



## AREA V REGIONAL SUPERINTENDENTS OF SCHOOLS

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*Instructional Implications of the Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts & Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects.*  
**Academic Vocabulary, Grades K-5**

### Session Description

Participants will differentiate the three tiers of words (domain-specific, general academic, and basic), analyze passages to identify examples of the word tiers, and consider appropriate instructional strategies and process for teaching general academic vocabulary.

### Expected Outcomes

- Become familiar with the concept of academic vocabulary (Tier 2 words) and why they are important;
- Become familiar with criteria for selecting Tier 2 words for explicit instruction;
- Explore some strategies and resources for teaching Tier 2 words.

### Agenda

- Welcome and Introduction (5 minutes)
- Three tiers of words (25 minutes)
  - Partner activity – Analyze two or three passages for examples of Tier 1, 2, and 3 words
  - Partner activity – Select a few general academic words on which to focus instruction
- Vocabulary instruction (5 minutes)
- Reflection (10 minutes)
  - Partner activity – How did we do?
  - What's next?
  - Reflection

### Time

- 45 minutes

### Audience

- Designed to be used with groups of K-5 leaders and teachers working with grade level or cross-grade level partners.

### Materials

- Handout copy of PowerPoint slides (suggested 6 slides per page)
- Handout Reading and Language Standards Related to Vocabulary Grades K – 5
- Handout Text Exemplars for Grades 2-3 and 4-5
- Handout Reflections

### Resources/References

- Appendix A, Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts & Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects [http://www.corestandards.org/assets/Appendix\\_A.pdf](http://www.corestandards.org/assets/Appendix_A.pdf)
- Appendix B, Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts & Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects [http://www.corestandards.org/assets/Appendix\\_B.pdf](http://www.corestandards.org/assets/Appendix_B.pdf)

- Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts & Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects  
[http://www.corestandards.org/assets/CCSSI\\_ELA%20Standards.pdf](http://www.corestandards.org/assets/CCSSI_ELA%20Standards.pdf)

### **Slide 1**

**Welcome** participants, and introduce the subject for today.

**Suggest** that participants sit in small groups with others who teach the same grade level(s).

**Check** to see that everyone has the handouts.

**Explain** that one of the instructional implications of implementing the CCSS will be an increased emphasis on building students' academic vocabularies.

**For instance, the facilitator might say,**

"We have seen how preparing students to be college and career ready by graduation will mean an increased emphasis on reading informational text and an increase in the level of text complexity. Preparing students to proceed up this "staircase" of text difficulty will require an increased emphasis on helping students learn academic vocabulary they will encounter in texts across a broad range of topics and disciplines."

### **Slide 2**

**Go over** the expected outcomes for this session.

**For instance, the facilitator might say,**

"Today we will look at a three-tiered model of vocabulary, with the focus on the tier that is referred to in the Standards as "general academic words": We'll take a look at what differentiates these words from the other tiers of words and why it is so important to include these in instruction."

### **Slide 3**

**Explain** that learning and using vocabulary is an important part of the Common Core State Standards, and references to it appear throughout the grade-level standards.

**Draw** participants' attention to the Handout Reading and Language Standards Related to Vocabulary K-5 for examples. Point out that Language Standard 6 and Reading Standard 4 (grades 3-5 Informational Text) refer specifically to "general academic words."

**For instance, the facilitator might say,**

"Acquiring and using language is an important part of the CCSS, appearing in the standards for reading, writing, speaking and listening, and language at all grade levels."

One emphasis which may represent a bit of a shift in classroom practice is on acquiring and using what are termed 'general academic words.' These are words of great importance to understanding academic writing, but they are words that many students, especially those learning English, may not comprehend because this vocabulary is neither the language of everyday conversation nor the subject-area 'hard words' traditionally included in the explicit content instruction."

### **Slide 4**

**Explain** that this three-tiered model of vocabulary categorizes words based on their frequency in texts (more to less frequently occurring) and applicability (broader to narrower) as you progress up the triangle.

**For instance, the facilitator might say,**

“The Common Core State Standards refer to a model that describes three tiers of words, categorized by their frequency in texts (more to less frequently occurring) and applicability (broader to narrower) from bottom to top.

- Tier 1 (at the bottom) consists of the basic words that most students at a particular grade level will know. These are the everyday words of conversation, and most of them are learned from the speech of children and adults around them. They are not considered a challenge to the average native speaker and comprise the bulk of words children know.
- Tier 2 (in the middle) consists of general academic words and is our focus today. These are the words that have utility across a wide range of topics and in many curriculum areas. Students will encounter and learn most of these words through reading text, rather than in conversation, and through explicit classroom instruction. They are especially important because building a strong academic vocabulary is key to comprehending academic text.
- Tier 3 (at the top) consists of the highly specific disciplinary vocabulary words that lack generalization – low-frequency words needed to understand the concept under study.”

