
ACADEMIC LANGUAGE

DEVELOPMENT ACTIVITIES

30 Structured Activities for Building Tier 2 & Tier 3 Vocabulary in Context

Grades 4–8

ELL / ESL

120 Vocabulary Words

- Word Sorts (5 Activities)
- Frayer Model Activities (5 Activities)
- Semantic Map Activities (5 Activities)
- Sentence Expansion Drills (5 Activities)
- Academic Discussion Stems (5 Activities)
- Vocabulary Preview-Review Routines (5 Activities)

INCLUDES:

30 Activity Packs • 120 Academic Vocabulary Cards • Frayer Model Templates • Semantic Map Templates • Discussion Stem Cards (5 Levels) • Vocabulary Preview-Review Routine Guide

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HOW TO USE THIS RESOURCE

This comprehensive resource is designed for educators working with English Language Learners (ELLs) in grades 4–8. It provides **30 structured academic language activities** that systematically build Tier 2 and Tier 3 vocabulary in meaningful context. Each activity targets specific language proficiency levels and content-area vocabulary, ensuring that students develop the academic language necessary for success across all subject areas.

Key Principles

- **Contextualized Learning:** All vocabulary is taught and practiced within meaningful content-area contexts, never in isolation.
- **Scaffolding:** Activities include built-in scaffolds that support students at different proficiency levels (Entering through Bridging).
- **Academic Discourse:** Students engage in structured academic talk using sentence stems and discussion routines.
- **Multiple Exposures:** The preview-review cycle ensures students encounter vocabulary multiple times across different modalities.
- **Transferable Skills:** Activities teach students how to learn vocabulary independently, building metacognitive awareness.

Activity Types Overview

Activity Type	Activities	Focus	Key Skills
Word Sorts	1–5	Categorizing vocabulary by meaning, structure, or concept	Analysis, classification, comparison
Frayer Models	6–10	Deep analysis through definition, examples, non-examples, and characteristics	Defining, exemplifying, contrasting
Semantic Maps	11–15	Mapping relationships between related words and concepts	Connecting, organizing, relating
Sentence Expansion	16–20	Building complex academic sentences from simple frames	Syntax, elaboration, precision
Discussion Stems	21–25	Structured academic conversation at 5 proficiency levels	Speaking, listening, discourse
Preview-Review	26–30	Systematic vocabulary introduction and review routines	Retention, self-assessment, metacognition

UNDERSTANDING TIER 2 & TIER 3 VOCABULARY

Tier	Description	Examples	Instructional Focus
Tier 1	Basic, everyday words used in common conversation; typically known by native English speakers	walk, talk, big, small, happy	Minimal direct instruction needed for most students
Tier 2	High-utility academic words found across content areas; more precise or formal than Tier 1 words	analyze, compare, evaluate, determine, represent	Primary focus of direct instruction; high return on learning investment
Tier 3	Domain-specific words tied to a particular content area or field of study	photosynthesis, integer, amendment, chromosome	Taught within the context of specific content-area lessons

PROFICIENCY LEVEL DESCRIPTORS

This resource uses the WIDA English Language Development Standards framework to scaffold instruction. Each activity includes differentiation suggestions for the following proficiency levels:

Level	Descriptor	Characteristics	Support Strategies
Level 1	Entering	Minimal comprehension; relies on visuals and context	Picture cards, L1 support, sentence frames with word banks
Level 2	Beginning	Developing comprehension; uses phrases and short sentences	Word banks, modeled responses, partial sentence frames
Level 3	Developing	Good comprehension; uses simple but some academic language	Sentence stems, graphic organizers, peer support
Level 4	Expanding	Strong comprehension; uses academic language with occasional errors	Complex sentence stems, independent use of tools, self-editing
Level 5	Bridging	Near-native comprehension; uses academic language fluently	Open-ended prompts, nuance and precision focus, leadership roles

Important Note: The activities in this resource are designed to be flexible. While each activity includes suggested scaffolds for specific proficiency levels, you should adjust the level of support based on your students' individual needs. Students at higher proficiency levels may still benefit from Level 3 scaffolds when encountering new or particularly challenging Tier 3 vocabulary.

ELA Academic Verbs — Open Sort

Objective: Students will categorize academic verbs based on self-determined criteria, developing metacognitive awareness of word functions and relationships.

Materials: Word cards: analyze, infer, summarize, evaluate, justify, synthesize, interpret, comprehend • Chart paper
• Markers

Procedure

Step 1: Distribute word cards to small groups of 3–4 students.

Step 2: Explain that this is an **open sort**: students must group the words using their own categories. There are no right or wrong categories, but they must be able to explain their reasoning.

Step 3: Allow 10 minutes for groups to discuss and sort the words.

Step 4: Have each group label their categories and present their sort to the class.

Step 5: During the debrief, highlight how words can belong to multiple categories depending on context (e.g., 'evaluate' and 'justify' often work together).

Step 6: Create a class anchor chart of the most effective academic categories.

Scaffold (Level 1 — Entering): Provide picture cues on word cards. Allow students to sort using L1 (native language) categories, then translate.

