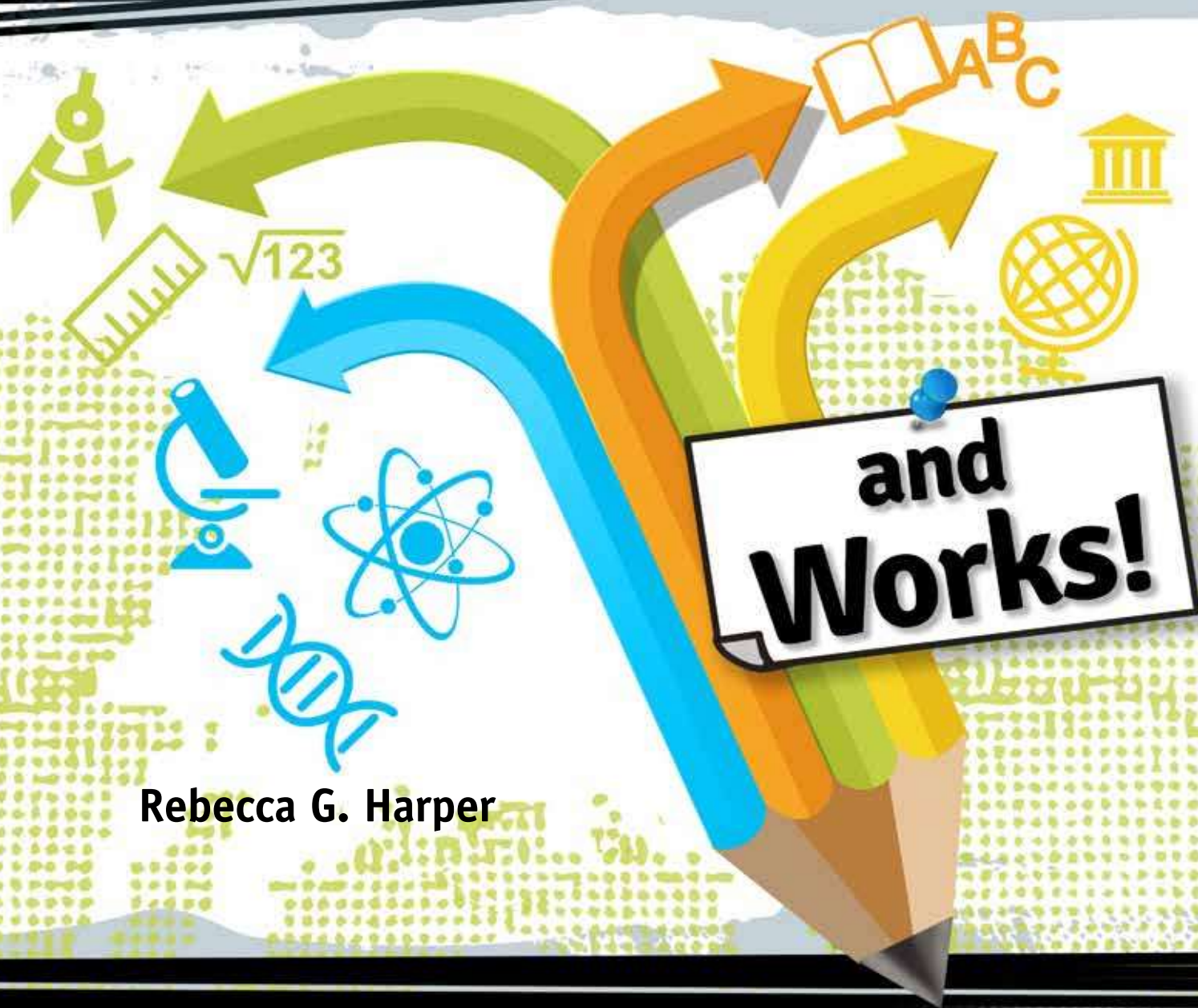


SHELL  
EDUCATION

# Content-Area Writing

That **ROCKS**



Rebecca G. Harper

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There are 26 skill-specific strategies in this book. Each strategy is structured similarly to a lesson plan to give a clear and organized snapshot of the writing activity. Each strategy starts with a background, procedure, and modification section to guide implementation. All activities conclude with extension ideas and a content-area crossover section. These sections are intended to be content-specific, giving the content-area teacher a set of differentiated ideas and modifications to meet the needs of all students in his or her classroom.

