



## Research-Based Vocabulary

### **TEN ESSENTIAL VOCABULARY STRATEGIES: Practice for Success on Standardized Tests**

*By Lee Mountain*

#### **Dual Purpose Series: Vocabulary Teaching AND Test Coaching**

Each *Ten Essential Vocabulary Strategies* book serves two purposes: first, it presents ten strategies for figuring out word meanings in context; second, it shows middle graders how to apply those strategies to vocabulary questions on standardized tests.

Arthur Applebee, director of the National Research Center on English Learning and Achievement, states, “Tests are a fact of life and have to be dealt with” (2002, p.33). However, he and many other educators feel philosophically torn between teaching valuable content and coaching for high-stakes tests. The decision need not be *either-or*; it can be *both-and*. Educators want materials that are “not only giving students solid instruction for life, but also addressing the skills they need to be good test takers” (Mesmer and Hutchins, 2002, p. 27).

*Ten Essential Vocabulary Strategies: Practice for Success on Standardized Tests* offers the best of both worlds: vocabulary strategies, which give students solid instruction, *and* test coaching. Look at the dual nature of the title and subtitle of this series. The title, *Ten Essential Vocabulary Strategies*, is content-oriented. Even if there were no standardized tests on the horizon, students would still need to learn vocabulary strategies for figuring out unfamiliar words that show up in their reading. The subtitle, *Practice for Success on Standardized Tests*, points up one immediate and critical application of the content: the vocabulary items on all standardized tests.

Whether we like it or not, “vocabulary items have garnered a disproportionate amount of space on the high-stakes tests that are currently popular throughout American edu-

**Ten Essential Vocabulary Strategies: Practice for Success on Standardized Tests is a dual-purpose vocabulary series for grades 4–8. This series highlights ten strategies for figuring out word meanings. The books show students how to use the strategies to answer the types of vocabulary questions most often found on standardized tests. Each of the ten lessons in the opening unit presents a strategy. The first five focus on variations of the context theme while the other five strategies focus on figurative language, synonyms and antonyms, affixes and roots, word relationships, and paired passages. The second unit of each book consists of ten practice test-sand incorporates a variety of literary genres. Each book concludes with a short wordplay unit. Answer keys are provided for both multiple-choice and open-response questions.**

cation. Contributing factors are that test makers find it easy to question the meaning of words, and such questions can be machine-scored at little cost” (Nilsen and Nilsen, 2003, p. 31). These truths about vocabulary questions apply to content-area tests as well as literacy assessments. Science tests ask about technical terms. Word problems are a crucial component of math tests. The vocabulary of social studies includes names of people and places. Standardized state and national tests invariably include vocabulary questions, not only in the reading sections but also in the content areas (Wood, 2001).

### **The Strategies Approach to Vocabulary**

Despite the prevalence of vocabulary questions, the teaching of vocabulary is often subsumed into the reading, language arts, or spelling program, and is given only a small amount of classroom time. Of course, students learn thousands of words per year incidentally—outside of school, in school, from conversations, and from reading (Nagy, 1988)—and it’s sometimes hard to find time in the crowded school day for an extensive vocabulary curriculum. For many educators, therefore, the most desirable vocabulary program is a relatively brief one that teaches *strategies* rather than individual words.

“Students need to be consciously aware of vocabulary strategies so they can use them on their own to determine the meaning of unknown words” (Burns, 1999, p. 201). “Students learn strategies faster if presented through direct instruction” (Block, 2001, p. 302). The “strategies approach” gives maximum returns on the limited time and energy teachers can devote to vocabulary instruction. Clearly, learning ten essential strategies for unlocking word meaning can yield abundant benefits.

These strategies give middle graders ten tools for getting better acquainted with words they know only slightly, words that are at the very edge of their vocabulary. Students would never miss a vocabulary question on the words they know *in depth*. But they also have many words on the fringe of their vocabulary, words that are not total strangers but not familiar acquaintances either.



