Working with students with language impairment:

Vocabulary

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Contents

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What is language impairment?

Language impairment refers to difficulties using and understanding language and is typically defined by comparing a student's performance on a language assessment with information about what is expected of children's language development at different ages. Specific language impairment (SLI) refers to language difficulties that occur when a student's other cognitive functions are within the average range, while the term 'non-specific language impairment' is used to describe students whose language skills are below those expected of their age but may be at a similar level to their cognitive skills. In this factsheet, we will use the terms 'language impairment' or 'language difficulties' to refer to all students with difficulties using and understanding language. Approximately 7% of children are affected by language difficulties but there is very wide variability in these children's abilities. Language impairment can involve all aspects of language, namely syntax (word order), semantics (vocabulary and meaning), morphology, phonology and pragmatics. It is important to note that children with language impairment are at risk for later literacy problems.

Glossary

Pragmatics
The way language is used and the use of language in social contexts

Cognition
The mental processes involved in gaining knowledge

Morphology
The forms and structure of words

Phonology
The sound system of a language

Phonemic awareness
The ability to hear, identify and manipulate sounds

What is 'vocabulary'?

The term 'vocabulary' refers to the words known by a person. This includes both the words a student understands when they hear or read the word (receptive vocabulary) as well as those they can produce in conversation or written work (expressive or productive vocabulary). It is important to distinguish this from word recognition vocabulary, which is generally used in schools to describe words that a student is able to read, whether or not they know the meaning. Word meaning vocabulary refers to words that students can define or attach meaning to[1] and is the focus of this discussion. In addition, this information will focus on both receptive and expressive vocabulary: receptive vocabulary refers to the understanding of words that are read or heard whereas expressive vocabulary refers to the spoken/written use of words.

There are different levels of 'knowing' a word from unknown (never seen or heard of it, no idea what it means), through to knowledge that the word exists, partial knowledge and complete knowledge[1].

Students learn vocabulary items in a variety of ways including:

- explicit teaching, when a parent, teacher or other person tells the learner the word and what it means
- developing meaning from contexts such as conversation, television, books and the playground
- strategically figuring out words and their meanings based on context, the parts of the words and strategies such as using dictionaries[1]

Typically developing learners are generally able to derive meanings from context and incidental learning situations but it is important to note that children with language impairments may not learn words as efficiently and may require more frequent and repeated exposure to truly learn a word. In addition, children with language impairments are less likely to learn words incidentally through book reading[2]. It is also important to note that vocabulary development varies widely among children at the age of school entry.

Why is it important? How does it impact on language and literacy development?

Vocabulary development is a crucial part of reading, writing and functioning in the classroom and is described by Scarborough[3], (2001) as one of the many strands that are woven into skilled reading. A large body of research has demonstrated the critical link between early vocabulary knowledge and later achievement in reading[2]. Importantly, studies have indicated wide discrepancies in vocabulary knowledge in the early years of school between children of different socio-economic backgrounds.

In early readers, research indicates that receptive and expressive vocabulary skills impact on the development of phonological skills and word identification skills[2]. Beginning readers, who have limited decoding skills, rely on their vocabulary skills to identify pictures and other contextual clues in order to make attempts at unfamiliar content words. Children who have difficulty understanding words are at higher risk for having difficulty blending sounds. Children with limited expressive vocabulary and who have difficulty defining words are more likely to have difficulty with word identification[5]. In later years, research also indicates that vocabulary knowledge is strongly associated with both comprehension[6] [7] and overall reading achievement. It also affects students' abilities to participate in classroom activities. The relationship between reading comprehension (understanding what you read) and vocabulary is particularly strong in upper primary school and beyond when reading is important to gain information in order to access the curriculum[7]. The importance of reading in gaining new information is often described as a shift from 'learning to read' to 'reading to learn'.

What do vocabulary skills look like in primary school aged students?

Children with limited vocabulary are likely to struggle with a number of areas of learning and social interaction. Some of these children will be identified before they come to school while others will be identified later by teachers or medical and allied professionals, such as speech pathologists. Many children will not be identified until perhaps much later when they present with significant learning difficulties not only in reading comprehension but in learning to accurately read more complex texts.

