

# Building Comprehension & Writing Through Vocabulary



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William Van Cleave

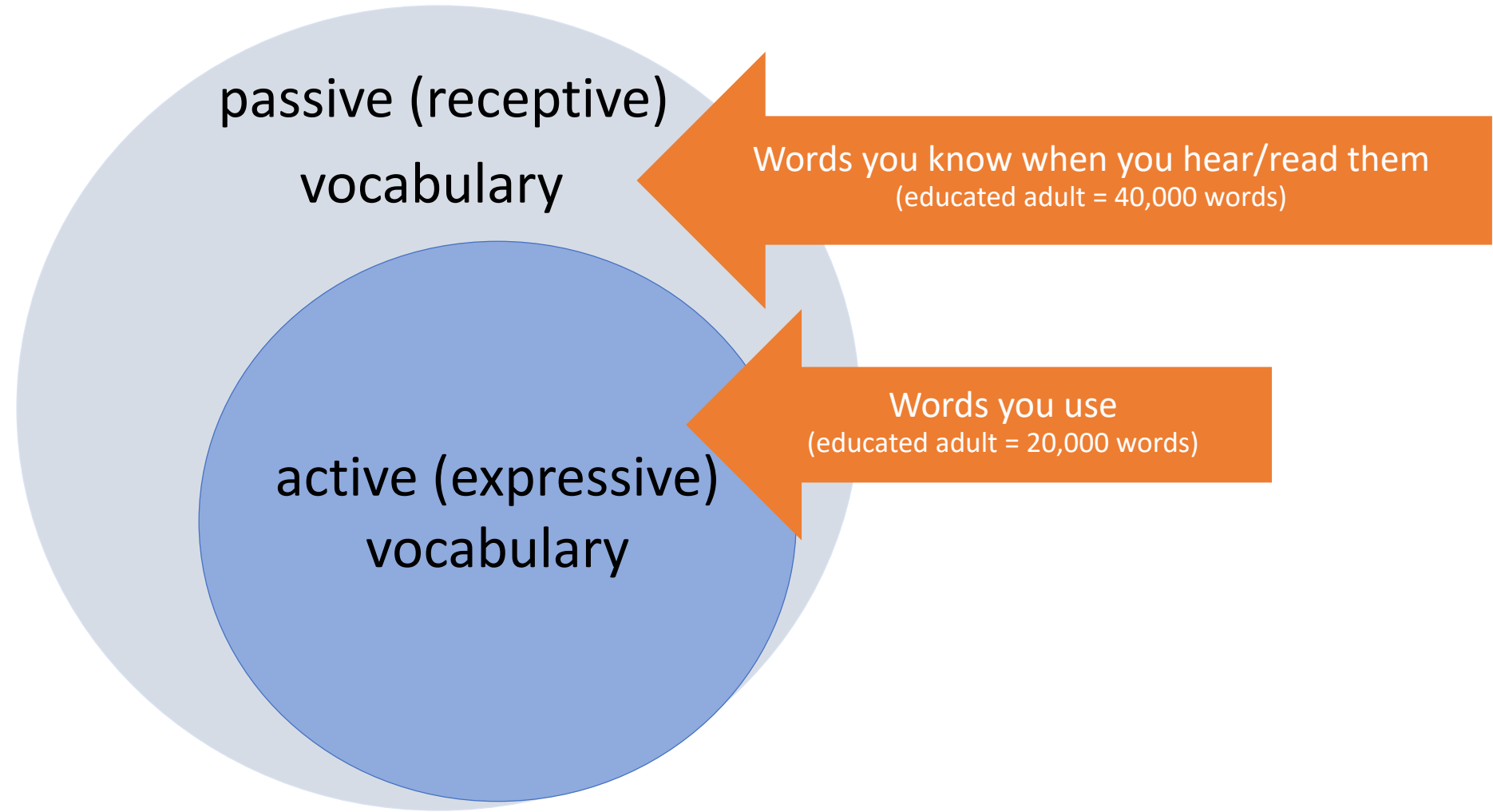
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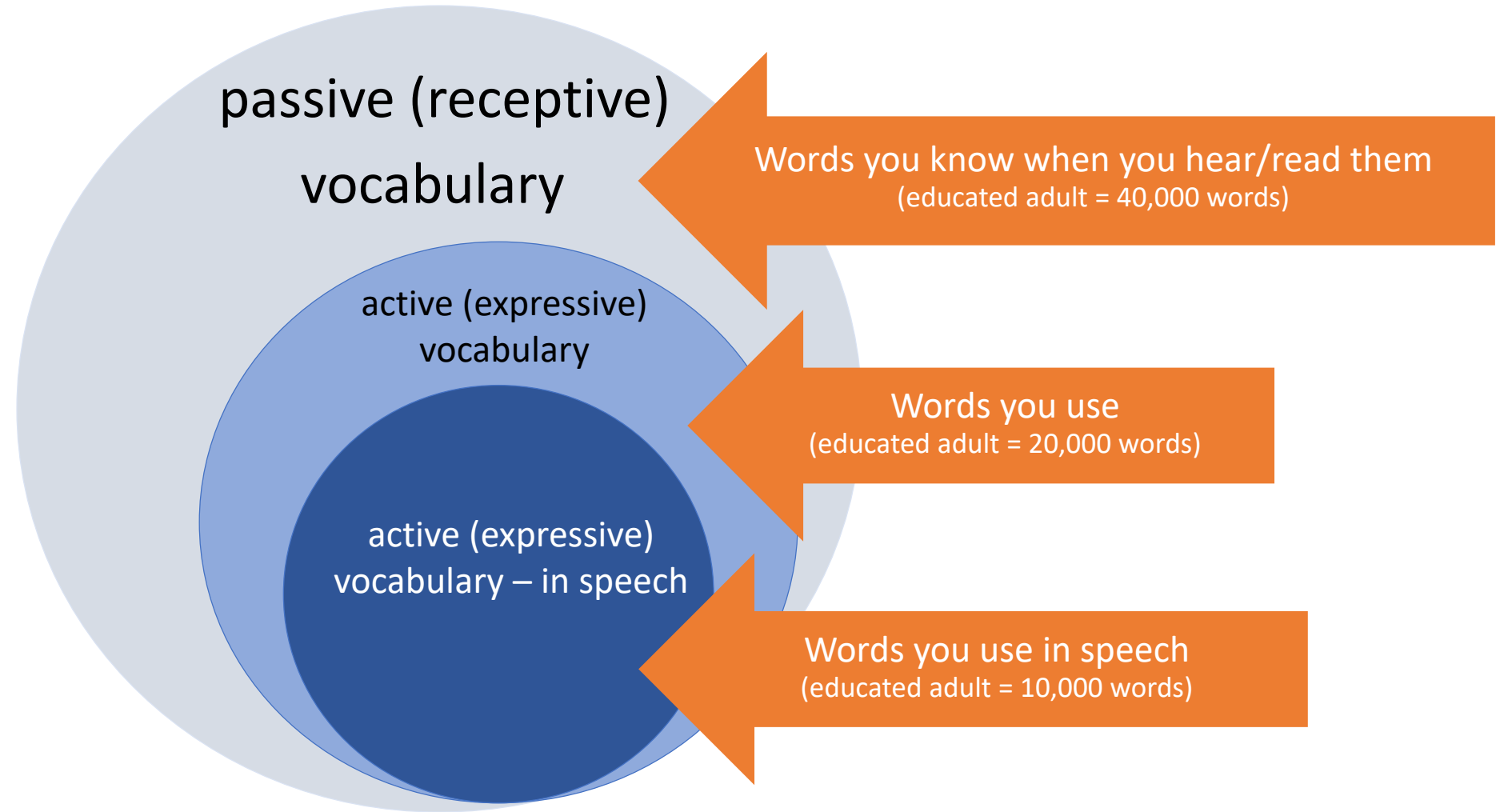
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# Framing Our Discussion

