

HACKING THE COMMON CORE

**10 Strategies for Amazing Learning
in a Standardized World**

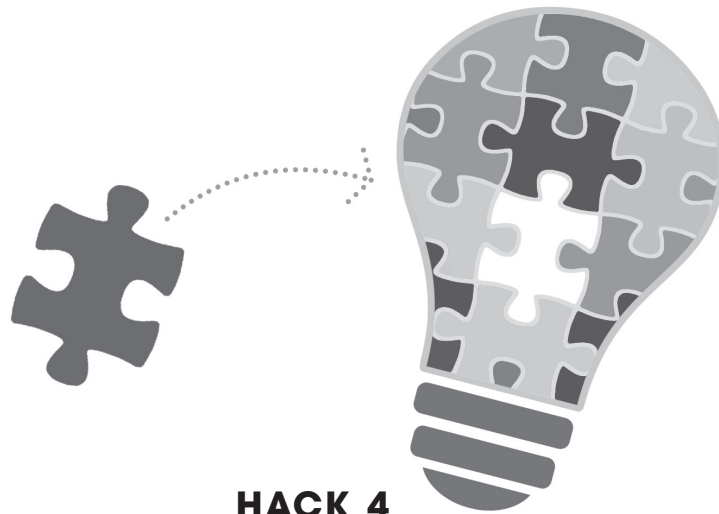


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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgements	7
Publisher's Foreword	11
Author's Note	15
Introduction:	17
<i>Why the Common Core State Standards need to be hacked</i>	
Hack 1: Shift Happens	21
<i>Make sense of the umbrella view</i>	
Hack 2: Close in on Close Reading	31
<i>Navigate a destructive misinterpretation of the standards</i>	
Hack 3: Friday Every Day	41
<i>Formative assessment and brain-based strategies</i>	
Hack 4: Morecabulary	49
<i>Create a new culture of vocabulary acquisition</i>	
Hack 5: Embrace the Novel	61
<i>Debunk the 70/30 delusion</i>	
Hack 6: Prioritize	73
<i>Make the standards work for you</i>	
Hack 7: Vigor Versus Rigor	83
<i>Meet the challenge without becoming paralyzed</i>	
Hack 8: Upgrade the Verb	93
<i>Take sophistication to a whole new level</i>	
Hack 9: One Size Fits None	103
<i>Adapt to fit every learner</i>	
Hack 10: Involve Parents	113
<i>Clarify their role</i>	
Conclusion	123
<i>Other Books in the Hack Learning Series</i>	127
Resources	129
About the Author	131



HACK 4

MORECABULARY

Create a new culture of vocabulary acquisition

The most important thing is to read as much as you can, like I did. It will give you an understanding of what makes good writing and it will enlarge your vocabulary.

—J. K. ROWLING, AUTHOR

THE PROBLEM: OUTDATED VOCABULARY INSTRUCTION

TRADITIONAL METHODS OF teaching vocabulary still pervade classrooms despite plentiful current research about word acquisition and process-oriented approaches. The field is full of respected educational researchers and leaders, including Robert Marzano, Marilee Sprenger, Janet Allen, Isabel Beck, Margaret McKeown, Irene Fountas, and Gay Su Pinnell, all supporting the same stance: Vocabulary acquisition is a process, not a rote task.

Lists of vocabulary words to be learned “just in case” and associated busywork activities, such as writing dictionary definitions and copying words multiple times, do not work. Testing vocabulary every Friday does not work. We’re fifteen years into the 21st century and we’re still

preparing kids to enhance their vocabularies with methods popular in the 1950s. Come on. It's time to put this tradition to rest.

THE HACK: INTEGRATE A PROCESS APPROACH

Pronounce. Engage. Assess.

That's it. Just those three things. Pronouncing new words for students is essential for speaking fluency. Engaging with the words in multiple ways helps students retain the newly taught words, and ongoing assessment (not tests) is necessary to gauge students' levels of retention. Whatever vocabulary you are teaching explicitly, whether teacher- or student-selected, make sure those three actions are happening. Vocabulary instruction in the classroom isn't an event. It's a habit, perhaps even a culture. This is true for vocabulary words, sight words, academic words, domain-specific words, any words. Except for extremely specific, high-

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level content terminology, there are no grade boundaries for word acquisition. There may be grade-level recommendations for assessing vocabulary, particularly in writing, but our concern here is not assessment; it's receptivity. For students to master a powerful vocabulary, it's essential that they be exposed to lots and lots of words from a very early age.