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Those “fringe” words frequently show up on standardized tests. Some students get test jitters, block on fringe words, and skip the question. Others make wild guesses because they don’t know how to narrow down the answers and tease out word meaning from context and structural analysis. But students can learn how to analyze a new word in its sentence, and how to get meaning mileage from whatever bit of familiarity they have with the word (Nilsen and Nilsen, 2004; Van Horn, 2001).

Middle graders should have a good chance of figuring out fringe words on standardized tests because their test passages are designed to include plenty of clues. However, it takes vocabulary know-how to select the correct meaning of a word that is only slightly familiar. *Ten Essential Vocabulary Strategies* is designed to give students that know-how, using these ten strategies:

- Meaning in a sentence
- Context clues
- Best word for a blank
- Multiple meanings
- Dictionary skills
- Figurative language
- Synonyms and antonyms
- Affixes and roots
- Word relationships
- Pairings and graphics

The series shows middle graders how to recognize these ten types of questions about words and how to handle each type effectively. They are thereby empowered to do as well as they possibly can on vocabulary items on standardized tests. Their use of vocabulary strategies also improves their reading comprehension scores.



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### Patterns/Strategies for Handling Vocabulary Questions

Recognized authorities on vocabulary instruction point up the benefits and efficiencies of the strategies/patterns approach compared to the one-word-at-a-time approach: "Expectations of logical patterns result in far more productive and reassuring word learning than the traditional one-word-at-a-time approach" (Bear, Invernizzi, Templeton, and Johnston, 2004, p. 252). Regrettably, some words featured in traditional programs are not only unfamiliar but also obscure, and therefore not likely to be remembered (Ruddell and Shearer, 2002).

The chances are slim of teaching the exact words that will appear on standardized tests (Nilsen and Nilsen, 2003). It is next to impossible for vocabulary program developers to outguess the test makers, who have thousands of words from which to choose. Rates of word acquisition vary tremendously, but the average increase in reading vocabulary for middle graders is 4,000 words per year (Graves, 2000). The numbers defy one-word-at-a-time instruction.

But students who know vocabulary strategies can see patterns and connections that help them with large groups of unfamiliar words. "Any word-study our students do is more effective if we deeply engage them in searching for patterns" (Boloz, 2003, p. 678). The Nilsens (2002) refer to *connections* rather than *patterns*, but they are thinking along the same lines: "For the human mind to learn new words, it has to be able to make connections and to build on the knowledge it already has" (page 260). Strategies that involve word categories, analogies, and affixes and roots are especially helpful in pointing up patterns; these strategies are developed in *Ten Effective Vocabulary Strategies*.

On tests, the standard wording for vocabulary questions is "What is the meaning of the word, \_\_\_\_\_, in the preceding passage?" Even when two questions have exactly the same wording, they can actually require two different patterns of thought. One may be asking for the literal definition of a word and the other for its figurative connotation. Middle graders who study *Ten Effective Vocabulary Strategies* learn how to interpret questions.



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### “Think-Alouds” for Modeling Ten Vocabulary Strategies

Harmon (2000) used student “think-alouds” to find out what students actually think and do as they encounter a new word and try to figure out its meaning. She pointed out the danger of assuming that middle graders have developed effective ways of dealing with unfamiliar words, since the ways some middle-graders coped with new words were “unproductive and self defeating” (p. 525). Harmon recommended the think-aloud insider perspective for vocabulary instruction.

One of the features of *Ten Essential Vocabulary Strategies* is the modeling of an effective think-aloud for each strategy. Note this approach to a question about the word *tripod* in Book 2:

#### Example

He set up his camera on a tripod.

What does the word *tripod* mean?

- A. a square table
- B. a rectangular base
- C. a platform with four legs
- D. a support with three legs

#### Think-Aloud

Let’s think about the four answers. A *tripod* has to be something that could hold a camera. But knowing that fact does not help you narrow down the answers. All four answers—a table, a base, a platform, or a support—could hold a camera. So the context is not leading you directly to the meaning of *tripod*.

But there is something familiar about the word *tripod*, something you have met before: a meaningful part at the beginning of the word. *Tri* sounds familiar. You’ve heard that part before on the words *triangle* and *tricycle*. A triangle has three sides. A tricycle has three wheels. Maybe a tripod has three of something.

