

Step Up to Writing Strategy Spotlight

Breaking Down Definitions



“Look these words up in the dictionary, copy down the definitions and write a sentence for each one.” How many times have those words been uttered within the walls of our schools? Sadly, for many students, the task becomes an exercise in frustration or busywork. Research indicates that for teaching the meaning of unknown words, it is a fairly ineffective strategy. Looking for something with more educational muscle? Read on...

Four steps are involved in breaking down definitions.

Assigning is not teaching.

Choose the most important words and directly teach them to your students. It's easiest to break down definitions using the overhead projector or document camera while your students make a copy in their notes.

1. Use three-column paper or fold paper into three columns and label them.

Word/term	Definition	Example

2. Put the word to be defined in the first column.

Word/term	Definition	Example
Denominator	-- number <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • below line in a fraction • tells how many parts in whole 	

3. For nouns: Think about the definition and decide to which *category* the word belongs and jot it after the dash in column two. This is the hardest part for struggling students! It requires a lot of modeling on your part. For verbs: Think about the definition and decide on a synonym (a word that means the same thing) and jot it after the dash, beginning with “to”.

Use additional words to describe or explain the word.

Word/term	Definition	Example
Denominator	-- number <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • below line in a fraction • tells how many parts in whole 	$\frac{1}{4}$ 4 pieces of pizza total
Numerator	--number <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • above line in a fraction • tells how many parts (out of the whole) there are or are being used/discussed 	$\frac{1}{4}$ 1 get to eat 1 piece
Calculate	-- to figure out <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • using math skills 	$38 \times 2 = 76$ not just guess

4. Add an example. The example is something that will be personally meaningful for the student, perhaps an illustration (quick sketch), an example, a symbol, a few words to describe a situation that applies to the word/term, or in some instances, a non-example.

Did you know?

Students have about a 15% chance of figuring out the meaning of an unknown word using the context cues. That means in a challenging book with 20 unknown words, the average student will figure out the meaning of three of them. Those aren't good enough odds! Which students are most likely to learn meanings of unknown words while reading independently? Those who already have the largest vocabularies!