

Students expand their knowledge of word depth and apply it to more and more words, ideally at an increasing rate.

This is all well and good on a theoretical level, but how does it play out in practice? Over the next few modules, we'll look at the different ways teachers can increase both the breadth and depth of student vocabulary.

MODULE
6.2

Explicit Vocabulary Instruction: The Daily Word Rollout to Achieve Deep Word Knowledge

Explicit Vocabulary Instruction should take place frequently—daily is common, perhaps even preferred—and should focus on a limited number of words, often even a single word or perhaps a pair of words. It follows, in general, a four-step process, beginning with **word selection**.

STEP 1: WORD SELECTION

Here's a simple but critically important fact about words, one that we cited in chapter 5 but that bears repeating: the number of different words that occur in printed texts far exceeds the number of words that occur in spoken discourse. Given the opportunity to write, we choose words carefully and precisely. The formality and permanence of the endeavor, not to mention the ease of parsing, cause us to select words more intentionally. We use words we might not consider when speaking. The result is that many of the words critical to understanding written text occur very rarely in spoken language.

Consider the data we referenced earlier from Jim Trelease's *Read-Aloud Handbook*: a typical children's book uses almost 31 rare words per 1,000. That's three times more rare words than adults use when they speak to children (9.3 rare words per 1,000) and also almost twice as many rare words as adults use when speaking to *other adults* (17.3 per 1,000). As students grow older, the rare words premium for written language increases. A book written for an adult audience uses 52.7 rare words per 1,000.⁴

Beyond telling us that it's important for students to read a lot to develop their vocabularies, these statistics tell us that the words that make reading challenging *generally don't occur in spoken language*. Functionally, they are nearly exclusive to written discourse. Therefore, it is critical to focus vocabulary instruction on those words that students won't hear through conversation.

One of the most powerful ideas from *Bringing Words to Life* is that words have differing levels of utility.⁵ Beck and her colleagues identify a three-tier hierarchy that is useful when deciding which words deserve “instructional attention.” Tier 1 words, they say, are those that are simple and familiar. They occur in general use and are therefore not really worth teaching. Tier 3 words are technical vocabulary that’s specific to a particular discipline or subject (for example, *chromosome*, *thoracic*, *fiefdom*). For general vocabulary instruction, Tier 3 vocabulary occur too rarely and specifically to have maximum return.

The most useful words to teach, they say, are those in the middle: Tier 2 words. Tier 2 words are highly useful, appear primarily in print, and are likely to appear in multiple contexts or with varying meanings (for example, *chameleon*, *inflection*, *disparate*).

We find Beck’s framework for choosing words compelling—our teachers use it all the time—but we often see educators cite words that are too simplistic as examples of Tier 1 words, words like *bike*, *ball*, and *person*. The problem with this kind of conceptualization of Tier 1 words is that it fails to rule out any words that teachers might actually teach in vocabulary lessons. It’s more useful to consider examples of words that might commonly be taught but that could be replaced with harder words because they commonly occur in verbal discourse rather than printed text. Words like *imagination*, *communication*, and *realize*, we argue, are still Tier 1 words. Students are likely to learn them and hear them in everyday discourse. Words like these are perhaps better reinforced via implicit vocabulary methods (which you can read about later in the chapter). Explicit Vocabulary Instruction, then, is more appropriate for more robust words that students are less likely to hear every day.

Which Tier 3 Words to Teach in Reading and English Classes

A recent visit to Beth Verrilli’s senior English class revealed that even twelfth graders aren’t too old for a word wall, in this case a word wall reminding them of the Tier 3 technical terms they’d learned so as to talk about literature in the most technical way. It was titled “How Do English Scholars Talk about Literature?” and contained words like *aphorism*, *catharsis*, *anaphora*, *metonymy*, and *synecdoche*. Almost all of the words on the wall would be considered domain-specific, Tier 3 words. It’s vital that all teachers prepare

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students of all grades to be able to both talk and write about literature with scholarly technical vocabulary specific to literary analysis—in much the same way that a science teacher would prepare his or her students to use scientific vocabulary when conducting experiments.

Because Tier 1 words don't typically pose a problem for even emerging readers, and words limited to specific domains tend to be covered in depth within those domains, reading and English classes, we think, should spend the lion's share of their time on Tier 2 words—the kind of words readers will grow into, the kind they'll use in college and in life.

