IDENTIFYING CRITICAL CONTENT

CLASSROOM TECHNIQUES TO HELP STUDENTS KNOW WHAT IS IMPORTANT
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Deana Senn, Amber C. Rutherford, and Robert J. Marzano

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Dedication

“If I have seen further, it is by standing on the shoulders of giants.” —Sir Isaac Newton

I dedicate this work to my current and former colleagues in the U.S. and Alberta.

—Deana Senn

I dedicate this work to improving education for all learners worldwide, including my sons Brayden, Jackson, and Landon.

—Amber C. Rutherford
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Introduction

This guide, *Identifying Critical Content: Classroom Techniques to Help Students Know What Is Important*, is intended as a resource for improving a specific element of instructional practice—identifying critical content. Your motivation to incorporate this strategy into your instructional toolbox may have come from a personal desire to improve your instructional practice through the implementation of a research-based set of strategies (such as those found in the Marzano teacher evaluation framework) or a desire to increase the rigor of the instructional strategies you implement in your class so that students meet the expectations of demanding standards such as the Common Core State Standards, Next Generation Science Standards, C3 Framework for Social Studies State Standards, or state standards based on or influenced by College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards.

This guide will help teachers of all grade levels and subjects improve their performance of a specific instructional strategy: identifying critical content. Narrowing your focus on a specific skill, such as identifying critical content, allows you to concentrate on the nuances of this instructional strategy in order to deliberately improve it. This allows you to intentionally plan, implement, monitor, adapt, and reflect on this single element of your instructional practice. A person seeking to become an expert displays distinctive behaviors, as explained by Marzano and Toth (2013):

- breaks down the specific skills required to be an expert
- focuses on improving those particular critical skill chunks (as opposed to easy tasks) during practice or day-to-day activities
- receives immediate, specific, and actionable feedback, particularly from a more experienced coach
- continually practices each critical skill at more challenging levels with the intention of mastering it, giving far less time to skills already mastered
Identifying Critical Content

This series of guides will support each of the above-listed behaviors, with a focus on breaking down the specific skills required to be an expert and giving day-to-day practical suggestions to enhance these skills.

Building on the Marzano Instructional Framework

This series is based on the Marzano instructional framework, which is grounded in research and provides educators with the tools they need to connect instructional practice to student achievement. The series uses key terms that are specific to the Marzano model of instruction. Table 1 provides a glossary of these key terms.

Table 1. Glossary of Key Terms

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Definition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CCSS</td>
<td>Common Core State Standards is the official name of the standards documents developed by the Common Core State Standards Initiative (CCSSI), the goal of which is to prepare America’s students for college and career.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CCR</td>
<td>College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards are broad statements that incorporate individual standards for various grade levels and specific content areas.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Desired result</td>
<td>The intended result for the student(s) due to the implementation of a specific strategy.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monitoring</td>
<td>The act of checking for evidence of the desired result of a specific strategy while the strategy is being implemented.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instructional strategy</td>
<td>A category of techniques used for classroom instruction that has been proven to have a high probability of enhancing student achievement.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instructional technique</td>
<td>The method used to teach and deepen understanding of knowledge and skills.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Content</td>
<td>The knowledge and skills necessary for students to demonstrate standards.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scaffolding</td>
<td>A purposeful progression of support that targets cognitive complexity and student autonomy to reach rigor.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extending</td>
<td>Activities that move students who have already demonstrated the desired result to a higher level of understanding.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The educational pendulum swings widely from decade to decade. Educators move back and forth between prescriptive checklists and step-by-step lesson plans to approaches that encourage instructional autonomy with minimal regard for the science of teaching and need for accountability. Two practices are often missing in both of these approaches to defining effective instruction: 1) specific statements of desired results, and 2) solid research-based connections. The Marzano instructional framework provides a comprehensive system that details what is required from teachers to develop their craft using research-based instructional strategies. Launching from this solid instructional foundation, teachers will then be prepared to merge that science with their own unique, yet effective, instructional style, which is the art of teaching.

*Identifying Critical Content: Classroom Techniques to Help Students Know What Is Important* will help you grow into an innovative and highly skilled teacher who is able to implement, scaffold, and extend instruction to meet a range of student needs.

**Essentials for Achieving Rigor**

This series of guides details essential classroom strategies to support the complex shifts in teaching that are necessary for an environment where academic rigor is a requirement for all students. The instructional strategies presented in this series are essential to effectively teach the CCSS, the Next Generation Science Standards, or standards designated by your school district or state. They require a deeper understanding, more effective use of strategies, and greater frequency of implementation for your students to demonstrate the knowledge and skills required by rigorous standards. This series includes instructional techniques appropriate for all grade levels and content areas. The examples contained within are grade-level specific and should serve as models and launching points for application in your own class.

Your skillful implementation of these strategies is essential to your students’ mastery of the CCSS or other rigorous standards, no matter the grade level or subject matter you are teaching. Instructional strategies such as *Examining Reasoning* and *Engaging Students in Cognitively Complex Tasks* exemplify the cognitive complexity needed to meet rigorous standards. Taken as a package, these strategies may at first glance seem quite daunting. That is why this series focuses on just one strategy in each guide.
Identifying Critical Content

In the context of teaching students brand new information, *identifying critical content* is one strategy you can’t live without. As you become more skilled in this strategy, you will see remarkable changes in your students’ abilities to process and understand new content because they are able to identify which content is critical and understand how learned content scaffolds in complexity. A classroom of scholars identifies critical content within standards, but also studies, recognizes, and celebrates as knowledge grows increasingly more sophisticated. Whether that standard is part of the CCSS or your district or state standards, your students will benefit from your expertise at identifying and conveying critical content to them. Take a moment to picture what you are preparing your students for: success in their future careers. In the workplace, information in constant competition for mental real estate will bombard your students. The skill of distinguishing critical information from that which is not critical is essential to a successful career. This instructional strategy reaches beyond helping students know what is critical in your classroom; it prepares them for a lifetime of being able to identify critical information.

