

# The Value of Direct Vocabulary Instruction: A Look Into the Research Behind *Vocabulary Power Plus*



**I**N THE WAKE OF THE PANDEMIC, many teachers have expressed their concerns about students' reading comprehension skills, noting anecdotally that a troubling number of students appear to be struggling with reading and interpreting texts. Recent reports, including those released by the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), have confirmed a decrease in students' reading abilities since 2019, with reading proficiency scores among fourth- and eighth-grade students falling to their lowest levels in decades for almost all demographics and ability levels. To combat the issue, schools and districts across the United States are exploring different instructional methodologies rooted in the science of reading, one of which is direct vocabulary instruction.

In this whitepaper, we will discuss the role of vocabulary in reading and writing proficiency, the effectiveness of direct vocabulary instruction as a whole, and the efficacy of the Prestwick House *Vocabulary Power Plus* program. This program provides students with a comprehensive study of vocabulary through critical reading passages, essays, and questions based on testing formats. Student books, digital presentations, test packets, and teacher answer keys are included in every class set. Its digital counterpart, *Vocabulary Power Plus Online*, offers all the same benefits of the traditional program in a completely web-based, interactive format that contains the important additional features of automatic grading for teachers and immediate feedback for students.

## Abstract

This report examines the effectiveness of increasing students' vocabulary, reading comprehension, and overall language skills through direct-instruction vocabulary programs in the language arts curriculum. The report presents data suggesting the necessity and effectiveness of direct vocabulary instruction and provides an example of a well-developed program that efficiently utilizes that approach.

## The Benefits of Vocabulary Instruction

Vocabulary instruction plays a pivotal role in the comprehensive development of language skills among students, especially in the realm of English language arts (ELA) education. A rich and diverse vocabulary not only empowers students to comprehend complex texts, but also enhances their ability to express thoughts with precision and nuance. As educators in the ELA domain,

it is imperative to recognize the impact of vocabulary instruction on students' academic achievement and communicative competence.

## Vocabulary and Reading

A robust vocabulary is the cornerstone of successful reading comprehension.

In 2000, the National Reading Panel (NRP), a U.S.



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government body appointed by Congress, released their famous report, *Teaching Children to Read: An Evidence-Based Assessment of the Scientific Research Literature on Reading and Its Implications for Reading Instruction*. The report noted that vocabulary and comprehension are inherently linked, as they both involve deciphering a text's meaning. While vocabulary focuses on individual words, comprehension analyzes the text at large. As the report states, "To get to the comprehension of larger units requires the requisite processing of the words. Precisely separating the two processes is difficult, if not impossible" (National Reading Panel, 2000, p. 4-15).

If students' vocabulary is limited, it will be harder for them to comprehend texts. As a result, students may read less because they find reading difficult, and in turn, miss opportunities to learn new words (Sedita, 2005). Conversely, a well-developed vocabulary facilitates word recognition and helps students read with greater speed and automaticity, leading to a more enjoyable and productive reading experience.

### Vocabulary and Writing Fluency

Writing fluency—the ability to write with ease, speed, and coherence—can have a substantial impact on students' communication skills. Becoming a proficient

writer relies heavily on vocabulary skills, as the two have a reciprocal relationship. Vocabulary knowledge influences writing, while writing contributes to expanding vocabulary knowledge (Samsidar et. al., 2022).

With a wide array of words at their disposal, students can enhance the overall quality of their written work. They can practice using words in context, selecting specific words that convey their intended meaning accurately with no room for ambiguity or misunderstanding. Knowledge of synonyms and antonyms can help students vary word choice and avoid repetition, leading to more engaging pieces.

Certain types of writing, such as formal, informal, persuasive, or descriptive, require different tones or styles. When a student has strong vocabulary skills, they are better equipped to adapt their writing to match the assignment. Consequently, students become more adept at crafting well-structured and persuasive essays, narratives, and analytical pieces.

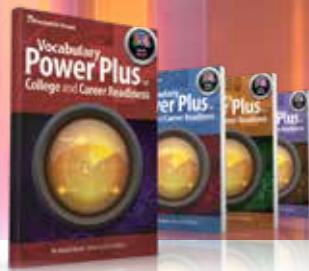
### Vocabulary and Test Preparation

Vocabulary knowledge greatly affects test preparation, impacting students' performance across a spectrum of standardized assessments and examinations.

For reading comprehension assessments, vocabulary knowledge proves indispensable. A robust vocabulary not only facilitates rapid information processing, but also promotes a deeper understanding of the text, enabling students to analyze the author's purpose, tone, and rhetoric with acuity.