Scaffold (Level 3 — Developing): Provide sentence stems for explaining categories: 'We grouped these words together because...'

Scaffold (Level 5 — Bridging): Challenge students to write a paragraph using at least four words from different categories to form a coherent academic argument.

Student Sort Template: Activity 1

Category	Sorted Words / Notes
Word Bank:	<i>analyze, infer, summarize, evaluate, justify, synthesize, interpret, comprehend</i>
Category 1: _____	
Category 2: _____	
Category 3: _____	

ELA — Claim & Evidence Expansion

Objective: Students will expand simple claims into complex academic statements by adding reasoning, evidence, and transitional phrases.

Materials: Expansion drill templates • ELA vocabulary cards (claim, evidence, relevant) • A short literary text

Procedure

Step 1: Review the target words: **claim, evidence, relevant**.

Step 2: Write a simple base sentence on the board: 'The author makes a claim.'

Step 3: Model the expansion process: Level 2 adds a 'because' clause. Level 3 adds specific text evidence. Level 4 adds a transition and a concluding thought.

Step 4: Students use the drill template to expand the base sentence step-by-step, ensuring they use the target vocabulary in their expansions.

Step 5: Pairs compare their Level 4 sentences, checking for academic tone and correct use of 'evidence' and 'relevant'.

Step 6: Volunteers share their expanded sentences with the class for feedback.

Scaffold (Level 1 — Entering): Provide a word bank for the 'because' and 'therefore' clauses. Allow students to copy the modeled sentence structure exactly.

Scaffold (Level 3 — Developing): Provide a list of relevant text quotes students can choose from for their Level 3 evidence.

Scaffold (Level 5 — Bridging): Challenge students to create a Level 5 expansion that acknowledges a counterclaim using 'although' or 'however'.

Student Drill: Activity 16

Level 1 (Base):	The author makes a claim about the character.
Level 2 (+ because):	The author makes a claim about the character. because _____.
Level 3 (+ evidence):	The author makes a claim about the character. because _____.
Level 4 (+ transition):	The author makes a claim about the character.; therefore, _____.

Apply It: Write your own Level 4 sentence about the text using the word *evidence*.

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

Math — Explaining Reasoning Expansion

Objective: Students will expand basic math answers into detailed explanations that demonstrate procedural fluency and mathematical reasoning.

Materials: Expansion drill templates • Math vocabulary cards (calculate, equation, distribute) • A solved math problem

Procedure

Step 1: Review the target words: **calculate, equation, distribute.**

Step 2: Provide the base sentence: 'I calculated the answer.'

Step 3: Explain that in math, showing your work means showing your language. Expanding the sentence mirrors showing the mathematical steps.

Step 4: Students expand the sentence: Level 2 adds what they calculated. Level 3 adds how they did it (using 'distribute' or 'equation'). Level 4 adds a justification ('therefore, the solution is...').

Step 5: Have students apply this to a real math problem they solved recently in class.

Step 6: Peer review: Partners check if the expanded sentence fully explains the mathematical process.

Scaffold (Level 1 — Entering): Provide sentence fragments that students arrange in order. Allow drawing the steps alongside the sentences.

Scaffold (Level 3 — Developing): Provide the mathematical terms in a word bank. Allow verbal explanation before writing.

Scaffold (Level 5 — Bridging): Students must write a Level 5 sentence that explains why a common misconception or incorrect step would lead to the wrong answer.

Student Drill: Activity 17

Level 1 (Base):	I calculated the answer.
Level 2 (+ because):	I calculated the answer. because _____.
Level 3 (+ evidence):	I calculated the answer. because _____.
Level 4 (+ transition):	I calculated the answer.; therefore, _____.

Apply It: Write a Level 4 sentence explaining how to solve a problem using the word *distribute*.

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

ACADEMIC VOCABULARY CARDS

Print and cut these cards for word sorts, flashcards, word walls, or interactive notebook activities. Each card includes the definition, an example sentence, synonyms, and antonyms to support deep processing.

Printing Tip: Print on cardstock and laminate for durability. Color-code by subject area for easy sorting.

ELA VOCABULARY CARDS

analyze

Definition: To examine something carefully and in detail to understand it better

Example: Analyze the character's motivations in the story.

Synonyms: examine, investigate, study

Antonyms: guess, ignore, overlook

cite

Definition: To refer to a source as evidence or proof

Example: Cite two examples from the text to support your claim.

Synonyms: reference, quote, mention

Antonyms: invent, fabricate, ignore

comprehend

Definition: To understand the meaning or significance of something fully

Example: Did you comprehend the main idea of the passage?

Synonyms: understand, grasp, apprehend

Antonyms: misunderstand, confuse

contrast

Definition: To compare two or more things to show their differences

Example: Contrast the two characters' approaches to the problem.

Synonyms: differentiate, distinguish

Antonyms: compare similarly, equate

depict

Definition: To represent or show something in words or pictures

Example: The author depicts the setting as dark and mysterious.