A child with vocabulary difficulties may show some or all of the following characteristics:

Expressive language difficulties, such as:

- hesitant language e.g. um, ah
- nonspecfic words e.g. 'thing', 'this'
- use of simpler words and a reduced range of words

Comprehension difficulties, such as:

- incorrect responses during class discussions
- incorrect responses to comprehension questions about a written text

Reading difficulties, such as:

- not remembering words read previously
- difficulty choosing words in context
- difficulty decoding words

See the table below for further details:

Kindergarten - Year 2 (Early Stage 1 - Stage 1):	
Students with strong vocabulary skills may:	Students with poor vocabulary skills may:
know and use a wide variety of specific words	have difficulties using a range of words including specific and technical words for writing and speaking and may use hesitant language e.g. um, ah and non-specific words e.g. 'thing', 'this'
read more and learn more words (The Matthew Effect); find it easier to learn new words[14]	not remember words read previously and take longer to learn new words, requiring numerous repetitions of words to learn their meaning[2]
be more likely to have good pre-reading skills and word identification skills[5] [8]	be more likely to have difficulty decoding words
respond more accurately to questions and instructions	put up their hand to answer questions less frequently than other children and often give incorrect responses during class discussions

Students with strong vocabulary skills may:	Students with poor vocabulary skills may:
have a better ability to comprehend texts[9] [10]	have difficulties understanding stories read aloud to them and may have trouble answering questions about written texts
find maths word problems easier	have difficulty understanding word maths problems

As a child moves into Stage 2 of learning, the focus shifts from learning to read to reading to learn. Language is more complex and abstract in the final stages of primary school learning.

Students in Years 3 - 6 (Stage 2 - Stage 3) will show all of the above skills, as well as the following:

Years 3 - 6 (Stage 2 - Stage 3):	
Students with strong vocabulary skills may:	Students with poor vocabulary skills may:
be able to use technical words when reading, writing and speaking	use a smaller variety of words, simpler words and repetitive sentences when writing or speaking
be able to generate synonyms and antonyms for common words	have reduced reading comprehension due to a reduced depth of knowledge of words e.g. meanings, synonyms[11]
understand that some words have multiple meanings	have difficulty using, understanding and remembering figurative language
be able to orally define words	show more difficulty learning new words[12]
have a good knowledge of word origins and apply knowledge of prefixes and suffixes to understand word meanings and to create new words	not learn words easily by hearing the word in conversations or discussions and may need direct instruction and repetition
draw on topic knowledge to assist them in working out the meaning of unknown words	show reduced skill in inferring information from text due to limited word knowledge and have significant difficulty understanding complex research data and text for writing and comprehension tasks

How is vocabulary assessed?

There are many assessments that can help us understand more about a student's vocabulary skills. They range from specific vocabulary assessments, through to comprehensive tests with subtests that assess various elements of vocabulary. The majority of these tests are completed by speech pathologists who specialise in language development and language difficulties in children. Some tests might be completed by psychologists or school counsellors.

Following is a list of tests that assess vocabulary specifically or as part of an overall language assessment. The list includes measures of both receptive and expressive vocabulary. It is in no way a complete list or a recommendation for the use of any particular testing instrument.

Tests to assess vocabulary			
Name of Test	**What Does it Assess?**	**Age group**	**Who Administers**
Clinical Evaluation of Language Fundamentals-4th Edition (CELF-4) Australian Standardised Edition	The CELF-4 assesses a range of language skills through a number of subtests. A number of these are used to evaluate vocabulary skills.	5 years - 21 years	Speech pathologists
Expressive Vocabulary Test, Second Edition (EVT-2)	The EVT-2 measures expressive vocabulary. It involves 2 tasks, labelling and providing synonyms.	2 years 6 months - 90+	Speech pathologists, psychologists, teachers
Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test, Fourth Edition (PPVT™-4)	The PPVT-4 is a measure of receptive vocabulary (understanding of vocabulary) for Standard American English.	2 years 6 months - 90+	Speech pathologists, psychologists, teachers
The WORD Test 2: Elementary and Adolescent	The WORD Test 2 evaluates the impact of vocabulary on academic performance.	6 years - 11 years 11 months	Speech pathologists

Name of Test		What Does it Assess?	Age group	Who Administers
Comprehensive Receptive and Expressive Vocabulary Test, Second Edition (CREVT-2)		The CREVT-2 measures receptive and expressive oral vocabulary in both adults and children.	4 years - adult	Speech pathologists
Comprehensive Assessment of Spoken Language (CASL)		The CASL is a general assessment of spoken language and processing (receptive) skills. Some subtests provide information about vocabulary skills.	3 years - 21 years	Speech pathologists
Montgomery Assessment of Vocabulary Acquisition (MAVA)		The MAVA is a comprehensive, standardised test for evaluating a student's expressive and receptive word knowledge across three tiers of vocabulary words.	3 years - 12 years 11 months	Speech pathologists
Test of Language Development-Primary, Fourth Edition (TOLD-P: 4)		The TOLD-P4 is a general language assessment with 9 subtests that measure different components of language. Some subtests provide specific information about vocabulary skills.	4 years - 8 years 11 months	Speech pathologists
Test of Semantic Skills-Primary (TOSS-P)		The TOSS-P is designed to assess a student's semantic skills. It yields specific information about a student's receptive and expressive semantic and vocabulary abilities.	4 years - 8 years 11 months	Speech pathologists

Supporting students with language difficulties in the classroom - general strategies and considerations

Vocabulary instruction needs to be comprehensive, integrated and school-wide. Integrated means that vocabulary is a fundamental concern in all grades, in all key learning areas and throughout the whole school day, while comprehensive means that vocabulary instruction is more than a list of words or the use of a dictionary. Comprehensive instruction can involve developing a language and word rich environment, intentional and often explicit teaching of selected words, opportunities for repeated exposure, use and practise, and strategies to allow students to learn new words independently.