The first step to helping your students know what is important is identify a lesson, or part of a lesson, as involving important content to which students should pay particular attention. This strategy is integral to helping your students understand new knowledge, make connections to prior learning, and ultimately retain new content. When implementing instructional strategies, teachers should identify and plan for the interdependence and cumulative effect among them. For example, once a teacher has identified the critical content, the next step is to preview the content with students, chunk that critical content, and ask students to process that content. After students have processed the content, teachers will ask questions that require students to make inferences, or elaborate, about content to further extend understanding. A teacher wanting to monitor whether students have internalized the critical content may ask them to record, represent, and reflect on this knowledge. The instructional strategies don’t work in isolation, but a teacher with a broad instructional repertoire will skillfully blend the strategies in order to
get overarching desired results. Although this guide will focus on *Identifying Critical Content*, it will also highlight the natural connections between this and other strategies, such as previewing and recording and representing.

There are many strategies that you can employ to intentionally teach content to students. The important attribute of *identifying critical content* is the role it plays when teaching something for the first time. Whenever you prepare to teach brand new knowledge, concepts, or skills that are likely to be unfamiliar to all or almost all of your students, communicate to them why the new learning is important; *how* it connects to their prior learning or experiences; and *when* the new knowledge will be necessary or beneficial.

## The Effective Implementation of Identifying Critical Content

Not all students are as savvy as teachers about what to do with important information. You must directly inform and specifically teach them. What are the ways you expect students to react to their awareness that critical information is forthcoming? What actions should they immediately take, such as writing new vocabulary in a journal or dictionary? Are there specific note-taking routines that were taught at the beginning of the school year and have been practiced to accuracy and automaticity? Do you expect students to give hand signals or write answers on small whiteboards to indicate their understanding of critical content? You cannot expect students to take action on important information unless you have stated and modeled your expectations and then followed up with consistent monitoring of their understanding of that information.

Effective communication of critical content requires adjustments in the way you present information to students. To make these adjustments, assemble a toolbox of ways to cue or prompt your students that you are about to introduce skills or knowledge of critical value and importance. Later in this guide you will find many ways to communicate the importance of critical content. As you read about the techniques, think about how to further develop those that are already your favorites, as well as how to become more skilled in employing different techniques to target subgroups of students that you may not currently be reaching.
The following behaviors are associated with identifying critical content:

- highlighting critical information that portrays a clear progression of information related to standards or goals
- identifying differences between critical and noncritical content
- continuously calling students’ attention to critical content
- integrating cross curricular connections to critical content

As you learn to implement this strategy, think about how to avoid some common mistakes. These roadblocks can take your teaching and students’ learning off course:

- You can fail to identify the critical content from a chapter, unit, or set of materials to read before you begin teaching.
- You can identify the critical content but then fail to communicate its importance to your students in effective and memorable ways that work best for the content or students.
- You can fail to communicate to students the kind of action or response their attention requires for certain types of important content.

**Failing to Correctly Identify Critical Content**

Whether you are an elementary or secondary teacher, you can easily become more focused on subject matter you have taught for decades and overlook the teaching of a critically important skill that gives purpose to the knowledge. Your failure to identify the specific learning target or national standard for students may signal that you need a more comprehensive understanding of the standards and how they relate to your curriculum. Consider your purpose. Are you primarily using your class time to teach a skill or important information? Before the bell rings and you stand before your students, you must determine the important knowledge and skills you want to teach based on standards.

**Failing to Communicate the Importance of Critical Content in Effective Ways**

Have you ever taken a class or listened to a lecture and at the end thought, “I’m not sure what I was supposed to learn or get out of this.” If so, that may
Identifying Critical Content

have been because the teacher or lecturer did not communicate the importance of critical content such that you were able to determine the key points. Not everything in a lesson is of equal importance. Some of our students inherently understand that, and some don’t. Some of our students get bogged down in the minutiae of our lessons. Signaling to students what is critical in the content is key to implementing an effective lesson.

Failing to Communicate the Type of Action Needed

After you have identified critical content and communicated its importance, do not neglect to give students opportunities to do something with this information. For example, if someone were to convince you of a certain key bit of information that is critical to your health, you are more inclined to figure out a way to remember that information. You might make a note of it or ask for additional information to clarify what is the most critical content. It is necessary to teach this skill to your students. Help them realize that hearing the critical content is only the first step; they need to do something with it for it to be effective.

Monitoring for the Desired Result

Effective implementation means more than just applying the strategy—it also includes checking for evidence of the desired result of the specific strategy during implementation. In other words, effective implementation of a strategy includes monitoring for the desired result of that strategy in real time. Presenting a lively lesson that engages students is not enough. The questions that need to be answered are: Did your students know what content was important, and did they learn or master the information taught? The most elaborately planned lessons have no meaning unless they focus on the critical content outlined in standards and are monitored by the teacher for the desired results of the implemented strategies.