The *background* section explains the rationale for the strategy. Teachers will find an overall synopsis of the strategy along with any pertinent research.

Aside from teaching the overall skill, each strategy has additional *benefits* for students in the content-area classroom.

The *procedure* section is organized into quick and easy steps.

Each strategy offers *modifications* to best support diverse learners.

The *extensions* can be applied to extend the strategy and lengthen the writing activity.

Each lesson ends with a *content-area crossover*, which offers multiple suggestions for how the strategy can be adapted across the content area.

Chapter 4

### Textual-Evidence Throw Down

**Background**

Finding evidence from a text can be intimidating for some students. Part of this could be because many of the text sources used for gathering information are fairly lengthy and include a variety of academic vocabulary. Sometimes students may not be sure where the evidence should come from, how it should be written, and how much is enough.

Textual-Evidence Throw Down includes the whole class in this process. Every student needs to find one detail, record it, and then discuss it with the class. Students "throw down" their notes and interact with their peers to determine if the information is valid and strong.

**Benefits**

- This activity will appeal to the tactile learner.
- This activity requires students to move around the room and engage with their peers.

**Procedure**

1. Make a list of the big ideas and/or themes you want students to find evidence for. This may include one idea or several. Label a large sheet of paper, and place each focus on the floor of your classroom. (Note: This can also be done on the wall and/or board.)
2. Distribute sticky notes for students to write their evidence.
3. Have students circulate the room and list evidence for each of the categories on the floor.
4. Have students return to their seats and hold a class discussion on some of the evidence in each category.

☆ This is an example of a High School Social Studies class completing the Red-Light, Green-Light Evidence activity.

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Chapter 4

### Textual-Evidence Throw Down (week 1)

**Modification**

- Have students take the evidence from the Textual-Evidence Throw Down and start them using the Red-Light, Green-Light activity on pages 41–42 to determine if the evidence is accurate.

**Extensions**

- If you would like to extend this writing into a longer formal writing piece, have students return to the evidence piles, choose new pieces of evidence (one they did not write and construct sentences or responses with the pieces of evidence.
- Instead of students using the evidence to construct a sentence with their partners, have them elaborate or expand on the information.
- Students should continue to select evidence from the piles as they have enough information to write paragraphs or multi-paragraph compositions about the material.
- Have students take pieces of evidence from the floor and construct potential assessment questions to attach the evidence on the sticky notes to the answer.
- Allow students to create a cooperative writing essay with partners or groups. One student writes a sentence and then passes the paper to another student to write another sentence. After each student finishes a sentence using evidence from the activity, the student passes it to a classmate. Students should go back to the evidence piles and locate another piece of information that works with the essay. This allows partners to work together cooperatively on a written activity locating pertinent information, and evidence to support a longer writing assignment.