Because a deeper dive into words implies a greater time commitment, word choice becomes even more important when selecting which Tier 2 words to explicitly teach. Here are some types of words to consider for Explicit Vocabulary Instruction:

- Words that appear in a text you are reading, that students may not know, and that are critical to understanding it.
- Words that relate to the content or themes of the novel or other content being taught. For example, when reading *Esperanza Rising*, you might consider teaching the word *exploit*. Although the word does not appear in the novel, students might use this word to describe the treatment of Esperanza and the other child migrant workers.
- Words that relate to other vocabulary words that can be compared, contrasted, or used as a group (for example, *tyranny* and *oppression*; *embellish* and *exaggerate*; *glance*, *gaze*, and *gawk*).
- Words that enable students to upgrade their word choice, replacing common words used in a book discussion or literary analysis. For the word *good*, for example, they might use *acceptable*, *favorable*, *satisfactory*, or *pleasing*; for the word *bad*, they could instead use *evil*, *wicked*, *atrocious*, *dreadful*, or *inadequate*.

STEP 2: ACCURATE AND STUDENT-FRIENDLY DEFINITION

Once you've selected a word (or perhaps several, depending on the grade level), provide students with a definition that is both simple and clear. It should not contain jargon or phrases that students are unlikely to understand. For example, telling students that

the definition of *banal* is “devoid of freshness or originality” may not be as helpful as rewriting it slightly to “lacking in originality” — still accurate, but much more digestible for students. Although ensuring that a definition is **student-friendly** is important, it’s just as important that a definition remain as accurate as possible (see the “Pitfalls to Avoid When Writing Student-Friendly Definitions” box).

When a word has multiple definitions, start with the one that is most applicable in the context of your reading and/or the one that will be most frequently used in other contexts (for example, “*Serene* describes a situation or setting that is quiet and calm”). A cautionary note: crafting definitions that are both accurate and student friendly is one of the most challenging and overlooked aspects of vocabulary instruction, so please don’t jump over this step hastily!

See It in Action

Watch Akilah Bond, Colleen Driggs, and Gillian Cartwright demonstrate the importance of accurate and student-friendly definitions in clip 25 at teachlikeachampion.com/yourlibrary. As they introduce the words *sigh*, *scarce*, *eradicate*, and *counteract*, each simple moment illustrates the importance of carefully planned and crafted student-friendly definitions.

Many teachers commonly seek to “arrive” at a definition as a last step in their vocabulary instruction. For them, teaching a new word means asking, “Who can tell me what *destitute* means?” and having students try to infer the meaning from there. To be more rigorous, vocabulary instruction should, in most cases, *begin* with an accurate definition, focusing instead on application (Figure 6.2).

Using words with richness and precision is a rigorous form of problem solving. But the problem solving can begin only once students know a word’s basic meaning. If instruction begins before students have a clear definition, they spend their time guessing at its meaning. Time spent guessing a word’s meaning is far less productive than time spent using and applying the word’s meaning in increasingly complex situations. For example, consider whether it is more rigorous to have students answer the question “What do you think *clandestine* might mean?” or instead to answer “How is *clandestine* similar to and different from *surreptitious*?” or “How could camouflage help you do something in a *clandestine* manner? How could you use something that was ‘blaring’ to do something in a *clandestine* manner?”

Figure 6.2 Two diagrams showing less rigorous and more rigorous vocabulary instruction

Diagram 1. Typical Lesson: "Who can tell me what 'destitute' means?"

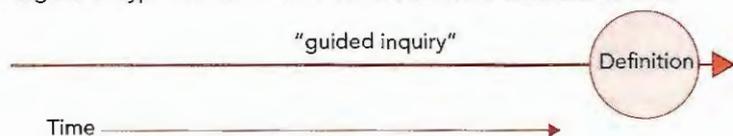
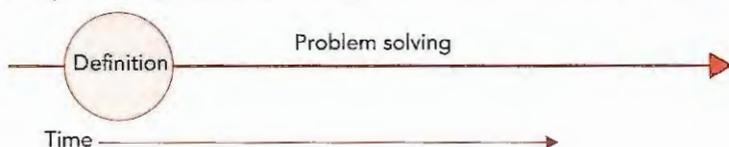


Diagram 2. Revised Lesson: "Who can describe a situation in which a rich person might still be destitute?"