As soon as the *three* connection pops into your mind, you’re on your way to the right answer. Only one of the choices mentions three: “D. a support with three legs.” The familiar and meaningful prefix *tri* led you to the correct answer.



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The preceding think-aloud demonstrates the benefits of trying more than one strategy to unlock word meaning—first context, then structural analysis. The teaching of vocabulary is greatly enhanced by the modeling of strategies (Crawley and Merritt, 2004; Gillet, Temple, and Crawford, 2004). Nagy (1988), too, recommends teaching vocabulary strategies by “modeling for students how knowledge of context and word parts can help the reader deal with unfamiliar words” (p. 38).

Many of the lessons in *Ten Essential Vocabulary Strategies* contain such wordings as “Let’s think in slow motion about the meaning of this term,” or “Suppose you were thinking aloud about each of the multiple-choice answers; your reasoning might sound like this . . .” The books thereby model the step-by-step thinking processes for unlocking word meanings.

### **Keeping Up with New Types of Standardized Test Questions**

Every year new types of vocabulary questions are added to standardized tests. Texas, for example, gave fair warning about including “paired passages” and “mixed selections” a year in advance of giving its new state test, the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (Texas Education Agency, 2002). Paired passages are two selections on the same topic that require students to show that they understand the relationships of the texts. The vocabulary questions that follow the two passages draw word-meaning clues from both. Mixed selections combine two kinds of writing into a single passage, for example, an advertisement within a story.

*Ten Essential Vocabulary Strategies* prepares students for questions on paired passages and mixed selections. In Book 1, for example, students first read about the author, Lewis Carroll, and then they read an anecdote from his classic *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*. The vocabulary questions that follow these paired passages require students to put together word meaning from both sources.

The series addresses mixed passages with practice tests that include billboard ads within a narrative, fortune-cookie strips within an article, and graphics within content-area material.



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In Book 3, students meet a pairing of (1) informational material with (2) a letter. There is (1) a paragraph about Harriet Tubman, who secretly helped runaway slaves travel north on the “Underground Railroad,” and (2) a letter that the famous and outspoken abolitionist Fredrick Douglass wrote to Harriet Tubman, praising her and contrasting their ways of working for the same cause. In the test on these paired passages, students practice for success on the following type of vocabulary question:

Which antonyms from (1) the background paragraph and (2) the letter show the differences between Fredrick Douglass and Harriet Tubman?

- A. public and private
- B. day and night
- C. multitude and few
- D. all of the above

Question type 10: Paired passages (also antonyms)

The test response “D. all of the above” is the correct answer for the preceding question. California is among the states that favor building students’ acquaintance with such multiple-choice test responses as “all of the above” and “none of the above” (California Department of Education, 2003). Multiple-choice is the preferred format of standardized tests; Florida’s FCAT, for example, has 85–90 percent of its items in that format (Florida Department of Education, 2003). It is the format of the great majority of the questions in *Ten Essential Vocabulary Strategies*.

The current emphasis on phonics suggests that standardized tests for the middle grades will address phonics in an advanced manner. The area where phonics and dictionary skills meet is phonetic *respellings*. When middle graders encounter a word that does not adhere to the primary rules of phonics and syllabication, often “recognition of the word eludes them” (Hook and Jones, 2002, p. 10). There is no benefit in sounding out a new word if it is not recognized when spoken. “Failure to ‘click’ the word into a recognizable whole can be frustrating for students and teacher alike” (Lewkowicz, 2003, p. 737).



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Such frustration, however, is easy to overcome if students learn strategies for getting the information they need from the dictionary. Respellings (with diacritical marks) and definitions (categorized by part of speech) are included with certain questions. Book B includes respellings along with questions on words like *sleigh* (slā) and *ache* (āk) and on names like Don *Quixote* (kē-hō-tā). Book 3 addresses the abbreviations of parts of speech that are used to categorize dictionary definitions.

