

# VOCABULARY INSTRUCTION

The two biggest barriers to reading comprehension are vocabulary and background knowledge.

When teaching vocabulary, the most effective approaches require that the teacher:  
(1) Carefully choose a limited number of Tier 2 words and provide direct, student-friendly explanations of their meanings.  
(2) Create meaningful interactions with the words in a variety of formats and contexts.  
(3) Ensure that students have multiple exposures to the new words.

## Menu of Vocabulary Instructional Strategies

From Isabel Beck's *Creating Robust Vocabulary*

Compiled by K. Fisher-Bishop

Below you will find high-yield instructional activities you can use to engage students in interacting with the Tier 2 vocabulary words they are learning.

Strategy	Explanation & Examples
<b>1. example/ non-example</b>	Students indicate which statements, descriptions, or comments are instances of a given vocabulary word & which are not.
<b>VARIATION 1:</b> Descriptions of situations & students respond to each as to whether or not it illustrates the target word. After their response, students should always be asked “why?” they responded the way they did.	
Example: If I say something that sounds <i>precarious</i> , say “Precarious.” If not, don’t say anything. Then you must tell me why or why not. (By asking students to say the target word, it will help them commit the word to memory.) <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. walking over a rickety bridge that spans a deep canyon.... Why or why not?</li><li>2. exploring a new tall school building....why or why not?</li><li>3. standing on one foot.....why or why not?</li></ol>	
<b>VARIATION 2:</b> A simple variation to the example presented above, but it adds a little creativity to how students indicate their response. Ask “why?”	
Example: If any of the things I say are examples of places where it might be <i>frigid</i> , say “Brrr.” If not, don’t say anything. <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. Antarctica.....why or why not?</li><li>2. Florida.....why or why not?</li><li>3. Canada in January.....why or why not?</li><li>4. Mexico.....why or why not?</li></ol>	
Example: If any of the things I say are things that might be <i>sleek</i> , say “Smooth, man>” If not, don’t say anything: <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. porcupine.....why or why not?</li><li>2. a duck.....why or why not?</li><li>3. a leaf.....why or why not?</li><li>4. a car.....why or why not?</li></ol>	

**VARIATION 3:** Students choose which of the two alternatives illustrates the target word. This variation is usually presented as *Which would....? Or Which is....?* Ask “why?”

Example: Which would be easier to *notice*:

- a house all alone on a hill or a house crowded in with lots of other buildings. ....why?
- a barking dog or a dog sleeping on a porch. ....why?
- an ant crawling along the floor or a snake slithering along the floor. ....why?

Which would *plod*:

- Frankenstein’s creation in a castle or a ghost in a castle. ....why?
- A huge dinosaur or a mountain lion. ....why?
- A heavy man or a skinny man. ....why?
- A girl who was really tired or a girl in a race. ....why?

Which would make a house *festive*: colorful banners hanging outside or turning the lights off. ....why?

**VARIATION 4:** Students choose which of the two target words represents a situation that is described.

Examples:

- Would you want the people who cook the school lunch to be *versatile* or *frugal*? Why?
- If you didn’t buy a pair of shoes until you wore out the ones you had, would that be *frugal* or *industrious*? Why?
- If you just won the lottery, would you be *jubilant* or *melancholy*? Why?
- Which would be something to *resist*:
  1. talking to a stranger or helping a companion? Why?
  2. laughing at someone’s joke or laughing at someone’s mistake? Why?

**VARIATION 5:** Useful for drawing attention to the distinguishing features of words that may get confused with each other:

Examples: If you had a very special photograph of a friend who had moved away, would you refer to it as a *memento* or a *talisman*? Why?

If you had a special keychain, a kind of lucky charm, would you refer to it as a *memento* or as a *talisman*? Why?

## 2. word associations

Students relate to what is presented with one of the targeted words, which provides opportunities for students to make connections between new words and people, happenings, and other things familiar to them.

**VARIATION 1:**

With the words *tedious*, *extravagant*, and *pretentious*, which of the following comments goes with a target word.

- I spent all my allowance for 6 months on that video.
- I just can’t face another minute of this!
- You’re so lucky that I am part of your team.

**VARIATION 2:** Ask students to come up with an association—it can be a person, a movie, and a common experience—to target words, and then explain the connection they see.

Word	Associations	Reasons/explanations
Eloquent	President Kennedy	Kennedy was an excellent speaker. People still talk about his speeches.

Pervasive	Computer viruses	Viruses seem to be all over the place and you always have to be on the watch for them	
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**VARIATION 3:** idea substitution—students hear a sentence that has something to do with one of their words, and then indicate which word. They then revise the sentence in a way that includes the word.

- I didn't want to answer his questions, so I pretended I didn't hear him. Which new word goes with that sentence? (evade) I didn't want to answer his questions, so I *evaded* him.
- Milk is something that babies have to have. (necessity) Milk is a necessity for babies.

### 3. generating situations, contexts, & examples

Students are not provided with choices as in the other strategies above. Students are asked to generate appropriate contexts or situations for statements or questions about their words.

**VARIATION 1:** Questions constrain the request for a situation within a specific context: the classroom.

Example: What would make a teacher say this to her class?

- What an *industrious* class you are!
- What a *clever* class you are!
- What a *splendid* class you are!
- What a *versatile* class you are!

**VARIATION 2:** Develop situations across various contexts.

- What might a clever dog learn to do when his owner comes home?
- What would a splendid day for ducks look like?
- Why is eating leftovers a frugal thing to do?
- Why might you examine an apple you found on the street?