Vocabulary knowledge also impacts written responses, notably in essay sections and response items, due to its impact on writing fluency as explored above. Students can select appropriate words, craft coherent sentences, and articulate concepts with clarity, skills that are crucial for impressing examiners. A varied vocabulary influences creativity in written expression, elevating the quality of test responses and differentiating exceptional test-takers from their peers.





## Methods of Direct Vocabulary Instruction

Numerous studies have shown that direct vocabulary instruction leads to significant gains in students' vocabulary knowledge (Blachowicz et al., 2006). Direct vocabulary instruction goes beyond incidental or implicit vocabulary learning that occurs naturally through exposure to texts and everyday language. Instead, it takes a deliberate and planned approach to target specific words, especially academic or domain-specific vocabulary, that students need to comprehend and use effectively.

However, there is no singular approach to direct vocabulary instruction. Rather, employing a variety of techniques and learning strategies increases the likelihood that students not only retain the words they learn, but are able to use them actively in authentic ways (Bromley, 2007; National Reading Panel, 2000).

### Multiple Exposures

Like other language skills, vocabulary knowledge is built over time. One lesson is not enough for students to retain new words. Neither is repeating the same lesson or activity twice. Students need to interact with new words numerous times in different contexts to fully commit their meanings to memory.

Multiple exposures to unfamiliar words, whether through reading, writing, listening, or speaking, serve as an effective scaffolding mechanism for vocabulary acquisition. Each exposure strengthens the connections between the word's semantic representation and its associated linguistic features (McGregor et al., 2007), allowing students to develop a more sophisticated understanding of word usage and nuances.

### Word Morphology

Word roots are the core linguistic elements that carry the fundamental meaning of a word. They are the smallest units of meaning within a word that cannot be further broken down into smaller components. Word roots can be combined with affixes, such as prefixes and suffixes, to create new words or modify the meaning of existing words.



With a working knowledge of word roots and affixes, students can better decipher unfamiliar words they may come across (Rasinski et al., 2011). The most common way of acquiring morphological knowledge in the classroom is by studying Latin and Greek roots, as around 60% of words in the English language are made up of these components.

### Distributed Practice

Also known as spaced practice or spaced repetition, distributed practice is a learning technique in which short study or practice sessions are separated by long intervals of time. This contrasts with massed practice, colloquially referred to as "cramming," in which long study sessions are concentrated in a short period of time. While massed practice may be appropriate in situations where immediate performance is required, it is generally considered less effective for long-term learning and information retention compared to distributed practice (Edmonds et al., 2021).

By integrating distributed practice into direct vocabulary instruction, students engage in regular reviews of previously learned words as they encounter new ones. Through this systematic reinforcement, students have repeated exposure to newly acquired words, leading to deeper encoding and strengthening the connections in their long-term memory.

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### Technology Integration

According to the 2010 National Education Technology Plan:

*Technology is at the core of virtually every aspect of our daily lives and work, and we must leverage it to provide engaging and powerful learning experiences and content, as well as resources and assessments that measure student achievement in more complete, authentic, and meaningful ways. (ix)*

This is true especially for today's students who have grown up alongside exponential advancements in digital technology.

Incorporating technology-based tools, such as educational apps, interactive websites, or digital media resources, with vocabulary instruction can create a dynamic, multidimensional learning experience and provide another context in which to engage with new words.

### Games and Other Activities

Supplemental activities like word puzzles, word association games, charades, flashcards, and matching offer a low-stakes way for students to learn. Away from the pressure of graded tests and quizzes, these hands-on activities provide opportunities for students to encounter and practice new words in diverse contexts, reinforcing retention and usage in a more fun and memorable manner.

## Direct Instruction and Vocabulary Power Plus

As previously discussed, direct vocabulary instruction requires a variety of approaches in order to be truly successful. Available for grades 4 through 12, *Vocabulary Power Plus* by Prestwick House systematically combines multiple methods of study in one program, providing an experience that is enriching for students, convenient for teachers, and cost-effective for schools.

All *Vocabulary Power Plus* lessons begin with an introductory list of words alongside simplified definitions, synonyms and antonyms, and natural contexts as examples. This combination ensures that readers become familiar with words that are used in unconventional ways because of style, context, or idiomatic usage (Nagy, 1988).

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**Lesson One**

- aegis** (ē' jīs) n. a shield; protection  
The life of the witness is under the aegis of the witness protection program.  
syn: backing
- rectify** (rek' tō fī) v. to correct; to make right  
JoAnne tried to rectify her poor relationship with her son by spending more time with him.  
syn: remedy; resolve
- enervate** (en' or vāt) v. to weaken  
The record temperatures enervated the farmhands before noon.  
syn: devitalize; exhaust      ant: energize; strengthen
- philanthropy** (fā lan' thrā pē) n. the act of donating money or work to those in need  
Half of the city was built by the philanthropy of wealthy steel barons.





