Word Play

Building Vocabulary Across Texts and Disciplines, Grades 6–12

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In Summary
A few years ago, the importance of teaching academic vocabulary moved to the forefront of conversation about vocabulary instruction. Lists of academic words hit the Internet and teachers began to plan instruction around key words. Unfortunately, not everyone imagined the same word lists when using the term “academic vocabulary.” Some believed that if we taught only those words that carry meaning across disciplines, kids could be successful on the standardized assessments required under No Child Left Behind. Indeed, those cross-disciplinary lists included many crucial words. *Analyze, compare, contrast, determine, synthesize,* and *conclude* all popped onto chalkboards and into student planners.

Simultaneously, other experts developed lists of terms that can mean very different things when related to different disciplines, and argued that students must know how to use these terms flexibly if they are to understand the discipline at hand. If, for example, a student doesn’t recognize that the word *expression* in mathematics means one thing and in drama another, he will be unable to truly comprehend both disciplines. Marzano and Pickering (2005) contend that without understanding specific academic vocabulary, students will be unable to master the current year’s content. They propose that teachers spend considerable time building students’ background knowledge—that is, teaching missed vocabulary—so that kids will be successful.
Moreover, Marzano stresses that learning new academic terms—and words in general—should be connected to prior learning and word knowledge. How will students learn *simile* and *metaphor* without knowing the word *compare*? How will students distinguish between a tornado and a hurricane as they read if they have never experienced either?

When I was teaching in Kansas, most of my high school students had never been outside their home state. In fact, those who were new to our school in Wichita often commented on how overwhelming that huge city was to them, having moved from smaller towns and farm communities around the state. As a girl who had lived in Chicago, Denver, and Atlanta, I often found our varying perspectives frustrating as I attempted to help my students engage with the texts we were studying. Skyscrapers, oceans, beaches, enormous interstates, and air travel had been a part of my actual experience; they were not just things I’d seen in photographs, movies, television, or on the news, as they were to many of my students. So when working with new vocabulary, I needed to find ways to connect to my students’ realities instead of just working with my own.

When students spend the majority of their school years within a single school system, aligned and spiraled curriculum can allow teachers to build on students’ prior knowledge through curricular experiences. If, for example, I know that all students study the Holocaust in the seventh grade, I can draw on that knowledge when I teach *The Diary of Anne Frank* in eighth grade.

We live in an age of transience. Aside from making some sweeping generalizations based on age, we cannot assume that all students come to school with similar background knowledge and academic vocabulary. A middle school student who moves from Virginia to Texas during middle school will have been taught a great deal of information about Virginia history and very little about Texas history. In addition, that student will understand weather patterns and geography from the perspective of living in the Mid-Atlantic region of the nation, not from living in the Southwest. As teachers, we need to listen to our students to determine their background knowledge and understanding of academic language and build from that point.
We have a big task set for us! Logically, kids must know those words that carry meaning across disciplines. They must also know discipline-specific language and be able to use context to determine which meaning is appropriate. And they must be able to access an ever-growing bank of academic words as the content of their classes becomes more sophisticated. That’s a lot of words!

Academic vocabulary lists are really extensions of the Fry lists (these lists of sight words and common academic words are based on the most frequent words in text). Unfortunately, many teachers believe that they alone are responsible for teaching their students every single word on every single list. Not true! Yes, we teachers should ensure that students know the vocabulary necessary to handle our course work, but that doesn’t necessarily mean that we need to teach each word separately.

Our students aren’t blank slates. They come to us already understanding and able to manipulate a wealth of words. The work we do on teaching vocabulary concepts can extend the knowledge that they already have. As I visit high school language arts classrooms, I notice that a lot of teachers still have kids define *noun*. They contend that the kids still don’t know this information, and yet on our state standards, kids are tested on nouns in third grade. Sometimes I think kids are masters at pulling the wool over our eyes, claiming they have no knowledge just so they can repeat information they have already learned, ensuing an easy course. Other times, I see that kids may be able to recite that a noun is a person, place, thing, or idea, but they have little concept of how nouns function in sentences. Instead of beginning with the definition of nouns, we should add to that basic definition to the deeper understanding of how words work in sentences. This approach not only reinforces learned terminology but also makes that vocabulary more interesting to students.