**VARIATION 3:** Ask students to develop comments that people might make that are associated with target words.

- What might an audience say about a splendid musician?
- What might a generous person say to a miser?
- What might someone who is exuberant say about your new bike?
- What might someone who is frugal say when looking at the price tag on a coat?

**VARIATION 4:** Variations within this format are good for small-group collaborative work.

Example: How might a....cook.....a musician.....a basketball player....a teacher show they are:

- Versatile
- Industrious
- Clever
- Expert

**VARIATION 5:** Another small-group activity might ask for different groups to develop descriptions of:

- Three things that would be catastrophic
- Three things that would be preposterous
- Three ways that a gymnast is flexible
- Three things a philanthropist might do

## 4. word relationships

Students think about and respond to how two words might be related. Working with two words and how their meanings and features might interact prompts students to explore novel contexts for the words and build new connections.

**VARIATION 1:** Ask students to describe how two vocabulary words might be connected or related. For example:

- *Conscientious/haphazard*—a response might be something like: “Someone who is conscientious would not do things in a haphazard way.”
- *Compassionate/advocate*—a compassionate lawyer might act as an advocate for someone who is in need and otherwise could not afford a lawyer.

**VARIATION 2:** Give the activity above more structure by phrasing a question around two words. Ask students to respond and then explain their answers. For example:

- Do people with *prestige prosper*? Why?
- What might a *meticulous* person be *vulnerable* to? Why?
- Could someone who is *curious* be a *nuisance*? Why?

**VARIATION 3:** Analogies—You can develop some, leaving one part for students to fill in. Eventually, students can be asked to construct their own—either complete or with a part missing for other students to complete.

- A *determined* person is someone who is really set on getting something done, while a person who is *wavering* is....
- You could describe someone as *morose* if he always saw the bad side of things. On the other hand, you could describe someone as *jovial* if she....

**VARIATION 4:** Ask them to sort words. A vocabulary log for your class would come in handy for this. After students have been introduced to a number of words, encourage them to sort the words into various categories—any categories you can think of will do.

For example, students might group words as follows...

Words that describe people: determined, charming, impatient, meek, eminent

Words that describe places: tranquil, eerie, monotonous, rustic, exotic

**VARIATION 5:** Continuums and other formats for expressing amount or degree. Ask students to place phrases (by number) on a word line that represents a continuum and explain their placement.

Example 1: How surprised would you be if:

1. An extremely fragile plant survived in an arctic region?
2. An enthusiastic teacher came to school dressed in a pirate costume?
3. A determined student gets an excellent grade?

Least surprised-----Most surprised

Example2: How well could you handle the following situations?

1. Having to *evade* someone you dislike every day
2. Everyone in the class thinks your outfit is *appalling*
3. Being *vulnerable* to the stomach flu
4. Your best friend is suddenly *reluctant* to talk to you

I can handle it-----Can't handle it

Example 3: Clap to show how much (not at all, a little bit a lot) you would like:

- To have your project described by the word *preposterous*
- Working in a *chaotic* atmosphere to complete your big test
- Having your room described as *eerie*

## 5. writing

A goal of any vocabulary program should include having students use their words in writing.

**VARIATION 1:** Provide students with sentence stems (either student or teacher-created), and ask them to complete them.

- The king was *miserable* because....
- The Queen was *calm* because....
- The child was *perplexed* because....

**VARIATION 2:** Extended writing

- Think of a time when you felt either *diligent*, *envious*, or *placid*. Write a little bit about what made you feel that way.
- Think of when you might need to *investigate*, *cooperate*, or be *impressive*. Write a paragraph to tell about it.
- Think of someone you could describe as one of the following: *precocious*, *meticulous*, *tenacious*. Tell what that person is like.

**VARIATION 3:** Prompt students to use several of their words in a writing assignment by providing an interesting premise and asking them to use three, four, or five of their vocabulary words in the story.

- Going to the mall and all the lights go out
- Arriving in a new city and people think you are a celebrity
- Finding a puppy with a bag of money tied around its neck at your door

## 6. returning to the story context

Reinforce the connection between understanding vocabulary and understanding story ideas by returning to the original text the word was found in.

An example from *The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963* (Curtis, 1995)

1. When Kenny came to read in Mr. Alum’s room, Mr. Alums said to Byron: “If, instead of trying to *intimidate* your young brother, you would emulate him and try to use that mind of yours, perhaps you’d find things much easier” (24). What did he mean?

- Find examples of *intimidation* throughout the novel
- Find examples of people that Kenny and Byron try to *emulate*.

2. In his epilogue, Christopher Paul Curtis wrote: “In the Northern, Eastern, and Western states, African Americans often faced *discrimination*, but it was not as extreme and *pervasive* as in the South” (207). What did he mean?

- Find examples of *discrimination* mentioned in the novel.

## 7. puzzles

Students enjoy puzzles that lead them through clues to an answer

**VARIATION 1:** Provide a series of clues for a vocabulary word. Each clue should narrow the range of possible responses. Students can also create their own clues for other students to guess the word. For example, the following sets of clues lead to the words *spectator*, *reliable*, and *relinquish*:

1. A lot of people would not actually see this person
2. It’s someone who just watches
3. The word has nine letters and starts with an s

1. Baby-sitters need to be \_\_\_\_\_
2. If someone is \_\_\_\_\_ you can count on them
3. The word has eight letters and starts with an r

1. It is hard for dogs to do this with a delicious bone
2. This word means to “give something up”
3. This word has nine letters and starts with an r

**VARIATION 2:** Crossword puzzles, dramatizing, drawing, and other creative responses.