Classroom teachers play an important role in the development of vocabulary skills in children in their class and particularly those with language difficulties. Following are some strategies that teachers may wish to consider when working with students with language impairments who show difficulties with acquiring and using appropriate vocabulary skills. The strategies are general, rather than specific and it is important to note that some students will need individualised programs and support by a speech pathologist.

In implementing any strategies, it is worth keeping in mind the following general framework:

Curriculum

- What elements of the curriculum can I adapt and/or use to highlight and teach new vocabulary?

Environmental

- What changes can I make to the learning/classroom environment to maximise the students' learning?

Individual

- What changes can I make to my teaching style (e.g. language use, pausing, repetition) to assist learning? What individual supports do the students need?

A framework for developing skills

Bauman et al (2007)[13] suggest a number of components that promote effective vocabulary development:

- developing a rich and varied language environment
- explicitly teaching individual words
- teaching word learning strategies

Students with language impairment may also benefit from the vocabulary teaching strategies associated with these components but they will require additional adjustments. The table below describes classroom strategies for each of these components, with suggested adjustments for students with specific language impairment.

Developing a rich and varied language environment

In the classroom this can be provided by:	Suggested adjustments for students with language difficulties include:
• the teacher reading a range of books/texts aloud • encouraging students to read a broad range of books independently, using strategies such as literature circles, word finder bookmarks, reading logs and journals • keeping a 'Word Wall' for interesting words from independent reading, content area vocabulary and other sources - encourage students to be 'Word Wizards' developing the habit of noticing and sharing interesting words they encounter in and out of school	• reading books aloud that are at the student's language level - it is important to use text that contains some but not too many new and difficult words • providing access to a broad range of book types (e.g. audio books, e-books) at an appropriate language level • providing visual support for word learning - pictures, photographs, pictorial mnemonic strategies or visual organisers • using student friendly definitions of words rather than dictionary definitions - pinpoint the word's typical use and explain its meaning in everyday language[15] • providing verbal support for word learning - modelling, expanding or recasting (repeating an incorrect word back to the student in a corrected form)

Explicitly teaching individual words

In the classroom this can be provided by:	Suggested adjustments for students with language difficulties include:
• developing 'memorable words', that is, words students feel they own because they use them, developed through discussing the words and students maintaining personal lists • selecting useful tier 2 and 3 words from Key Learning Areas (see NSW CER website: Selecting Words from: **NSW CER website: Selecting Words** and providing multiple exposures through a variety of activities e.g. ◊ **self-assessing word knowledge** by using checklists	• pre-teaching the most relevant and frequently occurring words for a curriculum topic • **explicitly teaching words** in a rich and multi-contextual manner • providing additional multiple repetitions or exposures to new words over time • scaffolding the use of visual organisers - model and joint construction, teacher partially completes and child finishes

In the classroom this can be provided by:	Suggested adjustments for students with language difficulties include:
◊ acting out/miming word meanings ◊ using graphic organisers: **concept maps**, **semantic maps**, **Venn diagrams** ◊ ranking lists according to intensity, **word clines/linear arrays** ◊ comparing words	• **using examples and non-examples** to support teaching word meanings • teaching the student to reflect on new words learned e.g. What new words have I learned?[16]

Teaching word learning strategies	
In the classroom this can be provided by teaching a range of rules and using clues, including:	**Suggested adjustments for students with language difficulties include:**
• **vocabulary rule** - a general strategy for attempting to work out the meaning of new words in text • **context clue types** - definition, synonym, antonym, example and general clues • **word-part clues** - which can also be presented as a chart and as a handout for students to keep as they move from class to class • **prefix and suffix families** charts to use when looking at new words	• additional modelling of strategy and scaffolding its use • additional modelling of how to use these and more guided and independent practice • supporting the student to identify when they don't know a word meaning and to use strategies to determine meaning (dictionary, discussion, context)

In summary

- Vocabulary skills vary widely among children of primary school age

- Strong vocabulary skills impact positively on children's ability to learn to read and to participate in language activities across the curriculum

- Students who have difficulties using a range of words including specific and technical words for writing and speaking and who use hesitant language e.g. um, ah and non-specific words e.g. 'thing', 'this' may have poor vocabulary skills

- Students with poor vocabulary may not remember words read previously and take longer to learn new words, requiring numerous repetitions of words to learn their meaning

- Classroom teachers are well placed to provide activities that boost vocabulary skills in students with and without language difficulties.