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**Exercise II**

**Sentence Completion**

Complete the sentence in a way that shows you understand the meaning of the italicized vocabulary word.

1. The antique watch had little material value, but it had enormous *intrinsic* worth because...
2. The *sybaritic* main cabin of the gigantic yacht has all the pleasures of...
3. The *servile* intern withheld any complaints when the cable television magnate told him to...
4. Flies are not considered *crepuscular* because...
5. A hobby or physical activity in the evening can be a genuine *catharsis* for people who...

Frequent encounters with new words in different contexts foster increases in recalling meaning. *Vocabulary Power Plus* ensures that each word is visited more than eight times throughout the introduction, exercises, reviews, and tests in each lesson, far exceeding the recommended minimum frequency of three occurrences per new word for retention (Beck et al., 1987).

In some exercises, readers are introduced to a selection of Latin and Greek roots and are prompted to think of related words, infer definitions, or to construct words out of the provided roots, most of which will be encountered throughout other lessons in the program.

Lesson One

**Exercise III**

**Roots, Prefixes, and Suffixes**

Study the entries and answer the questions that follow.

The roots *fus* and *fun* mean "melt" or "pour out."  
The suffix *-ion* means "the act of."  
The roots *grad* and *gress* mean "step" or "go."  
The suffix *-el* means "little."  
The prefix *con-* means "together."  
The prefixes *di-*, *dif-*, and *dis-* mean "apart."  
The prefix *e-* means "out" or "from."

1. Using *literal* translations as guidance, define the following words without using a dictionary.  
A. fusion                      D. regress  
B. funnel                      E. progress  
C. infuse                      F. congress
2. If you have an *effusive* personality, then it \_\_\_\_\_ of you.  
Motor oil will \_\_\_\_\_ across the gravel if it spills out of the can.
3. A step-by-step process is often called a[n] \_\_\_\_\_ process, and a highway crew might use a[n] \_\_\_\_\_ to smooth out a road.
4. *Egress* literally translates to \_\_\_\_\_, and if someone loses a high-paying job and takes a lower-paying job, his or her career is said to have \_\_\_\_\_.
5. List all the words that you can think of that contain the roots *grad* and *gress*.

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Lesson Four

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**Exercise I**

**Words in Context**

From the list below, supply the words needed to complete the paragraph. Some words will not be used.

sybaritic    crepuscular    apocryphal    servile  
maxim    internecine    estrange

1. When Johnny turned fifteen, he inexplicably began a[n] \_\_\_\_\_ war with his parents. The Smiths asked Johnny how he was able to afford his new laptop computer, and Johnny gave them a[n] \_\_\_\_\_ story about how it had fallen from the back of a truck. Enraged, they confiscated the computer and ordered Johnny to sit and listen.

“When your luck runs out and you end up in prison, it will \_\_\_\_\_ you from your family and friends, and it will limit your options for the future! Your grades are already suffering, and if you make a criminal record for yourself, you’ll end up having a low-paying job in which you must be \_\_\_\_\_, or be fired, while your successful friends enjoy \_\_\_\_\_ lifestyles by comparison. Is that what you want?”

From the list below, supply the words needed to complete the paragraph. Some words will not be used.

estrange    efficacious    crepuscular    risible  
kudos    inundate    intrinsic

2. Amy arrived at the empty lot just before sundown, when the \_\_\_\_\_ animals began to emerge from the forest to feed in the grassy field. The new development

Meaningful use is a quality concern to ensure that word meanings will be retained and recalled easily, which is the essence of converting vocabulary knowledge into reading comprehension (Nagy, 1988). In *Vocabulary Power Plus*, readers are prompted to think about meanings in words-in-context exercises, open-ended sentence completion, and inference exercises.

Essay writing prompts in close proximity to each lesson provide additional opportunities for meaningful use, further ensuring that students develop not just word knowledge, but also a strategy for forming a deeper understanding of words (Kame’enui et al., 1987).