With regard to vocabulary acquisition, access equals success, and the earlier that access occurs, the better. Students should have receptive experiences with words very early on, even though the expressive level happens later. For instance, it's perfectly acceptable for a 4-year-old to use the word "nonconformity" and know what it means, even if she has yet to understand how letters make words. (Google "Marzano vs. a Four Year Old" if you want to see a video of this happening.)

The Common Core is full of standards that support vocabulary acquisition and meaning making, including Reading Standard 4 and all of the language standards. There are implications for the speaking

and listening standards, too, as students need to both hear and orally use new words before they express them in writing. Vocabulary is the crux of one of the instructional shifts, so the more extensive vocabulary students develop when they are young, the more doors open for them into sophisticated texts and media experiences as they grow older. Effective vocabulary instruction is a gift.

WHAT YOU CAN DO TOMORROW

- **Stop having students do dictionary work.** Dictionaries, both traditional print behemoths and their digital ilk, should now be considered last resorts for transfer of meaning, unless the reader is comprehending at a level that leaving a text to discover a word's meaning will not derail their comprehension when they return to the text. Because of the number of words in our language, dictionary definitions are efficient, short records of a word's meaning, and as such are not accessible to students in a way that transfers understanding. Engage students by going beyond the dictionary. Have your class look for context clues, ask others for help, break words apart, explore etymology, think about word families, relate unknown words to familiar ones to bridge understanding, visualize or dramatize words, create games with new words. The list of possibilities is unlimited.
- **Stop testing vocabulary lists on Friday.** Friday is not the only day that vocabulary is important, though you'd never guess that was the case in many classrooms, even in 2016. This practice is still pervasive and it must stop. Vocabulary is important every day. We don't want

students to associate knowing vocabulary only with getting through a test on Friday. This habituation virtually guarantees that they will forget all that they've learned. They cram on Thursday nights to perform well on Friday's quiz or test and then they push it right out of their minds, making room in their short-term memory for next week's words. What we do want is frequent formative assessment to integrate words into long-term memory through repeated contextual use.

- **Be sure to pronounce every new word.** In 2013, I had the great fortune to hear Maya Angelou speak. She's a storyteller, an amazing storyteller, and I sat in rapt attention to her tales. One of her anecdotes involved playing Monopoly with her brother Bailey on her kitchen floor. She emphasized the first three syllables, each with a long "o" sound (Moh-noh-poh-ly). She didn't know how it was supposed to sound until she was 11 or 12 years old and someone told her the correct pronunciation. Her story made me wonder how often students deal with that same scenario, hence the invitation above for teachers to pronounce every word for their students.
- **Practice using new words.** Multiple experiences with new words gives them staying power in a student's brain. Use the vocabulary you want your students to acquire. If you speak it, the students will speak it. Insist that students use the new words when speaking to you or each other. Likewise, create opportunities for students to use their new words often in writing. When conferring with them or offering feedback, question their word choices, focusing on those they are currently learning. Frequent formative assessment will help make new words permanent.

A BLUEPRINT FOR FULL IMPLEMENTATION

Step 1: Engage with words in multiple ways.

Every single one of the researchers I name-dropped in the problem section advocates for engaging experiences with vocabulary that include explanations, examples, elaborations, and extensions. Make these tasks part of every vocabulary acquisition moment and lesson. Have students explain new words and meanings orally and then transition their newly learned vocabulary to their writing, as they are ready to do so. Ask them to provide examples, such as visualizations and dramatizations. Encourage learners to elaborate on meanings by making connections to other related words like synonyms, particularly when writing, so that they don't habitually use the same limited number of words. Give opportunities to extend meanings by letting students create original stories or design a game using their new words. Teachers may also want to consider etymological analysis or multiple texts that involve the new words.

Step 2: Tell stories about words.

The human brain is hard-wired to learn from narrative. Teachers should share stories about words, particularly when introducing new words to students, and especially when they've got a really good story to tell. Here's an example:

When I was younger, my parents had a green Datsun B210 with tan fake leather seats. We lived down south, so the interior of that car was always blazing. We'd get in the backseat and our legs would immediately stick to the "leather" and then the sweating would start and we'd be sliding all over. It was miserable. Add to that an annoying little brother and the result was frequent arguments in the back of that car. My mother had perfected a reach-around pointer finger technique that allowed her to wag, while driving, at my brother and

me as we continued to argue and misbehave. On one extraordinarily annoying day, I began to yell at my brother so he would know how insanely stupid I thought he was. I erupted, telling him at the top of my lungs, that he was *stupendous*, and immediately noticed my mother's pointer finger in action. The finger didn't complete the action, though, as my mother stopped short and I saw a smile erupt across her face in the rearview mirror. She said that was the nicest thing I'd ever said to my brother. She explained what the word meant, and its meaning is burned into my brain like a cattle branding. Even these many years later it still stings. But, as it turns out, my brother *is* stupendous; I just didn't know it then.

