Core Instructional Ideas to Promote Literacy Skills in Secondary Classrooms

Middle and high school teachers can incorporate activities into their instruction that both promote learning of course content and also strengthen students' literacy skills. The guides below offer classwide ideas for (1) boosting vocabulary knowledge; (2) modeling critical thinking skills through extended discussion; and (3) reinforcing reading comprehension skills.

Classroom Literacy Strategies: Academic & Content-Area Vocabulary

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<td>The explicit teaching of instructional vocabulary is a central literacy-building goal in secondary classrooms. As vocabulary terms become more specialized in content area courses, students are less able to derive the meaning of unfamiliar words incidentally simply by relying on the context in which they appear. Students must instead learn vocabulary through more direct means, including having opportunities to explicitly memorize words and their definitions. On average, students expand their reading vocabularies by 2000 to 3000 new words per year (Texas Reading Initiative, 2002).</td>
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<td>While the typical student can master a new word after about 12 meaningful exposures to the term; some students may require as many as 17 exposures to learn a word. (Kamil, et al., 2008). In secondary courses with a substantial number of specialized terms, time should be set aside each period to explicitly teach and review vocabulary.</td>
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<td>There are two general approaches to vocabulary instruction: ‘additive’ and ‘generative’ (Kamil et al., 2008). Additive strategies are the range of techniques used to teach specific words. For example, having students create flashcards to review vocabulary with the term on one side and its definition on the other would be one additive strategy. Generative strategies are those that teach students how to derive the meaning of words independently. Teaching students to identify word roots and affixes is one generative approach to vocabulary instruction.</td>
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<td>Provide Dictionary Training. The student is trained to use an Internet lookup strategy to better understand dictionary or glossary definitions of key vocabulary items. The student first looks up the word and its meaning(s) in the dictionary/glossary. If necessary, the student isolates the specific word meaning that appears to be the appropriate match for the term as it appears in course texts and discussion. The student goes to an Internet search engine (e.g., Google) and locates at least five text samples in which the term is used in context and appears to match the selected dictionary definition. Optional: Have students meet in pairs or cooperative groups to review their written definitions and context examples of target vocabulary.</td>
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<td>Enhance Vocabulary Instruction Through Use of Graphic Organizers or Displays: A Sampling. Teachers can use graphic displays to structure their vocabulary discussions and activities (Boardman et al., 2008; Fisher, 2007; Texas Reading Initiative, 2002). Four graphic</td>
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display formats are described briefly below—and examples of each appear in the next few pages of this handout:

- **4-Square Word Activity.** The student divides a page into four quadrants. In the upper left section, the student writes the target word. In the lower left section, the student writes the word definition. In the upper right section, the student generates a list of examples that illustrate the term, and in the lower right section, the student writes ‘non-examples’ (e.g., terms that are the opposite of the target vocabulary word).

- **Semantic/Word Definition Map.** The graphic display contains sections in which the student writes the word, its definition (‘what is this?’), additional details that extend its meaning (‘What is it like?’), as well as a listing of examples and ‘non-examples’ (e.g., terms that are the opposite of the target vocabulary word).

- **Semantic Feature Analysis.** A target vocabulary term is selected for analysis in this grid-like graphic display. Possible features or properties of the term appear along the top margin, while examples of the term are listed ion the left margin. The student considers the vocabulary term and its definition. Then the student evaluates each example of the term to determine whether it does or does not match each possible term property or element.

- **Comparison/Contrast (Venn) Diagram.** Two terms are listed and defined. For each term, the student brainstorms qualities or properties or examples that illustrate the term’s meaning. Then the student groups those qualities, properties, and examples into 3 sections: A. items unique to Term 1; B. items unique to Term 2; and C. items shared by both terms.

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**Promote ‘Wide Reading’** (Fisher, 2007). Students are encouraged to read widely in the content area, using texts that supplement and extend information supplied by the textbook. ‘Wide reading’ results in substantial increases in student vocabulary over time due to incidental learning. The effects of wide reading accumulate over time and result in increases in general academic vocabulary as well as vocabulary in specific content areas. Wide reading should be encouraged at the earliest possible grades, so that students can benefit from their expanded vocabulary knowledge ‘downstream’ (in later, higher grade levels). To strengthen the positive impact of wide reading on vocabulary development, have student texts available that vary in difficulty and that are of high interest. Discuss readings in class. Experiment with ways to document student independent reading and integrate that ‘wide reading’ into an effort grade for the course. If needed, build time into the student’s school schedule for supervised ‘wide reading’ time.

