

Academic Vocabulary and the CCSS

ACADEMIC VOCABULARY DEFINED

Vocabulary can broadly be divided into three categories, or tiers, based upon the characteristics of the words in question and the stages at which children learn such words. Initially, children grasp Tier 1 words from oral conversation. These are the basic and concrete words of everyday speech like *walk*, *said*, and *car*. At the opposite end of the spectrum are discipline and domain specific words students acquire when studying particular subject matter. These Tier 3 words—like *oligarchy*, *photosynthesis*, and *carburetor*—are highly specialized vocabulary used to describe content knowledge. Their low occurrence rate typically leads to them being explicitly defined by the teacher or the text itself (e.g. “Jim Crow laws were segregation statues that ensured white supremacy”).

Between everyday Tier 1 words and content specific Tier 3 words lay *general* academic vocabulary known as Tier 2 words. These precise and yet more abstract words like *saunter*, *boasted*, and *vehicle* largely stem from written sources. Because of their generality and frequent appearance across content areas—as well as their rich representational quality, multiple meanings (depending on context), and connection to other words—these Tier 2 words have high utility, and should be the focus of academic vocabulary instruction. Despite these features, they are seldom defined or scaffolded within texts.

ACADEMIC VOCABULARY AND THE CCSS

The College and Career Ready Standards of the CCSS articulate a range of expectations regarding what students should be able to do with regards to academic vocabulary:

- Interpret technical, connotative, and figurative meanings of words and phrases (**READING ANCHOR STANDARD 4**)
- Analyze how specific word choices shape meaning or tone (**READING ANCHOR STANDARD 4**)
- Determine or clarify the meaning of unknown and multiple-meaning words and phrases by using context clues, analyzing meaningful word parts, and consulting reference materials (**LANGUAGE ANCHOR STANDARD 4**)
- Demonstrate understanding of figurative language, word relationships, and nuances in word meanings (**LANGUAGE ANCHOR STANDARD 5**)
- Acquire and use accurately a range of general academic and domain-specific words and phrases (**LANGUAGE ANCHOR STANDARD 6**)
- Demonstrate independence in gathering vocabulary knowledge when encountering an unknown term (**LANGUAGE ANCHOR STANDARD 6**)

KEY ELEMENTS OF ACADEMIC VOCABULARY

Academic vocabulary has been shown to be a critical element in reading comprehension and academic achievement, yet the lack of frequent and systematic instruction with academic vocabulary as its focus is a primary cause of the achievement gap. Helping students build a rich understanding of words is therefore crucial, and students must be exposed to and taught such words in multiple contexts: through direct instruction as well as in context through discussion, reading and/or being read to, and responding to what they hear or read. Teachers thus need to be alert to the presence of Tier 2 words and carefully make professional judgments about which words to devote instructional time to learning. Many of these words can be learned by helping students pay close attention to context. Teachers should use their professional judgment to determine whether or not there is sufficient support in the text for determining meaning.

CHECKLIST FOR SELECTING ACADEMIC VOCABULARY FOR CLOSE READING INSTRUCTION

Typically there are many Tier 2 words in a sample text, which necessitates that teachers must choose from among them which to concentrate on. Since academic vocabulary supports close reading, words should be selected for closer investigation specifically when they meet one or more of the following criteria:

- Does the word significantly impact the meaning of the text (e.g. shape plot, mood or point of view)?
- Does it illustrate nuance in an author’s choice of words (e.g. *admitted* versus *confessed*)?
- Will it help students be more precise in describing ideas and concepts that they understand?
- Does the word have strong general utility (i.e. will students likely to see the word appear often in other texts?)
- Does the word belong to a high-utility semantic word family (e.g. base, basic, basically)
- Is understanding the word necessary to avoid confusion or guide understanding?
- Does it connect to other words, ideas, or experiences that the students know or have been learning?
- Will it be of use to students in their own writing (including when writing in response to the text)?
- Are there multiple meanings based on context that would point to a higher frequency of use (e.g., Texas was *admitted* to the union, he *admitted* his errors, *admission* was too expensive)?

ACADMIC VOCABULARY AND TEXT DEPENDENT QUESTIONS

The process identified for creating text dependent questions—framing a portion of the text and juxtaposing it against a standard based reading skill—should be used when constructing questions about academic vocabulary. Consider the following questions about the opening of Lewis Carroll’s *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*:

CCS Anchor Standard Focus	Text Dependent Question
Analyze how specific word choices shape meaning or tone (READING ANCHOR STANDARD 4)	How does the phrase “worth the trouble” set the tone of the opening two paragraphs?
Determine or clarify the meaning of unknown and multiple-meaning words and phrases by using context clues, analyzing meaningful word parts, and consulting reference materials (LANGUAGE ANCHOR STANDARD 4)	What clues are there in the passage about the meaning of the word “bank” in the first sentence?
Acquire and use accurately a range of general academic and domain-specific words and phrases (LANGUAGE ANCHOR STANDARD 6)	Use the phrase “flashed across her mind” in a sentence of your own that demonstrates your grasp of its meaning.

In sum, to fully absorb the meaning of Tier 2 words, students need actively think about and use academic vocabulary in multiple contexts.