It’s often tempting to re-teach words kids learned years before (under the notion of review), but instead we should focus on teaching our students the terms that are necessary to understand the new information they are presented with. Whatever discipline we may teach, we have an obligation to teach contextual meanings—and to teach them before kids encounter the words in their daily work. With our colleagues, we need to form a pact to
work together to teach the academic vocabulary that carries meaning across disciplines. Again, curriculum should guide decisions about which words to emphasize when.

When we use sophisticated terminology in our teaching, our students will rise to the occasion. Recently, I heard Kim Oliver, a National Board Certified Teacher and the 2006 Teacher of the Year, speak. She told a story about her kindergartners studying animals that live on land and animals that live in water. They were comparing and contrasting them, and she used that language in the classroom. Although most five-year-olds would use the simpler terms same and different if left to their own devices, this master teacher began building the academic language the children will encounter throughout their years in school.

Ultimately, we divide academic vocabulary into two categories: cross-disciplinary words and discipline-specific words. The following sections will introduce strategies for teaching both.

**Cross-Disciplinary Words**

Much of academic vocabulary is cross-disciplinary. These words often attempt to distinguish a level of analysis or understanding related to learning a discipline or concept. For example, are analyze and evaluate the same? Is one required for the other to occur? How are these terms related? Does one require more depth? If so, how? These are the questions students should ask when they encounter cross-disciplinary academic words. The following strategies help students to take ownership of these words and to use that understanding to grapple with the content at hand.

**Levels of Meaning**

All words are not created equal. If they were, we wouldn’t have so many of them! We select words because of their connotative associations and denotative meanings, to express a specific idea or thought. As I write, I am sur-
rounded by walls painted in *bright* blue, orange, and pink. I call it “the parrot room,” and it serves as my office at home. I selected these colors and painted them on the wall in bold stripes offset by squiggly lines on the “seams.” The inevitable question is *why*? The answer: I decided that if I am going to write a dissertation, I am going to do it in a room that is fun! When people visit our house, I am amused at their responses upon seeing my office for the first time. This room has been described as *fun, colorful, adorable, bright, outrageous*, and *whimsical*. Each of these words implies a different level of intensity. If I were to map them according to their nuances, beginning with the word with the most neutral meaning and progressing on in intensity, I might arrange them like this: *fun* (the most neutral), *adorable* (which can have a youthful and condescending connotation depending on its context but in this situation remains relatively neutral), *colorful, bright, whimsical* (which includes the connotation of color and fun), and *outrageous* (the most intense whether used in a positive or negative way).

When kids map words according to their levels of meaning as I’ve just done with the words describing my office, they get a better picture of the level of analysis or understanding the word implies. This strategy gives students greater access to the language of assessment questions, rubrics, and writing prompts.

**Setup**

Write an academic word on the chalkboard. Ask students to brainstorm words they associate with the selected word and list those to the side. As a class, determine if all of the brainstormed words truly relate to the given word and in what way. Students might say, for example, that to determine *significance* one must first *analyze* and *evaluate* something.

Have students work in groups to level the words, putting the most neutral word first (at the top for a vertical list or left for a horizontal list) and the most powerful word last (either bottom or right). As students work, they should discuss the connotations or definitions that prompt their decisions.
STEP INTO A CLASSROOM

It is the first week of school, and Jim’s ninth-grade students are working with some academic vocabulary words they will encounter throughout the year. From previous experience, Jim has learned that when he reviews and teaches early in the year some of the key terms his school system expects all freshmen to know, students will perform better throughout the year. As students enter the classroom on this hot August Thursday, they see the word plausible written on the board.

Jim begins the lesson saying, “Today we are going to work with some academic words that you already know. But instead of defining them, as many of you are accustomed to doing, we are going to think about relationships among these words. You see the word plausible written on the board. Let’s brainstorm a list of words that we might associate with (or think about when we hear) the word plausible.”

Students begin to call out words: possible, likely, reasonable, actual, realistic, fair, valuable, probable, credible, believable, arguable.

“That’s a great list,” Jim praises. “Do all of these words mean exactly the same thing?”

“No,” Carrie answers.

“What not?” Jim asks, seeking more information.

Carrie sighs, wishing he would ask another student. “If they all meant the same thing, we wouldn’t have all those words.”

“True. Can anyone select two of the words and tell me the difference between them?”

Brian, a willowy boy wearing cowboy boots says, “Possible and likely aren’t the same. Possible means that something could happen, but it may not be likely to happen.”