Pitfalls to Avoid When Writing Student-Friendly Definitions

Writing a simple, clear, and accurate definition is a vital part of planning for your vocabulary lesson. Unfortunately, many great vocabulary lessons are undercut by a poor-quality definition. Here are some common pitfalls to avoid when writing your definition:

Oversimplification

We often give students definitions that don't accurately capture the full meaning of a word because we focus on making it simple or student friendly. For example, a teacher might commonly define the word *heed* as "to listen," but to *heed* implies that one follows the guidance or request of some authority. A more appropriate definition would be "to listen and obey."

Inaccuracy

Teachers might give a definition that makes sense as a substitute for the vocabulary word as it is used in a given context but that does not reflect

the actual meaning of word. For example, a teacher reading with her class came across the following sentence: “The mother tried to *insinuate* that the teachers were to blame for her daughter’s problems, but the heroic principal told her politely that he would not tolerate this type of rudeness toward his hard-working staff.” The teacher defined the word *insinuate* as “a verb meaning to suggest”—a fitting definition for the context. However, this definition could lead to misunderstanding, as illustrated in this sentence: “I’m going to *insinuate* that you can improve your grades by coming in on Saturday.”

Size

The definition has too many parts to be useful or accessible for students. For example, a teacher might define *puny* as “of lesser size, strength, or significance; appearing weak, especially in stature.”

Inaccessibility

The definition includes words that students don’t already know, or it is overly abstract. For example, the dictionary definition for *privilege* is “a right, immunity, or benefit only enjoyed by a person beyond the advantages of most.” Better to define it as “a benefit given to a person or group of people”—simpler, yet still accurate.

Wrong tense or part of speech

The definition is in a different tense or part of speech than the word. For example, a teacher defines *sporadic* as “occasionally.” The word is an adjective, but the definition is for the adverb form of the word. Better to define it as “occurring occasionally.”

Once you have drafted an accurate, student-friendly definition, it’s also important to think about how to make it “sticky.” In *Made to Stick*, Chip and Dan Heath define ideas that stick as those that “are understood and remembered, and have a lasting impact”⁶—certainly something we want for the vocabulary words we teach. Making words stick for students increases the likelihood that the word enters their working memory, as well as their speech and writing. Here are a few tricks to make words stick.

Model Use

An important part of giving students a clear and accessible definition is to model how the word can be used in a sentence. Modeling provides a familiar context for students. For example, “*Tame* means to train a wild animal. Circus trainers would tame wild elephants before they put them in a show so that they could perform without hurting anyone.” Examples provide important context and start to model for students how the word might be used in multiple ways.

Add a Visual

Using a visual image for students to associate with a new word can help them remember not just the word but also nuances of its depth and context of use. Consider using pictures that demonstrate a literal illustration of the word (for example, “What in this picture establishes a tone of *serenity*?” or “I chose this picture as an example of *serenity*. In it you can see a woman meditating. She’s sitting with her eyes closed thinking deeply. What else about this picture shows *serenity*?”) or that serve as a backdrop for a memorable story that includes the word (for example, a photograph of a squirrel eating out of a person’s hand to illustrate the word *tame*). You can use the picture both to remind students of the word’s meaning and as a cue encouraging them to apply it. Posting vocabulary words along with their visuals is a useful reminder to students and will increase the likelihood that they use the words in their writing.

Act It Out

You can also have students act out a word (for example, “Show me what you would look like if you were *furious*” or “Who can *swagger* across the room?”) or have students develop gestures to help them remember words. This is useful not only for making the definition sticky and accessible but also for encouraging play with words. You can then help students recall the word by giving them the gesture.

STEP 3: PARAMETERS OF USE

The first time you tried to use a hammer, you might have bent a nail or two by striking it not quite squarely. Or perhaps you hit your thumb. Using new vocabulary can be similar. What teacher hasn’t asked a student to use a new word, only to see him use it in an awkward and erroneous manner: “I *exterminated* the clothes from my bedroom floor,” “The lion crept *clandestine* through the tall grass”?

As when one is using any new tool for the first time, it helps to have some guidance. When those new tools are vocabulary words, students need clear and

specific guidance about how to accurately use and apply these new additions to their proverbial toolkit. Building good habits from the outset is easier than breaking bad ones. Four **parameters of use**—common use, word partners, forms and prefixes, and similar/different words—can help students drive straight nails.