# Passive & Active Vocabulary



# Active Vocabulary: Writing & Speaking



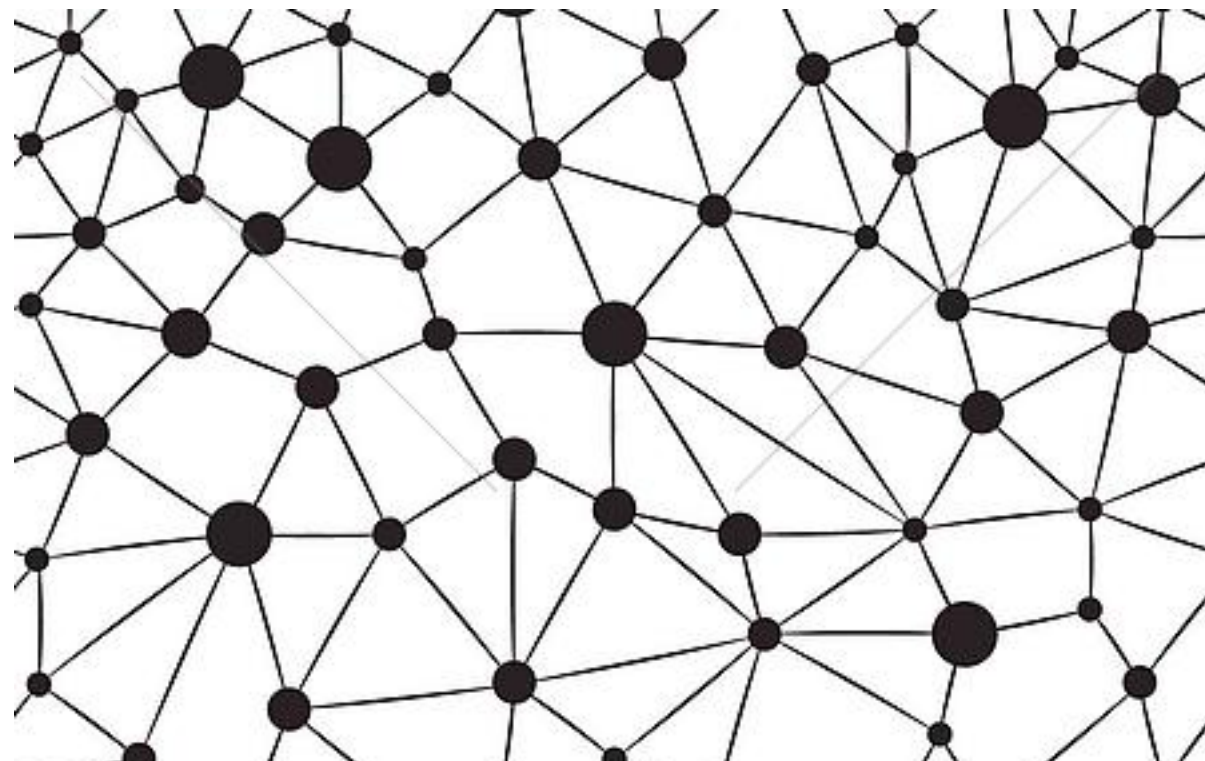
# Vocabulary in the Brain

## Old view of vocabulary in the brain...

- Words matched with their definitions

## New, more sophisticated and realistic view...

- Words related to other words, experiences with those words, etc.
- Not about “I know it” or “I don’t know it”
- Knowledge in layers and associations



# How We Develop Vocabulary

Through 3<sup>rd</sup> grade, vocabulary is primarily learned through oral language.



Starting in 4<sup>th</sup> grade, most words we learn are through reading.

# Vocabulary For Reading But Also For Writing

## For Reading:

“The lynchpin of deep comprehension is word knowledge.”

(Perfetti & Adlof, 2015, as cited in McKeown et al, 2017, 2)

Students needs to know 90% of the words on a page to understand the text.

(Nagy & Scott, 2000)

## For Writing:

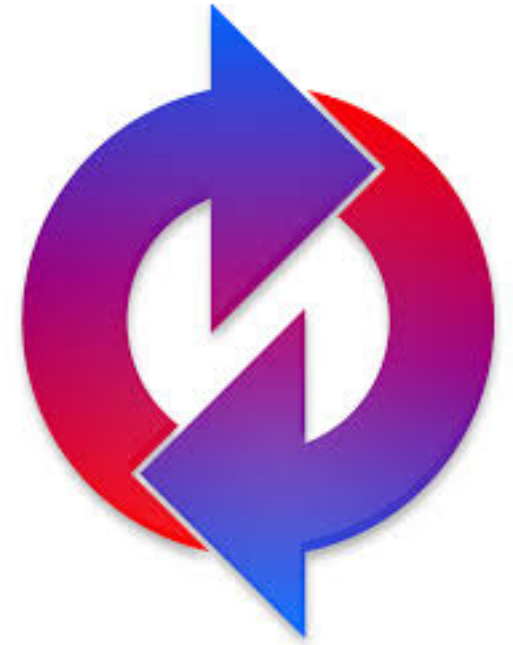
Vocabulary also affects writing quality. Strong vocabulary in writers begins to vary by genre, reflecting variances in genre-based expectations.

(Olinghouse & Graham, 2009; Olinghouse & Wilson, 2013, as cited in McKeown et al, 2017)



# Vocabulary Loop (Duff, Tomblin, & Catts, 2015)

- If you have a larger vocabulary, it makes reading easier.
- If you read more, you build vocabulary.
- It's a positive cycle—but it functions in strong readers and/or students with strong vocabularies.
- In other words, the strong get stronger while the weak get weaker.





# What Good Readers Do...

- Good readers “flesh out” meanings of new words through repeated but varying exposures. Since weaker readers don’t do that, we need to teach words quite deeply.

(Duff, Tomblin, & Catts, 2015)

- “Proficient users of language are more inclined to notice the distinctive semantic and structural features of words they encounter because they are tuned into relevant details, such as familiar affixes and roots, that will help them file the word in their mental dictionaries.”

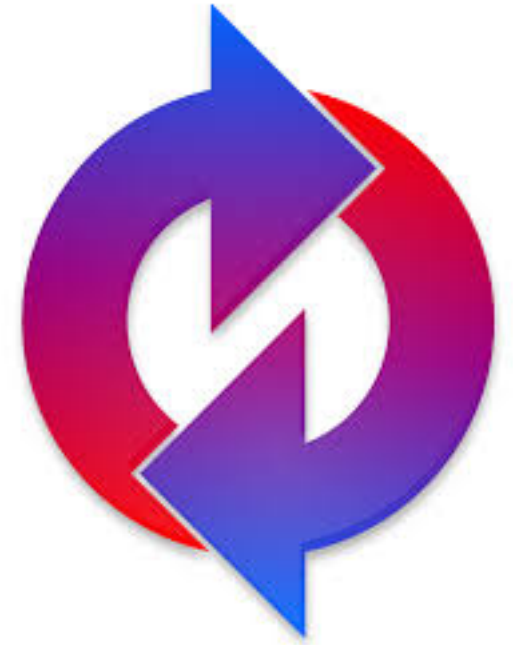
(Moats, 2020, 221)



# “What We Already Know and Believe”

“Meanings we ultimately take from reading usually reside somewhere between what the writer of the words intended and the listener or reader’s perceptions and ideas about the topic. Everything we comprehend through listening or reading is filtered through the lens of what we already know and believe.”

(Moats, 2020, 217)



# Why vocabulary is undertaught and poorly taught

“Expertise depends on developing new ways to see and label the world.”