### **Correlations with the IRA/NCTE Standards**

The preceding examples of content demonstrate the correlation of *Ten Essential Vocabulary Strategies* with the Standards of the International Reading Association and the National Council of Teachers of English (1996). Standard 1 addresses the reading of a wide range of texts, both fiction and nonfiction. The practice test passages in all books of the series include fiction and nonfiction, from which vocabulary questions are drawn. Standard 2 addresses the reading of literature from many periods and many genres. The practice test passages include classic as well as current selections from a wide variety of genres. The vocabulary questions are designed to help students understand how authors use figurative language, effective synonyms, and even puns in their writing.

Standards 3 through 6 address reading, writing, and language structure. In each of these areas vocabulary plays a significant part. Standard 3 specifically mentions knowledge of word meaning, context, and graphics. The contents of *Ten Essential Vocabulary Strategies* reflect these standards. The alignment of this series with the standards guarantees that the books will promote the most vital aspects of students' word work and will also provide test-prep assistance with vocabulary questions on standardized assessments.

The California Department of Education differentiates between "permissible" and "not permissible" test prep. The following question and answer from California is pertinent across the nation: "If the specific test for which I am preparing students were discontinued and a different test of the same type were substituted, would my test preparation



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procedure remain the same or would it change? If it would remain the same, then it probably is permissible because it is most likely generic preparation for any test or test format, rather than for one specific test or format. On the other hand, if that test preparation would change, then it probably is not permissible” (California Department of Education, 2003). The generic and transferable nature of *Ten Essential Vocabulary Strategies* makes the series not only permissible but also desirable for test preparation.

### **Word Choices, Word Work, and Wordplay**

Though the focus of *Ten Essential Vocabulary Strategies* is on strategies rather than individual words, the words featured in the exercises were still carefully chosen. They are useful to middle graders. Many are high-frequency words from rank-ordering research studies (Sakiey and Fry, 1979; Carroll, Davies, and Richman, 1971).

The suggested level for Book 1 of *Ten Essential Vocabulary Strategies* is grade 4. However, the books are designed so that they can be used at more than one grade level. In some schools, Book 1 would be suitable for grade 3, and in others, for grade 5. So the designation of the series as “middle grades” (grades 4 through 8) can be expanded to grades 3 through 9.

The concluding unit of each book moves from word work to wordplay. The featured forms of wordplay reinforce the previously introduced strategies; for example, synonyms are reinforced through hink pinks or rhyming riddles. Towell (1997) recommended riddles and rhymes for vocabulary expansion. Book 3 gives special attention to homophones and homographs that often confuse test takers. Such words can be differentiated effectively through wordplay (Mountain, 1982).

Brabham and Villaume (2002) saw the possibilities of students learning multiple meanings through wordplay: “Examples of teachers and students having fun with language included explorations of such words as *bat*—a flying mammal, a stick used to hit a ball, and what eyes do when people flirt” (p. 265). Such wordplay is an important part of the *Ten Essential Vocabulary Strategies* series.



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Riddles can also reinforce distinctions between figurative and literal language (Tyson and Mountain, 1982). Although the concluding wordplay units are short, they offer a pleasant continuance of vocabulary development beyond the learning of strategies and the practice of their application on test questions.

### **Conclusion**

Remember the old saying, “Give me a fish and I’ll eat for a day; teach me how to fish and I’ll eat for a lifetime.” That old saying is easy to paraphrase in terms of vocabulary: “Teach me a list of words, and I’ll pass this week’s test, maybe. Teach me to use vocabulary *strategies*, and I’ll be able to figure out unfamiliar words on all my tests, and for the rest of my lifetime of reading, too.” Vocabulary strategies strengthen reading comprehension both immediately and for life, so students gain both short-term and long-term benefits from the dual-purpose series, *Ten Essential Vocabulary Strategies: Practice for Success on Standardized Tests*.



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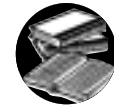
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With degrees from George Washington University in Washington, D.C., and from Pennsylvania State University, Mountain has extensive teaching experience. In 2000 she received the National Freedoms Foundation Award for contributions to education. Her textbooks have received both the McGuffey Award (Uncle Sam and the Flag) and the Texty Award (Pocketful of Posies Primer). She is a Fellow of the Text and Academic Authors Association, a member of Phi Beta Kappa, and the recipient of the 2003 University of Houston Teaching Excellence Award.

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