



Target the Problem: Vocabulary

Vocabulary refers to the words we must understand to communicate effectively. Educators often consider four types of vocabulary: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Listening vocabulary refers to the words we need to know to understand what we hear. Speaking vocabulary consists of the words we use when we speak. Reading vocabulary refers to the words we need to know to understand what we read. Writing vocabulary consists of the words we use in writing.

Vocabulary plays a fundamental role in the reading process, and contributes greatly to a reader's comprehension. A reader cannot understand a text without knowing what most of the words mean. Students learn the meanings of most words indirectly, through everyday experiences with oral and written language. Other words are learned through carefully designed instruction.



What the problem looks like

A kid's perspective: What this feels like to me

Children will usually express their frustration and difficulties in a general way, with statements like "I hate reading!" or "This is stupid!". But if they could, this is how kids might describe how their vocabulary difficulties affect their reading:

- I heard my friend tell what happened in the movie but I didn't really understand what he said about it.
- I feel like I just use the same words over and over again in my writing.
- I don't like to read on my own because I don't understand lots of the words in the book.

A parent's perspective: What I see at home

Here are some clues for parents that a child may have difficulties as a result of his or her vocabulary:

- She's unable to tell about her day in a way that makes sense.
- She misuses common words.

- He doesn't link words from a book to similar words from another book or from real life.
- He's often not able to find the right word to describe something.

A teacher's perspective: What I see in the classroom

Here are some clues for teachers that a student may have difficulties as a result of his or her vocabulary:

- She has questions about a lot of word meanings in a grade appropriate text.
- He seems to have a weak vocabulary.
- She is not able to make connections among words in various texts.
- He's often not able to find the right word to describe something.



How to help

With the help of parents and teachers, kids can overcome vocabulary limitations that affect their reading. Below are some tips and specific things to do.

What kids can do to help themselves

- Find books to read on your own. The more you read, the more new words you'll see, and the more you'll learn about the words.
- Look ahead in textbooks to learn new vocabulary and concepts before your teacher goes over the section in class.
- Keep a list of key vocabulary and transition words.
- Practice telling stories using the words *first*, *then*, and *finally*.

What parents can do to help at home

- Engage your child in conversations every day. If possible, include new and interesting words in your conversation.
- Read to your child each day. When the book contains a new or interesting word, pause and define the word for your child. After you're done reading, engage your child in a conversation about the book.
- Help build word knowledge by classifying and grouping objects or pictures while naming them.
- Help build your child's understanding of language by playing verbal games and telling jokes

and stories.

- Encourage your child to read on his own. The more children read, the more words they encounter and learn.

What teachers can do to help at school

- Help build language skills in class by playing oral and written word exercises and games.
- Teach students about the important, useful, and difficult vocabulary words before students read the text. This will help them remember the words and improve comprehension.
- Offer students many opportunities to encounter target vocabulary words beyond the context in which they are taught.
- Have students use taught vocabulary words often and in various ways both orally and in writing so they are better able to remember the words and their meanings.
- Teach vocabulary via explicit instruction and also through independent readings.
- Help students learn to use context clues to determine the meanings of words. Teach them that some context clues are more helpful than others and provide examples of helpful and less helpful clues.
- Read to your class each day. When the book contains a new or interesting word, pause and define the word for your students. After you're done reading, engage your students in a conversation about the book.
- Engage your students in conversations every day. If possible, include new and interesting words in your conversation.
- Explicitly teach the meanings of common prefixes, roots, and suffixes.
- Draw students' attention to common roots in a variety of words (for example, the similar roots and meanings of the words *vision*, *visual*, *visible*, *invisible*) and lead a discussion of the meanings of the words and how they tend to be used.

Browse our vocabulary resource library

Learn more about how to help children build their “word banks” through our articles, tips for parents, video, FAQs, and research briefs. Visit our [Vocabulary section](#) >

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