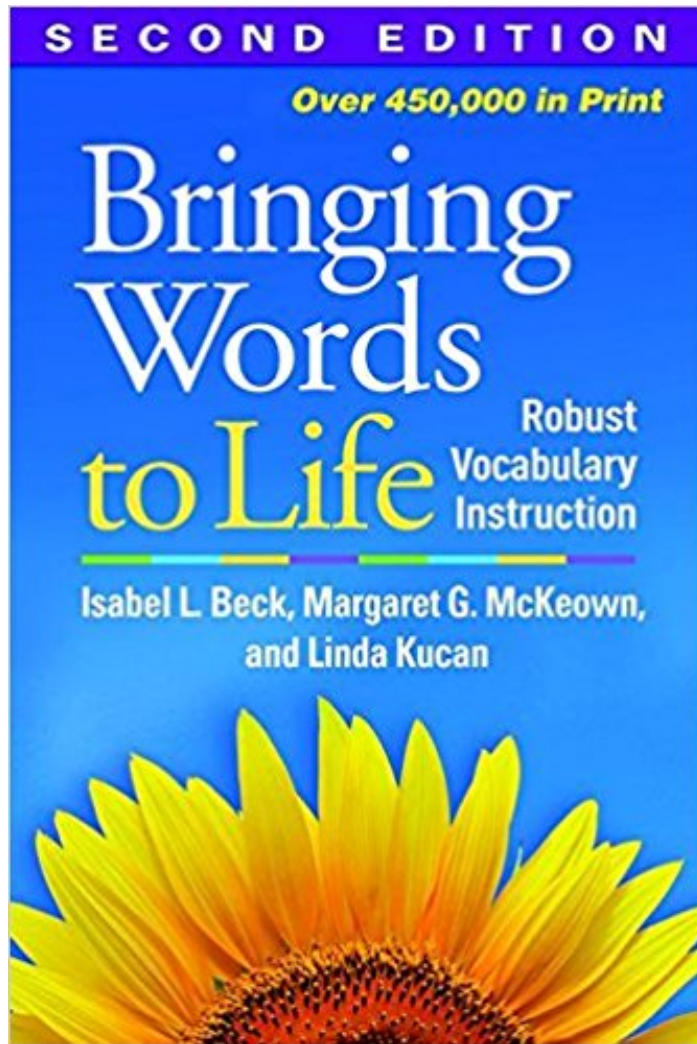
(McKeown et al, 2017, 4)

Most teachers see vocabulary as important, but most also neglect it in instruction. Stahl and Nagy (2006, as cited in McKeown et al, 2017) note that teachers often “think of vocabulary as separate from higher-order language processes,” which means they avoid it in favor of other activities misperceived as more valuable and also that instruction is often perceived as looking up definitions and writing definitions (6).

Vocabulary instruction takes time.

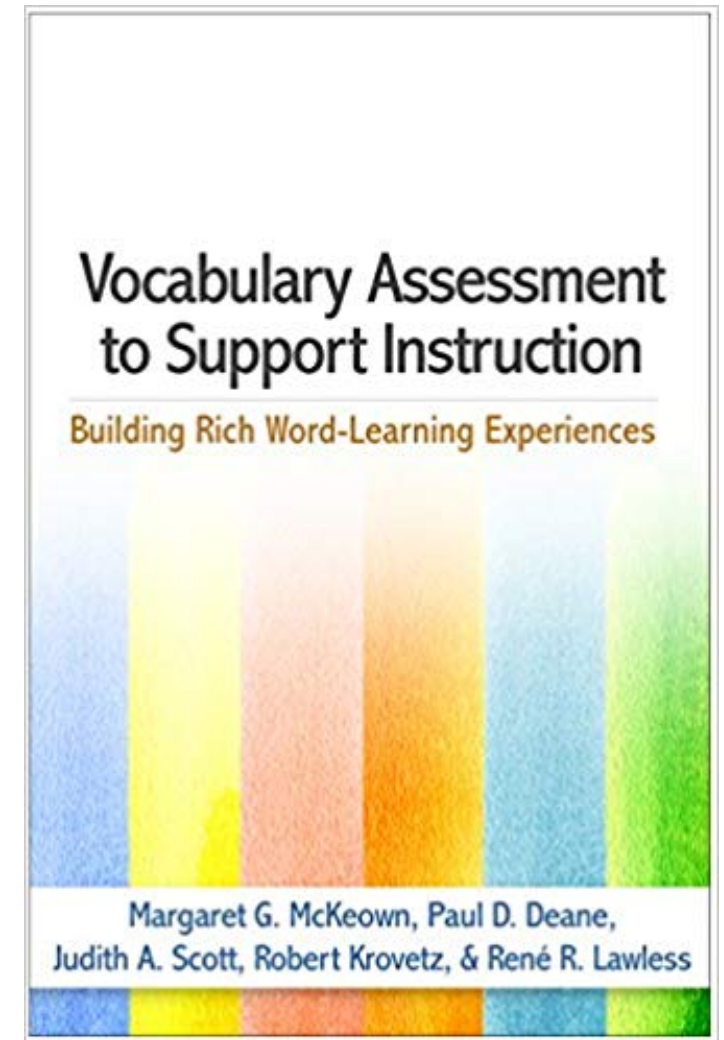


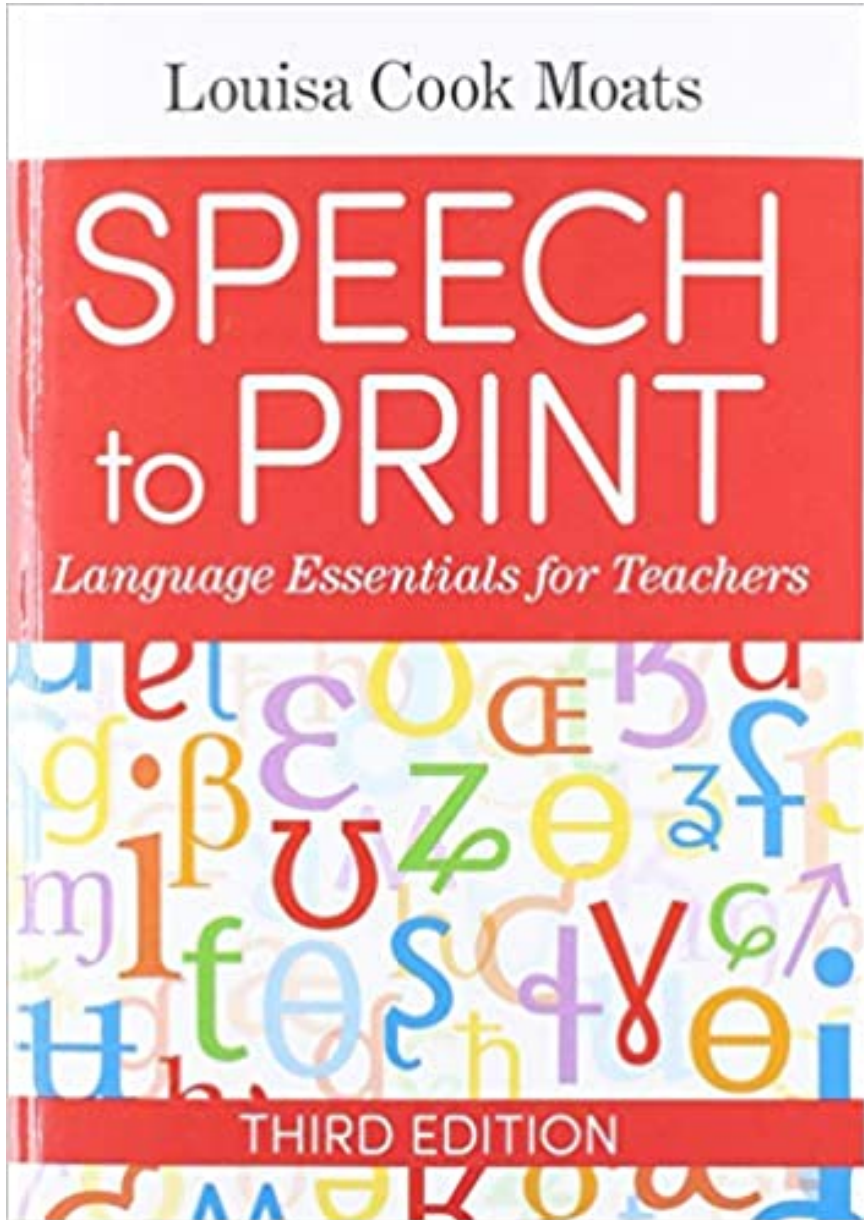
# Word Selection



If you haven't read *Bringing Words to Life*, I strongly recommend it. This book will change how you *think about* vocabulary. More importantly, it will change how you *teach* it. The much-expanded 2<sup>nd</sup> edition was published in 2013.

McKeown, one of the book's coauthors, is also coauthor to *Vocabulary Assessment to Support Instruction*, a deeper dive into the *relationship* between vocabulary assessment and instruction. This book is not for the faint of heart!