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Student's self-assessment of word knowledge prior to reading

a) How well do you know these words - teacher selects from a text to be read

I know the meaning of...			
Word	Very well	Somewhat	Not at all

Note: Based on Dale and O-Rourke (1986) and Allen (1999)

b) Predict-O-Gram – requires students to anticipate which words might fit within set
   categories e.g. in narrative text - setting, characters, action, describing words

Predict-O-Gram: Where do you think you will find this word?				
Word	Setting	Character	Action	Ending

Explicit teaching example

Below is a worked example of teaching the word persist, based on the book Kipper's Laces (Oxford Reading Tree, Oxford University Press) in which the main character, Kipper, is learning to tie his own shoelaces.

- The teacher contextualises the word for its role in the story: 'In the story, Kipper had to keep trying to tie his shoelaces until he had learned how to do it himself. He had to persist.'

- The child repeats the word to help secure phonological representation: 'Say the new word with me, persist'.

- The teacher provides the child with a prescribed definition of the word: 'If you persist, you go on doing something even if it is difficult.'

- The teacher uses the word in alternative contexts: for example, 'Yesterday I was doing some difficult work and I had to persist with it until I got it all right.'

- The child is encouraged to use the word in additional new contexts: 'Tell me about a time that you have had to persist with something.'

- The child repeats the word to reinforce its phonological representation: 'Say our target word, persist.'
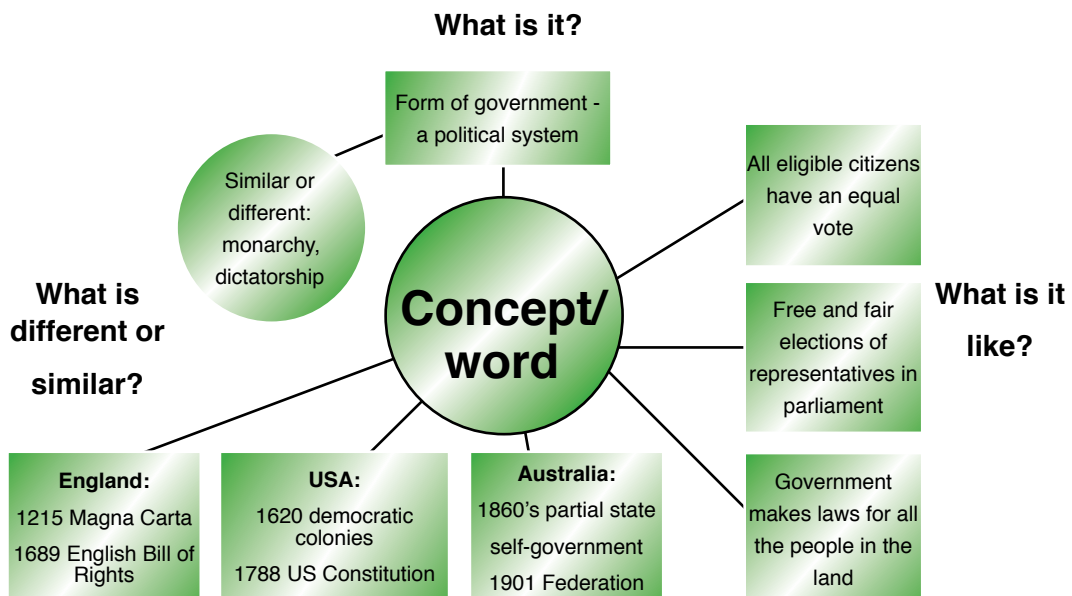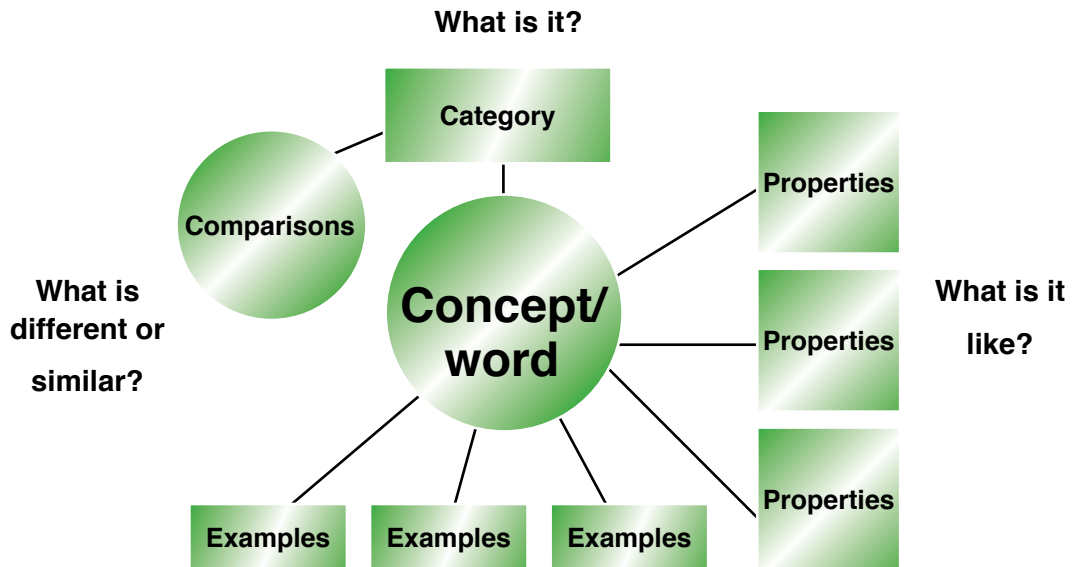
Adapted from Duff, et al (2008)

