

Which Words Do I Teach?

Practice Identifying Tier 2 and 3 Vocabulary for Instruction
Grades 4-5

Passage 1 – Informational:

Simon, S. (2006). *Volcanoes*. New York: HarperCollins.

Excerpt

In **early times**, no one knew how **volcanoes formed** or why they **spouted red-hot molten** rock. In **modern times**, scientists began to study **volcanoes**. They still don't know all the answers, but they know much about how a **volcano** works. Our planet is made up of many **layers** of rock. The top **layers** of **solid** rock are called the **crust**. Deep beneath the crust is the **mantle**, where it is so hot that some rock melts. The melted, or **molten**, rock is called **magma**. **Volcanoes** are **formed** when **magma** pushes its way up through the crack in the Earth's **crust**. This is called a **volcanic eruption**. When **magma pours forth** on the **surface**, it is called **lava**.

Commentary:

This passage contains 115 words with eleven tier two words and phrases that might cause problems to some students in this band, though not all are equally likely to do so. It contains six different tier three words related to volcanoes and earth science, highlighted in blue. Let's start with the tier three words.

As noted in the introduction, tier three words often repeat. Except for ***mantle***, each of these words repeats at least once; ***volcano*** repeats four times, or five if ***volcanic*** is counted. The text often provides the reader with generous support in determining the meaning of these words, as with ***molten*** and ***magma*** in sentence seven: "The melted or ***molten*** rock is called ***magma***." Both ***molten*** and ***magma*** are defined by the context. The same is true for ***crust***, ***mantle*** and ***lava***. It is clear that in order to comprehend this passage all of these tier three words need to be understood, but the text itself offers much support for building this understanding. This is often the case with tier three words.

There are also tier two words necessary to understanding the passage. The most direct would likely be ***layers*** in sentence 4. An understanding of ***layers*** is necessary to fully grasp and visualize the structure of the crust: "The top ***layers*** of

solid rock are called the crust.” Perhaps equally important would be *spouted* in sentence 1 and *pours forth* in the last sentence, needed to help visualize the action of a volcano. *Pours forth* helps define *eruption*, too. The same is true of *surface* in the last sentence.

Both *layers* and *surface* are tier two words likely to appear in middle and high school academic texts, and thus would justify more intensive instruction, though neither is particularly abstract nor part of a word family. Additionally, a firm understanding of these words will support students when they appear in their metaphorical, and hence, more abstract forms in texts at later grades as in, “on the surface this would seem”, and “layers of meaning”.

Early times and *modern times* could be thought of as tier two phrases. They are tier two in that they could appear in a variety of historical, literary or science texts. It is reasonable that many students in this band will have only a vague notion of the meaning of either term. Though not essential to understanding this passage, their likely appearance in a variety of texts would argue for more intensive instruction of both terms.

Formed in sentences one and eight and *red-hot* in line one are easily explained quickly; *formed* with the more common synonym “made” and *red-hot* with illusions to fire first being yellow and then red as temperature increases.

There is at times uncertainty as to which definition fits certain words: why, for example, would *erupted* not be a tier three word in a passage on volcanoes?

Erupted, though associated frequently with volcanoes, can be used in other cases: for example, skin erupting in hives, and teeth erupting from the gums.

Which Words Do I Teach?

Practice Identifying Tier 2 and 3 Vocabulary for Instruction
Grades 6-8

Passage 1 -- Informational:

Freedman, R. (2006). *Freedom Walkers: The Story of the Montgomery Bus Boycott*. New York: Holiday Press.

Excerpt from the Introduction: "Why They Walked"

Not so long ago in Montgomery, Alabama, the color of your skin **determined** where you could sit on a public bus. If you happened to be an African American, you had to sit in the back of the bus, even if there were empty seats up front.

Back then, **racial segregation** was the rule throughout the American South. Strict laws—called “**Jim Crow**” laws—enforced a system of **white supremacy** that **discriminated** against blacks and kept them in their place as **second-class** citizens.

People were separated by race from the moment they were born in **segregated** hospitals until the day they were buried in **segregated** cemeteries. Blacks and whites did not attend the same schools, **worship** in the same churches, eat in the same restaurants, sleep in the same hotels, drink from the same water fountains, or sit together in the same movie theaters.

In Montgomery, it was against the law for a white person and a Negro to play checkers on public property or ride together in a taxi.

Most southern blacks were denied their right to vote. The biggest **obstacle** was the **poll tax**, a special tax that was required of all voters but was too costly for many blacks and for poor whites as well. Voters also had to pass a **literacy** test to prove that they could read, write, and understand the U.S. Constitution. These tests were often **rigged** to **disqualify** even highly educated blacks. Those who overcame the **obstacles** and insisted on **registering** as voters faced threats, **harassment** and even physical violence. As a result, African Americans in the South could not express their **grievances** in the voting booth, which for the most part, was closed to them. But there were other ways to protest, and one day a half century ago, the black citizens in Montgomery rose up in protest and united to demand their rights—by walking peacefully.

It all started on a bus.

Commentary:

This excerpt contains 321 words: nine tier three words and phrases and ten tier two words. Understanding of all nine tier three words is necessary to fully comprehend this passage. As noted in the introduction, these words are often repeated and defined in context. **Segregated** is introduced in the second paragraph, though determining its meaning from this paragraph might be difficult without a clear grasp of **discrimination**. The next paragraph, however, provides more context as well as repetition.

The second paragraph contains a high proportion of tier three words not repeated later in the text, as well as one tier two compound word. When this many words students might struggle with are packed together, determining meaning from context becomes more difficult. It is possible that these terms were described earlier in the book, but not likely given that this excerpt was taken from the introduction. In these situations, if students are to have the opportunity to read independently and learn from their reading, some words (especially tier three) might need to be introduced before reading. The remaining tier three words, **poll tax** and **registered**, are well supported by the context of the last paragraph, and would not likely need any pre-teaching.

Introductions in general are more likely to need support before reading, but even here, a third of the tier three words could be determined from context.

The first tier two word, **determined**, indicating that much of what follows in the passage is based on skin color, is essential to understanding the passage. The power of **determined** here lies in the notion that skin color in Montgomery, Alabama at that time was the causal agent for all that follows. The power of the word and its connection to the topic merits intensive instruction. It is also a word with multiple meanings, likely to appear in future texts, and part of a word family (determine, determination, determined, terminate, terminal).

Second-class, **worship**, and **obstacle** are more concrete and supported by the text. Though **literacy** is less concrete, as well as part of a word family (literate, literature), it is not central enough to the meaning of the passage to warrant intensive instruction.

Rigged, **disqualify**, **harassment**, and **grievances** are more central to the text and the topic in general, and are likely to appear in future social science texts. On this basis, they would merit more intensive discussion.