



National Center on  
Improving Literacy

# EXPLICIT VOCABULARY INSTRUCTION TO BUILD EQUITABLE ACCESS FOR ALL LEARNERS

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Office of Special Education Programs  
U.S. Department of Education



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**Boston University** Wheelock College of Education  
& Human Development



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## NCIL Mission

*To increase access to, and use of, evidence-based approaches to screen, identify, and teach students with literacy-related disabilities, including dyslexia*

Identify or develop free or low-cost evidence-based assessment tools for identifying students at risk of not attaining full literacy skills due to a disability

Priority 1

Identify evidence-based literacy instruction, strategies, and accommodations, including assistive technology, designed to meet the specific needs of such students

Priority 2

Provide families of such students with information, and collaborate with parent training centers

Priority 3

Identify or develop evidence-based PD for teachers, paraprofessionals, principals, other school leaders, and specialized instructional support personnel

Priority 4

Disseminate the products of the comprehensive center to regionally diverse SEAs, LEAs, regional educational agencies, and schools

Priority 5



# The 5 Big Ideas of Beginning Reading

**Infographic:** <https://improvingliteracy.org/brief/5-big-ideas-beginning-reading>

**Videos:** <https://youtube.com/playlist?list=PLZXVpwHTPnn3d3ojpqMNE0Fa2ZUw3qIGT>

## The 5 Big Ideas of Beginning Reading

Comprehension is the goal of reading. We use the other four big ideas to build up to reading comprehension. This can start with listening comprehension for pre-readers and readers who are still learning how to decode.

### Phonemic Awareness



The ability to identify and play with individual sounds in spoken words. Practice blending phonemes prepares students to read words, and practice segmenting phonemes prepares them to spell words.

### Phonics



Understanding how letters and groups of letters link to sounds to form letter-sound relationships and spelling patterns. It involves learning letter-sound correspondences and common spelling patterns. Phonics supports decoding and spelling and leads to fluent reading.

### Vocabulary



Knowing what words mean and how to say and use them correctly. Many word meanings are learned through reading, but before students can read text on their own, vocabulary can be taught through oral language interactions and reading books aloud.

### Fluency



The ability to read words, phrases, sentences, and stories correctly, with enough speed and expression. When decoding skills become automatic, students can more easily focus their attention on understanding words and text. Fluency is the bridge to comprehension.

### Reading Comprehension



The ability to understand what you are reading. In addition to vocabulary and fluent reading of text, reading comprehension requires background knowledge, understanding sentence and text structures, monitoring understanding, and connecting ideas.



## EXPLICIT VOCABULARY INSTRUCTION TO BUILD EQUITABLE ACCESS FOR ALL LEARNERS

The best approach to beginning reading instruction for students with or at risk for literacy-related disabilities incorporates explicit instruction in five areas: phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, **vocabulary**, and comprehension (National Reading Panel, 2000).

## The Educator's Science of Reading Toolbox

By the National Center on Improving Literacy in Partnership with The Reading League Journal

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The best approach to beginning reading instruction for students with or at risk for literacy-related disabilities incorporates explicit instruction in five areas: phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension (National Reading Panel, 2000). These are known as the "5 Big Ideas" in beginning reading. While the research is clear on *what* to teach, knowing *how* to teach these pieces can be challenging. To start, there is overwhelming evidence that in order to maximize struggling readers' meaningful access to the 5 Big Ideas in the reading curriculum, teachers must provide systematic and explicit instruction in each area (Gersten et al., 2009). Instruction that is vague and ambiguous may prove to be confusing to struggling readers. Providing explicit instruction in each of the 5 Big Ideas ensures equitable access for the range of learners in our classrooms. Put another way, not providing struggling readers explicit instructional supports to access the curriculum is unjust and inequitable (Fien, Chard, & Baker, 2021). This Educator's Toolbox provides practical ways to incorporate explicit vocabulary instruction within your classroom to ensure your vocabulary lessons are accessible to all learners.

#### What Is Vocabulary and Why Is It Important?

Vocabulary refers to the words we must know in order to comprehend and communicate effectively. In general, vocabulary can be described as either oral vocabulary or reading vocabulary. Oral vocabulary refers to words that we use in speaking or recognize when listening. Reading vocabulary refers to words we recognize or use in print. The primary way that students develop a robust vocabulary is through wide and independent reading (Stanovich, 1986). However, we must also teach students vocabulary before they learn to read, and we must continue to explicitly teach vocabulary to students who struggle to learn to read in the early grades (Beck & McKeown, 2007).

Vocabulary plays an important part in learning to read. Instruction and intervention in language-based skills, including language, vocabulary, and listening comprehension, should start at the very



# Vocabulary

Words we must know in order to comprehend and communicate.

- Oral vocabulary speaking/listening
- Reading vocabulary - recognize or use in print

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# How Do Students Learn Vocabulary?

- Indirect - conversations, listening, reading
- Direct - explicit instruction

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# Specific Word Instruction

Specific word instruction should occur before, during, and after reading.

## Four Steps:

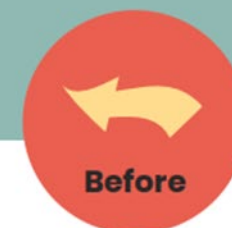
Step 1: Select the Word

Step 2: Provide a Student-Friendly Definition

Step 3: Illustrate the Word

Step 4: Check Student Understanding

## Example Vocabulary Lesson



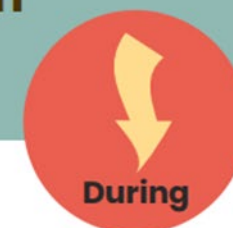
**Before**

**Teacher**

The title of this book is *The Grouchy Ladybug*. **Grouchy** means grumpy or angry. Someone who is grouchy is not happy.

**Prompts**

- What does grouchy mean?
- Show me with your face what grouchy looks like.
- Look at the book cover again. How would you describe the ladybug on the cover?



**During**

**Teacher**

When discussing story elements, like the main character, use the target word to describe the ladybug.

**Example**

"The grouchy ladybug is grouchy, mean, and not polite."

Prompts like the following can be used to promote additional discussion and interaction.

**Teacher Prompt**



**Discuss**

Encourage students to use the target word and to use full sentences in their responses.

**Student Response**

"Take a moment and share with your partner about a time when you felt grouchy. Now, who can tell me a time when you felt grouchy?"



"I felt grouchy this morning when my sister woke me up."

"When you're grouchy, you're in a grumpy, bad mood. Tell me how that feels."



"When I'm being grouchy, it feels like I'm not happy about anything."

"If someone is grouchy, how are they acting? What do they do? What do their face and body look like?"



"Grouchy people never smile, and they just sit there all slouchy."



- In what ways are teachers' current instruction reflective of specific word instruction suggested in the article?
- What challenges and opportunities exist for implementing these instruction in your divisions?
- What resources and support are needed to implement these practices in your divisions?



## Free Resources

- [Foundations in Emergent Literacy: Snapshot Series \(REL-SE\)](#)
- [Identify and Define Multiple-Meaning Words in Context: Gr. 1 \(NCII\)](#)
- [Vocabulary Instructional Routine: New Vocabulary: Gr. 2 \(NCII\)](#)
- [Vocabulary Instructional Routine Third Grade: Base Words and Affixes: Gr. 3 \(NCII\)](#)
- [Teaching Academic Content and Literacy to English Learners in Elementary and Middle School \(WWC\)](#)
- [Teaching Newcomer English Learners: Four Powerful Vocabulary Practices Video \(REL-NW\)](#)
- [10 Key Vocabulary Practices for All Schools \(MCPER\)](#)

