for identifying and asking about words they don't know. To further explore the joy of words, Ms. Rodriguez gives her class a pun, joke, or image of the week that uses words with multiple meanings.

Mr. Davies is a self-described "word-nerd" and proclaims it proudly to his middle-school students. He models his own interest in words by regularly using academic vocabulary and by talking to his students about new words that he is learning. He encourages students to notice vocabulary words by giving extra credit when students provide an example of a vocabulary word used outside of class or a new word they have discovered themselves. During class discussions of history topics, Mr. Davies calls attention to examples of specific word use that make his students' arguments strong. His students learn that vocabulary can be empowering.

9 Teachers regularly assess students' targeted vocabulary knowledge.

Through regular vocabulary assessments, teachers gather information on their students' vocabulary level and progress, as well as information on the effectiveness of instruction. In addition, the vocabulary tests further motivate the students to be accountable for new words they are learning. The length, content, and format of vocabulary tests vary with their purpose. Some tests probe a student's deep knowledge of a word, and others assess only a student's familiarity with a word. Some tests measure a student's knowledge across the curriculum, whereas others are specific to the weekly unit and content. Informal, curriculum-based tests should be short in format and quick to administer.

Examples of Vocabulary Assessments

Assessment Type	Use	Example
Screening	Vocabulary screenings are commercially available and can be implemented schoolwide.	**Ms. Rodriguez** uses screening information at the beginning of the year to place her students into reading groups and to assist in planning instruction. This assessment also alerts her to students who struggle with language and may benefit from visuals and repeated instructions.
Rating Word Knowledge	**Whole-class thumb rating:** "Thumbs up if you have heard this word and know what it means, thumbs sideways if you have heard it but don't know what it means, thumbs down if you have never heard it." **Individual rating:** 1. I have never heard the word before. 2. I have heard the word but do not know what it means. 3. I sort of know the word's meaning but cannot explain it to others or use it in a sentence. 4. I know the word well enough to explain it to others and use it in a sentence.	Before teaching and after teaching words, **Mr. Davies** has his students rate their own word knowledge to help them monitor their understanding. Mr. Davies also uses the information to determine which words to emphasize in his instruction.

Assessment Type	Use	Example
Using the Word in a Sentence	Students write a sentence using the target word in their vocabulary logs or on their vocabulary maps. "I **embraced** my mom when I saw her after school."	**Ms. Rodriguez** regularly uses instructional activities as informal vocabulary assessments to monitor her students' understanding. Students write sentences with their words in their vocabulary log and have the opportunity to read their examples to the class.
Answering Embedded Multiple-Choice Questions	Because the students had worked hard all year, the principal _____ a 4-day weekend for the whole school. A. decreed B. renounced C. embellished D. denied	**Mr. Davies** uses embedded multiple-choice questions for his weekly vocabulary tests. These questions are typical of those on his state's standardized tests. To encourage his students' creativity, he uses sample sentences from his students' vocabulary maps for the test. This practice reduces his planning time and further motivates his students to create interesting sentences. For extra credit, he adds questions on words they have not studied so that the students can practice using context to infer meaning.

10 Students engage in regular and wide reading across a variety of topics and genres.

Students who have good vocabularies are better readers; better readers increase their vocabulary and world knowledge through reading increasingly difficult texts. Teachers explain the connection of vocabulary and reading to students and encourage their students to read both in and outside of school.

Ms. Rodriguez requires her second-grade students to read every day with a home reading log and encourages parents and caregivers to read with their children at home. At the beginning of the year, she gives parents tips on reading aloud at home and provides a list of recommended books that have rich language for second-grade students.

Mr. Davies provides his eighth-grade students with a wide variety of texts to enrich their understanding of history. He has a small library of engaging young adult novels on historical topics that the students can check out and take home to read for extra credit. During his lessons, he distributes primary source documents such as letters, posters, advertisements, and period writings so that the students can engage in deep reading. He plans at least 50 minutes a week in class for students to read texts and practice reading around new words to learn vocabulary. He also provides guidance for parents to help their children at home with reading assignments.

For an example of parent tips, see:
https://meadowscenter.org/resource/how-can-i-help-my-child-with-content-area-reading-at-home-five-key-strategies-to-consider

The Meadows Center
FOR PREVENTING EDUCATIONAL RISK
THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT AUSTIN
COLLEGE OF EDUCATION

10 KEYS

For a list of research evidence supporting the recommendations in this document, visit
https://meadowscenter.org/resource/10-key-vocabulary-practices-for-all-schools

—https://meadowscenter.org—