Step 3: Construct meaning socially.

Teachers, as coaches, should navigate students through their thinking and pull out important facets, helping them to construct, at least at a base level, a workable definition of new words. Create definitions, at least partially, from analyzing context, root word knowledge, and prefixes or suffixes. Workable definitions can also come from their receptive vocabulary—words that they've integrated into their oral language but have not yet transitioned to their expressive vocabulary where they know the word well enough to write it or use it to create some demonstration of learning. This social construction of meaning builds on prior knowledge bases. Effective teachers help students to build on a foundation of pieces that students already own. Social construction of meaning can also be engaged using virtual tools such as Today's Meet or Padlet, where students might virtually contribute text, images, and video to build meaning in expressive ways. This would be a boon to engagement, offering students opportunities to share perspectives, which could in turn act as scaffolding for students who need it.

Step 4: Allow students to identify words that they want to learn.

New vocabulary acquisition should be contextual and authentic. In addition to words that the teacher thinks are important or that the teacher has identified as potential roadblocks in a text, solicit student-generated words for vocabulary lists. These words might not be ones a teacher might intend, but if students feel the need to go deeper with words they don't know or understand fully, they should be allowed to do so. This enriches their experiences with words and gives them a sense of being valued and invited to learn what is meaningful for them. It would be especially important for students in younger grade levels to be able to say that they had trouble understanding this word or that word, and to have those words added to their word study or word work.

Step 5: Play games with words.

Playing games with words allows students a trial and error space, a sandbox, to try out the words or practice fluency or build knowledge through activities that aren't the traditional rote. This ultimately helps students retain the new words they are learning.

One of the fun things my oldest daughter and I do in the car or on walks around the neighborhood is to amuse ourselves with words that have multiple meanings. I might see a squirrel and I'll ask her to define the word "squirrel" in her own words. Then I'll tell her that it also has a different meaning and talk about being distracted. We'll have conversations about "squirreling" on someone in a conversation or even a squirrel getting distracted from its own mission to bury acorns and climbing a nearby tree.

Step 6: Engage in constant formative assessment.

Constant formative assessment is necessary. Knowing whether or not students are "getting it" is an obligation in every classroom. In the

“What You Can Do Tomorrow” section, I wrote about listening for students to use the new words orally and observing students using the new words in writing. Extend these practices throughout the school year. Teachers should be on a constant quest to determine whether or not students are understanding and applying new learning. This certainly could happen on a unit test, but effective teachers are going to be looking for evidence of understanding and application so that potential opportunities for improvement don’t have to wait a week or two before a more formal assessment occurs.

Step 7: Read. Read. Read.

Independent reading at an instructional reading level is essential to developing strong, vocabulary-savvy readers. Although reading grade-level texts, such as with guided reading, is clearly necessary, positive interactions with a broad range of texts creates flexible, fluent readers and thinkers. Still, students need to be reading at instructional reading levels as much as possible to access more text and thus more words. Lots and lots of reading at a student’s instructional level is the best way to develop good readers and build high-level vocabulary toolboxes. You do not tell an athlete how awesome running is and then expect him or her to win the race without practice. The athlete has to run often and far to be a better runner. Analysis of running technique is valuable, but even learning from this sort of focused assessment does not negate the necessity to run. Reading works the same way.

OVERCOMING PUSHBACK

TWWADI: This is “The Way We’ve Always Done It.” Just because a practice is traditional, or habituated, or widespread doesn’t mean it’s a good one. We can’t continue to perpetuate ineffective instructional practices. This is a challenge, a provocation to do what’s best for students rather than what’s easy for adults. Continuing to engage in vocabulary-building practices that have been proven not to work is like

ignoring the fact that even though a lighter will create a fire more efficiently and faster, you're happy rubbing two sticks together, regardless of how long it takes to get a spark, if you get a spark at all. Our students can't wait for the fire to be built. Ditch the tradition and start a bonfire.