“Can you give me an example?”

“Sure,” Brian continues. “It’s possible that my parents will let me go to the movies Thursday night, but it isn’t likely because it’s a school night.”

“Good. Can someone else distinguish between another pair?”

Ted, the sci-fi addict, says, “Plausible and realistic aren’t exactly the same. I’m reading Ender’s Game, and the main character, Ender, is a little kid who commands troops to fight aliens. It’s plausible because I don’t know what the future will be like and I guess it could happen, but it’s not really realistic because it isn’t real right now.”

“Okay. So we have a sense that not all of these words mean exactly the same thing. Do we think all of them are related to the word plausible?” Jim asks.

“I guess if we looked in a thesaurus, we could find out if all of them are synonyms. That would tell us,” Jessica replies.
“Yes, but I want you to make that determination on your own. What do you think, Jessica, are all of these related?”
“I guess so.”
“Anyone disagree?” Being that it is the first week of school and Jim knows that his freshmen aren’t likely to take many risks yet, he waits a bit but doesn’t get a response. “Okay, well, let’s try this: In your groups, look over these words and rank them, with the most neutral word first and the most powerful word last. I’m going to give you sticky notes so you can write one word on each sticky note. Then you can move them around until you have a list your group agrees on.”
Jim distributes the sticky notes, and the students get to work. Although Jim moves from group to group, he does not interject himself into the students’ conversations because he wants to gauge students’ reasoning and depth of understanding of word nuances. When he calls the students back together as a class, he asks, “What was the most difficult part of this task?”
Terri quickly responds, “When we think about something being plausible, like in language arts, we think about books, like asking if something could really happen. But not all of these words work in that context, like fair, so we had to think about these words in a lot of ways to get a list.”
“Okay. Would you bring your group’s sticky notes up and put them on the document camera (a machine like an overhead projector but that can project opaque documents, not just transparencies) the same way you have them on your table?”
Terri does. The list is as shown in Figure 7.1.

Figure 7.1  Levels of Meaning

(Continued)
“I’m curious to know why *reasonable* comes before *fair*. Does anyone have any thoughts on this?” Jim asks.

Marcia offers, “Something may seem reasonable, but that doesn’t necessarily make it fair. But I think if something is fair, it also has to be reasonable.”

“Do you have an example?”

Marcia thinks for a minute and then continues, “Well, when my older sister turned sixteen, my parents got her a car, but they are telling me they aren’t going to get me one. They say that we can share my sister’s car and that she can still take me places. I guess this is reasonable because she takes me places now. But it doesn’t seem very fair that she got a car and I won’t get one.”

“But what if your parents got you a car but couldn’t afford the insurance for two cars, one for you and one for your sister?” Zach counters. “That may be fair, but it wouldn’t be reasonable.”

“So do we think this order is correct or incorrect?” Jim asks.

“Even though Zach’s got a good point, I think more often than not, if something is fair, in the larger sense of being just, it is also reasonable.” Marcia replies.

This type of discussion continues, not so much to create one class list of words on which everyone agrees, but to discuss the relative value of the words in relation to one another.

**Differentiation**

This activity may prove particularly difficult for English Language Learners. Not only does academic language present a challenge, but cultural differences may overshadow nuances that native speakers will recognize easily. For example, a student from a socialist society may view the notion of fairness as life necessities (medicine, schooling, child care, and so on) as everyone being provided for equally, thus relating *fair* to *equal*. An American student may have a sense that what is *fair* is what is *right* or *just* for the situation.

When working with academic language, you can help English Language Learners by giving them language objectives in addition to content objectives, and by connecting new vocabulary to mastered vocabulary. For example, *residence* is more specific than *house*, but *house* is likely the word that has been mastered. In addition, creating stories around academic words can increase memory through associations.
Picture It

Similar to the Weighty Words activity (Chapter 4) in concept, this strategy challenges students to create a short digital movie to define, conceptualize, and visually present academic words. Easy to create in Apple iMovie or Windows Movie Maker, or even with a video camera, these quick projects help students capture images to remember academic words.

Setup

Break students into small groups and give each group a word to learn and a blank note card. Ask each group to think about how they can visually represent...

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**STEP INTO A CLASSROOM**

It is September, and after reviewing some key academic words, Rosaura’s eleventh-grade American studies students are making digital movies to demonstrate terminology they will encounter throughout the year. She plans to use the students’ movies over the course of the year to keep key academic language fresh in her students’ minds.

