

## Developing Vocabulary

Vocabulary knowledge is critical to academic success in social studies and all other subjects. When students encounter a new word in their reading, three possibilities exist:

- § They ***know the concept***, but are unable to connect the meaning to the proper label. Both a dictionary and textbook glossary are helpful when students have a concept but not the particular label. If the word to be taught is one for which they already have the appropriate concept and lack only the label, the teaching task is relatively simple.
- § They ***know the label***, but unable to provide precise information about the concept. The dictionary is very useful when the label is known because it provides a definition, synonyms, word origin, etc. The textbook glossary is even more useful because it defines the word in the context of social studies subject. If students already know the word to be taught but lack the complete understanding of the concept, then the teaching task needs to focus on concept development to deepen their understanding of the meaning of the word.
- § They ***know neither the concept nor the label***. If students have no knowledge about meaning or the word, they cannot not make any connection between concept and label. The dictionary is almost useless when students lack both the label and the concept. If students lack an understanding of both the word and its meaning, then the teaching task is more difficult. The teacher must provide students with opportunities to learn the label and the meaning of the word, develop a conceptual understanding of it, and use it in appropriate ways in the classroom.

# Different Word Meanings

Knowing a word is complicated by the fact that most words have more than one meaning.

§ Words have *literal, factual meanings* upon which almost everyone can agree. These literal meanings are generally found in the dictionary as very precise definitions and are referred to as **denotations**. Many words also have multiple denotative meanings, and the literal meaning of word may be quite different than the social studies meaning of a word (e.g., *initiative, cabinet, reservation, containment, trust, cataract, commune, fault, union, trough*). In within social studies, a word may have more than one meaning (e.g., *franchise, republican, axis, relief, pueblo*).

§ Words also *personal, evaluative meanings* that vary from person to person and are known as **connotations**. These evaluative meanings convey or suggest meanings that are associated with the original denotative meanings. Dictionaries often included common connotative definitions of words as alternatives to the denotative meanings. Slang words are examples of words whose evaluative meanings are almost completely disconnected from their denotative meanings (at any given time, the current slang words popular among teenagers usually have completely different meanings from their denotative ones).

The field of social studies is rich in words and phrases which have special connotative meanings. Some of the many words and phrases that are part of the **social studies jargon** are *yellow dog, gerrymander, carpetbagger, cold war, perestroika, bycatch, doldrums, Holocaust, oligarchy, domino theory, ethnic cleansing, and glass ceiling*.

§ Meanings must also be developed for those phrases, symbols, initials, and abbreviations that stand for words. While these **acronyms** are not technically “words,” they are entities for which meaning must be built. Twentieth century social studies is filled with many acronyms (e.g., *WWI, WPA, FBI, UN, CIA, IRS, EPA*), which can be difficult for students to learn and remember.

Recognition that words have both denotations and connotations is an important part of vocabulary instruction. Students need to have both a sense of the denotative and connotative meanings of words. They need not only to understand what they read but also to evaluate it. They also need to be aware of the multiple meanings that most words have and of the many acronyms that have meanings as well.

# Ways of Defining Words

- Usage:** Define the word by using it in a sentence.
- Synonym:** Define the word by writing another word that has a similar meaning.
- Antonym:** Define the word by writing a word that has a meaning opposite to the word.
- Classification:** Define the word by indicating some of its characteristics (semantic features)
- Exemplification:** Define the word by providing an example, a picture, or the specific object.
- Comparison:** Define the word by providing an example and a statement of how the example differs from the referent.
- Physical Relationship:** Define the word by showing the relationship of a part to the whole and to the other parts with which it adjoins.

# Commonly Used Verbs in the Social Studies

**Analyze**

**Explain**

**Compare**

**Illustrate**

**Contrast**

**Interpret**

**Critique**

**Justify**

**Define**

**Outline**

**Describe**

**Prove**

**Diagram**

**Relate**

**Discuss**

**State**

**Enumerate**

**Summarize**

**Evaluate**

**Trace**

# Signal Words and Phrases

Signal words and phrases are commonly used in social studies in textbooks, essays, and source documents to indicate the direction or pattern of thought in a paragraph or chapter. They help readers see how two ideas and relate to each other. Signal words are usually located at the beginning of a sentence and are followed by a comma. They are the writer=s way of getting the reader=s attention and showing him how to interpret and predict upcoming information.

§ **Words that signal definition**

§ **Words that signal example**

§ **Words that signal simple listing or addition of ideas**

§ **Words that signal sequential listing (the ordering of steps, events, etc.)**

§ **Words that signal analysis**

§ **Words that signal comparisons**

§ **Words that signal contrast**

§ **Words that signal a cause and effect relationship**

## Some Strategies to Use to Teach Vocabulary

<b>The Real Thing</b>	Put students in direct contact with the real thing that the word represents
<b>Skits</b> (short dramas)	Have students act out a sentence that contains the word whose meaning is to be explained. Skits are especially valuable to teach an unfamiliar meaning of a word that has multiple meanings.
<b>A Picture is Worth a 1000 Words</b>	Use pictures and visuals because they provide students the “next best thing to being there” opportunities.
<b>Scavenger Hunt</b>	Identify the vocabulary words, divide the class into teams, and have them collect the real things or visuals (pictures). Do the scavenger hunt activity <i>before</i> study of the vocabulary words so that students already have an interest in and information about the words
<b>Creating Analogies</b>	Use an analogy to compare a relationship familiar to students with one that is unfamiliar. For example, “Rules are to a classroom as a constitution is to a government.”
<b>Word Cards</b>	Have students write each new vocabulary word on a 3x5 card and keep all these words together in a file box. Students can write the meaning of the words in their own words on the back of the cards.
<b>Word Wall</b>	Use an area of the classroom to display important vocabulary word associated with a unit or subject. Add words to the word wall when appropriate.
<b>Word Books</b>	Have students make word notebooks in which to record the words they are learning.
<b>Context Power</b>	Use surrounding words or context to learn the meaning of a new word. Have students use the context clues to discover the meaning of the new word.