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**Hold ‘Read-Alouds’** (Fisher, 2008). The teacher selects texts that supplement the course textbook, illustrate central concepts, and contain important vocabulary covered in the course. The instructor or another accomplished reader reads aloud selections from those texts for 3 to 5 minutes per class session—while students follow along silently. Read-alouds provide students with additional exposure to vocabulary items in context. They can also lower the threshold of difficulty: Students may be more likely to attempt to read an assigned text independently if they have already gotten a start in the text by listening to a more advanced reader read the first few pages aloud. Read-alouds can support other vocabulary-building activities such as guided discussion, vocabulary review, and wide reading.

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**Provide Regular In-Class Instruction and Review of Vocabulary Terms, Definitions** (Texas Reading Initiative, 2002). The teacher presents important new vocabulary terms in class, along with student-friendly definitions. The instructor also provides ‘example sentences’ to illustrate the use of each term. Students are then assigned to write example sentences employing new vocabulary to illustrate their mastery of the terms.
Generate ‘Possible Sentences’ (Texas Reading Initiative, 2002). The teacher selects vocabulary that applies to the day’s text selection, including 6 to 8 challenging new vocabulary terms and 4 to 6 easier, more familiar vocabulary items. First, the instructor introduces the vocabulary terms to the class. Then, the teacher provides definitions of the words (or better yet elicits those definitions from students if possible). Then students are directed individually, in pairs, or in small groups to write sentences that contain at least two words from the posted vocabulary list. Next, in large group, students share their composed sentences, which are written on the board. This report-out continues until all words from the original list have been put into sentences. NOTE: Students and the instructor refrain from evaluating sentences as being ‘correct’ or ‘incorrect’ during this stage.

Next, students are directed to read the text selection. After students have completed their reading, they review the ‘possible sentences’ that were previously generated and written on the board. For each sentence, the class evaluates whether, based on the passage just read, the sentence is ‘possible’ (true) in its current form. If a sentence is found to be untrue (‘not possible’), the group recommends how to change the sentence to make it ‘possible’.

Troubleshooting Tips

Students Lack Basic Academic Vocabulary. Some students may have deficits in their grasp of more general academic terms, such as discourse or hypothesis. The school may want to develop a list of the most crucial of these more general academic terms and make this shared list available to all teachers to better allow those instructors to regularly use and model this more general academic vocabulary. As a starting point, teachers can view a comprehensive list of academic words and the frequency with which they are used in English at: http://language.massey.ac.nz/staff/awl/

Building Capacity

Develop Content-Area Vocabulary Lists for Each Course. Whether working alone or with their instructional departments, secondary teachers should develop a list of the most important vocabulary items that students should master in each content-area course. When teachers have identified essential vocabulary in advance, they can more easily integrate vocabulary instruction into their lessons.

Measure Student Acquisition of Target Vocabulary. Teachers can informally track student vocabulary acquisition by listening to student use of vocabulary during guided discussions and monitoring vocabulary terms that appear in student journal entries.

More formally, teachers can track student acquisition of specialized vocabulary by using brief, timed vocabulary matching probes (Espin, Shin, & Busch, 2005). The student is given a worksheet with vocabulary items appearing on the left side of the page. Definitions that correspond to each of the terms appear on the right side of the page, in scrambled order. The student matches terms to their correct definitions.

References


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**Definition of This Word**

**Non-Examples of This Word**

4-Square Word Activity

Word Definition Map

This Word: What is This?

This Word: What Is It Like?

Word

This Word: Examples...

This Word: Non-Examples...