There are multiple ways teachers can monitor whether students know the content that is important and can distinguish between important and less significant information. Below are some examples that can help you tell if your students are able to identify critical content from a specific lesson:

1. Students can identify the critical information addressed in class.

2. Students can explain the difference between critical and noncritical content.
3. Students can describe the level of importance of the critical information addressed in class.

4. Formative data from the lesson show that students attend to the critical content (e.g., questioning, artifacts).

5. Students can explain the progression of critical content in the lesson.

Each technique discussed in this guide also has examples of monitoring specific to that technique.

**Scaffolding and Extending Instruction to Meet Students’ Needs**

As you monitor for the desired result of each technique, you will probably realize that some students are not able to identify the critical content and others are easily able to demonstrate the desired result of the strategy. With this knowledge, it becomes necessary to adapt for the needs of your students. You must plan ahead of time for those students who may need you to scaffold or extend instruction to meet their needs.

There are four different categories of support you can provide for students who need scaffolding: 1) support that teachers (including instructional aides or other paraprofessionals) or peers provide; 2) support that teachers provide by manipulating the difficulty level of content that is being taught (for example, providing an easier reading level that contains the same content); 3) breaking down the content into smaller chunks to make it more manageable; and 4) giving students organizers or think sheets to clarify and guide their thinking through a task one step at a time (Dickson, Collins, Simmons, & Kame’enui, 1998).

Within each technique that is described in subsequent chapters, there are illustrative examples of ways to scaffold and extend instruction to meet the needs of your students. Scaffolding provides support that targets cognitive complexity and student autonomy to reach rigor. Extending moves students who have already demonstrated the desired result to a higher level of understanding. These examples are provided as suggestions and should be adapted to target the specific needs of your students. Use the scaffolding examples to spark ideas as you plan to meet the needs of your English lan-
guage learners, students who receive special education or lack support, or simply the student who was absent the day before. The extension activities can help you plan for students in your gifted and talented program or those with a keen interest in the subject matter you are teaching who have already learned the fundamentals.

Teacher Self-Reflection

As you work on your expertise in teaching students to identify critical content, reflecting on what works and doesn’t work can help you become more successful in the implementation of this strategy. Use the following set of reflection questions to guide you. The questions begin with reflecting about how to begin the implementation process and move to progressively more complex ways of helping students identify critical content.

1. How can you begin to incorporate some aspect of this strategy in your instruction?

2. How can you signal to students which content is critical versus non-critical?

3. How could you monitor the extent to which students attend to critical content?

4. What are some ways you can adapt and create new techniques for identifying critical information that addresses unique student needs and situations?

5. What are you learning about your students as you adapt and create new techniques?

Instructional Techniques to Help Students Identify Critical Content

There are many ways to help your students effectively interact with new knowledge and ultimately master the learning targets or standards of the grade level or content area. The ways you choose to put your students on high alert regarding critical content that is about to unfold during a specific lesson or unit will depend on your grade, content, and the makeup of your
class. These various ways or options are called instructional techniques. In the following pages, you will find descriptions of how to implement the following techniques:

1. Verbally cue critical content.
2. Use explicit instruction to convey critical content.
3. Use dramatic instruction to convey critical content.
4. Provide advance organizers to cue critical content.
5. Visually cue critical content.
6. Use storytelling to cue critical content.
7. Use what students already know to cue critical content.

All of the techniques are similarly organized and include the following components:

- a brief introduction to the technique
- ways to effectively implement the technique
- common mistakes to avoid as you implement the technique
- examples and nonexamples from elementary and secondary classrooms using selected learning targets or standards from various documents
- ways to monitor for the desired result
- ways to scaffold and extend instruction to meet the needs of students

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Instructional Technique 1

VERBALLY CUE CRITICAL CONTENT

The easiest, and often fastest, way to communicate to your students that certain information is important is to tell them. That is the essence of verbal cueing. This sounds simple enough until you realize, after teaching a concept or skill, that your students’ questions indicate they do not understand what is important about the lesson even though you taught it. There is an effective way to convey critical information to students. This instructional technique, verbal cueing, will help you effectively implement the strategy of identifying critical content.

How to Effectively Implement Verbal Cueing

The effective execution of verbal cueing depends largely on the accurate identification of the important information in the content you are teaching. Use prioritized standards and learning targets to identify the critical content in a unit, lesson, and digestible bite of information. Use resources to ensure accuracy of the critical content, and then plan for how you will cue its importance to your students. Here are three ways you can verbally cue critical content.

Directly State the Important Information
Be direct, succinct, and assertive in stating the information that is important. If you feel overwhelmed by the amount of information you think should be included in your lesson, imagine how some of your students will feel. Take a moment to identify the central idea and a few supporting details, and work with that structure to determine how you will state which information is important.

Raise or Lower Your Voice to Indicate Critical Content
Students take cues from your intonation. Leverage that to signal to students what is important about the information you are imparting. Raise or lower
Identifying Critical Content

your voice for a few sentences to help students focus on critical content. This may take practice; don’t hesitate to record yourself as part of learning to implement this technique.

Pause at Key Points During the Presentation
The simple act of pausing at key points during a presentation of new content gives students time to think about information and signal what they find to be important. This enhances their ability to identify the critical content in a lesson.