Wanting to emphasize the planning process instead of focusing on the end result, Rosaura has her students create a storyboard in addition to writing their group’s script on a note card.

Reggie, Kirsten, Sari, and Wendy are working with two words: *represent* and *representative*. “What ideas do we have?” Kirsten asks.

“We could do something government-like to show that one person represents a bunch of people,” Reggie suggests, wanting to keep the project simple.

“What about doing something more abstract, like having something morph into a symbol that might represent it?” Sari, a future artist, asks.

“Like what?” Kirsten jumps in.

“Well, like we could have a picture of our town turn into a picture of a flag.”

“Or a picture of the football team could fade into a picture of our school, showing that our athletes represent our school,” Wendy, a cheerleader, says.

“If we do something like that, we could still use Reggie’s idea and have a picture of a bunch of people turn into a picture of our state representative. We could get that off his website,” Kirsten suggests.

As this idea comes together, Sari begins to sketch out storyboard images. Reggie and Wendy agree to gather the digital images of the town, and Kirsten will gather needed images from the web.

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communicate their word’s definition in a quick video that they will present to the class. They should do more than simply demonstrate the word’s denotative meaning, by telling a brief story that shows the word’s connotative meaning as well.

For example, the word *reveal* could easily be demonstrated by hiding an object behind a curtain and then moving the curtain to make the object visible, thus revealing the item. But *reveal* has a deeper meaning that goes beyond simply being able to see a thing’s outward shape. When something is truly revealed, one gets a sense of its inner characteristics as well.

To make this more apparent, the students might create a brief video story. For example, they could show a few kids passing by a lonely student sitting alone in the cafeteria, and then one student stops, introduces himself, and the two eat lunch together—thus revealing the lonely girl’s compassionate nature. The final clip could show a curtain opening to reveal a heart, symbolic of the compassionate boy’s inward quality.

**Differentiation**

If students aren’t proficient with Apple iMovie or Windows Movie Maker, or if you don’t have the time or the equipment to teach this software, students can use video cameras and act out their stories. Indeed, some words may lend themselves more readily to this type of project anyway.

If students struggle to create their own story, have them find their words in other stories. Although there is merit in having students generate story ideas and take those ideas to fruition, giving them a visual representation of words will help them to remember key vocabulary. To differentiate, ask them to look for examples of these key terms in their everyday life.

A couple of years ago when we adopted our son, we took our daughter out of her first-grade class for two weeks to travel with us when we picked him up. She missed the introduction of shapes in her classroom. Wanting her to continue with school work while we traveled, I asked her teacher for some assignments that she could complete to remain on target with what her class would be studying. We agreed that my daughter could take pictures of various shapes as she encountered them on our trip and write in her journal about where she discovered the various items she photographed. My daughter quickly identified the mirror in our hotel room and the wheels
on our van as circles. She didn’t have to draw a circle to demonstrate understanding. The same can be true with words.

Encourage students to find examples of academic words in action in commercials, television shows, or movies. Ask them to look for examples in magazine ads or articles. Ask students to couple the description (or example, if they can physically bring it in) with a brief explanation of why the found example works, and allow that to demonstrate understanding.

**Vocabulary Squares**

Using the same templates as they would use for Morpheme Squares (Chapter 2), students create word puzzles using an academic word and a
synonym (or antonym). To solve these student-created puzzles, an individual works to find the synonym combinations that will allow all of the small square pieces to form one large square.

**Setup**

Use a template with either four or nine squares. These can be created by inserting a table into a text document (or using a ruler and pen and paper).

In this example, I have used four squares, thus making the puzzle relatively simple. In this sample, students are using the following sets of antonyms to create their pieces: synonym/antonym, compare/contrast, debate/concur, plagiarize/author, random/sequence.
After students create the puzzles, they cut them apart on the internal lines. Students may then either work to solve their own puzzle or trade with another student. Although the individual sides may pair in a number of ways, only one combination (most likely) will solve the entire puzzle.

**In Summary**

Although cross-disciplinary academic vocabulary can appear dull on the surface, students must have authentic and meaningful experiences with
these words if they are going to take ownership of them and be able to apply their unique meanings in new situations. Yes, these words appear on many standardized assessments, but more important, they give clues to the depth of the task at hand, allowing students to use them effectively throughout their lives.
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