Concept Mapping

Graphic organisers can be used for a number of purposes as well as vocabulary e.g. to summarise content, show links between ideas, assess learning, compare and contrast ideas and knowledge. Here we will look at just some that can be used specifically for vocabulary.

a) Concept of definition – to help students use several strategies to develop and refine their knowledge of word meanings and concepts. (Programming and Strategies Handbook pp. 123-124)

What is it?

Category

Comparisons

What is different or similar?

Concept/ word

Properties

Properties

Properties

What is it like?

Examples   Examples   Examples

What is it?

Form of government - a political system

Similar or different: monarchy, dictatorship

What is different or similar?

Concept/ word

All eligible citizens have an equal vote

Free and fair elections of representatives in parliament

Government makes laws for all the people in the land

What is it like?

England:	USA:	Australia:
1215 Magna Carta 1689 English Bill of Rights	1620 democratic colonies 1788 US Constitution	1860's partial state self-government 1901 Federation

Semantic Mapping

Semantic mapping enhances vocabulary development by assisting students to link new information to previous information. It links brainstorming with categorising.

1. Select a word important to the topic being discussed
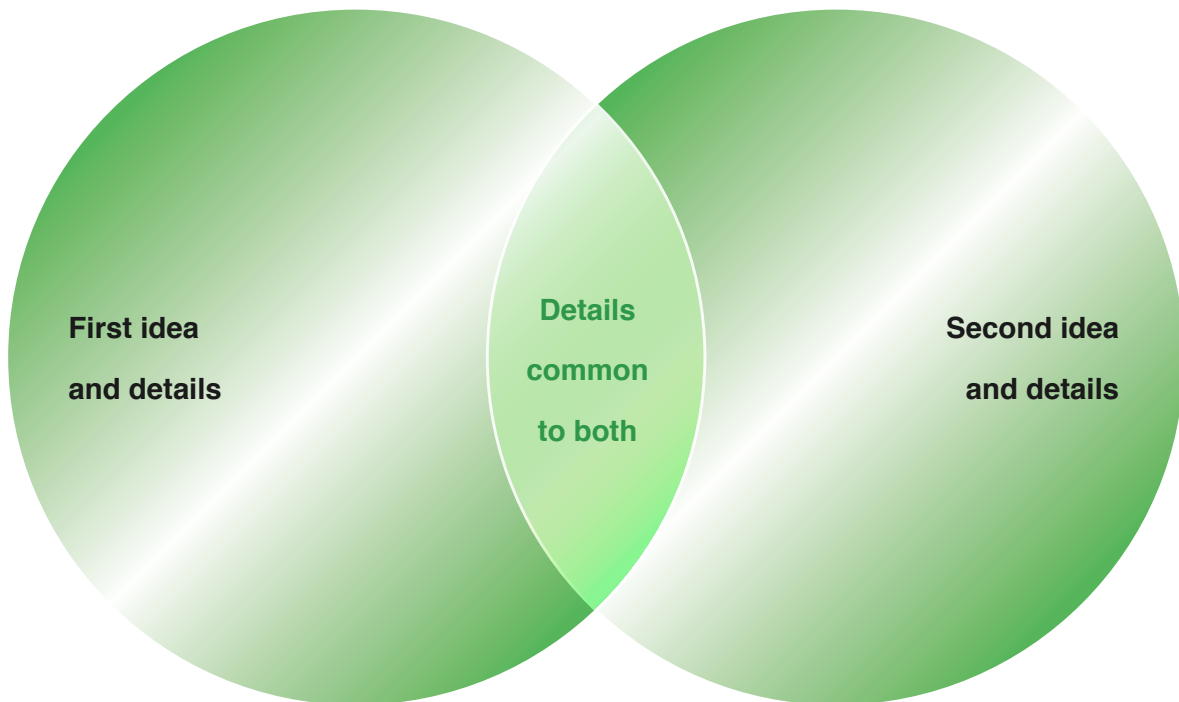
2. Display the selected word