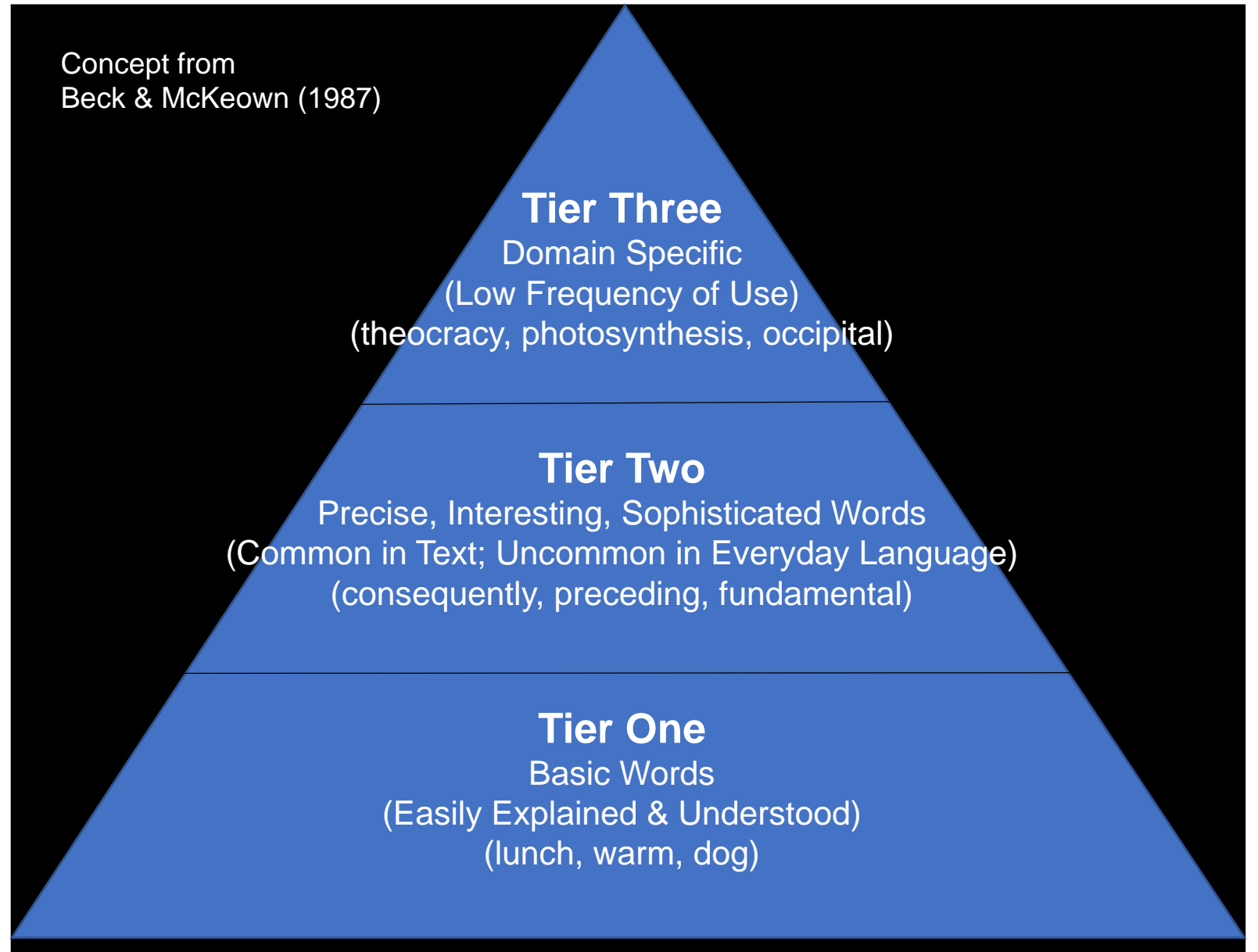




While I'm touting terrific books, let me recommend the third edition of Dr. Louisa Cook Moats' *Speech to Print*. I've referenced it both here and in my morphology materials. Moats' book will help you conduct a deep exploration of all facets of structured literacy. While it's a challenging, professional read, she writes with such clarity and understanding for what a teacher needs to know. It can be read cover to cover, or you can choose selected portions to explore as the need and desire strikes you.

# Three Tier Vocabulary Model

Concept from  
Beck & McKeown (1987)



## What You Need

Beck et al (2013) suggest that you need 15,000 word *families* to be competent.

- You get 8000 from common speech (Tier One).
- That leaves 7000 word families to learn.





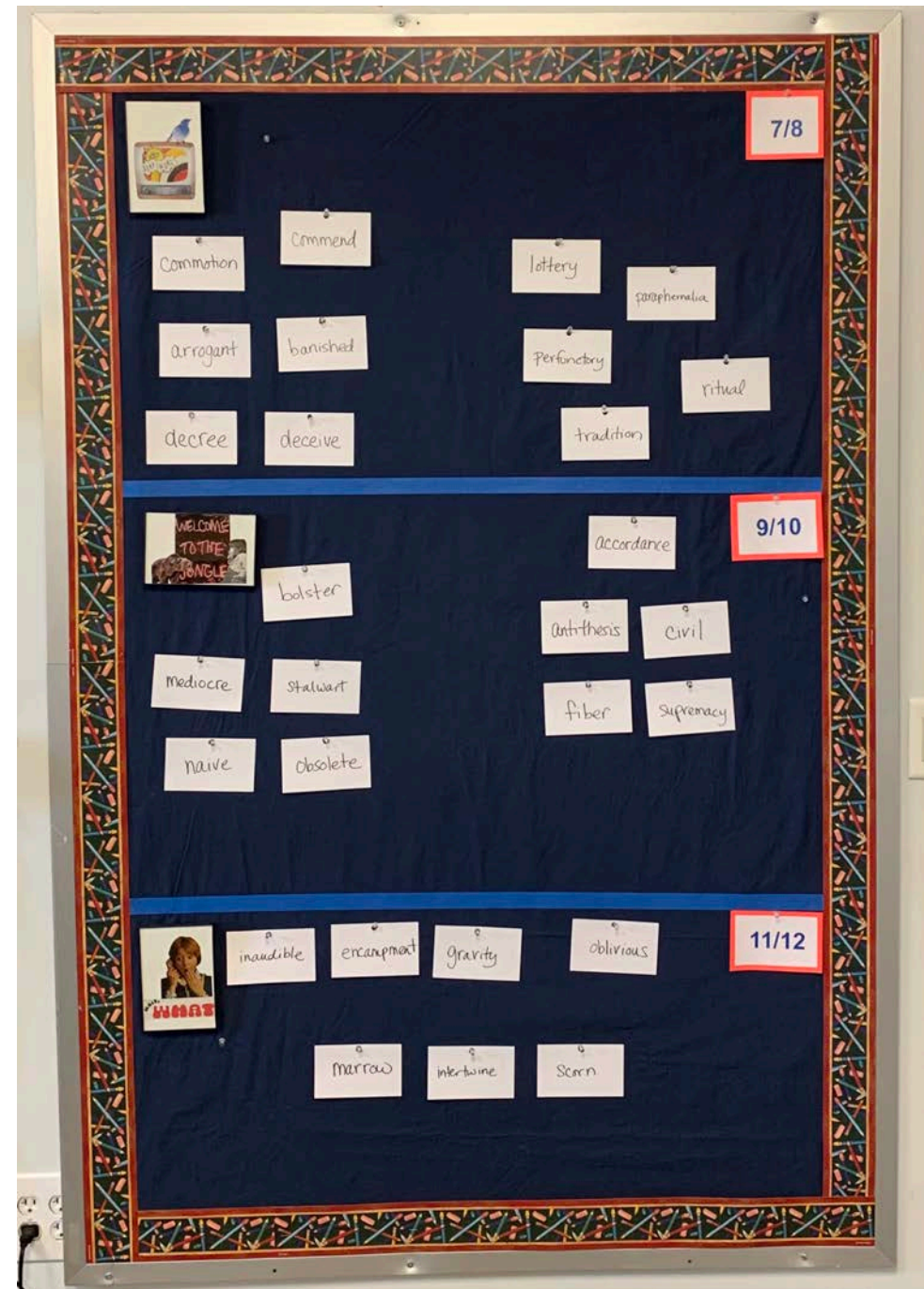
# How to Choose...