Common Mistakes
Learning from mistakes while trying to teach is often painful. Knowing ahead of time where problems might arise will increase your likelihood of success in implementing this technique. Watch out for these common mistakes when you use verbal cueing:

- The teacher has a difficult time isolating the critical content, which results in making general statements instead of cueing critical content.
- The teacher uses a verbal cue too frequently, causing students to feel confused and overwhelmed by the sheer volume of important information.
- The teacher might pause for emphasis too frequently or sustain the pauses for too long a time, leaving students unable to determine the critical content.
- The teacher inconsistently changes intonation and seems to signal that information is important when it isn’t.

Examples of Verbal Cueing in the Classroom
Following are two examples (one elementary and one secondary) and their corresponding nonexamples of verbal cueing. As you read, think about experiences you have had in your classroom. Consider the common mistakes and note how the example teachers cleverly avoid them and the nonexample teachers miss the mark by making one of these common mistakes.
Elementary Example of Verbal Cueing

The first example/nonexample illustrates verbal cueing when introducing critical information about the skill of listening at the elementary level. The standard is taken from the CCSS Speaking and Listening Standards for Grades K–5: follow agreed-upon rules for discussions (for example, listening to others and taking turns speaking about the topics and texts under discussion) (CCSS, Speaking and Listening Standards K–5, p. 23). In the example, the teacher begins with “listening to others” and identifies two pieces of critical information about the listening skill. The bold text indicates where the teacher changes the pitch of his voice to indicate that critical content follows.

Good morning, class. Today we are going to learn how to listen. One important thing about listening is that you do not talk when you are listening. The second important thing about listening is that you should look at the person who is talking to you. You are listening to me right now. I can tell because you are not talking and you are looking at me.

After this brief introduction, the teacher goes on to teach the rest of the lesson. He first solicits some student volunteers to demonstrate the two important things about listening: not talking, and looking at the person who is talking to you. In this example, listening is a new skill the teacher wants his students to learn. He will use the verbal cueing he used for the introductory lesson as a reminder whenever he asks students to talk to a partner.

Elementary Nonexample of Verbal Cueing

The following elementary nonexample is based on the same grade level and CCSS listening standard as the previous example.
Good morning, class. I thought we’d talk about listening today. I hope when we get done with our lesson you’ll know how to be a good listener. Listening is really an important thing to do in school. I know you all know that because you’re sitting so quietly and being such good listeners now. I want you to practice listening today. I have some stickers here, and whenever I see a good listener during the day, I’m going to silently give that person a sticker.

The nonexample teacher doesn’t actually identify the critical content for the skill of listening. The teacher fails to focus on what is important and makes general statements instead. In this scenario, there is no indication of what is critical about listening. Before you teach a lesson, summarize the content in a sentence or two. This is the critical content you need to cue to students.

**Verbal Cueing in the Secondary Classroom**

The secondary example/nonexample is also based on a speaking and listening standard. It is the CCR Anchor Standard 1 for Speaking and Listening that expects students to prepare for and participate effectively in a range of conversations and collaborations with diverse partners, building on others’ ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

**Secondary Example of Verbal Cueing**

This example features a high school social studies teacher who is trying to teach his students a specific aspect of Standard 1: come to discussions prepared, having read and researched material under study. He wants to convey the important information about the task in a brief lesson using verbal cueing. The bold text indicates that the teacher is raising or lowering his voice to emphasize two items of critical importance that he wants his students to take away from the lesson.
Greetings, class. Today we are going to think and talk about what it means to prepare for and participate in a discussion. There are two important things to remember from this lesson today. Write them in your academic notebook. The first important thing is that preparing means doing something positive ahead of time to get ready for the discussion. The second important thing is that participation means actively doing something positive during the class discussion.

After this verbal cue, the teacher divides the class into small groups. Half of the groups list as many answers as they can to this question: What are some positive things you could do to prepare for class? The other set of groups lists answers to this question: What are some positive things you should do during the class discussion to show that you are participating? The teacher walks around looking at the list of activities that each small group has generated and concludes that students can identify the importance of preparing and participating.

Secondary Nonexample of Verbal Cueing

The nonexample secondary teacher begins his lesson the same way as the example teacher. Take careful note of where this teacher makes two common mistakes, thereby missing the opportunity to check that the desired result of this instructional technique was achieved.
Identifying Critical Content

Tomorrow, I want everyone to come prepared to participate in the class discussion about chapter two. Remember, part of your grade in this class depends on preparing and participating.

The nonexample teacher left out two important pieces of his lesson: 1) giving students opportunities to do something with the important information, and 2) monitoring whether students understood the two pieces of critical content.

Determining If Students Can Identify Critical Content from Verbal Cueing

Always take time to monitor whether students know the difference between important and unimportant content. To find out who knows and how well they know it, assemble a toolkit of tasks designed to fit your grade or content area. Here is a collection of ways that you can monitor your students’ understanding of critical content as a result of verbal cueing:

- Students indicate their answer to a question from one of two or more possible answers by holding up color-coded cards. For example, students may display one of two response cards: Yes or No. The teacher notes students who have made incorrect choices, and plans to follow up with them.

- Students keep journals or learning logs in which they write entries on the critical information from each lesson in a particular unit. They leave them open on top of their desks so the teacher can scan them for the critical content.

- Students write their answers to questions or problems on small whiteboards and hold them up for the teacher to read.

