

Using vocabulary principles

5B - Teach academic words and subject terminology using vocabulary principles

There are a number of key principles for the effective teaching of vocabulary – things that teachers should consider that would help pupils learn and retain new words and phrases more successfully.










These principles are outlined below and have been arranged into three stages of vocabulary learning:

- **Introducing** new vocabulary
- **Explaining** new vocabulary in more detail
- **Consolidating** new vocabulary into long-term memory

Principles of vocabulary teaching

Broadly speaking, teaching should draw upon one principle from each stage.

**The one exception is 'sound it out', which should be present every time.*

Introduce			Explain			Consolidate		
								
1. Simplicity is key	2. Devil in the detail	3. Sound it all out	4. Context matters	5. Paint a picture	6. Root work	7. Find and seek	8. Deep in thought	9. Soak it up
Offer a simple pupil friendly description of the word that unlocks its main features	Provide a detailed description of a concept, including all its category, semantic features and associations	Write it down and say it aloud, highlighting any patterns of letters and sounds to support spelling	Give examples and non examples of different sentences to show pupils their usage in context	Show images for unfamiliar objects and diagrams for abstract concepts, processes and relationships	Use etymology & morphology to explore the different parts of words of latin and greek origin	Set short quizzes such as MCQ as retrieval practice and opportunities to check basic understanding	Ask problem solving questions to help pupils think more deeply about word meanings	Design tasks and games that help pupils to engage with the structure of words and their varied meanings

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Introducing new vocabulary

1. Simplicity is key

The principle of simplicity supports pupils learning academic vocabulary – words like *avarice* in English or *barren* in geography, rather than more conceptual terms like *Christianity* or *perspective* which require a different approach (see below). A simple, pupil-friendly description breaks the word down into its core meaning, focusing on its important features.

For example, if teaching the word *juxtaposition*, a simple definition might be: 'Juxtaposition means placing two or more things side by side for comparison or contrast.' This gives pupils a clear and direct understanding of the word, which they can then build on as their vocabulary grows.

2. Devil in the detail

More specialist vocabulary requires more detailed definitions to capture the greater complexity. Providing more thorough, detailed explanations of words or concepts,

covering all nuances, categories, and associations help pupils grasp not only the basic meaning but also the finer, more complex aspects of a word.

For example, if teaching the word *revolution*, the detailed description would go beyond just a significant change or uprising. It might include:

- **Category:** Revolution is a type of social or political movement.
- **Features:** Revolution involves a fundamental change in power or organisational structures, often through force or popular uprising, and seeks to bring about significant change in a society.
- **Semantic associations:** It is often associated with ideas of rebellion, transformation, and the overthrow of an existing system or government.
- **Examples:** The American Revolution, which led to the independence of the United States, or the Industrial Revolution, which transformed economies and societies through technological advancements.

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3. Sound it out

This principle supports vocabulary learning by encouraging pupils to break down a word into its individual sounds and syllables to help with both pronunciation and spelling. This method highlights letter-sound patterns, helping pupils recognise how words are constructed and making spelling easier to remember.

For example, with the word *elastic*, you would:

- **Write it down:** e-l-a-s-t-i-c.
- **Say it aloud:** e-las-tic.
- **Highlight patterns:** Point out the 'a' sound and the 'l' sound, and emphasise the 'st' blend. You could also note the "ic" ending, which is common in adjectives.

Explaining new vocabulary

4. Context matters

Providing the context for word usage helps support learning by showing pupils how word meaning can change

depending on the situation in which it's used. By providing *examples* and *non-examples*, pupils can see how the word functions in different sentences.

For example, with the word *estimate*, you can offer different contexts:

Example (correct usage):

- I need to estimate the total cost of the project. (*Here, estimate refers to making an approximate calculation.*)
- The scientist provided an estimate of the population size based on her research. (*Here, estimate means an educated guess or approximation based on data.*)

Non-example (incorrect or unclear usage):

- I will estimate the deliciousness of the pizza. (*Here, estimate is used inappropriately because it doesn't logically apply to subjective qualities like taste.*)

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5. Paint a picture

Using graphic organisers helps pupils understand unfamiliar words. Showing images for concrete objects or diagrams for abstract concepts, processes or relationships makes it easier to visualise and grasp meaning.