## Younger students...

- Read-alouds, rather than books they are reading.
- 6-10 words a week, but not introduced all at the same time. (Beck et al, 2013)

## Older students...

- From books they're reading.
- 10 words a week, but not introduced all at the same time.
- 10 exposures each. (Stahl & Fairbanks, 1986)



# Selection of Words:

1. Essential – got to have them to understand text
2. Top-of-the-class words
3. Tier Two, high impact words
  - Words that can be related to other words/experiences outside the text
  - Words that apply to multiple areas of study/interest
  - Teachable moment words – polysemy
4. Words that have interesting morphemes, or meaning parts, that can be used to build vocabulary beyond the text

Polyssemy:

A Deeper Look

# Polysemy: How Do Students Make Use of It?

- First meanings are easier to retrieve.
- Secondary meanings are more difficult to retrieve.
- Stronger students (readers) access context to interpret secondary meanings and are able to make connections between those new contexts/meanings and their original understanding.
- Problematically, strugglers do not make this jump as readily or easily. Someone has to show them.

(McKeown et al, 72)

# The Importance of Polysemy: Learning with Your Blinders On

Do you know the word deeply enough to understand it when you see it in a new context?

- pioneer
- segregation
- parallel
- relationship
- text

# The Importance of Polysemy: Learning with Your Blinders On

Do you know the word deeply enough to understand it when you see it in a new context?

Consider these “newer” words...

- viral
- text
- “began a book” (author Louise Penny)

# The Importance of Polysemy

- metonymy –
  - the crown
  - The pen is mightier than the sword.
  - “...lend me your ears.”
- metaphor
  - a giant among men
  - such a teddy bear
  - a low down dirty dog
  - music to my ears



# Metaphors

by Sylvia Plath

I'm a riddle in nine syllables,  
An elephant, a ponderous house.  
A melon strolling on two tendrils.  
O red fruit, ivory, fine timbers!  
This loaf's big with its yeasty rising.  
Money's new-minted in this fat purse.  
I'm a means, a stage, a cow in calf.  
I've eaten a bag of green apples,  
Boarded the train there's no getting off.





## Prime—A Great Example of Polysemy

Remember, your knowledge of a word is based on your experiences hearing, reading, speaking, and writing it. Your knowledge *deepens* as you are exposed to the word over time. In particular, polysemy, or the existence of multiple meanings of a word, allows us to develop our understanding of a word's meaning over time, and perhaps over a lifetime. Polysemy is, in fact, a significant factor in vocabulary expansion in students (71).

The word prime provides a terrific example of polysemy.

# Prime

You might also link the base prime to other, morphologically related words, such as primitive, primal, primary, primate, and primogeniture, but we'll look at morphemes, or meaning parts, in the next segment.

Obviously, you can't teach all the nuances of prime in a single lesson. The point is to teach the meaning of prime the students need for your content but to teach a deep enough understanding of the term to help two different kinds of students:

- (1) The students who have seen or heard prime in other ways need to connect your newly introduced application to their existing knowledge.
- (2) The students who are new to the term need to have a framework for the word, in this case that it means first/best and has a lot of applications, so that when they see it in another context, it makes sense and they can connect that new exposure to their existing knowledge.

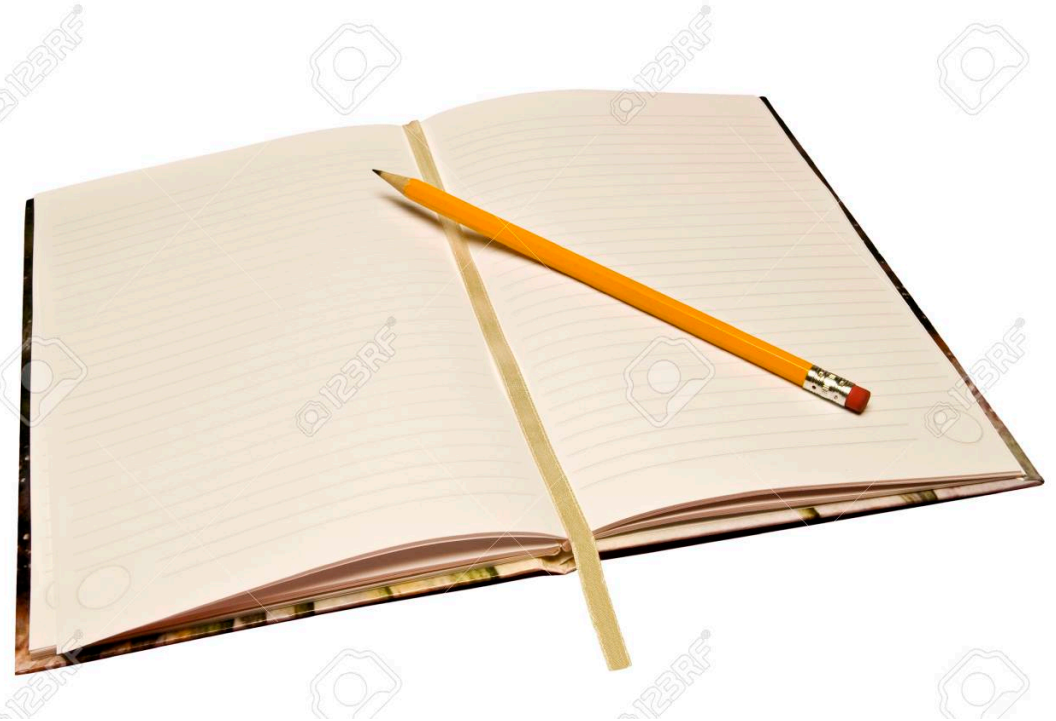
# Prime

So we deepen and expand our understanding, knowledge, and application of terms over a lifetime. Memorizing the definition of a word may (or in fact may not) begin that study—but it certainly isn't the end result.

When we learn words effectively, we are also learning how to learn words – so that we are more adept at learning new words later.

# Vocabulary Journals

Students can keep vocabulary journals. They “log” a word and its definition along with any accompanying information, which might include illustrations, experiences with the word, and so on. When the word comes up again, in another subject or in an experience outside the classroom—a discussion, a book, a movie, etc.—they return to the journal and add the new experience, expanding their understanding and application of the word.



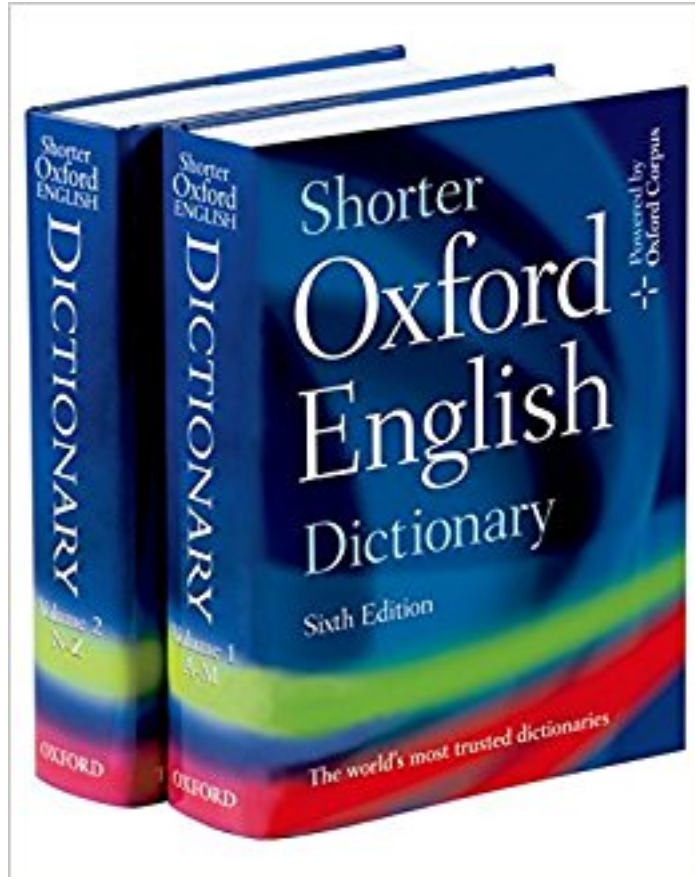
Myth Busters:  
Dictionaries,  
Context, and More