- Students respond chorally. The teacher notes the students who respond incorrectly and makes a mental note that these students will need more opportunities to respond. The teacher takes care to ensure that all students respond and can be heard.
Use the student proficiency scale for verbal cueing to determine the progression of your students’ ability to identify critical content. Explain to them why some information is important and why other information is irrelevant or trivial.

### Student Proficiency Scale for Verbally Cueing Critical Content

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Emerging</th>
<th>Fundamental</th>
<th>Desired Result</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Students can state what the lesson is about.</td>
<td>Students can state some, but not all, of the important information in the lesson.</td>
<td>Students successfully state the important information in the lesson.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students can list some information in the lesson that is important.</td>
<td>Students can explain which information in the lesson is important versus unimportant.</td>
<td>Students accurately explain why some information in the lesson is important versus unimportant.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Scaffold and Extend Instruction to Meet Students’ Needs

As you become more skilled at identifying critical content and using verbal cues to convey information, you will find that you can more readily identify various individuals or small groups of students who need something more or different from your original instruction. Some students need support, or scaffolding, that takes them from where they are to where they need to be. Other students need to be challenged further, so you must extend the ways in which you expect them to interact with critical content. The following suggestions are meant to be illustrative. Use them as springboards for zeroing in on the precise needs of your students.

#### Scaffolding

Instructional support for verbal cueing may take the form of further explanations, more vocabulary instruction and guided practice, or teacher modeling. Use your classroom walls to provide scaffolding for students. Post resources that students can consult—such as a word wall, picture keys, or important steps in a process—to identify critical content.
Identifying Critical Content

Extending
Think about extension activities for your students who have readily mastered identifying important and unimportant information and can manipulate the critical content at higher levels. This will enlarge and deepen their knowledge. Two ways to extend students’ interaction with critical content is to ask them to either prioritize or categorize the critical information of the lesson.
Instructional Technique 2

USE EXPLICIT INSTRUCTION TO CONVEY CRITICAL CONTENT

If you are unaware of the power of explicit instruction to convey complex concepts and information to students, or if you have made a conscious decision to avoid any instructional approach that might be perceived as too direct, you owe it to your students to be more explicit. When the information or skill is foundational and there is no room for failure, consider using explicit instruction. If students are struggling, lack background knowledge or vocabulary, or have special needs, explicit instruction is essential. The more explicitly you teach critical content, the more readily all of your students can apply what they have learned. Lay out important information and skills in plain language that leaves no confusion in your students’ minds.

How to Effectively Implement Explicit Instruction

Explicitly Identify the Critical Content
Point out to students what’s important in the content. Even if you’re pressed for time or think students should know what’s important in the lesson based on previous lessons, you must explicitly identify the critical content of each chunk of information and for each lesson. If your notes are in slide form, consider preparing at least one slide in which you state the critical content for every lesson. Explicit instruction should be simple, plain, clear, and systematic. It should focus on the critical content and be free of irrelevant bells and whistles that may distract students.

Model Critical Skills, Strategies, and Processes
Modeling is one of the most effective ways to communicate critical content. It can take several forms in your classroom:
**Identifying Critical Content**

- Demonstrate or show your students explicitly how to perform a skill, strategy, or process.
- Think aloud as you perform the skill, strategy, or process.
- Show exemplars of completed student work, as well as nonexamples, that help your students differentiate between good and unacceptable work.

**Chunk Critical Content into Digestible Bites**

Students need time to think as they are learning. If you race through material, students don’t have opportunities to process and take ownership of the content. Learning proceeds more efficiently when students receive information in small chunks that they can process immediately. There is no set rule for how large or small a chunk should be, but usually the more students know about the content, the larger the chunk can be. Use the following suggestions to present digestible bites of information:

- Present only one important concept or idea at a time.
- After presenting new information, give students thinking time in which they may talk with a partner, write out a question, or write an answer on a small whiteboard.
- Design handouts so that all of the information students need is on one page.
- Pass out only one handout at a time.
- Give only one direction at a time.

**Develop Student-Friendly Definitions for Important Concepts**

Student-friendly definitions distill a concept to its essence using simple words that students are more likely to understand and remember. Explicit instruction requires consistent and easy-to-understand definitions. Extend the consistency to all classes within a grade level or all content courses in a department to give students increased opportunities to practice and master these definitions.
Common Mistakes

Teachers want all students to master the required content and skills. Explicit instruction is one way to ensure that students who may be struggling with the basics have an opportunity to acquire them to the same extent as those students who catch on quickly. The latter group of students may readily compensate even if a teacher stumbles during instruction; however, struggling students need every teacher’s A-game in order to achieve mastery. Watch out for these common mistakes when you use explicit instruction:

- The teacher provides vague or general information.
- The teacher moves too quickly or laboriously long through the introduction of critical information, minimizing the amount of explicit instruction.
- The teacher assumes that students have prior knowledge they do not have.
- The teacher doesn’t give students opportunities to write down, talk with a partner, or ask questions about digestible bites of important information.
- The teacher’s presentation style distracts students from the critical content.

Examples and Nonexamples of Explicit Instruction

As you consider these examples and nonexamples, read carefully to recognize the common mistakes and make connections to the suggestions for how to effectively implement explicit instruction.

