

Tips on Teaching Individual Words

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After working for nearly 50 years as an educator, I am all too frequently chagrined by how much we do not know, by how many questions about teaching remain unanswered. But there is one thing we absolutely do know: We know how to effectively teach individual words!

Effective Instruction on Individual Words

To understand what we know about teaching individual words, it is helpful to think in terms of a continuum of increasingly effective levels of instruction:

- Instruction that involves both a definition and context is markedly stronger than instruction that involves only one of these. The combination of these two elements is so much more powerful than either of them alone that even the thinnest instruction should contain both.
- Instruction that also involves activating prior knowledge and comparing and contrasting meanings is stronger still.
- Still more powerful instruction goes even further and also involves students in actively manipulating meanings, making inferences, searching for applications, and frequent encounters with the words.

Obviously, but unfortunately, the most powerful instruction requires much more time than less powerful instruction.

Why We Can't Always Use the Most Powerful Instruction

The English language contains something like 200,000 words, the average high school graduate has learned something like 40,000 words, and the average 6th grader has learned something like 20,000 words. Clearly, there are a lot of words for students to learn and for teachers to teach. Equally clearly, we cannot teach all of those words. More to the point here, we cannot teach as many words as we need to teach using the most powerful instruction. Some of the time, we need to use instruction that is less powerful but also less time consuming.

Several Types of Instruction

Because we do not have time to provide the most powerful instruction on all the words we teach, we need use a variety of teaching methods. Here, I provide an example of Introductory Instruction, which does not take a lot of time but does serve to get students started on the long road to learning rich and full word meanings, and an example of Rich and Powerful Instruction, which does take a significant amount of time but which provides students with fuller and deeper meanings. I also provide an example of a Review Activity. Whatever sort of initial instruction we provide, Review Activities are necessary if student are to remember and use newly learned words over time. Other examples of Introductory Activities, Rich and Powerful Instruction, and Review Activities can be found in texts such as Blachowicz and Fisher (2006), Graves (2006, 2009), and Stahl and Nagy (2006).

An Example of Introductory Instruction: A definition, some rich context, and a picture constitute instruction that takes relatively little time but can be quite effective (Graves, 2006, 2009). While not all words can be pictured, many can; and pictures can markedly increase the effectiveness of instruction for all students and be particularly valuable for English language learners.

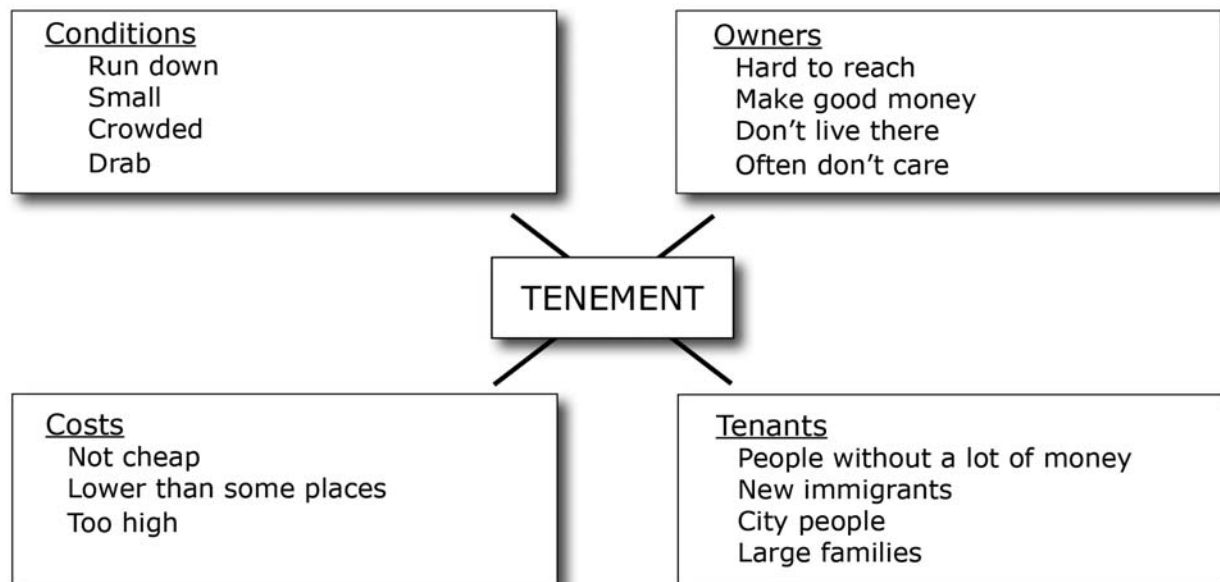


avalanche. An *avalanche* occurs when a large mass of snow and rock slide very rapidly down a mountain. They can be very destructive.

The owners of ski resorts do everything possible to avoid the dangers of *avalanches*.

An Example of Rich and Powerful Instruction: Semantic Mapping—in which a teacher and students work together to create a graphic organizer depicting a central concept and its related concepts (Heimlich & Pittleman, 1986)—is a good illustration of richer and more powerful instruction.

- Put a word representing a central concept on the board, overhead, or lcd.
- Ask students to work in groups listing as many words related to the central concept as they can.
- Display students' words grouped in broad categories.
- Have students name the categories and perhaps suggest additional ones.
- Discuss with students the central concept, the related words, the categories, and their interrelationships.



An Example of a Review Activity: Connect Two—an approach suggested by Richek (2005)—is a good illustration of a review activity. Note that with review activities, there is no teaching involved. Students just need the opportunity to think about words and meanings that they've already learned.

- Give students two columns of 5-10 words each.
- Ask them to pick pairs of words.
- Ask them to explain the relationship between the words.

bayonet	hoarse
disgrace	exuberant
muffled	cunning
exposed	pondered
insignificant	ruefully
splendid	courier
roll	musket

With these words, students might, for example, select *bayonet* and *musket* and explain that a *bayonet* can be attached to the end of a *musket*. Or they might suggest that a *courier* would be *insignificant* if she carried nothing of importance. It doesn't matter if the relationships are silly or far fetched—silly or far fetched relationships are just fine—what matters is that students need to think about the meanings of the words in order to come up with the relationships.

The Tips in a Nutshell

We know how to most effectively teach words. But the most effective methods are time consuming. With the number of words we need to teach, we cannot always use the most effective/most time consuming methods. It is helpful to think of three sorts of instruction: (1) Introductory Instruction such as a definition, some rich context, and a picture, (2) Rich and Powerful Instruction such as semantic mapping, and (3) Review Activities such as connect two.

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Michael Graves is the author of *The Vocabulary Book* (Teachers College Press, IRA, & NCTE, 2006), *Teaching Individual Words* (Teachers College Press & IRA, 2009), and *Essential Readings on Vocabulary* (IRA, 2009).