3. Ask students to brainstorm related words and ideas

4. Record these on post-it notes

5. Arrange into categories

6. Label categories

7. Construct the semantic map

8. Think of things that may be linked to these categories

9. Following modelling and guided practice, allow students to construct their own maps and share their ideas

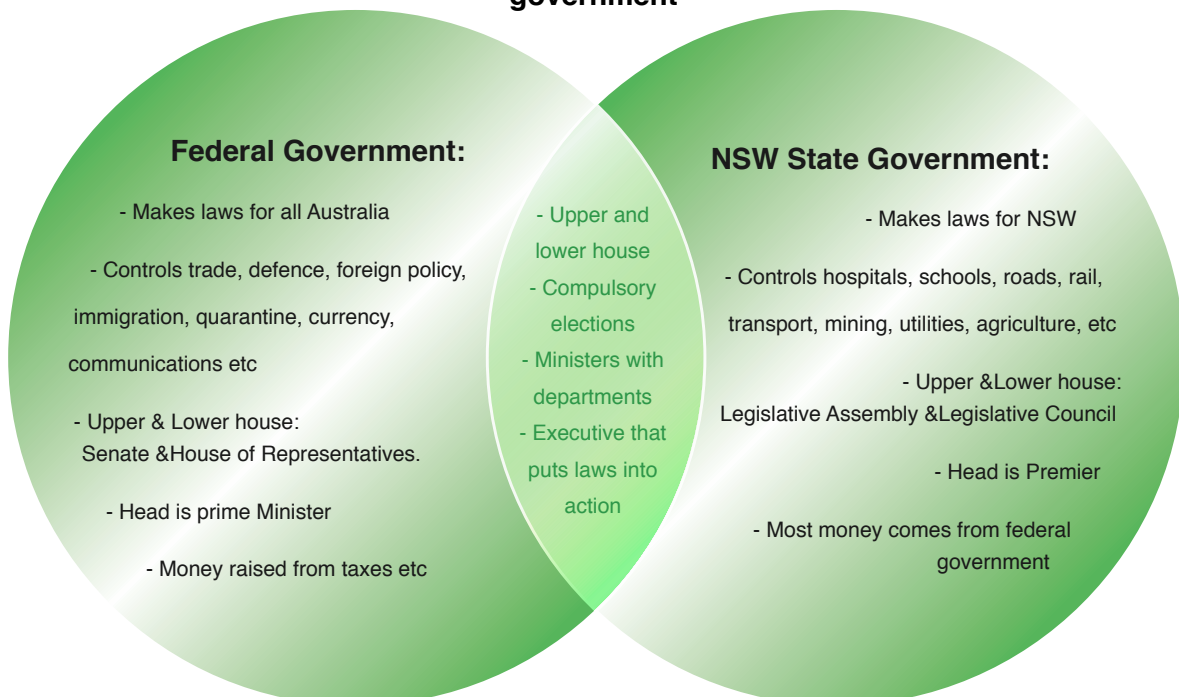10. Map can take many forms and the process may be far less formal
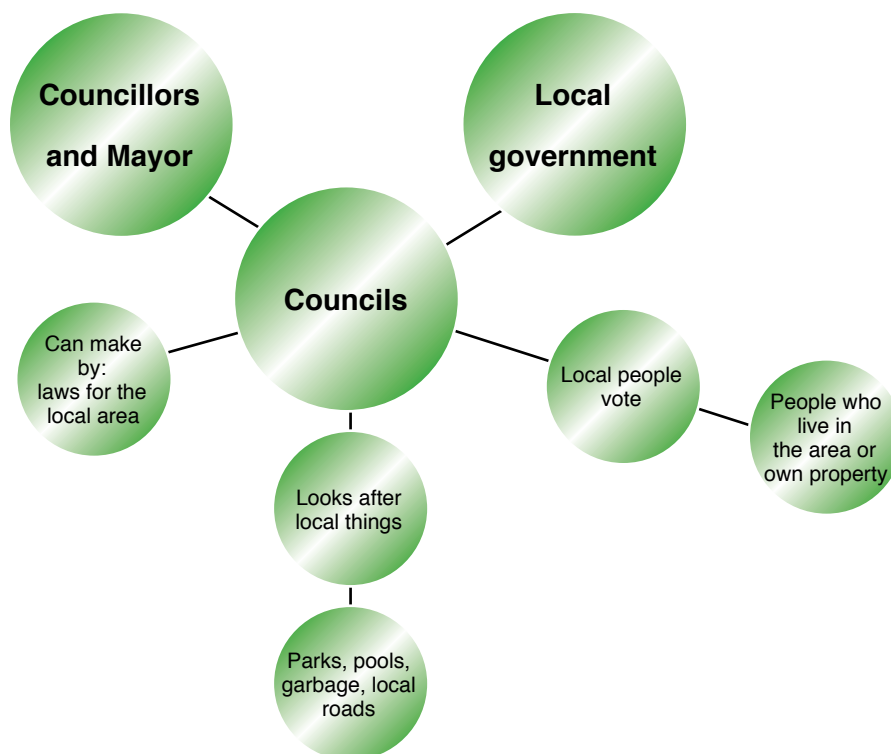
Venn diagram