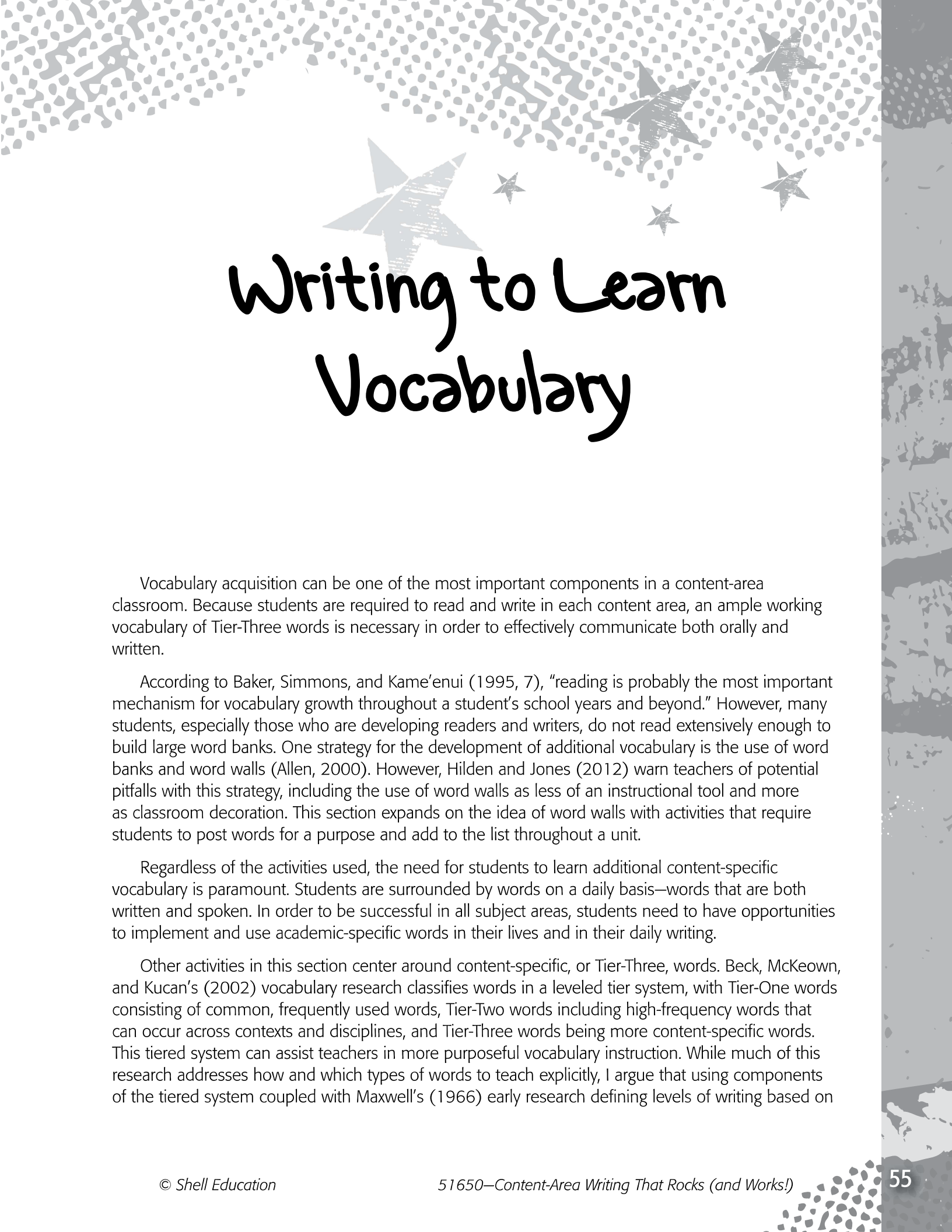
**Content-Area Crossover**

- Social Studies**—This activity can be used during historical lessons. Have students start by making a claim about an event or person from history and then progress to locating actual evidence to support their thesis statements.
- Math**—Use the Textual-Evidence Throw Down to reinforce what constitutes effective evidence when justifying answers to math problems.
- Science**—Use this activity to have students compare two topics taught. For example, students can compare the benefits of solar power with the use of fossil fuels. Once students have thrown down the qualities or benefits of each type of power source, they can then choose an example and find evidence from multiple sources to support or refute the claim.
- Art**—This activity can be used to determine and justify why a particular painting is an example of a period or a movement.

**BeStar Tip**

Make sure students have adequate time to complete the task but not so much that they get off task.

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# Writing to Learn Vocabulary

Vocabulary acquisition can be one of the most important components in a content-area classroom. Because students are required to read and write in each content area, an ample working vocabulary of Tier-Three words is necessary in order to effectively communicate both orally and written.

According to Baker, Simmons, and Kame'enui (1995, 7), "reading is probably the most important mechanism for vocabulary growth throughout a student's school years and beyond." However, many students, especially those who are developing readers and writers, do not read extensively enough to build large word banks. One strategy for the development of additional vocabulary is the use of word banks and word walls (Allen, 2000). However, Hilden and Jones (2012) warn teachers of potential pitfalls with this strategy, including the use of word walls as less of an instructional tool and more as classroom decoration. This section expands on the idea of word walls with activities that require students to post words for a purpose and add to the list throughout a unit.

Regardless of the activities used, the need for students to learn additional content-specific vocabulary is paramount. Students are surrounded by words on a daily basis—words that are both written and spoken. In order to be successful in all subject areas, students need to have opportunities to implement and use academic-specific words in their lives and in their daily writing.

Other activities in this section center around content-specific, or Tier-Three, words. Beck, McKeown, and Kucan's (2002) vocabulary research classifies words in a leveled tier system, with Tier-One words consisting of common, frequently used words, Tier-Two words including high-frequency words that can occur across contexts and disciplines, and Tier-Three words being more content-specific words. This tiered system can assist teachers in more purposeful vocabulary instruction. While much of this research addresses how and which types of words to teach explicitly, I argue that using components of the tiered system coupled with Maxwell's (1966) early research defining levels of writing based on

format, audience, and function can offer additional benefits in the content-area classroom. Merging these two ideas helped me develop the Levels of Words activity (page 57). Because audience, format, and role are highly important in writing, they also are important in the acquisition and implementation of new vocabulary.

