LAY THE GROUND WORK. Start by giving students a specific definition. Then ask them to apply their knowledge of the definition in increasingly challenging ways.

PLAN AHEAD. When you provide students a definition, it’s first crucial to plan them in advance. Definitions that are provided spontaneously are often inaccurate or fail to capture a word’s precise meaning. A teacher might commonly define the word “heed” as “to listen,” but to “heed” implies that one follows the guidance or request of some authority. A more appropriate definition would be “to listen and obey”.

KEEP IT BRIEF. Definitions should be student-friendly, written in language accessible to students. A tidy and efficient definition gives students the best possible chance of understanding and recalling the definition of a new word. For example, the dictionary definition for “privilege” is “a right, immunity, or benefit only enjoyed by a person beyond the advantages of most.” Better to define it as “a benefit given to a person or group of people” – simpler, yet still accurate. We suggest 5-7 words generally, though there will be some vocabulary words you can capture in a three-word definition and some you can’t capture in seven.

BE CONSISTENT. The definition should also utilize the same part of speech and tense as the word is used in the text. Definitions that inadvertently imply a word is a verb when it’s shown as a noun can be confusing and sabotage students’ application of the word. For example, a teacher defines “sporadic” as “occasionally.” The word is an adjective, but the definition is for the adverb form of the word. Better to define it as “something done infrequently.”

REMEMBER NUANCE. The definition should also capture the word’s common use and its nuance. For example, it might be tempting to define a word like respite as “a short break.” However, when you take a respite you are taking a break from something difficult and it’s almost always used with a preposition (Respite from…). A strong definition would be something like, “A rest from difficulty” with the note that it often appears with “from.”

CHECK FOR ACCURACY. Finally, the definition should be double-checked for accuracy. Unfortunately, inaccurate definitions are surprisingly common. It’s useful to ask a colleague for a “peer review” to ensure your definition is correct and precise.

For more on the topic of teaching vocabulary, please visit Doug Lemov’s blog at teachlikeachampion.com/blog.

And be sure to check out his forthcoming book, Reading Reconsidered.