The curriculum we purchased already includes vocabulary instruction. Most of them do. However, as I've said, the vendor does not know your population of students as you do, nor does that vendor necessarily understand all the facets of effective vocabulary instruction. You, on the other hand, know your students and, after having read to this point in this chapter, you should have a pretty good handle on how you can enhance vocabulary instruction in your classroom. Look at the vocabulary processes in your vendor product. Assume that they are basic, like cheese pizza. What can you add to it to enhance the flavor and the pizza experience? How much more do you need to *pronounce, engage, and assess*?

THE HACK IN ACTION

Over the last couple of years, I've had the opportunity to do some teaching on Skype with classrooms around the country. In one of those virtual teaching situations, I worked with a group of fourth graders in an elementary school in Jacksonville, Florida. We were working on improving their writing practice and I was offering whole-class feedback on work that they had submitted to me via email.

While reading through their writing I noticed some global factors that would make useful mini-lessons. A couple of those global factors had to do with word choices and details in their writing. In the course of sharing this feedback with them, I offered a blanket statement about being "emphatic" writers.

One of the students immediately raised her hand and asked what "emphatic" meant. I stopped my mini-lesson to address this new vocabulary word. I asked if anyone in the classroom knew what "emphatic" meant. No hands went up. I asked them to think about words that

sounded similar to the word “emphatic.” One student offered “static,” but another offered “emphasis.” I reminded the students that while “static” might be a rhyming word, the word “emphasis” was in the same word family.

I asked the students if anyone knew what the word “emphasis” meant. Several hands went up. Of those students with their hands up, I asked one to read a selection from his writing for the class, but to read with “emphasis.” The student read with intense expression, punctuating several of the words while he read.

I asked the class again how many students knew what emphasis meant. More hands went up. I asked students who could tell me a definition of the word. I called on several students to explain. Their answers included:

“Reading something loud.”

“I think it means that something is important.”

“Does it mean that something is special and we need to pay attention to it?”

I told them that all were right. I explained that “emphasis” and “emphatic” were in the same word family and had similar meanings. So, now that they knew what “emphasis” meant, I asked them what they thought I might mean by being “emphatic writers.” Here’s what they came up with:

“Maybe we should make sure we’re writing about something important.”

“Sometimes we should read what we write and see if it makes sense.”

“Is this about the details you were talking about? Do we need good details?”

“I can emphasize something important by adding more details, right?”

We had a quick discussion of the word “emphasize” being part of the “emphasis” word family. One student looked the word up on an

online dictionary on one of the class iPads. When he read the definition out loud, it included something along the lines of “expressing ideas forcefully and clearly.” We discussed which of the meanings made the most sense to the group and they emphatically chose their own definitions.

This entire scenario took only a few minutes and we were able to get back to our mini-lesson. After I was done with the virtual session, the teacher added “emphatic” to the list of words they were working on. She noticed that several students began using it immediately when they spoke, and some even used it in their writing in subsequent weeks. Note that this scenario had a natural and authentic flow to it rather than being a stand-alone, and perhaps forced, word lesson. It represents an opportunity to engage in vocabulary instruction at the moment that vocabulary instruction is needed. Note that I *pronounced* the word, I *engaged* with a couple of quick activities to determine its meaning, and I did a quick formative *assessment* before I went back into the mini-lesson. The classroom teacher followed up with continued usage of the word and subsequent observations of how it was being used in speaking and in writing.



I wholeheartedly believe that a process-oriented approach to vocabulary instruction is the key to maximum student learning and performance. Over the last few years, it’s taken some convincing to get teachers to understand that the way we’ve always done it won’t work for contemporary students. Vocabulary instruction has to be relevant and authentic: It needs to be just in time versus just in case.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Michael Fisher is an instructional coach and educational consultant specializing in the intersection between instructional technology and curriculum design. He works with districts across the country helping teachers and schools maximize available technology, software, and Web-based resources while attending to curriculum design, instructional practices, and assessments. He posts frequently at ASCD Edge (edge.ascd.org), the Curriculum 21 blog (www.curriculum21.com/blog), and his own blog (digigogy.blogspot.com). He's written several books on curriculum and technology, including *Ditch the Daily Lesson Plan*, *Upgrade Your Curriculum: Practical Ways to Transform Units and Engage Students* with co-author Janet Hale, and *Digital Learning Strategies: How Do I Assign and Assess 21st Century Work?* He's also a contributing author to the Solution Tree Series *Contemporary Perspectives on Literacy*. You can contact him via Twitter @fisher1000 or by visiting his website at www.digigogy.com.