Synonyms: portray, illustrate, represent

Antonyms: hide, conceal, obscure

evaluate

Definition: To judge or determine the value, quality, or importance of something

Example: Evaluate the strength of the author's argument.

Synonyms: assess, judge, appraise

Antonyms: ignore, disregard

infer

Definition: To reach a conclusion based on evidence and reasoning

Example: What can you infer from the character's actions?

Synonyms: deduce, conclude, reason

Antonyms: state directly, assume

interpret

Definition: To explain the meaning of something; to understand it in a particular way

Example: Interpret the metaphor used in stanza three.

Synonyms: explain, translate, decode

Antonyms: misinterpret, distort

justify

Definition: To provide good reasons for an action, decision, or belief

Example: Justify your answer using evidence from the text.

Synonyms: defend, support, validate

Antonyms: contradict, oppose, deny

narrative

Definition: A spoken or written account of connected events; a story

Example: Write a narrative about a personal experience.

Synonyms: story, account, tale

Antonyms: summary, list, fact sheet

perspective

Definition: A particular attitude toward or way of regarding something; a point of view

Example: How does the narrator's perspective change throughout the story?

Synonyms: viewpoint, standpoint, angle

Antonyms: fact, objective truth

summarize

Definition: To give a brief statement of the main points

Example: Summarize the key events of chapter four.

Synonyms: condense, outline, recap

Antonyms: expand, elaborate, detail

synthesize

Definition: To combine different ideas or information to form a new understanding

Example: Synthesize information from both texts to form a conclusion.

Synonyms: integrate, combine, merge

Antonyms: separate, isolate, divide

theme

Definition: The central idea or underlying message in a text

Example: Identify the theme of the story and explain your thinking.

Synonyms: message, central idea, moral

Antonyms: plot, setting, character

explicit

Definition: Stated clearly and directly, leaving no room for doubt

Example: Find the explicit details that support the main idea.

Synonyms: clear, direct, stated

Antonyms: implicit, vague, suggested

implicit

Definition: Implied but not directly stated; suggested indirectly

Example: What implicit meaning can you find in the poem?

Synonyms: suggested, implied, inferred

Antonyms: explicit, stated, direct

Semantic Map Blank Templates

Use these blank semantic map templates to help students map relationships between a core concept and its associated attributes, examples, or sub-categories.

Core Concept: _____	Definition: _____ _____
Branch 1	Details / Examples: _____ _____
Branch 2	Details / Examples: _____ _____
Branch 3	Details / Examples: _____ _____
Branch 4	Details / Examples: _____ _____

Core Concept: _____	Definition: _____ _____
Branch 1	Details / Examples: _____ _____
Branch 2	Details / Examples: _____ _____
Branch 3	Details / Examples: _____ _____
Branch 4	Details / Examples: _____ _____



Discussion Stem Quick-Reference Chart

A consolidated reference of academic discussion stems across all 5 proficiency levels. Keep this chart accessible during group work and Socratic seminars.

Level	Communicative Function	Academic Sentence Stems
Level 1 (Entering)	Making Observations Asking for Help	• I see ____. • The picture shows ____. • How do you say ____?
Level 2 (Beginning)	Predicting Clarifying	• I predict ____ because ____. • I notice that ____. • What does ____ mean?
Level 3 (Developing)	Explaining Building On	• My reasoning is ____. • Based on the text, ____. • I agree with ____, and I also add ____.
Level 4 (Expanding)	Evaluating Counter-Claiming	• The strength of this argument is ____. • An alternative perspective is ____. • Both texts agree that ____.
Level 5 (Bridging)	Acknowledging Nuance Directing Discourse	• While it is true that ____, the nuance lies in ____. • I'd like to pivot the conversation to ____. • This concept fundamentally represents ____.

Vocabulary Preview-Review Routine Guide

The Vocabulary Preview-Review routine is a high-leverage instructional cycle designed to move academic vocabulary from unknown to owned. Follow these steps for maximum retention:

Step 1: PREVIEW (Before the Lesson)

Introduce the 3-5 target words. Students do NOT look up definitions yet. They write a 'My Guess' based on word parts, cognates, or visual context. This activates prior knowledge and builds curiosity.

Step 2: ENCOUNTER (During the Lesson)

Students read the text or engage in the activity. They actively hunt for the target words. When found, they write the surrounding sentence or 'Context Clue' in their log. This provides authentic context.

Step 3: REVIEW (After the Lesson)

Students discuss the words in context. They write the 'Actual Definition' in their own words (not copied from the dictionary). This ensures comprehension and ownership.

Step 4: APPLY (Independent Practice)

Students write 'My Example' using the word in a new context. If they cannot write a sentence, they need more scaffolding or exposure.

Step 5: REFLECT (Ongoing)

Periodically, have students review their logs. Star words they feel confident using, and circle words they still need to practice. Use the blank logs provided in Activities 26-30 for new units.

Consistent use of this routine builds metacognitive awareness and empowers ELLs to take charge of their own vocabulary acquisition!

THANK YOU!

Thank you for purchasing this premium resource! Your support helps me create more high-quality, rigorous materials specifically designed for ELL/ESL educators.

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