Venn diagrams are used to compare concepts / words and find out what is the same.

**First idea
and details**

**Details

common

to both**

**Second idea
and details**

Example: Three levels of government

Federal Government:

- Makes laws for all Australia

- Controls trade, defence, foreign policy,
immigration, quarantine, currency,
communications etc

- Upper & Lower house:
Senate &House of Representatives.

- Head is prime Minister

- Money raised from taxes etc

- Upper and
lower house
- Compulsory
elections
- Ministers with
departments
- Executive that
puts laws into
action

NSW State Government:

- Makes laws for NSW

- Controls hospitals, schools, roads, rail,
transport, mining, utilities, agriculture, etc

- Upper &Lower house:
Legislative Assembly &Legislative Council

- Head is Premier

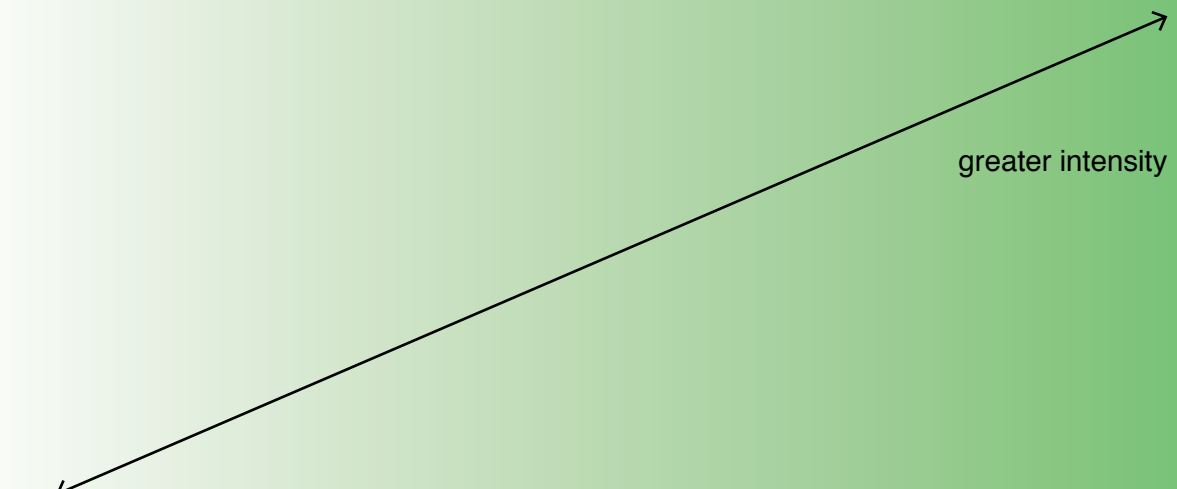- Most money comes from federal
government

Word clines / linear arrays

Word clines are graphic organisers that arrange words in order of intensity. Word clines can be used to:

- help learners refine their knowledge of words describing a similar attribute.

- support the teaching of modality in writing (Programming and Strategies Handbook p. 129)
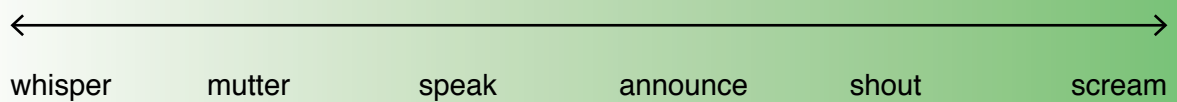
less intensity   greater intensity

greater intensity

less intensity

Example:

whisper   mutter   speak   announce   shout   scream

Nutritious		
Examples	**Student generated definition**	**Non examples**
grapes, green beans, apples, eggs	Food that is healthy for you and helps you grow strong	chips, biscuits, chocolate

The Vocabulary Rule

When you come to a word and you don't know what it means, use:

1. **Context clues:**
   (These are ideas or hints about the meaning of a word in the words or sentences around the word.)
   Look for context clues both before and after the hard word.
   Sometimes they are close to a word, but other times they are several sentences away.
   Some context clues will be really obvious but others will be weak.
   Sometimes context might even be confusing.