Common Use

It usually helps to start with an explanation of how a word is commonly used. You might say, for instance, “*Eradicate* is often used to describe an effort to completely eliminate something harmful. For example, a doctor might spend years trying to eradicate polio,” or “You would talk about an animal being *tame*, but not really a person. To do so would imply something animal-like about the person.” Explaining common use (and asking students to practice it) allows students to have better access to and command of new words.

Word Partners

Along with explaining a word’s most common use, it’s helpful to describe words that often appear with—either preceding or following—the new vocabulary word you are teaching. Be sure to introduce the kind of partner words—often prepositions—without which a word isn’t accurately used (“*Foist* is a verb, and people often pair it with the word *upon*”). Word partners help ensure that students appropriately use new words in speech and in their writing.

Forms and Prefixes

Be explicit about the alternate forms a word might take, providing examples of how and when to change its part of speech. Be relentless when asking the same of your students in their practice. (For example, “*Serene* is an adjective that describes a calm, quiet situation. You might also see the word *serenity*, which is the noun form. It’s the thing. I seek it. I seek *serenity* when I go to church or when I want peace and calm and quiet.”) Knowing the variety of forms a word can take is helpful not only in ensuring proper usage but also in supporting both depth and breadth of vocabulary development. If a student knows the different forms that *occupy* can take, for example (*occupation*, *occupied*, *occupies*, *unoccupied*, *preoccupied*, and so on), and how those different forms may be used in different contexts, she will have better command of the word and will have discretely increased the number of words in her vocabulary. Understanding the change that adding a prefix can make increases the likelihood that a student will be able to recognize, define, and understand multiple forms of the word in a text.

Similar To/Different From

Help students understand the shades of meaning words can have by explaining (or asking students to explain once they know the definition) how a word is similar to and different from the new vocabulary word. For these purposes, choose a similar word and intentionally describe the similarities and differences. (For example, “*Serene* is similar to *quiet* because *serene* things are always quiet, but quiet things aren’t always *serene*. You could be quiet and tense or worried or angry and some people feel *serene* even if there’s noise around them.”)

In many cases, the discussion of the relationship between these two words is the perfect time to highlight the differing degrees of the meaning of words. For example, a person who is feeling *glum* is not experiencing as strong an emotion as someone who is feeling *sorrowful*. If you opt to use similar words to support the rollout of your vocab word of choice, consider the following:

- The similar word should be a word that students are already familiar with, but ideally one with depth and rigor.
- The two words may share a definition at the most basic level (for example, *gaze* and *glance* are both types of looks).
- The similar word may have the same basic meaning but differ in degree (for example, *glum* is not as strong as *dejected*).
- Plan how to clearly articulate what the two words have in common, but also why they should not be used interchangeably (the more concisely you can explain this, the better).
- Ideally, the similar word will be the same part of speech as your vocabulary word.

Carefully describing a new vocabulary word with the four parameters of use helps students begin to grasp and understanding new words deeply—and, ideally, develop a passion for learning them.

Beware the Synonym Model

Of course, introducing similar words alongside your chosen vocabulary word is different from the “synonym model” of instruction—a model in

which words are introduced as a pair of words having the same definition. Introducing word pairs as synonyms can oversimplify their precise definitions, inhibit accurate application, and hinder reading comprehension. Beck and her colleagues describe the flaws in the synonym model of teaching vocabulary, saying, “Although handy for providing a quick anchor point for a word, [the synonym approach] is a bankrupt way to teach word meaning. Building an understanding of language comes through developing knowledge of both the similarities and the differences among words and the precise roles they can play.”* In this light, similar words should be used as a way to build both breadth and depth—not as a replacement for deep teaching.

*Isabel L. Beck, Margaret G. McKeown, and Linda Kucan, *Bringing Words to Life: Robust Vocabulary Instruction* (New York: Guilford Press, 2013).

STEP 4: ACTIVE PRACTICE

The last step in any successful vocab lesson—**active practice**—is the most important. As Beck et al. discuss, we learn words by using them and seeing them, over and over, in different settings. Vocabulary instruction becomes most rigorous when it puts students in situations where they must apply their nascent knowledge of a word in challenging ways, or even problem-solve ways to use words in new settings. Further, as Brown, Roediger, and McDaniel point out in *Make It Stick: The Science of Successful Learning*, rigorous recall—remembering and problem solving at the same time—builds strong *and lasting* memory.⁷ Doubly so when active practice causes students to say and hear a word—and its correct pronunciation—multiple times. Triply so when it’s intellectually challenging.