Elementary Example of Explicit Instruction

The first example focuses on the standard: demonstrate basic knowledge of one-to-one letter-sound correspondences by producing the primary or many of the most frequent sounds for each consonant (CCSS Reading Standards; Foundational Skills K–5, p. 16). The example teacher is teaching one consonant at a time. A formative assessment showed that most students in the class do not associate the /s/ sound with the letter s. So the teacher has chosen to provide explicit instruction on the /s/ sound.
Today we’re going to learn a new sound. Our new sound goes with the letter s. I’m going to make the sound for you, and then you will have many turns to practice the sound. When you know the sounds that go with the letters, you will be able to read words and books. Listen to what I say and watch my lips.

Here’s our new sound for today. Teacher points to the s on the board. The letter says /s/.

The teacher points to the letter and says: Together. What sound? /s/ Yes.

The teacher and students repeat this segment several times while the teacher watches students’ eyes and mouths to see if any of them are having difficulty. In the next phase of the lesson, the students respond in unison without the teacher’s support. In this type of explicit instruction, only one sound at a time is introduced and then practiced to mastery.

Elementary Nonexample of Explicit Instruction

Our nonexample of explicit instruction is also focused on learning letter-sound correspondence for the letter s.

I have a wonderful new story to read aloud to you. Teacher holds up book titled Sam’s Silly Sister Sue. Can someone tell me what they see on the front cover? Students point out that there is a girl roller-skating. A fluffy dog and little boy are laughing at her. Students agree that Sam is the boy, the girl is sister Sue, and the dog is probably named Spot.

The teacher is excited about all of the information the children have inferred from the picture. At this point, she has yet to introduce the most important information of this lesson: the connection between the printed letter and sound it makes. She goes on to ask students to signal a thumbs-up
whenever they hear the sound that the letter *s* makes while she is reading the story aloud to them.

This teacher has made a couple common mistakes. First, she provides vague information. She also assumes that the students have the prior knowledge to determine the relationship between the letter *s* and its sound from her read-aloud.

### Secondary Example of Explicit Instruction

The secondary example is from a high school geology class. The learning target for students comes from the first section of Standard 1 of the College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Reading. It states that students are expected to *read closely to determine what the text says explicitly*. Explicit instruction in the context of this standard calls for explicit modeling and thinking aloud by the teacher. The teacher’s modeling will give students an accessible way to understand how skilled readers extract meaning.

Today we’re going to learn what it means to read closely to determine what a text says explicitly. I’m going to show you a three-step way to do that. *The teacher puts a paragraph relating to geology on the screen.* The teacher has already determined that many of his students have great difficulty figuring out what a text is explicitly about, so he decided to provide the students with a question to guide their reading and thinking.

I often find it hard to read something long and complicated while at the same time trying to remember what I’ve read. Today I am going to show you how to read one sentence at a time to see if it answers a question. The question is, What does the text explicitly say caused the land surface of the earth to change? *The first step is reading one sentence. The second step is deciding if the sentence answers the question.*

Let me show you how it works. *Teacher reads aloud the first sentence of the text and rereads the question.* As I read this sentence, I don’t find anything that tells me a reason or a cause
Identifying Critical Content

for the earth to change. So, I would answer no. This sentence does not answer the question. The third step is explaining why the sentence doesn’t answer the question. I say that the first sentence told us what the paragraph would be about, but it didn’t give any reasons for why the earth changed.

The teacher continues to model this process for students with the next sentence before asking students to try one by themselves.

Secondary Nonexample of Explicit Instruction

Today we’re going to cover the first chapter in our new unit about how the earth’s surface has changed over time. I want you to really concentrate when you read this first section. You need to get every bit of meaning out of it that’s there so you will be able to write a one-sentence summary that answers this question: What does the text explicitly say caused the land surface of the earth to change?

The teacher provides no modeling. He expects students to read the whole text and write a summary rather than chunking the reading into digestible bites. Many students may be unable to accomplish this.

Determining If Students Can Identify Critical Content from Explicit Instruction

Monitoring students’ abilities to identify the critical content from the scripted type of explicit instruction found in the elementary example is quite simple. The constant back and forth between the teacher and class during periods of unison response offers constant opportunities to monitor students. As you become more adept at eliciting whole-group responses, you can begin to call randomly on individual students. This kind of random questioning serves two purposes: 1) it keeps all students engaged and anticipating the
next question, and 2) it gives students who are still uncertain about the critical content an opportunity to hear the correct response.

When a student gives an incorrect response, don’t be reluctant to correct him or her by quickly modeling the correct answer and moving on. Come back to that student again to give him or her an opportunity to answer correctly. You can implement this kind of monitoring in just a few seconds and use it to check recall of critical information from prior lessons. The call and response between you and your students can help create a classroom climate where errors are merely momentary setbacks.

Monitoring students’ abilities to identify critical content from the explicit instruction of comprehension skills, such as in the secondary example, depends on the quality and frequency of thinking aloud and modeling you provide for them. When you make your thinking transparent, students will follow your lead and soon be comfortable with sharing their thoughts about what they have read. This is the most effective kind of monitoring to determine if students have isolated the critical content. Plan how and when you will provide opportunities for students to share their thoughts with a partner or the whole class, so that you can listen in and check that they know what content is critical.

Use the student proficiency scale for explicit instruction to determine whether your students are demonstrating the desired results as you implement this technique. Make a copy for reference as you plan and implement explicit instruction in your class.

