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## What is Academic Vocabulary? Why is it important?

by Becky L. Spivey, M.Ed.

### What is academic vocabulary?

Academic vocabulary includes words used in academic dialogue and texts. It does not include words students use in general conversation, but academic vocabulary *relates* to other familiar words that students do use. For example, rather than using the simple verb *watch*, an academic term would be *observe*. Academic vocabulary words help students understand oral directions and classroom instructions as well as comprehend text across different subject areas.



The words in our vocabulary fall into three tiers.

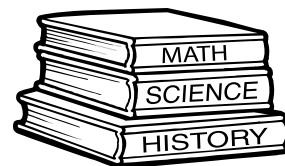
**Tier 1 words** include basic or high-frequency vocabulary words and usually don't include multiple meaning words.

**Tier 2 words** are less familiar to students but help in comprehending written texts and conversations shared between the teacher and student. Tier 2 words are "general academic words" and sometimes may be referred to as "rich vocabulary." These words are precise but more subtle forms of familiar words and include multiple meaning words. For example, instead of saying "he *walked*," one may say "he *sauntered*." Tier 2 words cross over into a variety of domains or subject areas.

**Tier 3 words** are "domain specific" and are critical to understanding subject content. Generally, they have low frequency use and are limited to specific subjects – i.e., the geographical terms *isthmus*, *peninsula*, and *cape*. We find Tier 3 words in informational texts or textbooks. Tier 3 words are best learned through direct instruction within specific subject or content lessons.

Still, the term "academic vocabulary" may not hold the same meaning for all teachers. Many educators think this term represents a "*vocabulary of directions*," or the words students must know in order to perform well on standardized tests. "Testing" vocabulary represents yet another category of words. Testing vocabulary includes active verbs and concrete nouns. The active verbs direct students to think more deeply about their subject matter (*identify*, *explain*, *organize*, *retell*, *illustrate*, etc.). The nouns tell students what they are to use to present their comprehension of the subject material for an assessment or assignment (i.e., *outline*, *graph*, *chart*, *essay*, *theme*, *analogy*, *Venn diagram*, etc.). Noted educator and author, Jim Burke suggests, "You cannot expect to succeed on

assignments if you do not understand the directions.” Burke recently released his “A-List” of 15 academic vocabulary words based on what his current teaching colleagues decided are central to *all* subjects and are in keeping with state standards and the Common Core. For each of the “A-List” verbs, Burke provides three more related words to help students understand and generalize the term across the curriculum. For example, the word *analyze* is followed by *break down*, *deconstruct*, and *examine*. Click the following link to view this list. Teachers may photocopy the list for classroom use only.



<http://englishcompanion.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/A-List-Teacher-Edition.png>

All students, especially English Language Learners and other at-risk students, require explicit and direct instruction in order to learn many Tier 2 and most Tier 3 vocabulary words. Learning academic and testing vocabulary in a variety of ways will help meet students’ specific learning style or needs.

As early as kindergarten, direct and focused vocabulary instruction for Tier 2 and Tier 3 vocabulary, including test vocabulary, should begin. Teachers must be responsible for **selecting** the vocabulary for their students to learn and **not be dependent** on the bold, italicized, or highlighted words in a textbook, many of which students may already know or do not need. Vocabulary instruction should focus on words students will encounter throughout their academic careers, rather than those they will rarely use after passing a test.

Each state’s curriculum standards and the Common Core State Standards (if your state has adopted them) provides objectives to assist teachers in selecting appropriate Tier 2 and Tier 3 vocabulary lists across all subject areas. Using these selected words, teachers can and should create their own custom vocabulary lists as well as context-rich sentences and definitions in order to teach and help students understand and use them correctly in context, thus mastering their learning objectives.

#### Resources

Burke, Jim. (2016) The A-List: *Verbs to Live By*. Retrieved March, 2016 from <http://englishcompanion.com/the-a-list-verbs-to-live-by/>

Learning A – Z. (2015) Common Core State Standards. *What Is Academic Vocabulary?* Retrieved March 2016 from <https://www.learninga-z.com/commoncore/academic-vocabulary.html>

Vocabulary.com (2014). *Jim Burke’s Academic Vocabulary List*. Retrieved March 2016 from <https://www.vocabulary.com/lists/388513#view=notes>

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## Helpful Products

The list of Super Duper® products below may be helpful when working with children who have special needs. Visit [www.superduperinc.com](http://www.superduperinc.com) and type in the **item name or number in our search engine**. If you’re viewing this Handy Handout on a computer, click the links below to see the product descriptions.

Core Curriculum Vocabulary Cards  
Fun Sheets Level one  
[Item #BKCRD-44](#)

Core Curriculum Vocabulary Cards Level One  
[Item #CRD-44](#)