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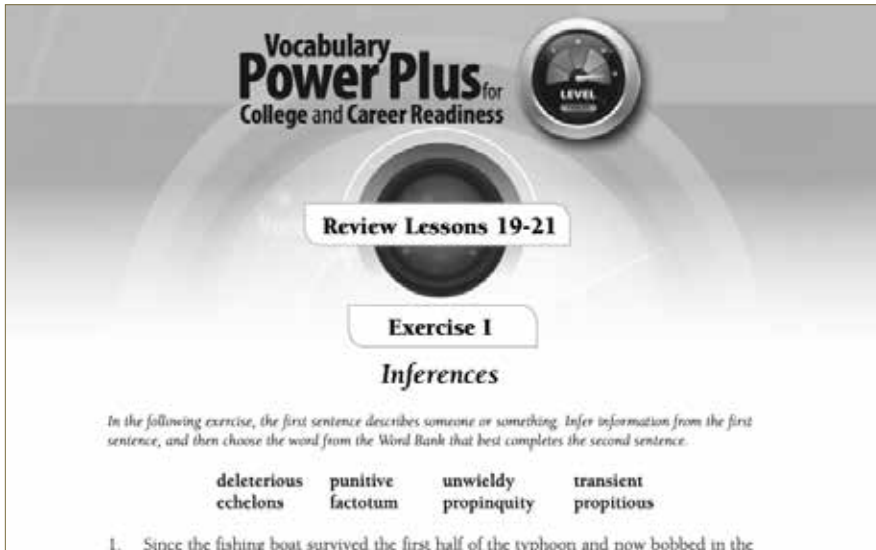
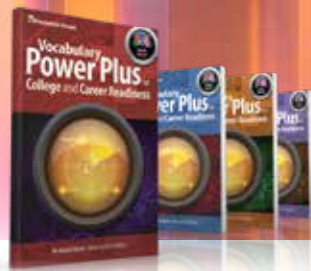
**Exercise V**

**Subject Prompts**

Here is a writing prompt similar to the one you will find on the writing portion of an assessment test. Follow the instructions below and write a brief, efficient essay.

Entertainment today, including both film and literature, often excites our misdirected judgment. When we read books or watch films set in historical contexts of the mid-1800s or earlier, we tend to weigh the behavior of characters against our expectations for people of the present. The featured heroes, or even the sympathetic characters, tend to be those who stand out among their contemporaries by espousing beliefs or attitudes of the present. This causes the other characters, representing the status quo, to seem primitive, or even barbaric, by comparison.

This often unconscious “judgment” that we render upon fiction is best described as *presentism*, an act of applying the values and beliefs of the present to the people—real or fictional—of past generations, cultures, and civilizations. There is a perpetual debate, for example, over the virtue of the founders of America, some of whom blazed frontiers, engaged in fierce battles, and established a successful



**Vocabulary Power Plus** includes regular cumulative reviews in which previously introduced words are revisited after a period of time. These distributed reviews serve to reinforce and refresh students' memory of words they have learned earlier in the course.

### Online Resources

Free digital resources are available to supplement the *Vocabulary Power Plus* experience. A dedicated website, [vocabularypowerplus.com](http://vocabularypowerplus.com), hosts an array of activities for students to peruse for each level of the program. Here, students can study the vocabulary words from each lesson using digital flashcards, review definitions with matching and spelling games, and test their knowledge with short, low-stakes quizzes.

On the Prestwick House website, teachers can download and print free review crossword puzzles for each lesson in the 9-12th grade series.

A separate digital program based on the print series, *Vocabulary Power Plus Online*, fuses the efficiency of direct instruction and the interactivity of online experiences into one platform designed to make vocabulary

instruction easy for teachers and fun for students.

*Vocabulary Power Plus Online* offers word study that builds upon itself

over the course of each five-word lesson. A fresh take on the systematic approach of W. E. Nagy (1988), who prescribed a three-pronged method of integration, repetition, and meaningful use, each lesson includes the following sections:

**Learn** – an overview of the words and definitions via audible dictation and on-screen text

**Practice** – a non-graded “playground” for trial and error, with unlimited chances to answer correctly; students have the opportunity to work through until mastery of the content is demonstrated.

**Show** – a workspace to practice/learn via multiple-choice and fill-in-the-blank exercises

**Apply** – context-based assignments

*Vocabulary Power Plus Online* is a subscription-based program and is currently available for grades 9-12. ■



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## See for yourself how *Vocabulary Power Plus* can improve vocabulary and test scores in your classroom.

Building a powerful vocabulary isn't just in the state standards; it's critical for success in every element of language arts instruction.

That's why *Vocabulary Power Plus* was created from the ground up to give students an edge on reading comprehension, test preparation, writing, and grammar.

Other vocabulary programs might help your students memorize a few words for the end-of-week quiz, but *Vocabulary Power Plus* ensures students retain the words they learn using research-proven methods. The series provides students with regular practice on standardized test formats, reading comprehension passages, and writing and grammar exercises in one streamlined program that's simple to build into any curriculum.

## *Vocabulary Power Plus Online* for Grades 9–12

Based on the core program trusted by thousands of teachers, *Vocabulary Power Plus Online* streamlines the vocabulary learning experience, saving you time usually spent on traditional instruction.

Each level in the program is designed to strengthen students' vocabulary skills in just minutes a week. Interactive exercises and bite-sized lessons provide individualized vocabulary instruction on over 1,200 high-level words across the series. And because of its online format, learning can take place anywhere, even outside the classroom!



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