**Student Proficiency Scale for Explicit Instruction**

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<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Emerging</th>
<th>Fundamental</th>
<th>Desired Result</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Students provide</td>
<td>Students provide responses related to the important information in the</td>
<td>Students provide accurate responses</td>
<td>Students provide comprehensive, accurate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>responses related to</td>
<td>lesson.</td>
<td>regarding the important information in</td>
<td>responses regarding the important information</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>the important</td>
<td></td>
<td>the lesson.</td>
<td>in the lesson.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>information in the</td>
<td></td>
<td>Students are able to discuss the critical</td>
<td>Students are able to successfully process the</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>lesson.</td>
<td></td>
<td>content.</td>
<td>critical content.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students can state some</td>
<td>Students can state some critical content.</td>
<td>Students are able to discuss the critical</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>critical content.</td>
<td></td>
<td>content.</td>
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Scaffold and Extend Instruction to Meet Students’ Needs

Meeting the needs of your students may require designing lessons for both your struggling and your higher achieving students to become more self-managed in your classroom. Below are some examples of each.

Scaffolding
When you are having difficulty with individuals or a small group of students who do not seem to grasp or remember the critical information from day to day, or even in the same day, try one of the following ways to adjust your instruction:

- Remind, review, and reteach critical content that students need more frequently (for example, important academic vocabulary).
- Provide a classroom or subject matter reference book that contains frequently used vocabulary or spelling words, rules, procedures, and checklists for students to consult if they are confused.
- Develop specific and consistent classroom routines to identify critical content so that students recognize the cues.

Extending
Some of your students may need an extra challenge to make identifying critical content enhance their learning for that lesson. Try these ideas for extending explicit instruction:

- Encourage students who are able to quickly parse important information to rank it in order of significance.
- Ask students who are proficient in identifying critical content to create a cheat sheet that includes the critical content and what led them to know it was critical. This can then be used to help students who are not as proficient with this process.
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USE DRAMATIC INSTRUCTION TO CONVEY CRITICAL CONTENT

Students who have a difficult time acquiring new knowledge from other ways of identifying critical content may benefit from acting out the critical content. This does not need to entail formal scripts and long-winded speeches. Students acting out math facts or linking hand signals to key vocabulary are types of dramatic instruction.

How to Effectively Implement Dramatic Instruction

There are several types of dramatic instruction from which to choose. They include role plays, skits, dramatic readings, hand gestures, and coordinated movements such as dance. Here are the key aspects to remember as you plan your lesson.

Choose Just One Type of Dramatic Instruction

If you have a flair for the dramatic and coach the after-school drama club, you may be tempted to combine several types of dramatic instruction mentioned earlier. Remember that your goal is to signal to students the importance of the material being presented—not to mount a full-scale production.

Check Alignment to the Learning Target

Class time is too precious to spend time on dramatic instruction that doesn’t tie to the critical content, no matter how fun it is. If you are unsure about the overt linkage between the dramatic instruction and critical content, run your idea past a colleague. Explain exactly what you propose to do and how it connects to the content. If you aren’t able to make a case, it is best to abandon the idea and find another.
Identifying Critical Content

Rehearse, Rehearse, Rehearse
Walk through how your lesson will work in the real world of your classroom. If your students have never used physical movement to illustrate word meanings, you will need to model an example or two for them. Establish some routines for dramatic instruction such as personal space and movement around the classroom. Take care to rehearse several times to decide where and when you will use your voice and body and how long the dramatization will be.

Students Need to Summarize
Be sure to include an opportunity for your student to explain how the enactment represents the critical content. Otherwise you might find that some students were successful in the enactment but do not understand how the enactment ties to the lesson.

The More Students Involved, the Better
There is sometimes the temptation to call on the exceptionally talented students to participate in a skit. This may cause most students to love the performance, but fail to interact with the new knowledge you want them to master. Whenever possible, instead of only modeling the dramatic instruction, have all students participate.

Common Mistakes
There are a few common mistakes teachers make as they use dramatic instruction to convey critical information:

- The teacher does not make overt linkages between the performance or dramatization and critical content.
- The teacher involves only a few students in the dramatization. Students who are watching are not likely to acquire the critical content to the same extent as those who are acting, moving, or demonstrating with face, hands, or body.
- The teacher demonstrates everything and does not ask students to participate at all. This does not give all students the benefits of dramatic instruction.
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- The teacher does not ask students to summarize the performance. This mistake means that some students may not make the linkage between the dramatization and the critical content.

Examples and Nonexamples of Dramatic Instruction

Some of these examples may be from a different grade level or subject than you teach. View them as you would a fresh perspective from a colleague, and use them to find a new approach or alternative way of thinking about instruction.

**Elementary Example of Dramatic Instruction**

The first example and nonexample illustrate how and how not to use dramatic instruction to teach vocabulary in a classroom with students who need extra support in learning English language vocabulary.

The specific standard being addressed is *distinguishing shades of meaning among verbs differing in manner or intensity by defining or choosing them or by acting out the meanings* (CCSS, Language Standards K–5, p. 27). The teacher has chosen this set of words to use dramatic instruction for the first time with her students: *look, peek, glance, stare, glare,* and *scowl.* In this lesson, students will act out the meanings of the words. The teacher posted cues on a bulletin board for students to consult. The dramatic instruction has scaffolding and extending built in such that struggling students will have a third opportunity to master the word meanings by adding the right facial expressions or hand movements (if needed), while advanced students will be challenged to write a short play that incorporates both the words and facial expressions.

