

## Building Academic Vocabulary

Academic Background knowledge consists of segments of information which have words and phrases associated with them. Numerous studies have found a positive correlation between academic background knowledge and achievement in school. Students who have a large amount of academic background knowledge about a topic learn new information on the same subject easier and quicker than those who do not. Moreover, studies have revealed a significant relationship between knowledge of academic information and achievement later in life.

In Building Background Knowledge for Academic Achievement: Research on What Works in Schools, Robert Marzano first outlines a program of wide reading to compensate for the lack of academic experiences. Its purpose is to provide a variety of virtual experiences. Then, he details a research-based process for teaching academic terms, people, and events to build academic vocabulary. Marzano details this process in his six-step process for teaching new terms. He recommends these two interventions to be used together through grade ten as a comprehensive approach to enhance student academic background knowledge.

### Wide Reading (Self-Selected Reading)

The goal is for the students to be engaged in reading for pleasure. The teacher does a quick read (reads orally for 5-to-8 minutes). Then students read silently or in pairs from material on their level and of their own choosing for a period of uninterrupted time (15 to 20 minutes). They are asked to do an activity to reflect upon what they have read and to share what they have been reading with others. However, at no time are they asked to take a test, because that would decrease motivation. This program must be consistently used over many years in order to have a compensatory effect upon background knowledge (vocabulary).

### Six-Step Process for Teaching New Terms

**Step 1: The teacher provides a description (not a definition!), explanation, or example of the new term.** This may be done in a variety of ways:

- Build on direct experiences, such as a field trip or a guest speaker, that provide examples of the term.
- Tell or read a story that integrates the term.
- Use video or computer images as the stimulus for the information.
- Ask individual students or small groups to do the initial investigation into the term and present the information to the class, sometimes in the form of a skit or pantomime.
- Describe your own mental picture of the term.
- Find or create pictures that exemplify the term.

**Step 2: Students restate the description, explanation, or example in their own words.** Help students develop sufficient initial understanding so that they can describe the terms in their own words. The description is written in an academic notebook. The notebook is divided into different content areas, with more than one vocabulary word per page. Each entry consists of the term, a description written in the student's own words, a Likert Scale to denote the level of understanding, and a space for a nonlinguistic representation of the term. (See Figure A)

<b>Term:</b>	<b>My Understanding</b>	1	2	3	4	<b>Subject:</b>
<b>Describe:</b>						

Figure A

**Step 3: Students create a nonlinguistic representation of the term.** The teacher helps the students develop sufficient initial understanding so that they can represent the terms through a picture, a symbol, or graphic representation. The picture is added to the description of the term in the academic notebook. (See Figure A)

**Step 4: Students periodically do activities that help them add to their knowledge of vocabulary terms.** Teachers provide multiple opportunities for students to revisit and revise their descriptions and nonlinguistic representations as they develop closer approximations of the terms. They engage students in activities such as free association of words that are related to a given term, comparing terms, classifying terms, solving analogy problems, and creating metaphors.

**Step 5: Periodically students are asked to discuss the terms with one another.** In elementary classes this can be done through “Think, Pair, Share” or student presentations of their most interesting word. In secondary classes, teams of students can be formed. Each student identifies terms with which he/she is having difficulty. The other students on the team share the information they have written and the way they have represented it nonlinguistically in their academic notebooks. Students can also be organized into pairs and given a list of the two or three of the most difficult terms they are studying. The pairs of students identify what’s true, what’s false, what’s new, and what’s confusing about the terms.

**Step 6: Periodically students are involved in games that allow them to play with the terms.** Games provide opportunities to review terms and serve as an energizing break in the routine of the day. Examples of vocabulary building games include “What is the Question?” (modeled after Jeopardy! on television), “Vocabulary Charades,” “Name that Category” (modeled after the television show “The \$100,000 Pyramid”), “Draw Me (modeled after the game of “Pictionary”), and “Talk a Mile a Minute.”

Building Academic Vocabulary Teacher’s Manual by Robert Marzano and Debra Pickering provides the necessary procedures to implement the comprehensive approach to academic vocabulary development described in Building Background Knowledge for Academic Achievement. It includes instructions on creating a list of academic vocabulary terms, teaching the selected terms, offers specific activities and games, and gives tips for managing the program. There is also an extensive appendix with templates to use with the activities and games and Academic Vocabulary Word Lists for various levels and subject areas.

A preliminary report put out by ASCD finds a statistically significant positive effect for the Building Academic Vocabulary program on the students’ abilities to read and comprehend subject-area content for grades 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, and 9.