

You almost never master a word on one occasion. Because the end goal is for students to retain vocabulary (words taught both implicitly and explicitly) for later use in their reading, writing, and speaking, it is important that teachers are thoughtful and intentional about creating and using systems for students to meaningfully revisit these words.

According to research done by David Liben in *Aspects of Text Complexity: Vocabulary Research Base*, students need a *minimum* of six repetitions with a word before they truly learn it.<sup>11</sup> In order to solidify student understanding of vocabulary words, students must use them—and use them *a lot*. Spiraling back involves revisiting words you’ve already taught, giving students the kind of practice that can ultimately lead to real mastery. We recommend four different approaches to reinforcing and maintaining previously taught vocabulary:

1. Engaging in word play
2. Prompting students to upgrade word choice in discussion and writing

3. Applying words to reading
4. Utilizing the classroom environment

This module discusses a handful of suggestions for spiraling back to vocabulary words that you have previously taught. In the days and weeks after you teach a new word, these approaches should serve as effective tools to help students remember (and remember to use!) vocabulary they've learned.

## USE WORD PLAY

Word play does more than support students in using new words and better understanding them; it conveys a sense of passion, playfulness, and appreciation for vocabulary that is important to communicate to kids (and it is also fun for teachers). By reviewing several words at once, you can ask lots of clever overlapping active practice questions. For example, you might ask students to choose between two targeted words—a tactic that causes them to evaluate similarities and differences between the words. (For example, “Which would you do if you had trouble seeing clearly: focus or gape?” “Which would you probably do if you needed to wear glasses but didn't have any: squint or gape?”)

Pose questions that force students to think about the relationship between words, in addition to the words' individual meanings. Connections help students retain the meaning of a word, as well as better grasp its own particular nuances. These questions can be argued with a variety of answers—for example, “Could a *virtuoso* be a *rival*? Why or why not?” “Is there such thing as a *benign tyrant*?” Open-ended questions like these, as in active practice, are useful in providing an additional prompt for rigorously applying a word. They are especially useful when spiraling back on previously taught vocabulary, as you can address more than one word at a time and ask students to rigorously apply the words in a variety of contexts.

Regardless of the types of word play you give to your students, finding ways to systematically incorporate them as part of your daily routines is useful to ensure that you constantly spiral back to vocabulary words you have previously taught. Consider including word-play questions as part of your daily Do Now (a short activity that students complete when they enter class, outlined in *Teach Like a Champion* and *TLaC 2.0*), an oral drill (a questioning routine you might use to review previous material at the start of class), or as part of homework or a word journal (for example, “Write a story about this picture. Use two of these four words”; “Write a story about a tyrannical hermit”). Making vocabulary a rich and consistent part of each of these academic routines can ensure

that new vocabulary is maintained and that previously taught vocabulary is spiraled throughout the year.

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## See It in Action

Watch as Stephen Chiger kicks off his eleventh-grade reading class in clip 31 at [teachlikeachampion.com/yourlibrary](http://teachlikeachampion.com/yourlibrary). In one of our favorite clips, Stephen introduces three new vocabulary words and reviews previously taught words as well. He gives a variety of examples and clear definitions, uses Call and Response to lock in definitions, and then asks students to describe a variety of scenarios in which one of the previous day's words might apply.

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## VOCABULARY UPGRADES

Consistently challenge students to provide vocabulary upgrades in writing and during classroom discussions to make sure that students use the new words they are learning. This will better ensure that new words will enter their working vocabulary. (For example, “What is a more specific word you could use for the word *weird*? Who has a way of upgrading her answer to include one of our vocabulary words?”)

Asking students to upgrade the vocabulary that they use in discussion will also better support them in using those new words in their writing. And as always, make sure that students are using new words appropriately. One teacher recently shared with us that she was so insistent that her students no longer use the word *sad* that they began using the word *depressed*. The teacher quickly realized that her passion for vocabulary upgrades caused students to misuse a new word—for example, her students reported being “depressed” that there wasn’t pizza for lunch. When you ask students to upgrade their vocabulary, make sure that they are also doing so with fidelity to the definitions.

## CONNECT TO TEXTS

One of the best ways to ask students to use and apply new vocabulary words is to ground your questions in the text. Consider asking students to describe situations in novels that you are reading. (For example, “Which one of our vocabulary words describes how Jesse must be feeling right now? Why?”)

In addition, a great way of extending and maintaining vocabulary is to help students identify when one of their explicit vocabulary words appears in a text. Because strong implicit and explicit instruction causes students to be more attentive to words, they will likely find these words themselves. You might consider having students keep vocabulary lists of words encountered in texts—both those encountered implicitly as well as those taught explicitly.



### See It in Action

Watch clip 32 at [teachlikeachampion.com/yourlibrary](http://teachlikeachampion.com/yourlibrary). As they read Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, Beth Verrilli reviews the word *exploited* with her eleventh and twelfth graders with a series of Cold Calls. "Who *exploited* something in *Macbeth*?" "How did Lady Macbeth *exploit* Macbeth's weaknesses?" "One other person who *exploited* something?" "How did Macbeth *exploit* Duncan's trust?" These questions not only help students better understand *Macbeth* but also ask students to apply a vocabulary word that they have previously been taught.

## CLASSROOM ENVIRONMENT

Consider changing the classroom environment to be more conducive to the learning of new words. A word wall is the most obvious and most common way of keeping vocabulary instruction alive for maintenance and extension. Many teachers keep a visual record of all their vocabulary words on a wall in their classroom. The word wall is a helpful tool for students throughout the year; they can use it as a resource to upgrade their vocabulary in both writing and discussion. It can also be useful for teachers to help in planning and asking overlapping practice questions.

### Vocabulary Instruction, Reconsidered

For students to communicate effectively, especially at the level necessary to thrive in a college environment and beyond, they need to pick up a serious arsenal of words. It is the responsibility of all teachers to chop away at the student vocabulary deficit in an intentional way— both by taking the time to look deeply

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at a number of specific words and by developing students' general familiarity with more common words throughout the course of actual reading. Through a concerted effort to teach the meanings, uses, and pronunciations of new words both explicitly and implicitly, teachers can give keys both to unlocking complex texts and to becoming excellent writers with a commanding vocabulary.

In the next chapter, we'll turn away from vocabulary to more systems-based strategies. It's amazing what a few intentional and consistent systems for approaching activities in the literacy classroom can do in terms of creating efficiency, productivity, and, ultimately, student autonomy.

## NOTES

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3. Ibid.
4. Jim Trelease, *The Read-Aloud Handbook* (New York: Penguin, 2013).
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7. Peter C. Brown, Henry L. Roediger III, and Mark A. McDaniel, *Make It Stick: The Science of Successful Learning* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2015).
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9. William E. Nagy, and Judith A. Scott, "Vocabulary Processes," in *Handbook of Reading Research*, ed. Michael L. Kamil, Peter B. Mosenthal, P. David Pearson, and Rebecca Barr (Mahwah, N.J.: Erlbaum, 2000), 3:269–284.
10. David Coleman and Susan Pimentel, *Bringing the Common Core to Life: Ten Essays on the Anchor Reading Standards* (publication data unknown), 6.
11. David Liben, *Aspects of Text Complexity: Vocabulary Research Base* (Chicago: Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, 2010), <https://docs.gatesfoundation.org/documents/literacyconveningvocabularyresearchbase.pdf>.