When I am teaching vocabulary lessons, I like to rank words by formality (academic vocabulary being the highest level). Level-One words are very informal. Examples include slang, abbreviations for common words and overused words, such as *good*, *bad*, and *sad*. Level-Two words are not quite as informal, but they have not reached the most formal academic stage. Words such as *image*, *vegetation*, and *vehicle* are the words that are in the middle. Level-Three words are the most sophisticated. Words such as *thesis*, *plethora*, and *antiquities* are examples of Level-Three words. In many cases, these are genre-specific words—words and phrases that are common to certain academic formats and papers. Often, these are the words that are discipline specific.

The strategies in this section focus on defining and stretching students' understanding of words (including synonyms and antonyms for vocabulary words). It is critical that students have a working, growing vocabulary, especially in the content-area classroom. The following strategies can be used as tools for building (and learning) vocabulary:

|                                 |    |
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# Alpha-Boxes

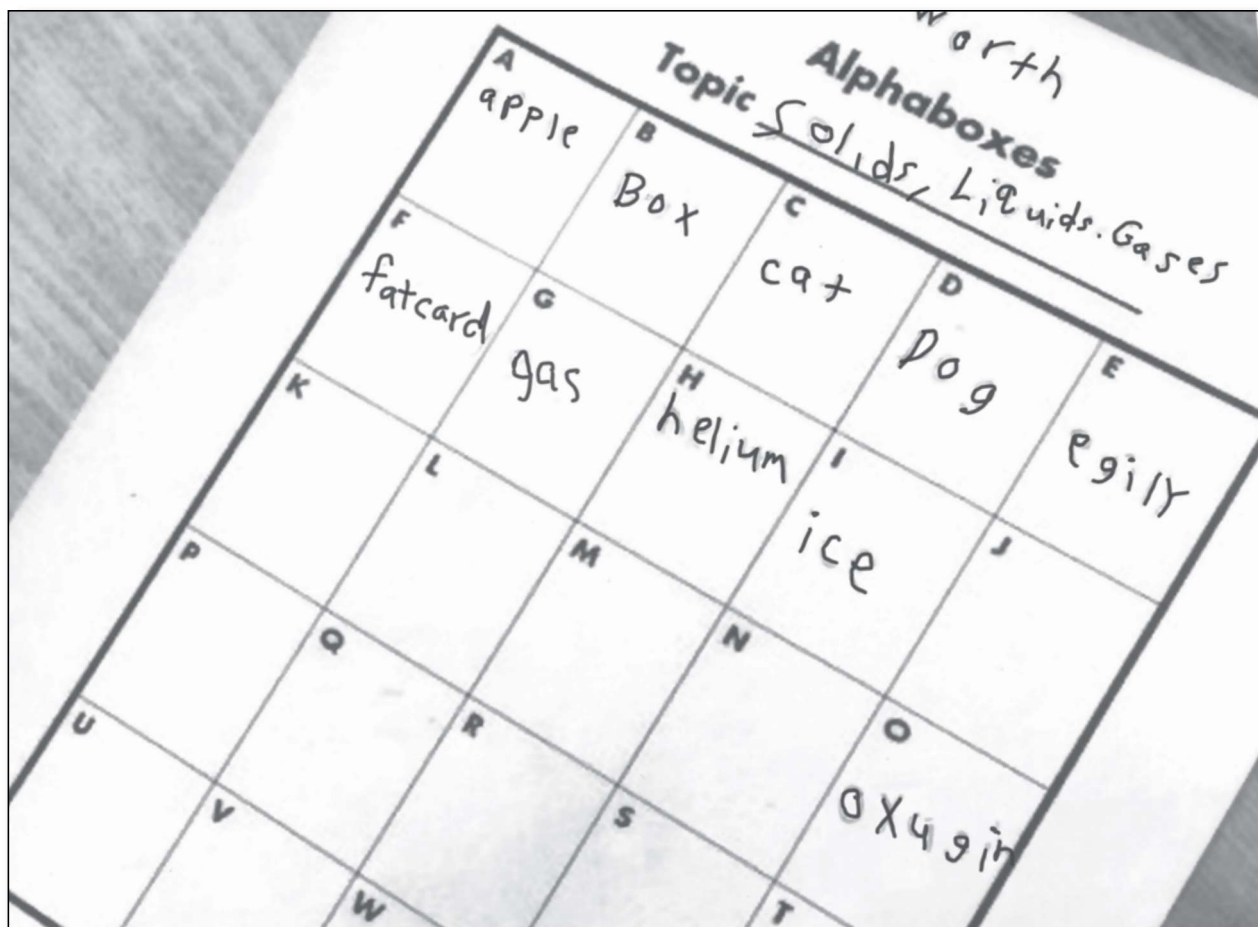
## Background

Alpha-Boxes can aid in vocabulary acquisition and activate students' prior knowledge in the content-area classroom. This activity is easy to use and can be used at the beginning, during, or as a culminating activity for a content-area unit.

For this activity, students have to make word associations for a content-specific topic. Encourage students to get creative and use words, sketches, or phrases to make as many associations as possible. This activity stretches and expands students' understanding of a given topic.

## Benefits

- This activity can be used as an ongoing formative assessment.
- This activity requires participation from you and students, promoting a two-way-street model of learning.
- This activity promotes classroom discussion.
- Use this strategy at the beginning of a unit to activate prior knowledge—something crucial for comprehension and an added benefit for English language learners (ELLs).



☆ This Alpha-Box activity was completed in an elementary education science classroom.

## Alpha-Boxes (cont.)

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### Procedure

1. Have students write each letter of the alphabet on a sheet of paper, leaving space for writing words under each letter (or use the template on page 108).