At our vocabulary workshops, we frequently ask participants how many times they think students need to say, hear, or read a word before it enters their functional vocabulary. The answers we get have ranged from as low as four times to as many as twenty-five times. Because of a wide number of variables (for example, interest in the word, student absorption rate for a particular topic, variability across words and students), there isn’t really a way of knowing *exactly* how many times a student needs to use a word before he remembers it forever. Even so, we know that the answer is definitely not one time. To better ensure that a vocab word will be remembered and used in the future, give students a myriad of quick exposures after introducing it. For each Explicit Vocabulary

lesson, plan five to seven quick questions (both verbal and written) that provide students with opportunities to interact with the word. It's not simply about exposure. Active practice should give students opportunities to practice mastering both meaning and usage.

Active Practice to Master Meaning

Mastering meaning involves students using a word to illustrate its degree of meaning with fluidity, expertise, and a depth of understanding. There are four different ways you can ask students to practice mastering meaning, both verbally and in writing. You can ask students:

1. When a word would (and would not) apply: "Would it be accurate to say that Aunt Alexandra is acting like a *tyrant* in this scene? Explain."
2. To combine multiple new words: "Could a *tyrant* ever be *humble*? Tell me why or why not."
3. To narrate the story: "Can a group ever exert *tyranny* over another group? How? Explain how a group of people in *To Kill a Mockingbird* make decisions that are *tyrannical*."
4. To define a change: "How is it different to state that Aunt Alexandra is being *tyrannical* as opposed to, say, *bossy*?"

Many teachers tend to have consistent types of questions and prompts for their students (for vocabulary and otherwise), so this list is helpful in starting to expand your repertoire in planning active practice questions. When we shared (and practiced!) these questions with teachers and leaders in a recent workshop, several teachers gave the feedback that this variety of questions has not only improved students' mastery of meaning but has also made vocabulary instruction more interesting and engaging for them as teachers.

Active Practice to Master Usage

Asking students to practice accurately helps prevent misapplication of words. To build positive new habits (and avoid the need to unlearn bad ones), it's a good idea to have students practice a variety of uses. There are two ways to do this:

1. Change the form: "In its adjective form, we would say '*tyrannical*.' Would Atticus agree that Aunt Alexandra is *tyrannical*?"

2. Create a sentence with the word and/or other parameters: “Write a sentence in which you describe Aunt Alexandra looking ‘*obliquely*’ at Scout. Be sure to describe what Scout has done to earn such a glance.”

It’s quite a common practice to ask students to create sentences with new words. Using additional parameters adds rigor and helps ensure that students are learning to use a word correctly.

Three Keys to Active Practice

When practicing, be sure that students are accurately applying the word. It is not uncommon for an eager student to lose the meaning of a word in her earnest attempts to apply it wherever the definition seems to fit. Whether it’s to master meaning or usage, there are three important keys to getting the most out of active practice.

Say the Word

The first key is to ensure that students actually use the new word in their answers (you would be surprised by how often we forget this!). Instead of using a new word, students will often describe it. For example, if a teacher asks a student to describe a time when he feels *sentimental*, the student might answer, “when I look at photo albums of my baby brother when he was little.” That may demonstrate an understanding of the word’s meaning, but unless the teacher urges the student to use the word in his sentence—“Looking at photo albums of my baby brother makes me feel *sentimental*”—the student doesn’t actually practice using the word, and isn’t as likely to be able to use it again.

Push for Precision

The second key to active practice is ensuring that student answers illustrate their understanding of the word. When asked to use the word *detest*, for example, we often hear students say something like “I *detest* broccoli.” Without further explanation, it’s not clear whether they truly know what it means to *detest*. In this case, push students a bit further to expand their sentences to illustrate the meaning of the word, as in “I *detest* broccoli because it’s bitter.”

