

ESSENTIALS OF LEARNING

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This week marks the end of my third year as a tutor. As such, in a few months, many students will be changing schools, and almost all are moving to a new grade level. What I will share here is the most salient lesson I have learned from my students. I hope that my story will be helpful in preparing your student for the coming year.

There are many stories to choose from but the tale of the failing straight A mathematics student is most illustrative. One of my recent students had earned an A in every math class or segment since the first grade. She was so adept in mathematics that she had signed up for the Advanced Placement class in Statistics. She thought, correctly, that such a course, along with the expected A, would ease her entry into college. When she came to me, she was failing. Fifteen minutes into our first tutoring session, I knew why.

Statistics is a mathematically founded area of study, but the situations from which statistics are derived, and to which statistical predictions are applied, are expressed in English. My student simply didn't have the vocabulary to read and understand the situation, and therefore could not erect the proper mathematical relationships in order to produce incisive and representative statistics.

I found the same problem buried in the poor grades of a student struggling with high school physics. Test questions on Physics examinations are identical to those found in statistics in that the questions are presented in English. With that in mind, I began to inquire into the level of comprehension at which some of my English Language students were operating. I quickly learned that people understand words on at least three levels. The highest level is that the student can recite a near-dictionary quality definition, identify the word as a noun or verb and so on, and perhaps even offer a second definition or the etymological origin. Nobody does that.

At the other end of the spectrum is complete ignorance of the word and anything it might convey. That level is found all too frequently, but it is not the predominant level. In many cases, the student has heard the word and has an impression of what it means or might mean. The context is often used as a clue, but the student can't offer a definition. When asked, the student operating at this level will most often begin the definition with, "It's like..." The definition is given by example, not by explanation.

The reason that this is important is that the addition of a distinct meaning to a word that is used can change the impact of the sentence. I am reminded of the time I was at the drive-through of a fast food restaurant. The speaker was malfunctioning and I heard nothing but static. I was unable to understand a word that was said by the attendant. So, I said, "I'm going to drive up to the window. You are totally unintelligible." When I arrived at the window, the manager was hanging out of it and screaming at me. "Why did you call my employee stupid?"

Applied to examinations such as the SAT, it is easy to see that a student who is reading the paragraph in the Reading Comprehension and Retention section cannot possibly do well if many of the words are defined by impression rather than description. As a result, in almost every subject in which I tutor, I now pay very close attention to the vocabulary of the student.

It might be worthwhile for some readers to take one or two days a week this summer and check your own vocabulary or that of your offspring. The easiest way is to have the student read aloud. In short order, you will be able to tell which words are well known and which ones are fuzzy around the edges. When you find the fuzzy one, stop and ask for a definition. Keep a list. On the next day, ask the student if he remembers the word and the definition.

Exceptional scholastic performance arises from preparation. Be prepared.