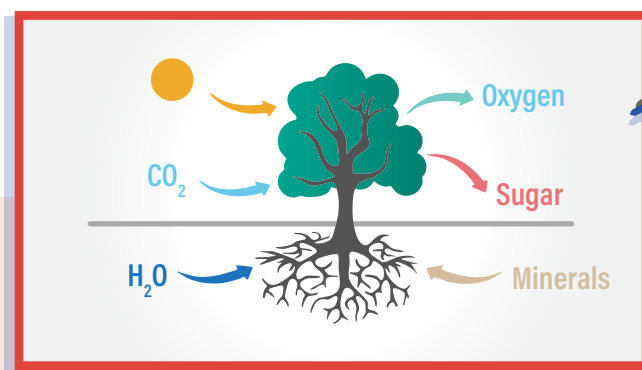
For example, with the word *volcano* you can:

- **Show an image:** Display a picture of a volcano to help pupils see what it looks like and how it erupts.

For an abstract concept like *photosynthesis*, you can:

- **Use a diagram:** Show a labelled diagram that illustrates the process of photosynthesis, highlighting how sunlight, carbon dioxide, and water are converted into energy for plants.

This method helps pupils form mental images or connections to the word, making the meaning clearer and easier to retain.



6. Root work

Etymology and morphology involves breaking down words into their parts (roots, prefixes, and suffixes), especially those with Latin or Greek origins. Understanding these components helps pupils decode unfamiliar words and recognise patterns in meanings, potentially learning lots of words with similar patterns, rather than just the one.

For example, with the word *television*:

- **Etymology:** Break down the word into its Greek and Latin roots:
 - 'Tele' (Greek) means 'far' or 'distance.'
 - 'Vision' (Latin) means 'seeing.'
- **Morphology:** Explain how these parts combine to give the word its full meaning:
 - 'television' = seeing things from a distance, which makes sense for a device that shows images from far away.

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Consolidating new vocabulary

7. Context matters

This principle can be reinforced by using short quizzes, such as multiple-choice questions (MCQs), to give pupils retrieval practice and check their understanding of word meanings in context. These quizzes help ensure that pupils can correctly apply vocabulary in context.

For example, with the word *bank* (which has multiple meanings), you might use the following MCQ:

Question: In which sentence does the word *bank* refer to a financial institution?

- The boat drifted toward the riverbank.
- She deposited money at the bank.
- He sat on the bank, fishing.

Correct answer: B) She deposited money at the bank.

This approach tests pupils' ability to distinguish between different uses of a word based on the context, improving their ability to apply vocabulary in different situations.

8. Deep in thought

This principle supports vocabulary teaching by encouraging pupils to think critically about word meanings through problem-solving questions. These questions push pupils to analyse, compare, or apply words in new contexts, fostering a deeper understanding.

For example, with the word *fragile*, you might ask a problem-solving question:

- If you had to ship something *fragile* like glass, how would you protect it? Why is it important to treat *fragile* items differently from others?

This encourages pupils to think about why something *fragile* needs care and connects the word to real-life scenarios, deepening their understanding of the word's meaning.



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9. Soak it up

This principle supports vocabulary teaching by using interactive tasks and games that engage pupils with word structures and their multiple meanings. These activities allow pupils to actively explore and internalise vocabulary, making learning more memorable.

For example, with the word *light*, you can design the following tasks:

- **Word association game:** Ask pupils to brainstorm different meanings of light (eg not heavy, bright, or an idea) and categorise them.
- **Word building challenge:** Give pupils a base word like light and ask them to create new words by adding prefixes or suffixes (eg lighten, delightful).
- **Sentence sorting:** Provide sentences using the word 'light' in different contexts (eg 'The box is light' vs. 'The room is filled with light') and ask pupils to match the word to its correct meaning.

These activities encourage pupils to 'soak up' the structure and varied meanings of words, helping them engage with vocabulary in fun and meaningful ways.

