

## Module 1:

Instructional Implications of the Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts & Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects.  
Session 4: Academic Vocabulary, Grades 6 – 12 ELA & Content Areas



### 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 Module 1, Session 4 ELA & Literacy

### Resources/References

- Appendix A, Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts & Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects  
<http://www.ode.state.or.us/wma/teachlearn/commoncore/ela-appendix-a.pdf>
- Appendix B, Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts & Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects  
<http://www.ode.state.or.us/wma/teachlearn/commoncore/ela-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)
- *Oregon Literacy Plan—K-12*, K-12 Teachers: Building Comprehension in the Common Core  
<http://www.ode.state.or.us/teachlearn/subjects/elarts/reading/literacy/have-you-ever.pdf>

- *Oregon Literacy Plan*—K-12, Chapter 3: Instruction, Oregon K-12 Literacy Framework <http://www.ode.state.or.us/teachlearn/subjects/elarts/reading/literacy/chapter-3-instruction.pdf>

### **Slide 1**

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

**Suggest** that participants sit with partners.

**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; why it is so important to include these in instruction; and some of the strategies that are included in the resources that are part of the Oregon Literacy Plan."

### **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 6-12 for examples. Point out that Language Standard 6 refers 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 toward 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 peers and adults around them. They are not considered a challenge to the average native speaker and comprise the bulk of words students 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 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. The excerpts on the slide are taken from the CCSS Informational Text Exemplars for grades 6-8.

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

“Here are five excerpts from the Grades 6-8 Informational Text Exemplars in Appendix B of the CCSS document. 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.”

**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,**

“Students can learn and retain a deep understanding of relatively few words in a school setting. In addition, instructional time is precious, so carefully selection of which general academic words to invest in is doubly important.”

### **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 fractals excerpted in Slide 6 has many academic words one *could* teach in addition to the domain-specific words. So, the teacher will want to select the general terms that are most central to this particular text. Words like *structure*, *pattern*, *generate*, and *infinite* are more important to understanding this text than are “IBM fellow” or *conceived*.

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 *structure* refers here to the arrangement of parts of physical objects in nature, but we can predict that students will encounter it as it is applied to the organization of any complex system.

Students are likely to encounter the concept of *structure* across the curriculum -- in language and literature, biological and physical sciences, social sciences.”

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. It might in this case be an opportunity to look at roots and prefixes, for instance, using students’ knowledge of *construct* to extend to *construe*, *Reconstruction*, *obstruct*, and others.

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### **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 a the words in several of the selections from the CCSS document. Working with partners or small groups, read the last excerpt, from *Innumeracy*, and one or two others and select some words you would assign to the three tiers.”

### **Slide 11**

**Explain** the words chosen in the passage from *Innumeracy*, 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 for the passage from *Innumeracy*. The Tier 3 words – or domain specific words – are ones we would not expect to find applied broadly and in multiple ways. The first two are key to the main point of the passage.

The Tier 1 words that might pose problems for non-native speakers include ones they would have heard infrequently, such as *lever*, figures of speech such as *bottleneck*, or *resisted* as it is used here.

What words did you come up with for this and the 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 excerpts, 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, brief definitions, or graphics so students can move past the word relatively quickly and still comprehend the passage. For instance, knowing what the term *fulcrum* refers to is critical to understanding the Archimedes reference, and students familiar with the term *lever* may have forgotten the companion term *fulcrum*. However, a brief reference to it or simple graphic might be sufficient to remind students.”

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 excerpts of larger works the students would be reading – full of even more Tier 2 words. Additionally, consider that every content area teacher

will be selecting words to teach, as well. So, you will probably need to pare down your list to just a few really critical words.”

*[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 *Innumeracy*. This is a very short passage, and we would expect many more Tier 2 words in larger works assigned to students. So the difficult question becomes which of these words to invest in? Which of these 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.

Let’s look at “*Innumeracy*.” *Intractable* is likely a new generalizable word for many students. It is not central to the meaning of the text, however: The author could have just said *difficult* and gotten the point across. Nor is it likely to be frequently encountered. But I would include it here as a word that adds impact, or, as one that is a more precise term for a known concept. Several of the words have prefixes dealing with scale (*mini-*, *nano-*, *micro-*) and might be taught together.

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

### **Slide 14**

**Explain** that vocabulary instruction should include both instruction 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. For instance, what is the impact of the term *intractable* versus another term, such as *stubborn*. Or *vastness* instead of *enormity*.

When we look at Language Standard 4, we see that using knowledge of affixes and roots and using context as clues to meaning continues from grade 5 all the way through the 11-CCR level, since they continue to be strategies relevant to all mature readers. The last group of words in the prior slide would provide a good opportunity to focus on prefixes conveying *smallness*, for example.”

### **Slide 15**

**Explain** that explicit instruction is one of the nine Effective Teacher Delivery Features in the Oregon K-12 Literacy Framework. Planning should include the elements listed.

**Invite** participants to fill in the planning checklist (included on page 3 of the Text Exemplar handout) for one of the general academic words they identified earlier.



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

“The Oregon K-12 Literacy Framework also includes a section on Effective Teacher Delivery Features, one of which is explicit instruction. Advance planning includes these elements; instruction includes modeling and other systematic, explicit approaches. Let’s take a look at elements to include in advance planning for explicit instruction of academic vocabulary.

- 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 last page of the Text Exemplar handout, you will find the checklist. 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,**

“The *Oregon K-12 Literacy Framework* includes many, many more strategies for supporting students before, during, and after reading. One that they include for after reading is think-pair-share to increase factual recall and conceptual understanding of content information.

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.