Jim Wright, Presenter

www.interventioncentral.org
Semantic Feature Analysis for This Concept: _____________________________

Possible Features of This Concept


# Classroom Literacy Strategies: Extended Discussions

## Why This Instructional Goal is Important

Extended, guided group discussion is a powerful means to help students to learn vocabulary and advanced concepts. Discussion can also model for students various ‘thinking processes’ and cognitive strategies (Kamil et al. 2008, p. 22). To be effective, guided discussion should go beyond students answering a series of factual questions posed by the teacher: Quality discussions are typically open-ended and exploratory in nature, allowing for multiple points of view (Kamil et al., 2008).

When group discussion is used regularly and well in instruction, students show increased growth in literacy skills. However, discussion is often underused as an instructional method. In one large research study of middle and high school language arts classes, for example, teachers were found on average to devote less than 2 minutes per class period to discussion activities (Kamil et al., 2008). Guided discussion holds an additional benefit: Content-area teachers can use it to demonstrate the ‘habits of mind’ and patterns of thinking of experts in various their discipline: e.g., historians, mathematicians, chemists, engineers, literacy critics, etc.

## Strategies to Promote This Instructional Goal

### Use a ‘Standard Protocol’ to Structure Guided Discussions (Kamil et al., 2008)

Good guided classwide discussions elicit a wide range of student opinions, subject individual viewpoints to critical scrutiny in a supportive manner, put forth alternative views, and bring closure by summarizing the main points of the discussion. Teachers can use a simple structure to effectively and reliably organize their discussions:

A. Pose questions to the class that require students to explain their positions and the reasoning to support those positions.

B. When needed, ‘think aloud’ as the discussion leader to model good reasoning practices such as taking a clear stand on a topic or providing an explanation of why one supports a particular position.

C. Supportively challenge student views by offering possible counter arguments that students must attempt to answer.

D. Single out and mention examples of effective student reasoning.

E. Avoid being overly directive; the purpose of extended discussions is to more fully investigate and think about complex topics, not to push students toward a pre-determined viewpoint or finding.

F. At the conclusion of the discussion, sum up the general ground covered in the discussion and highlight the main ideas covered.

Teachers can train students to lead discussions (with teacher coaching as needed) and have those students moderate extended discussions in whole-group or cooperative learning format. Teachers can use the standard discussion protocol provided here as a starting point for training students as discussion leaders.

## Troubleshooting Tips

**Students Are Reluctant to Participate in Discussions** (Kamil et al., 2008). As the discussion leader, be sure to make the discussion activity a ‘safe’ one in which all students feel that their
thoughts are valued. The teacher should provide sufficient structure to the activity so that students know clearly what is expected of them. If necessary when first training students to participate in extended discussions, the instructor can use texts that will elicit student interest—even if those texts are only marginally related to course content. As students are drawn into discussion by those high-interest texts and class participation increases, the teacher can start to use texts for future discussions that overlap more with the curriculum.

**Teachers Lack the Time for Frequent Use of Extended Discussion.** Guided discussion is an effective method for enhancing and verifying student understanding of course content (Kamil et al., 2008). If class time is limited, the instructor should reserve discussion time at least for those course topics and concepts that are potentially most complex, challenging, ambiguous, or open to misinterpretation.

**Teachers Require Behavior Management Training to Manage Discussions.** Extended discussions can require flexible behavior management strategies to both promote student involvement and maintain classroom order. Some teachers may be reluctant to engage in sustained discussions in their classrooms because of behavior management concerns. One solution is for the school to offer staff development to teachers on how to effectively manage a classroom during large-group or small-group discussion activities (Kamil et al., 2008).

### Building Capacity

**Provide ‘Discussion Coaches’.** The school can identify teachers in the school who have the formal training and/or experience to run effective discussion groups. These teachers might then be available to coach other instructors in how to integrate discussion into classroom instruction. The school may consider having these ‘discussion coaches’ visit classrooms to actually demonstrate discussion techniques with students, as well as to observe and provide feedback to other teachers on those educators’ use of discussion strategies.

**Allow Teachers Opportunities to Share Their Successes in Using Extended Discussion.** Adopting new classroom practices is not easy. Schools can assist teachers to make the transition to using discussion more creatively and widely by allowing them opportunities to communicate regularly with their colleagues (perhaps by content area) to share ideas for discussion topics, formats, etc.