# On Dictionaries

**versatile** – capable of or adapted for turning easily from one to another of various tasks, fields of endeavor, etc.

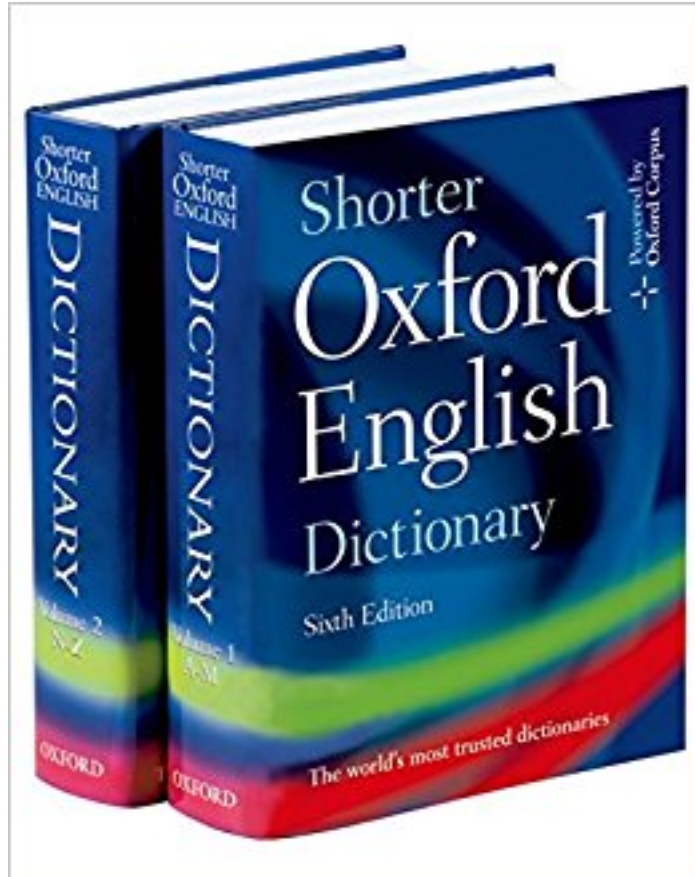
(dictionary.com – extracted 3/2020)

# On Dictionaries



Traditional dictionaries and most basal readers do not provide accessible, useful definitions. They're meant for reference, not instruction. They **presume** metalinguistic knowledge – or the way words connect with experiences, text, the world.

# On Dictionaries



No research indicates that having students look up assigned words in the dictionary to copy their definitions in any way improves vocabulary development.

Further, knowing a word doesn't mean knowing its definition. Instead, it means knowing how it functions with other words and how you can use it (and how you can't).



## Your brain's dictionary...

“Each of us has a **lexicon**, a mental dictionary residing in the brain that contains more information about words than a published dictionary would be able to print.”

(Moats, 2020, 220)

# On Wide Reading...

Yes, wide reading is important, but...

## Here's the problem.

The students most in need of vocabulary growth are unlikely to read widely...and to read widely in content needed.

Wide reading benefits students when...

- they read a lot.
- they read difficult enough text.
- they have the skills to infer word meaning.



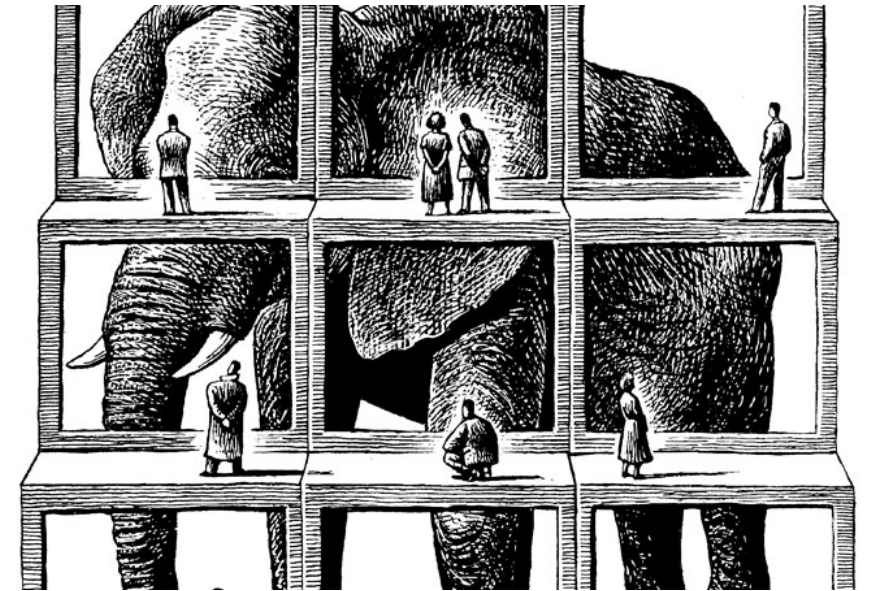
# Context matters, but...

Yes, context matters...but direct instruction has a much stronger effect.

## Here's the problem.

Often...

- meaning is not evident or obvious from the surrounding text.
- students who struggle most with vocabulary also struggle with word decoding and therefore may be unable to discern context even when provided.
- even when context is provided and understood, students may not retain meaning for other contexts.
- the strongest readers/writers get more out of context than weaker readers/writers, so the very students whose vocabulary you want to improve benefit least from the context clues that teachers often expect students to rely upon.



## **On incidental coverage...**

- Many good teachers think incidental exposure will accomplish a lot.
- It's real and natural, it occurs during instruction, and it's embedded in content—all good.

## **Here's the problem for strugglers...**

- They lack the vocabulary foundation to build upon.
- They need multiple repetitions to learn a word.
- Teachers tend not to use incidental vocabulary coverage as much as they think they do.

## **On using words in sentences...**

- Many good teachers believe the best way for students to show knowledge of a word is to use it in a sentence.
- It's a genuine, application activity, it helps students anchor their knowledge of a word in their own context, and it allows them to practice with how they might use it in the future in their own thinking and writing—all good.

## **Here's the problem...**

- Application is one of the highest-level tasks used to practice vocabulary.
- You can have a decent understanding of the meaning of a word and fail miserably at using it in a sentence.

# On using words in sentences (continued)...

Examples of usage errors from a 9<sup>th</sup> grader's work:

- The funeral was full of **solace** after the coffin was buried into the ground.
- I took a long **strode** to second base so that I would not get out.
- I have been told I have many **droll** personalities that no one has ever seen.

63% of students' sentences were judged to be "odd" (Miller & Gildea, 1985).

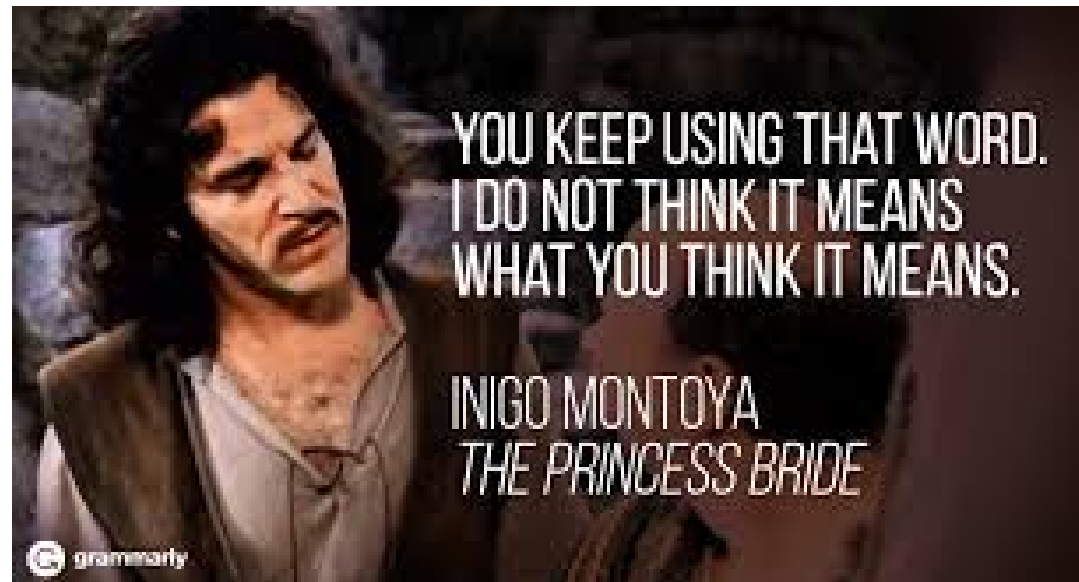
60% of students' sentences were judged unacceptable (McKeown, 1991, 93).