### **Slide 5**

**Explain** the three tiers of words.

**For instance, the facilitator might say,**

“Tier 1 words are not usually a challenge to the average native speaker, though English language learners will have to attend carefully to them. They are the words that most students can be expected to know at a given grade level. Many, perhaps most, of these words are acquired through conversation and without deliberate effort.

Tier 2 words, in contrast, are far more likely to appear in written texts than in everyday speech. They appear in all sorts of texts, from technical to literary, are highly generalizable, and consequently have high utility both for reading and writing. They often represent subtle or precise ways to label things or convey known ideas or concepts. Unlike Tier 1 words, they usually require a more deliberate effort to acquire.

Tier 3 words are specific to a domain or field of study and are key to understanding a new concept within a text or content area. Because they are closely tied to the content knowledge of the discipline, they are far more frequent in informational text than in literature. Recognized as new and “hard” words for most readers (particularly student readers), they are often explicitly defined by the author of a text, used repeatedly throughout the text, and otherwise heavily scaffolded (for instance, made a part of a glossary). They are typically explicitly taught as part of the unit of study.

### **Slide 6**

**Explain** that Tier 3 words are often defined within the text, and students need to be taught to recognize the syntax clues, such as the two commas that set off nominal apposition (“animals that eat plants, herbivores, may be found...”) or the various ways the term “called” is used in embedded clauses (such as “a special kind of doctor called an anesthesiologist ...”). The excerpts on the slide are taken from the CCSS Informational Text Exemplars for grades 4-5.

**For instance, the facilitator might say,**

“Here are four little excerpts from the Grades 4-5 Informational Text Exemplar handouts. They illustrate very well how Tier 3 words are often defined within the text. It is important, of course, to teach students how to recognize the syntax and diction cues that indicate a term is being defined.

One frequently used sentence structure is the appositive, where a synonym is set off by commas, as in “animals that eat plants [comma] herbivores [comma] may be found ...” When the word *or* is added, as in

the first two examples here, a potential misreading of the text becomes possible. So, we want students to recognize that here the word *or* means ‘*in other words*’ rather than ‘*either ... or.*’ Otherwise, they may misread the sentence as ‘Light [either] reflects or bounces off objects.’

Words such as ‘called’ are often used to signal a definition and may be used in embedded clauses, such as ‘an invisible gas called water vapor is produced...’; this construction can also be misread, as in ‘a special kind of doctor called an anesthesiologist ...’ (But the doctor didn’t call the anesthesiologist.)”

### **Slide 7**

**Explain** that it is important to explicitly teach key academic words because students are unlikely to pick them up from spoken language, in contrast to Tier 1 words; and authors are unlikely to define them within the text or include them in a glossary, in contrast to Tier 3 words.

#### **For instance, the facilitator might say,**

“Because Tier 3 words are obviously unfamiliar to most students, contain the ideas necessary to a new topic, and are recognized as both important and specific to the subject area in which they are instructing students, teachers often define Tier 3 words prior to students encountering them in a text and then reinforce their acquisition throughout a lesson. Unfortunately, this is not typically the case with Tier 2 words, which by definition are not unique to a particular discipline and as a result are not the clear responsibility of a particular content area teacher.

What is more, many Tier 2 words are far less well defined by contextual clues in the texts in which they appear and are far less likely to be defined explicitly within a text than are Tier 3 words. Yet Tier Two words are frequently encountered in complex written texts and are particularly powerful because of their wide applicability to many sorts of reading.

The Catch 22 is that since most of these words are acquired through reading, struggling readers don’t acquire them at the same rate as proficient readers. Then, their lack of knowledge of these words, in turn, discourages them even more from reading grade-appropriate material.

So, teachers need to be alert to the presence of key Tier 2 words and determine which ones need careful attention.”

### **Slide 8**

**Explain** that because relatively few vocabulary words will be taught explicitly in a year, the words need to be carefully selected.

#### **For instance, the facilitator might say,**

“K-3 students are exposed to roughly 3,000 new words throughout the year. Ten percent of these words should be taught systematically, across all subject areas. Divided by the range of content students need to know (e.g., math, science, history, literature), of these 300–350 words, roughly 60 words can be taught within one subject area each year. A reasonable number of words to study each week is about 10. Consequently, vocabulary for instruction needs to be carefully selected.”