_The students are sitting on a rug in front of an easel that contains a list of the words with their meanings, as well as their picture cues._

On Monday we began to learn some new words. The words, meanings, and picture cues to help you remember the meanings are here on the easel. Today we’re going to add one more thing to each word to help us remember what it means. We’re going to act out the words. Let me show you what I mean.
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The teacher points to the word peek, pronounces it, points to the picture cue, and reads the meaning. Then she acts out the meaning of the word peek for her students. Everybody show me what peek looks like. Terrific. I was peeking at my students. Who were you peeking at? The students answer, “The teacher.”

I’m going to act out another word. The teacher acts out the word scowl, and then reads the word and its meaning. I was scowling at you. But it was just a pretend scowl because I am not angry with you. Now, everybody show me what your scowl looks like. Excellent. Now show me what a peek looks like. I’m going to point at the word, and I want you to show me the face that goes with it.

All of the students in the group can produce dramatic facial expressions to match the words peek and scowl. The instruction gets more dramatic as the students begin to acquire the subtleties of this set of words and become more comfortable in pronouncing the words and producing the definitions in English. The teacher checks throughout the lesson that students can match facial expressions to their corresponding words, as well as read them on the chart and produce a spoken meaning for each word.

**Elementary Nonexample of Dramatic Instruction**

The nonexample elementary teacher has the same general plan as the example teacher, but she misses the mark at a crucial point in the lesson. Her students never get to try out any of the faces, and she stops the lesson without monitoring the students’ abilities to match the appropriate facial expressions with the words and meanings on the chart.

**Secondary Example of Dramatic Instruction**

The secondary example and nonexample are from a high school biology class. It focuses on the Next Generation Science Standard HS-LS1-4: use a model to illustrate the role of cellular division (mitosis) and differentiation in producing and maintaining complex organisms. The high school biology
The teacher begins by giving students time to review their notes and activities from previous lessons in which they learned about the purpose and process of mitosis. Rather than memorizing each step of the process, students in small groups brainstorm how they can act out the process of mitosis, focusing on the obstacles that cells overcome in order to reproduce. As students are creating their enactment, the teacher walks around listening and giving guidance when necessary. Instead of asking each group to demonstrate to the entire class, the teacher has them partner with one other group. In addition to enacting mitosis, the groups summarize how the model illustrates the role of mitosis in producing and maintaining complex organisms.

**Secondary Nonexample of Dramatic Instruction**

The nonexample teacher plans a similar lesson, but instead of asking students to brainstorm their own enactment, she guides a small group of students through the enactment while the rest of the class watches. This is an equally effective simulation but fails to follow through with the most important phase of instruction—involving the students and monitoring that they understand the process of mitosis and are able to summarize how the model illustrates the role of mitosis in producing and maintaining complex organisms.

**Determining If Students Can Identify Critical Content from Dramatic Instruction**

Monitoring should always have two components: 1) something that students do to demonstrate the desired result of the technique (in this instance, state the critical content depicted in the dramatic instruction); and 2) something that the teacher does to check for the desired result and respond to students’ progress. Here are some specific examples of monitoring that flow from the use of dramatic instruction:

- Students summarize the dramatic reading or skit to a partner. Meanwhile, the teacher quickly moves about the room and listens to the spoken summaries to ensure that students have identified the critical content.
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- Students add a quick sketch of the hand gestures to their notes to match the corresponding critical content; the teacher checks that they are able to match the gestures to the content.

- Students narrate the coordinated body movements using critical content from the lesson, and the teacher confirms that the students’ narrations link the body movements and critical content.

The student proficiency scale for dramatic instruction shows the range of student proficiencies for how successfully they can use dramatic instruction cues to master the critical content of a specific lesson. Use the scale to reflect the precise ways you plan to identify the desired result of dramatic instruction.

### Student Proficiency Scale for Dramatic Instruction of Critical Content

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Emerging</th>
<th>Fundamental</th>
<th>Desired Result</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Students participate in the dramatization.</td>
<td>Students can explain how the dramatization relates to the lesson.</td>
<td>Students are able to relate the dramatization to the critical content of the lesson.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students can identify some critical content in the dramatization.</td>
<td>Students can discuss the dramatization using some of the critical content.</td>
<td>Students can correctly narrate the dramatization using critical content.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students can discuss parts of the dramatization.</td>
<td>Students can make statements about the critical content in the dramatization.</td>
<td>Students can accurately summarize the critical content in the dramatization.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students can state some critical content.</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Scaffold and Extend Instruction to Meet Students’ Needs

There will be students who do not grasp critical information the first time they hear it. Similarly, there are students who “get it” and “had it” before you “taught” it. Meeting the needs of these two diverse groups of students requires that you adapt your instruction. The more focused a teacher is on designing instruction for all students, the more ground he or she will gain with students...
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on either end of the achievement continuum. Here are some ideas for developing scaffolding and extending to meet students’ needs.

Scaffolding

- If students struggle with extracting the critical content from dramatic instruction, create sentences that relate to the dramatic instruction. Write some that contain critical content and some that do not. Ask students to sort the statements into two groups: important and not important.

- Some students may struggle with drawing pictures of the hand gestures you introduced as part of the lesson. Provide these students with small pictures of these hand gestures that they may tape into their notes or use as a model to copy.

- If students did not make the linkage between your dramatic instruction and the critical content, ask some questions to help them understand the connection.

Extending

- Have students create an original skit, dramatic reading, set of hand gestures, or a set of dance moves to convey the critical content.

- Ask students to evaluate the work of classmates to select the best example that illustrates the critical content and justify that decision.