2. Write the theme or topic above the Alpha-Box. To complete the activity, each associated word needs to start with the letter under which it is being placed. For example, if the topic is wars that shaped the United States of America, under the letter /W/, students can list *War of 1812*, and under the letter /C/, they can list *Civil War*.
3. Provide time for students to share their activity sheets with the class. Clarify any misconceptions or incorrect vocabulary words. Allow students to add words that they may have missed.

### Modifications

- To use Alpha-Boxes throughout a unit, have students add words to their lists daily. As they learn more content, more words go in each box. This activity should be viewed as a running list—one that can be added to and taken from as students clarify understanding of a topic.
- To use Alpha-Boxes as a culminating activity, have students fill in their words after completing a unit.
- If 26 letters seem too overwhelming for students, have them circle or star only a few letters at first. This may help them focus on a few letters rather than all of them.
- If students need fewer letters to focus on, consider giving a range of letters to aim for throughout the activity. This allows students the flexibility of using the letters that

they feel are the strongest, removing the daunting task of assigning all 26 letters.

- Create a large Alpha-Boxes chart in the classroom that students can add to during any giving unit, semester, or year. This works well in primary classrooms, since some students may not know how to write or spell the words yet.

### Extensions

- When finished, you can leave the Alpha-Boxes as they are, or you can use them as springboards to other activities. For example, you may elect to have students choose one letter each from their Alpha-Boxes sheets to create a page for a picture book. Since each student would have his or her own letter to write about and illustrate, the class will be able to assemble an entire alphabet picture book about a given topic.
- Assign a number of letters to extend writing, and have students use their Alpha-Boxes sheets to write sentences about the chosen letters.

### Content-Area Crossover

- Social Studies—Alpha-Boxes are handy for activities that require students to use vocabulary and lists. In the social studies class, use Alpha-Boxes to list and identify character traits of historical figures, important terms for a historical period, or events that were important to certain groups of people or regions.