### **Slide 9**

**Explain** that these criteria can help teachers select academic words to include in explicit instruction.

#### **For instance, the facilitator might say,**

“So many words – so little time! Here are several criteria to help teachers select high-value words on which to focus instructional time.

The first consideration is the importance or centrality of the word to understanding a text under study. What does it convey that another, similar word would not? Precision? Specificity? A nuanced description?

For instance, the piece about light excerpted in Slide 6 has many, many academic words one *could* teach in addition to the many domain-specific words. So, the teacher will want to select the general terms that are most central to this particular text. Words like *image* and *visible* are more important to understanding this text than are *soars*, *scan*, *scurried*, and *beady*, used in the opening paragraphs to describe a falcon and a field mouse.

The second consideration is how useful this word will be to the readers or writers as they approach other texts and other contexts. Is it a word likely to appear frequently across content areas and subjects? Does it have multiple meanings, and are students likely to encounter it used differently than it is here? For instance, the word *image* refers here to an optical representation, but we can predict that students will encounter it as it is applied to a mental picture, an artistic representation, a close likeness, public opinion.

The third consideration is whether the word holds the instructional promise of rich connections, both to the students' experiences and prior knowledge and to other key concepts or groups of words. For example, *image* can be extended to *imagery* in art and literature, *imaginary*, *imagination*."

### **Slide 10**

**Invite** participants to work with partners or in small groups to identify Tier 3 and Tier 2 words, as well as a few Tier 1 words that may require additional instruction for non-native speakers.

#### **For instance, the facilitator might say,**

"Let's take a look at the words in three of the selections from the CCSS document. Working with partners or small groups, read the selections and select some words you would assign to the three tiers.

The middle selection, from *14 Cows for America*, is included in the 'read-aloud' selections for grades 2-3, and is interesting because there are quite a few 'big words' in it. Think about which ones a teacher might focus on for a 3<sup>rd</sup> grade read-aloud versus which ones a teacher might include for 4<sup>th</sup> or 5<sup>th</sup> grade independent reading."

### **Slide 11**

**Explain** the words chosen for "14 Cows..." passage, and **invite** participants to share their word selections for it and the other two passages.

#### **For instance, the facilitator might say,**

"Here are some examples of Tier 3 and Tier 1 words you might have included – although this would certainly vary depending on whether the teacher was using this as a read-aloud for 3<sup>rd</sup> graders or a reading selection for 5<sup>th</sup> graders.

The terms Nairobi and Maasai are non-generalizable domain-specific terms with very limited utility; we would not expect students to encounter them with any frequency at all unless they were studying this particular geographic region. The extent to which the teacher would deal with these terms would depend on the age of the students and the context of the lesson. In a 5<sup>th</sup> grade world geography unit, Nairobi and Maasi could be part of a unit of study; for younger students, a teacher's brief explanation that these are names for a town and a group of people in Africa would be sufficient.

The terms *tribe*, *tribal*, and especially *elders* have more broad application, but still are not terms we would expect intermediate students to encounter frequently.

*Diplomat*, *diplomatic*, and *embassy* are included here as Tier 3 words for younger students, but a teacher might choose to treat them as Tier 2 words for older students studying world nations, and perhaps

broadening the study to include the concepts of personal conduct (e.g., a diplomatic way to correct someone) and broader concept of ambassador (e.g., the injured owl became an ambassador for wildlife).

Tier 1 words to pay attention to for English language learners could include the idioms *sent word* and *sit up* as well as less frequently used words such as *village* or multisyllabic words such as *ordinary*.

What words did you come up with for this and the two other passages?"

### **Slide 12**

**Explain** that most reading selections will have far too many Tier 2 words to teach in depth, so strategic planning of which words to include is critical.

**For instance, the facilitator might say,**

"So now let's look at the words you identified as Tier 2 words. As you can tell by these very brief passages, grade-appropriate complex text will contain more Tier 2 words than students can learn to comprehend deeply at one time. Consequently, it is critical that teachers plan strategically -- first, what texts to include, and then second, what Tier 2 words to study in depth.

That leaves the question of what to do about the words one does not teach in depth. One suggestion is to use synonyms or graphics so children can move past the word relatively quickly and still comprehend the passage. For instance, in the "14 Cows..." selection, many students may not know what a 'jeep' is, and the word choice (rather than simply *car*) does reinforce the picture of *jounces* and *dusty, rugged road*. However, there are far too many terms in the whole passage to teach in depth, and *jeep* is not a high-utility word, nor are we aiming for deep comprehension of it. So, a simple synonym or graphic to help students get the sense of it would probably be the best choice."

