Vocabulary
Advanced Readers: Concepts and Skills

Vocabulary is knowledge of word and phrase **meaning(s)**. Key vocabulary concepts and skills to teach adult learners at the advanced level are described below.

DEFINITIONS OF VOCABULARY CONCEPTS AND SKILLS

Vocabulary instruction has a wealth of terminology associated with it. This section will highlight fundamental concepts and definitions that are the basis for teaching and learning vocabulary.

All explanations and descriptions involve word or phrase meaning (see sidebar on phrases) and focus on three different aspects of developing meaning:

- Understanding meanings of **whole words or phrases** in isolation or in context;
- Breaking down complex words into parts, and using **word part meanings** to understand the whole word; and
- Understanding how **signal words** show connections between ideas in a text.

WORD TIERS

Reading instruction researchers have developed a three-tiered model of vocabulary development based on frequency of word use. Reading instructors can use this model to help determine which words are most important to teach. These categories are called tiers.

- **Tier 1 (high frequency in speech):** Tier 1 words are those used in everyday speech and learned by native English speakers as children. These are the first words native English–speaking adult learners encounter at the beginning level of reading instruction. Examples of Tier 1 words: *clock, homework, understand, jump, ready, tall.*

- **Tier 2 (high frequency in written text):** Tier 2 words are sometimes called "general academic words." While they may be used by sophisticated language users in speech, they appear more frequently in written texts. Tier 2 words tend to be more abstract than Tier 1 words and used in more formal, technical, or academic contexts, though they are not specific to any field. Adult

> **Phrases**
>
> Phrases (i.e., two or more words together) are included in vocabulary instruction when the phrase as a whole can be used as one part of speech (e.g., noun, verb, adjective). Examples:
>
> - Phrasal verbs such as to *chip in* or to *count on*
> - Nouns such as a *spin-off*, a *put-down*, or a *rip-off*
> - Idiomatic expressions such as *elbow grease*, *hang in there*, or *spill the beans*
> - Adjectives such as *follow-up* meeting, *fallback* plan

Teaching Adults to READ
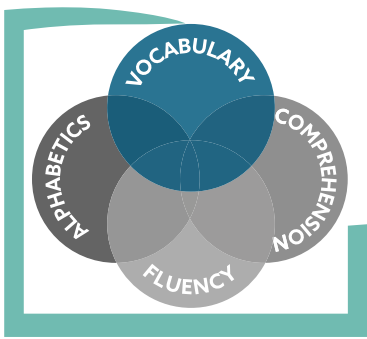
LINCS

learners at all levels—native English speakers and English learners (EL) alike—benefit from direct instruction in Tier 2 words. Advanced readers can also expand their comprehension of Tier 2 words as they encounter them when reading literary and informational texts. Examples of Tier 2 words: *benefit, expectation, compatibility, incongruous, generalize, pacify, sympathetic.*

- **Tier 3 (low frequency and technical):** Tier 3 words, sometimes called "domain-specific words," are specific to academic and technical disciplines, terminology that specialists in a job or field of study need to know. When Tier 3 words appear in writing, especially for non-specialist audiences, they tend to be defined in the text or in glossaries. Because building background knowledge is key to building comprehension, content area knowledge and its associated vocabulary become a focus of instruction at the advanced level. As long as Tier 3 vocabulary is taught well in social studies or science lessons, it is less important to spend time teaching and learning Tier 3 words in the context of general adult education reading instruction. Examples of Tier 3 words and phrases: *catalytic converter, antebellum, onomatopoeia, sine, ultraviolet.*
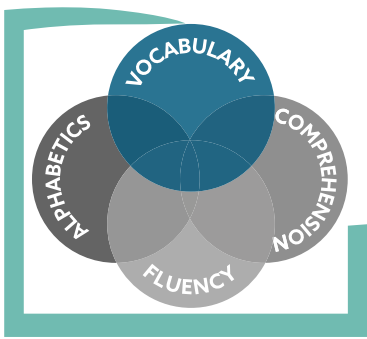
WORD STRUCTURE/MORPHOLOGY

In addition to learning the meanings of whole words or phrases, advanced adult readers may benefit from being able to break down words into smaller, meaningful parts and recognize patterns in how those parts combine to form words. The study of the internal structure of words is called **morphology**. Research indicates that **morphological analysis** is a powerful strategy for learning new vocabulary and determining the meaning of new words that adults encounter in texts they are reading.