- See the problem? We'll get to some workarounds in a little while.

# Don't ask...

“What do you think \_\_\_\_\_ means?”

Why? When would it be okay?



# A Sampling of Best Practices...



## **First – a “word conscious classroom...”**

*Keep your eye on the ball.*

- Improve their understanding/comprehension.
- Improve their ability to express in speech/writing.
- Improve their ability to explore words on their own, giving them the tools to do this for themselves.

## First – a “word conscious classroom...”

*Your attitude matters.*

- Use word play—smart words and particular uses of words.
- Model the intentional use of powerful, meaningful words.
- Aim for breadth but more importantly depth—fewer words, more deeply.
- Aim not just for *more* words, but more precise *use* of words.
- Develop systematic, focused vocabulary instruction that engenders a curiosity about words.
- Yes, this takes time!

# Good Practice #1

*Discuss how authors use vocabulary to convey a message.*

- This deep dive takes time.
- It has a positive effect in students' writing.
- It's typically done once you've finished reading...so you don't kill the flow of the text.

“Dolphins are animals of good **omen**. It made me happy to have them swimming around the canoe, and though my hands had begun to bleed from the chafing of the paddle, just watching them made me forget the pain. I was very lonely before they appeared, but now I felt that I had friends with me and did not feel the same” (Scott O’Dell, *Island of the Blue Dolphins*, 65).

## Good Practice #2

*Build into your peer editing/revising practices.*

- Is there a better word for this? Or a different word for this?  
What other word could go here?

Our time at Disney World was fun. We rode on lots of rides. Mom let us eat all the junk food we wanted. There were all kinds of cool characters walking everywhere. I hope we get to go back to Disney World one day.

## Good Practice #3

*Alter the definition each time.*

---

contemplate

- consider
- look at carefully
- think about for the future
- meditate on
- consider all the angles of



## Good Practice #4a

*Develop continuum vocabulary activities. Here's  
Version A.*

smart

intelligent

clever

fast

sharp

astute

shrewd

insightful

brainy

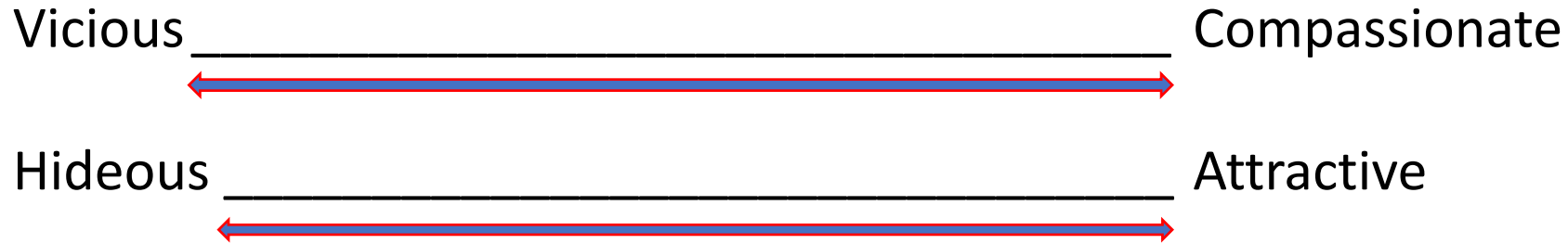
wise

bright

brilliant

## Good Practice #4b

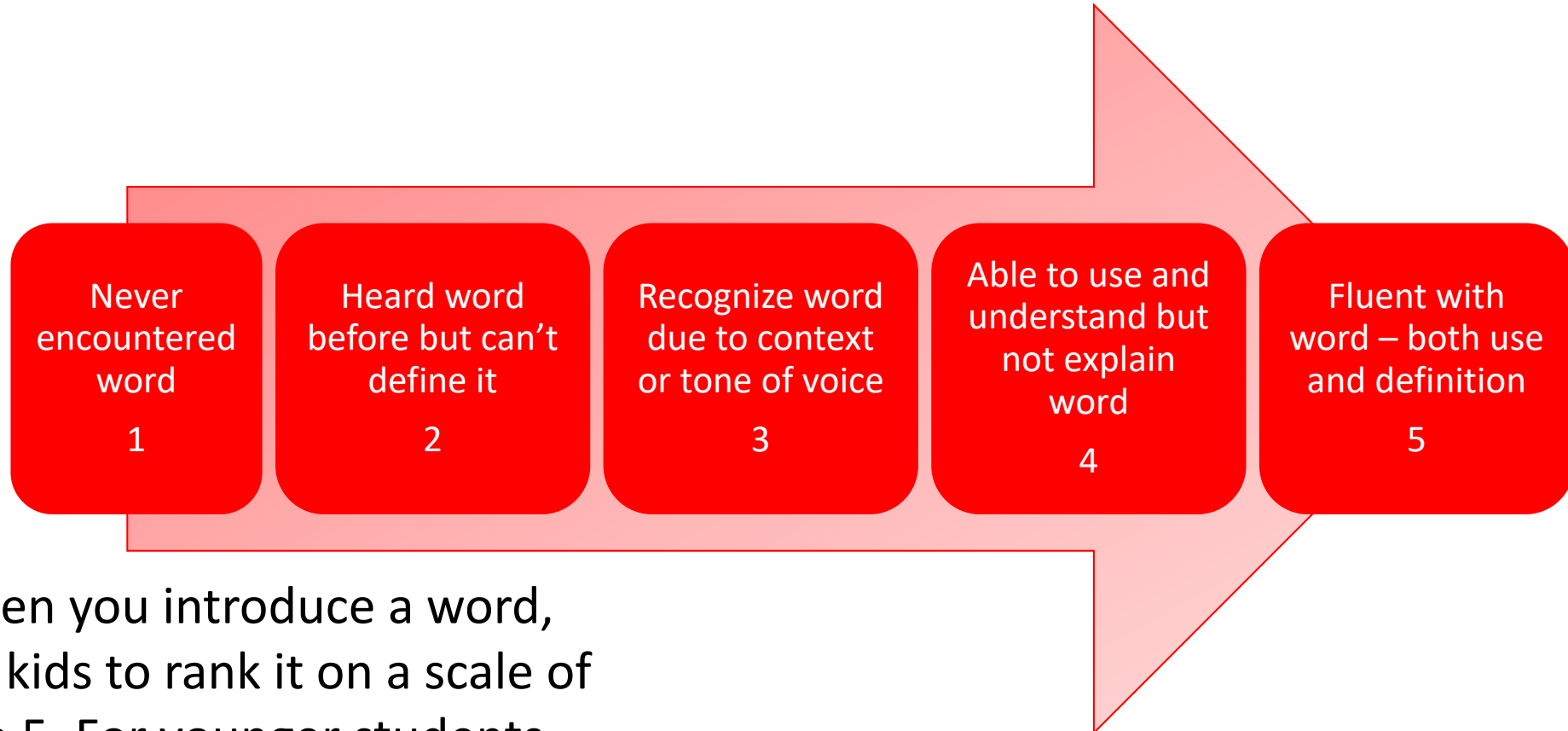
*Develop continuum vocabulary activities. Here's Version B.*



(adapted from Moats, 2020)

## Good Practice #5

*Ask students to rank words you intend to teach.*



When you introduce a word, get kids to rank it on a scale of 1 to 5. For younger students, you might use 1 to 3.



## Good Practice #6

*Build in a step.*



**Good Practice #6**

*Build in a “recognize” step.*



## Good Practice #6

*Build in a “recognize” step.*



### ***Teach...***

- versatile means flexible
- clarification – not like touching your toes
- nuances, etc. – deep teaching

### ***Recognize...***

1. adversary
2. brandish
3. diminish
4. ominous
5. versatile

### ***Recall...***

What does **versatile** mean?

## Good Practice #7

*Build in an application step.*

- 1) Explain when you could use **versatile**.
- 2) Create a context for student sentences, using sentence frames.

For example...