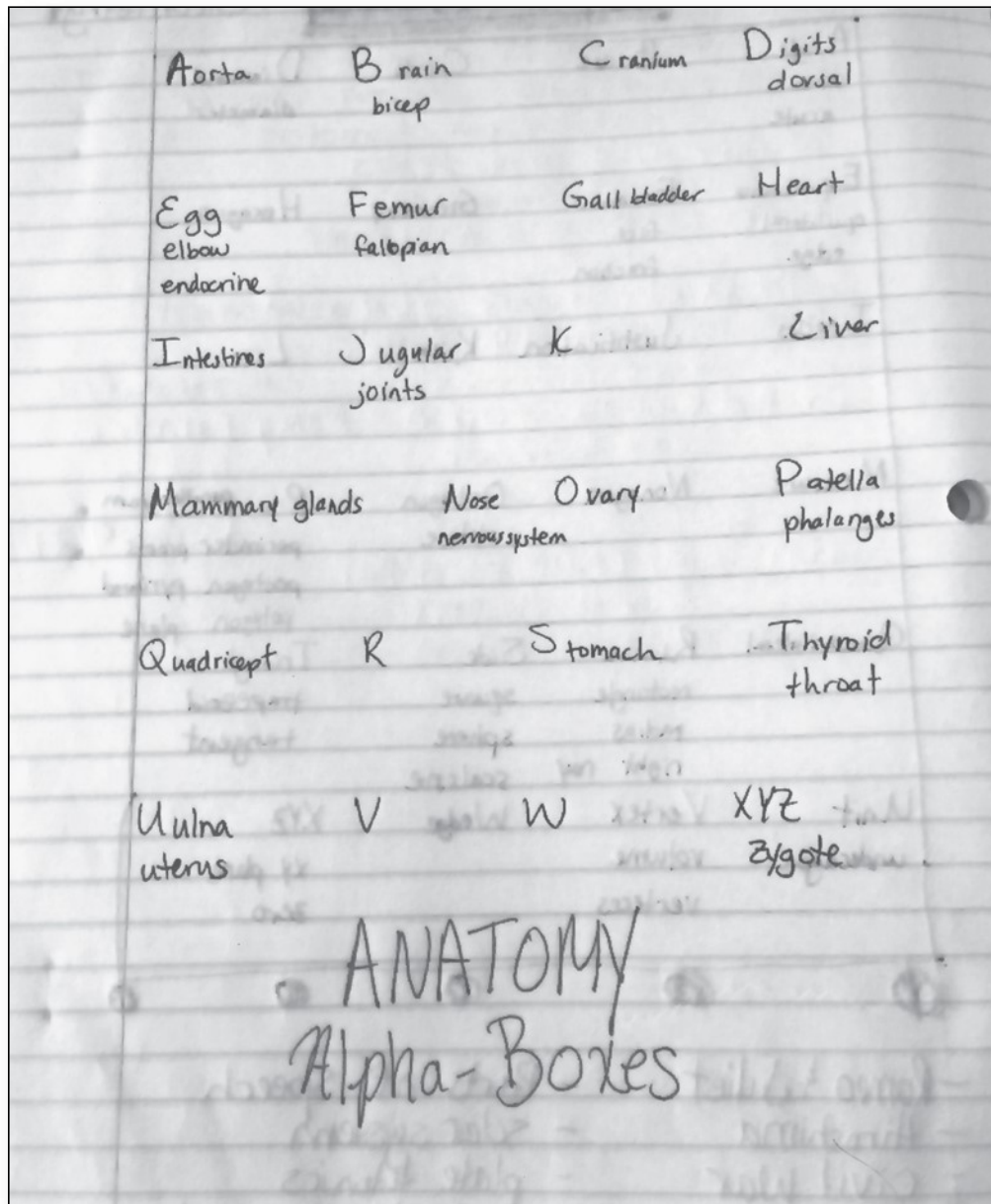
### Rock Star Tip

On a consistent basis—daily or weekly—have students share what they've added to their Alpha-Boxes. This gives classmates time to add words that they may have missed and allows you to clarify misconceptions or incorrectly placed words.



## Alpha-Boxes (cont.)

- Math—In mathematics, use an Alpha-Box to label key mathematical words, terms, or concepts after teaching a unit.
- Science—In science, use two Alpha-Boxes to have students compare concepts. For example, you may have students work with partners to fill in one activity listing only living things and another activity listing nonliving things.
- Art—In art, use this activity to have students combine materials (charcoal, paint, or colored pencils) to invent new colors and name them.



☆ This activity was completed in a secondary education science classroom.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## Alpha-Boxes Template

**Directions:** Write the topic above the chart, and then brainstorm as many words as you can related to the topic. Add the words to the boxes with the letter that begins the words.

**For example:** Epic would go in the E box.

---

|          |          |          |            |          |
|----------|----------|----------|------------|----------|
| <b>A</b> | <b>B</b> | <b>C</b> | <b>D</b>   | <b>E</b> |
| <b>F</b> | <b>G</b> | <b>H</b> | <b>I</b>   | <b>J</b> |
| <b>K</b> | <b>L</b> | <b>M</b> | <b>N</b>   | <b>O</b> |
| <b>P</b> | <b>Q</b> | <b>R</b> | <b>S</b>   | <b>T</b> |
| <b>U</b> | <b>V</b> | <b>W</b> | <b>XYZ</b> |          |