Note: The terminology introduced in this section is useful for instructors. It is not necessary for adult learners to know or use the terminology when determining the meaning of words. Instructors can decide if they think knowing the terminology might be helpful for their students.

MORPHEMES

The smallest unit of *meaning* (as opposed to sound) is called a **morpheme**. (You might note that the smallest unit of sound is called a *phoneme*.) The main types of morphemes relevant for vocabulary study are defined below. For vocabulary study, the focus is on the *meaning* of the words and word parts.

A word can be made up of the following parts:

- **Base word:** a morpheme that stands alone as a word, without other added morphemes (e.g., *the, bread, umbrella, separate, quick*)

- **Root:** a morpheme of usually Latin or Greek origins. Roots cannot usually stand on their own as words but are combined with affixes or other roots to create an English word (e.g., *chron* (time) is the root of *chronology, synchronize*; *port* (carry) is the root of *portable, transport*)

- **Affix**: a prefix or suffix

  - **Prefix:** morpheme that attaches at the beginning of a word (e.g., *ante-* in *antebellum*; *circum-* in *circumference*)

  - **Suffix:** morpheme that attaches at the end of a word (*-ship* in *assistantship*; *-nomy* in *taxonomy*)

> **Syllable vs. Morpheme**
>
> A syllable is a unit of sound, whereas a morpheme is a unit of meaning. If a syllable does not have a particular meaning in a word, it is not a morpheme. For example, the words *money* (two syllables: *mon-ey*) and *umbrella* (three syllables: *um-brel-la*) are each only one morpheme.

COMBINING MORPHEMES

New words can be formed by combining morphemes in different ways:

- Two base words combine to make a compound word (e.g., *bird + house* ➡ *birdhouse*).

- Two or more roots combine to make a word (e.g., *tele* (far) + *phon(e)* (sound) ➡ *telephone*).

- One or more **affixes** are added to a base word or a root to make a word (e.g., *mis-* + *understand* + *-ing* ➡ *misunderstanding*).

Affixes can be classified by their function or by how they affect the meaning of the whole word:

- **Inflectional suffixes** do not change the core meaning or part of speech of the base word but rather give information about its grammatical function (these affixes "inflect" the word). For example:

  - *walk* + *-ed* ➡ *walked* (present to past tense verb form)

  - *boat* + *-s* ➡ *boats* (singular to plural noun)

- **Derivational affixes** change the meaning or part of speech of the base word (these affixes "derive" a new word). For example:
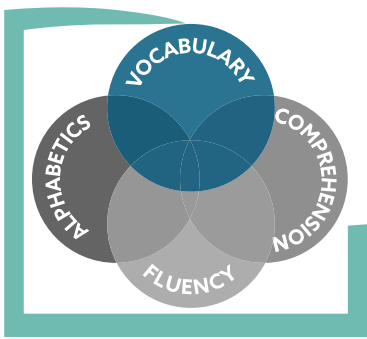
- Part of Speech Changes Meaning:
  - *un-* + *happy* ➡ *unhappy* (adjective changes meaning)
  - *un-* + *tie* ➡ *untie* (verb changes meaning)
- Change in Part of speech:
  - *happy* + *-ness* ➡ *happiness* (adjective changes to noun)
  - *break* + *-able* ➡ *breakable* (verb changes to adjective)
  - *item* + *-ize* ➡ *itemize* (noun changes to verb)

SIGNAL WORDS

An author uses *signal words* to help readers understand how information is organized and provide clues about what is important in the text. Academic texts are full of complex sentences and ideas that are connected within and between sentences with conjunctions, transition words, and other syntactical features to indicate relationships between concepts and ideas. It is difficult for a reader to understand academic texts without processing these relationships. When sentences or ideas in a text appear not to fit together logically, a missed signal word, such as a transition, is often to blame.

Signal words are especially important for English learners (ELs) to learn. They tend to be familiar with the basic signal words used in everyday conversation, such as *but, and,* and *because*, but often have not learned the signal words that occur in higher level academic texts, like *however, moreover, nevertheless,* or *despite*. The higher-level signal words can be difficult to define even for native English speakers because rather than having a meaning of their own, these words function to shape the meaning of a sentence and direction of the text.