Using these short versions of the criteria for selecting Tier 2 words, winnow down your lists to the few you might select to teach in depth. Remember, you are looking at very small excerpts of larger works the students would be reading – full of even more Tier 2 words. So, you will probably need to pare down your list to just a couple."

*[Allow 5 minutes for partners to work.]*

### **Slide 13**

**Model** the task.

**For instance, the facilitator might say,**

"Here are some suggestions for Tier 2 words in the short excerpt from '14 Cows for America.' The whole selection is included in Appendix B of the Common Core State Standards and is about six times as long as this excerpt, so we would expect many times more Tier 2 words in the entire passage. So the difficult question becomes which words to invest in? Which words can be seen as useful 'tools' which students will encounter frequently at this grade level? Which words will they have multiple subsequent opportunities to use and make their own?

There is no 'right' answer, of course, and much depends on the context in which the passage is used, the grade level of the students, the subsequent texts and writing opportunities students will have – as well as the words contained in the rest of the text.

At the top of the list, I might put the word *respond* because of its high utility and also because it has multiple meanings students are likely to encounter (*reply, react, react favorably to treatment*). It lends itself to teaching within a family of related words such as *response, responsible, responsive* that are also high frequency.



However, the word is not particularly important to the reader's understanding of this text, so if I had to choose one, I might select instead the term *ceremony* and teach it with the web of words that in this selection distinguish a *ceremony* from a mere *event*."

What ideas for this or the other two selections did you come up with?

#### **Slide 14**

**Explain** that vocabulary instruction should include both instructions on the meaning of words as well as instruction in word-learning strategies.

**For instance, the facilitator might say,**

"Selecting words to invest our time in is followed, of course, by the instruction itself. Vocabulary instruction should include, over time if not in every lesson, instruction both in the meaning of specific words and in word-learning strategies.

In teaching the meaning of specific words, this slide lists several powerful procedures to include during initial instruction. Many of these are included in Language Standard 5. There is, additionally, one emphasis in the standards that is not reflected in this slide: When using synonyms to teach the meaning of a word and to link it to other known words, it is important to also discuss the nuances, the 'shades of meaning,' that distinguish them.

When we look at Language Standard 4, we see that knowledge of common inflections and affixes begins in kindergarten and progresses through Greek and Latin affixes and roots in grades 4 and 5. Likewise, using context as clues to meaning begins in grade 1 and continues through grade 5. Incidentally, these both carry all the way through to the 11-CCR level, as well, since they continue to be strategies relevant to all mature readers."

#### **Slide 15**

**Invite** participants to fill in the planning handout (included on page 2 of the Text Exemplar handout) for one of the general academic words they identified earlier.

**For instance, the facilitator might say,**

- It begins by setting the purpose for learning, identifying for students what the learning objective is and why it is important. *[briefly discuss example]*
- The critical details that define the concept being learned are identified and thoroughly addressed. *[discuss example]*
- Highly specific examples and non-examples limit the range of interpretations students might reach. Examples of concepts are carefully selected and the number and range of examples illustrating the dimensions of a target concept (as well as closely related concepts) are carefully planned beforehand. *[discuss example]*
- Current learning objectives are expressly connected to previously learned material. Obviously, this will be much easier if potential connections are included well in advance as units are planned, texts selected, and learning activities identified.

On the second page of the Text Exemplar handout, you will find the handout. With a partner or two, please take a few minutes to add the elements for one of the Tier 2 words you identified." *[Allow a few minutes to work. Invite participants to share some examples.]*

#### **Slide 16**

**Explain** that learning vocabulary requires sufficient practice, review, and deep processing over time in order for students to know and use the vocabulary without hesitation.

**For instance, the facilitator might say,**

“Deep comprehension of new vocabulary requires practice, review, and deep processing over time. Instruction that includes practice and review activities requiring students to think deeply about a word and its relationships is more likely to be effective. Overall, review must be sufficient to enable a student to know and use vocabulary without hesitation; be distributed over time; be cumulative, with vocabulary integrated into more complex tasks; and be varied so vocabulary use can be applied to multiple contexts and used to illustrate a wide application of student understanding.

For instance, a variety of experiences around each new word might begin with students putting a student-friendly definition into their own words and include practicing using the word in a variety of contexts, creating pictures, graphics, or semantic maps; participating in games, story-telling, and discussions that link new words to words that students already know; and other active learning strategies distributed over time.”

**Slide 17**

**Invite** participants to turn to partners to answer the questions.

**For instance, the facilitator might say,**

Let’s take a few minutes for the ‘think-pair’ part where you consider each question, think about the answer, and discuss it briefly with a partner.”

**Slide 18**

**Suggest** the activities listed as possible follow-ups to this session.

**Invite** participants to fill out the Reflections page.