To ensure that students have to rigorously apply a word and its definition, avoid obvious or mundane questions. Using simple fill-in-the-blank questions or asking questions that require students only to use the word to describe their own experiences can have two negative outcomes. First, the degree of the word may not match the context or shade of meaning (for example, “I was *irate* when my sister got ice cream before I did”)

because students have grown accustomed to a simple fill-in-the-blank formula. Second, students may generate a surface level of understanding of a word (“I *adore* my teddy bear”) without understanding its deeper meanings or connotations. To avoid these outcomes, provide prompts that support students’ precise use of the word (for example, “Write a sentence about why a mouse would likely *despise* a snake” rather than “Write a sentence using *despise*”) or that require combining similar words with slightly different meanings (for example, “Write a sentence in which you describe something you dislike and something you *detest*.”). Asking rigorous application questions increases the quality of student practice, as well as deepens their understanding of the word and its definition.

Make It Right

The final key is for students to practice using different forms of the word—correctly. It is essential to consistently correct inaccurate parts of speech or tenses. Do not accept, for example, “The pond was *scarce* of water.” If we accept incorrect forms of new vocabulary words during practice, then students will most assuredly make those mistakes in their writing and beyond the classroom.

The three keys of active practice can support teachers in asking students to rigorously apply their burgeoning vocabulary, and they are useful in giving feedback to students on their practice as they use new words and apply their meanings in a variety of contexts.

EXPLICIT VOCABULARY INSTRUCTION ROLLOUT SEQUENCE

The order you choose to teach the different components of a vocabulary rollout can be adapted based on the word(s) of the day. For certain words, you may find yourself omitting one or more of the components. It is important, however, to choose a basic sequence and use it consistently. The predictability of the format of your daily vocabulary rollout will both maximize your instructional time and increase student ownership. You’ll spend less time explaining what to do and how to do it. Habits lead to efficiency and, in this case, optimizing the focus on studying words. One of the dangers of teaching Explicit Vocabulary in this way is that the lesson runs too long, meaning there is less time left for whatever other reading instruction you might have planned. Teachers who are especially efficient with their time avoid this by carefully planning their

Explicit Vocabulary rollout scripts. In order to make the most efficient use of your time, plan your rollout script so that it includes several key components. You might consider practicing this rollout in advance and timing yourself, ideally keeping the rollout within six to nine minutes and spending as much time as possible in active practice:

1. Define the word and give its part of speech (30 seconds to 1 minute).
2. Give a familiar example (30 seconds to 1 minute).
3. Give a picture/and or a motion (30 seconds to 1 minute).
4. Describe parameters of use (common use, word partners, other forms, similar to/different from) (1–2 minutes).
5. Engage in active practice: six to eight practice questions in which students use the word both verbally and in writing (4 minutes).

To see a completed example of a rollout, you will find one possible rollout script for the word *gullible* in the appendix (and on teachlikeachampion.com).

Another Pathway to Breadth and Depth: Roots and Affixes

Teaching students about roots, prefixes, and affixes is another important way to quickly increase the quantity of student vocabulary. Once students have a handle on a relatively small number of roots and affixes, they have significantly boosted their ability to accurately infer meanings of new words, as well as to deeply understand words. (Anyone who has taken Latin can likely attest to the impact it had on their vocabulary development.) Knowing roots and affixes also helps students grow attentive to a word's etymology and build a breadth of word knowledge. Here are some action steps for exposing students to roots and affixes—and to do so in a way that helps build vocabulary as well as attentiveness to and passion for words:

Provide an example. Give a word that includes a given root or affix. Provide the definition so that students can see how the word parts work together in the definition. For example, "Notice that the word *congregate*, meaning 'to come together,' has the root *greg*, which means 'flock or herd.'"

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Use as part of active practice. Ask students to identify roots or affixes and describe how they relate to meaning. For example, "Why is the root *ped-* in the word *pedestrian*?" "What might *monolith* and *lithograph* have to do with a stone?"

Consider memorization. Although we don't encourage rote memorization as a way to build a depth of vocabulary knowledge, when it comes to roots, affixes, and prefixes, it can be useful to introduce several of these at a time for memorization and provide opportunities for spiraled review.

Use sensitivity analysis. Show students how affixes can be shuffled to make new words. For example, "If we replace *in* with *con* in the word *incur*, the word becomes *concur*, meaning 'to agree with.'"

Use in place of misdirective context clues. When contexts are misdirective (description to come later), support students in determining the meaning of an unknown word based on known roots and affixes. A robust grasp of roots, prefixes, and affixes is beneficial as students learn to independently investigate the meanings of unknown words.

Model etymology. Ask students to identify other words containing a root. For example, "*Telepathy* is sending or reading thoughts and feelings from far away. What other *tele-*words have 'far away' in their meaning?"