*The versatile student was able to...*

or

*Claudius acted maliciously when...*

or

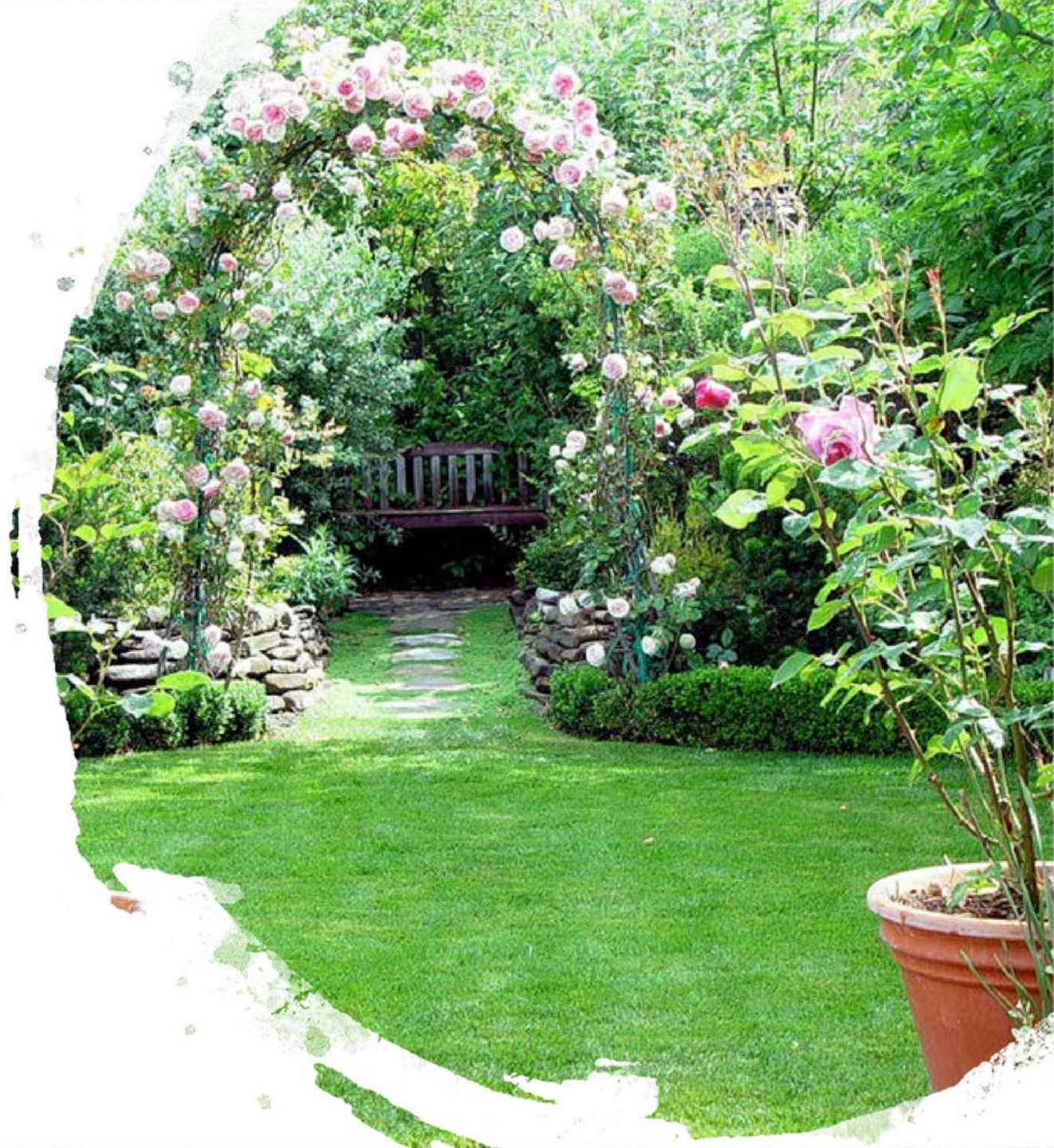
*An exasperated player on the court might...*

# Good Practice #8

## *Develop connections.*

What do these words have in common?

- gloves, rake, hoe, wheelbarrow, shovel, hose, trowel
- sit, stand, lie down, crawl, squat, kneel, stretch, bend, walk, saunter, march, jog, run
- pediatrician, allergist, cardiologist, podiatrist, dentist
- chalk, harness, rope, webbing, carabiner, pulley, helmet, crampon



# Good Practice #8

*Develop connections.*

---

What is a sycamore?

- What category does it fall into?
- What are other examples of things in its category?
- How can you distinguish it from other items in its category?



# Good Practice #9

## *Create associations.*

Define in student-friendly terms but also include words associated with the word in question.

### dawn (n.)

*user-friendly definition:*

- first glimpse of daylight before the sun rises

*synonyms:*

- daybreak, daylight

*associated words:*

- morning, dew, sunrise, coffee, jog, chilly, rooster



## Let's look at a word.

Define in student-friendly terms. According to dictionary.com (extracted 4/2020), the word catastrophe has 6 definitions, but only the first 2 are worth a look.

### **catastrophe**

1. a sudden and widespread disaster
2. any misfortune, mishap, or failure; fiasco

If you're going to start with the dictionary, help students establish a student-friendly definition afterwards. If it's in their words, even better.

- (A) What's wrong with the provided definition?
- (B) Take a shot at a student-friendly definition.



## Let's look at a word.

Define in student-friendly terms. According to dictionary.com (extracted 4/2020), the word catastrophe has 6 definitions, but only the first 2 are worth a look.

**catastrophe**

a disaster, or a major disaster

*But we may need to come back to this one...*

# Let's analyze the word.

This might include phonology, orthography, morphology, and or etymology.

## **catastrophe**

a disaster, or a major disaster

Students and teacher...

A. Read it.

- Loop divide its syllables.
- Practice pronouncing it.

B. Discuss it.

- This is a word from the Greek. Notice the ph. What does it say? (ph says /f/.) That happens in words from the Greek. They are often about science, school, and the arts. Here are some other ph words: phonics, trophy, elephant.
- Look at the final e. What is peculiar about it? (It isn't silent. You say it!)

# Let's analyze the word.

This might include phonology, orthography, morphology, and or etymology.

**catastrophe**

a disaster, or a **major** disaster

Students and teacher...

C. Write it.

- Copy the letters carefully, preferably in chunks.
- Name each letter as you write it.
- Do not worry about memorizing the spelling of the word. Why not?

# Let's analyze the word.

This might include phonology, orthography, morphology, and or etymology.

## **catastrophe**

a disaster, or a **major** disaster

Memorizing the spelling isn't on the list because...

- Spelling words should be words students frequently and readily use in their writing.
- Vocabulary words do NOT make good spelling words.

Adjust the preceding procedure to synchronize (another word of Greek origin) with students' needs. You may need to do more...or less...

# Let's interact with the word.

This includes activities to help deepen our understanding of the word.

**catastrophe** = a disaster, or a **major** disaster

Here are some things that work!

- A. Teacher provides examples interactively. (Use thumbs up/thumbs down.)
- B. Students provide additional examples. (Use turn and talk and then share out.)
- C. Teacher and students work the word through any/all the activities mentioned earlier.
- D. Teacher uses it in a sentence.
- E. Students use it in sentences (with or without frame).

Application continues throughout the week, the year, and the decade, ideally in multiple contexts.

“Understanding what we read depends on the ability not only to decode the words in print, but also to know the words’ meanings in relation to real-world truths and in relation to other words. Effective vocabulary instruction will target words most important in a semantic field and teach not only their individual meanings, but also how they are connected to other words.”

(Moats, 2020, 245)

A robust approach to vocabulary involves directly explaining the meanings of words along with thought-provoking, playful, and interactive follow-up.

(Beck et al, 2013)

## ***Tier Two/Academic Vocabulary Lists***

Coxhead, Averil. (2000). The Academic Word List.

<https://www.wgtn.ac.nz/lals/resources/academicwordlist>

Davis, Mark & Dee Gardner. (2013 to present). Academic Vocabulary Lists.

<https://www.academicwords.info/>

## ***Resources Worth Exploring***

Etymology website. etymonline.com

Cobuild. collinsdictionary.com

Corpus of Contemporary American English. english-corpora.org.

Longman Dictionary. ldoceonline.com

Onelook. onelook.com.

Reverso Dictionary. mobile-dictionary.reverso.net

Visual Thesaurus. visualthesaurus.com

Vocabulary Website. vocabulary.com

Word Associations. wordassociations.net



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