2. **Word-part clues:**
   See if you can break the word into a root and prefix or suffix to help figure out its meaning.

3. **Context clues:**
   Read the sentences around the word again to see if you have figured out its meaning.

Context Clues

Context clue type	Example
Definition: The author explains the meaning of the word right in the sentence or selection of text.	When Sara was hiking, she accidently walked through a patch of **brambles**, *prickly vines and shrubs*, which resulted in many scratches on her legs.
Synonym: The author uses a word similar in meaning.	Josh walked into the living room and accidently tripped over the **ottoman**. He then mumbled, 'I wish people would not leave the *footstool* right in the middle of the room. That's dangerous!'
Antonym: The author uses a word nearly opposite in meaning.	The supermarket manager complained, 'Why do we have such a **plethora** of boxes of cereal on the shelves? In contrast, we have a real *shortage* of pancake and waffle mix. We've got to do a better job ordering.'
Example: The author provides one or more example words or ideas.	There are many members of the **canine** family. For example, *wolves, foxes, coyotes* and pets such as *collies, beagles*, and *golden retrievers* are all canines.
General: The author provides several words or statements that give clues to the word's meaning.	It was a **sultry** day. The day was very *hot and humid*. If you moved at all, you would *break out in a sweat*. It was one of those days to *drink water* and *stay in the shade*.

Words in *italics* provide clues for words in **bold**.

From Baumann, Font, Edwards & Boland (2005)

Word-Part Clues

1. Look for the **root**: the basic part of the word.
   It might be a whole word (e.g. *happy*) or a meaningful part of a word (e.g. *vid-, vis-*).

2. Look for a **prefix**: a word part added to the beginning of a word that changes its meaning (e.g. *un-, in-* = not).

3. Look for a **suffix**: a word part added to the end of a word that changes its meaning (e.g. *–ness* = state or quality of; *-ible, -able* = capable of).

4. Put the meanings of the root and any *prefix* or **suffix** together and see if you can build the meaning of the word (e.g. happi**ness**, *un*happi**ness**, vis**ible**, *in*vis**ible**).

Prefix and Suffix Families

Family	Prefix/Suffix	Meaning	Examples
NOT prefix family	dis-	not, opposite	dislike, disloyal, disallow
	un-	not, opposite	unafraid, unhappy, unimproved
	in-	not, opposite	invisible, inappropriate, insolvency, inconsistent
	im-	not, opposite	impolite, imperfect
	il-	not, opposite	illegal, illiterate
	ir-	not, opposite	irresistible, irresponsible
	non-	not, opposite	nonfiction, nonstop, non-elected
POSITION prefix family	pre-	before	prehistoric, preview
	fore-	before	forewarn, forethought
	mid-	middle	midnight, midday
	inter-	between, among	international, intercity
	post-	after	postwar, posttest
OVER/ UNDER prefix family	super-	over, high, big, extreme	superheat, superhuman
	over-	more than, too much,	oversleep, overheat, overruled
	sub-	under, below	subset, subtropical
TOGETHER prefix family	com-	together, with	compress, compassion
	con-	together	concentric, conform
	co-	together, with	coequal, co-author, cooperate, coordinate
BAD prefix family	mis-	bad, wrong, not	misuse, misread, misunderstand,
	mal-	bad, ill	maltreat, malnourished,
AGAINST prefix family	anti-	against	antibiotic, antipollution,
	contra-	against, opposite	contradict, contraindicate
NUMBER prefix family	uni-	one	unicellular, unicycle, united, unicameral
	mono-	one	monorail, monosyllable
	bi-	two	bicycle, biweekly, bicameral
	tri-	three	tricycle, triangle
	quad-	four	quadrilateral, quadrangle
	penta-	five	pentagon, pentathalon
	dec-	ten	decade, decagon
	cent-	hundred	centimetre, centipede
	semi-	half	semicircle, semiyearly
Other useful prefixes	re-	again, back	redo, rearrange,
	trans-	across, through	transport, transatlantic,
	de-	take away	deforest, deflate,
	ex-	out of, away from	exhale, export
	under-	low, too little	underweight, underestimate
PERSON suffix family	-ee	person, who	employee, trainee,
	-er	person who does something	employer, teacher, exporters
	-or	person who does something	actor, dictator, governor, councillors
Other useful prefixes	-ful	full of, characterised by	joyful, beautiful
	-able	can be, worthy of	valuable, dependable
	-ible	inclined to	terrible, responsible
	-less	without, free of	hopeless, bottomless

From Baumann, Edwards & Boland (2005)