

ELL Strategies & Best Practices: Building Background Knowledge

Challenge: How can teachers provide the background knowledge ELLs need to better comprehend academic texts and new content?

Background or content knowledge is essential for understanding academic texts and learning new content. However, ELLs may lack prior knowledge or familiarity with an experience, person, or concept that is addressed within a text that the author assumes readers already know about. Teachers often build background knowledge by pre-teaching key concepts. Although pre-teaching takes more time, it fills knowledge gaps and encourages ELLs to build on prior learning to deepen their understanding of a text or concept. Providing visuals and written explanations that help ELLs decipher the vocabulary and implicit references within a text will help them become more effective readers and promote critical thinking.

Intervention: Add visuals and written explanations to texts students read on Actively Learn to build background and content knowledge.

Embed Visuals Throughout a Text

Add visuals that clarify unfamiliar vocabulary and provide information that is crucial to understanding a text. Visuals (e.g., photos, maps, videos, charts, timelines, graphic organizers, etc.) can be inserted throughout the text by [adding media](#) to a question or note. Use the [Extra Help](#) feature to differentiate instruction and provide targeted support for ELLs.

Add Teacher Directions and Notes

Include [teacher directions](#) to pre-teach or review vocabulary, historical context, or important concepts that students will need to understand prior to reading the text. Add [notes](#) throughout the text that explain key ideas and provide background knowledge in simple English (or a student's native language).

Thinking about using Actively Learn to build background knowledge? Here are some ideas:

Include images in notes (like the examples below) to provide content knowledge and help ELLs understand new vocabulary.

DR. LEARN
Here is another example of a food chain:



A Food Web in a Grassland Ecosystem With Five Possible Food Chains

The diagram illustrates a food chain in a grassland ecosystem. It shows energy flow from producers (Grass) to various consumers. The consumers include a Grasshopper, a Mouse, a Snake, a Rabbit, a Squirrel, and a Hawk. Arrows indicate the direction of energy flow between these organisms.

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The word "web" has multiple meanings. Here it means a network of things that are connected (like the strands of a spider's web).



The image shows a close-up of a spider's web, which is a network of interconnected strands, illustrating the concept of a "web" as a network of things that are connected.