### References

# Classroom Literacy Strategies: Reading Comprehension

## Why This Instructional Goal is Important

Teachers have a wide degree of latitude in selecting reading comprehension strategies to use in their classrooms. At present, there is no clear evidence that any one instructional technique to promote reading comprehension is clearly superior to others. In fact, it appears that students benefit from being taught any self-directed practice that prompts them to engage more actively in understanding the meaning of text (Kamil et al., 2008). Reading comprehension interventions vary: Some (e.g., Oral Retell) are whole-group or cooperative learning strategies that promote a better understanding of specific reading assignments, while others (e.g., Question Generation) are designed to teach specific reading comprehension skills such as the ability to formulate a main idea sentence to capture essential ideas from an informational passage.

## Strategies to Promote This Instructional Goal

### Assist Students to Set ‘Content Goals’ for Reading (Boardman et al., 2008)

Students are more likely to be motivated to read—and to read more closely—if they have specific content-related reading goals in mind. At the start of a reading assignment, for example, the instructor has students state what questions they might seek to answer or what topics they would like to learn more about in their reading. The student or teacher writes down these questions. After students have completed the assignee reading, they review their original questions and share what they have learned (e.g., through discussion in large group or cooperative learning group, or even as a written assignment).

### Have Students Monitor Their Own Comprehension and Apply ‘Fix-Up’ Skills (Boardman et al., 2008)

Teachers can teach students specific strategies to monitor their understanding of text and independently use ‘fix-up’ skills as needed. Examples of student monitoring and repair skills for reading comprehension include encouraging them to:

- Stop after every paragraph to summarize its main idea
- Reread the sentence or paragraph again if necessary
- Generate and write down questions that arise during reading
- Restate challenging or confusing ideas or concepts from the text in the student’s own words

### Teach Question-Answer Relationships (QARs) (Raphael, 1982; Raphael, 1986)

Students are taught to identify ‘question-answer relationships’, matching the appropriate strategy to comprehension questions based on whether a question is based on fact, requires inferential thinking, or draws upon the reader’s own experience. Students learn that answers to RIGHT THERE questions are fact-based and can be found in a single sentence, often accompanied by ‘clue’ words that also appear in the question. Students are informed that they will also find answers to THINK AND SEARCH questions in the text—but must piece those answers together by scanning the text and making connections between different pieces of factual information. AUTHOR AND YOU questions require that students take information or opinions that appear in the text and combine them with the reader’s own experiences or opinions to formulate an answer. ON MY OWN questions are based on the students’ own experiences and do not require knowledge of the text to answer. Students are taught to identify question-answer relationships in class discussion and demonstration. They are then given specific questions and directed to identify the question type and to use the appropriate strategy to answer.

### Use a Pre-Reading Questionnaire to Tap Prior Knowledge (Duffelmeyer, 1994; Merkley, 1996)
To activate their prior knowledge of a topic, students complete a brief questionnaire on which they must express agreement or disagreement with 'opinion' questions tied to the selection to be read; students then engage in a class discussion of their responses. The instructor first constructs the questionnaire. Each item on the questionnaire is linked to the content of the article or story that the students will read. All questionnaire items use a ‘forced-choice’ format in which the student must simply agree or disagree with the item. After students have completed the questionnaire, the teacher reviews responses with the class, allowing students an opportunity to explain their rationale for their answers. Then students read the article or story.

**Troubleshooting Tips**

**Content-area Teachers Are Intimidated by the Request to Teach ‘Reading Comprehension’.** A busy teacher may feel overwhelmed at the thought of having to teach so global a skill as ‘reading comprehension’ to struggling students. Instead, the school can acknowledge that classroom teachers are ‘content experts’ and encourage them to generate ideas for helping students to better comprehend specialized course texts and readings in which the teacher is highly knowledgeable.

**Building Capacity**

**Allow Instructional Departments to Develop Their Own Set of Comprehension Ideas.** Each academic subject presents unique reading comprehension challenges. For example, social studies often requires that students be able to read and understand historical documents from different time periods, while advanced math courses expect that students can comprehend and solve word problems with advanced math graphics. Build in regular opportunities for teachers within the various instructional departments to communicate with each other about reading comprehension strategies that work best within their discipline.

**References**


