

*Scaffolding for a Divorced  
Part of My Curriculum: Vocabulary*

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### *Introduction—Vocabulary*

Vocabulary is an important, but often neglected part of English curriculum. It's hard to teach, if there's a way of teaching it, and so it's often shafted. In our class, I wanted vocabulary to be an essential part of our learning experience because it is one of the building blocks by which we expand our personal lexicon and a vehicle which is used by many to then read a more diverse pick of literature. Vocabulary is also the marker of the arrival at academia, and if one can talk the talk, so to speak, one is often hailed as "educated," "literate," and "academic." I want to offer my students this very advantage when I make vocabulary a part of our class; to make it more connected to their curricular study, I pick words that come out of the texts we read.

### *Background—Lincoln High School*

In the heart of Silicon Valley, Middletown houses a whole spectrum of diversity, from the affluent engineer to the working migrant to the recent immigrant. Lincoln High School is located in Middletown, the only high school in the city of Middletown. The block schedule (four classes for 90 minutes per class) supports a lower teacher-student ratio and more in-depth approach to teaching. LHS is a school in the Lincoln Union High School District and home to over 1,739 students. Of the 1,739 students, 32% are Hispanic, 28% are white, 17% are Asian, 16% are Filipino or Pacific Islander, 5% are African American, and 2% are Native American. Looking at the population as a whole, 32.6% are LEP (Limited English Proficient), 96.7% stay in school, and 67.5% attend the California public colleges (for more information, see <http://www.LHS.fuhisd.org/>). The school itself is a microcosm of the world—a rich blend of different faces, language, personalities, and cultures. The majority of the student population at LHS is made of minority students, and the rainbow of colors that Lincoln boasts of lends it a most distinctive flavor of life.

### *The Students—My Class*

My class was made of a heterogeneous group of 24 wonderfully vibrant sophomores; they are a racial mix of Filipino, Chinese, white, black, and Latino students. A few were high achievers, but the most of them fell in the middle and low range of performance. What I found among the middle and low achievers, though, was that some are bright students with little motivation for work. Their relationship with me can be characterized with an analogy—sometimes when you strike a match, it lights up, and the energy we had in the classroom was like that initial spark of blue and orange light. Most, if not all the students, responded to me well and respected me, saw me as a mentor / friend who would talk with them about their lives and their problems. But they could still get very chatty which can grate any teacher the wrong way.

### *The Course—World Literature*

Although our course emphasized World Literature, our class was actually integrated with World History and named World Studies, which meant that the 55 students were shared between two teachers. We were in a double room that housed the 55 students. During the course of the term, however, we decided to stop integrating because we felt that better instruction and teaching practices would happen more effectively in a smaller class. The students who attended World History during second block attended World Literature during third block, and vice versa. Though our classes were no longer in a huge double room with 55 students, we often paralleled the literature with the time period the students were studying in World History.

The different styles of teaching presented by the History side and the Literature side proved to be somewhat of a challenge. The students, when they were in World History, were required to memorize facts, dates, and reasons for historical events and then tested on those very things. In World Literature, on the other hand, students were not asked to memorize much; instead, they were asked to apply what they understood about a particular piece of literature, analyze and synthesize it in order to present a coherent interpretation. The different natures of the disciplines and the different pedagogical styles of the teachers may have subconsciously confused the students

because “testing” of vocabulary, in our class, World Literature, became a very difficult hurdle to overcome.

### *How Students Demonstrated Their Knowledge*

In terms of how the students demonstrated their knowledge, I was noticing that they had no problems with the rote tests that were given in World History, but when it came to World Literature, they had trouble applying knowledge that they had memorized in a different context. In other words, students could take what they learned and repeat the process if the context did not differ too much, but if the context was drastically different and students needed to transfer what they knew to a new context, they grappled and became frustrated. I did not want my students to simply know how to memorize different bits of information without knowing how to wield it. They were wonderful rote test takers, but did not seem to know how to take tests that asked them to apply their knowledge in a new context. The concept of transfer enters, and I could tell that my students had trouble engaging in “high road transfer”; they could engage in “low road transfer,” however. They could apply the concepts that they had learned in the same contexts, but not one that asked them to engage in higher order thinking. Seeing as how they didn’t, how could I, as their teacher, help them so that they could?

### *The Issue—Vocabulary*

In our class, we failed to give vocabulary regularly, and the number of words changed with every week. It was the students’ responsibility to obtain the definitions to the words. The tests we initially gave tested understanding and usage of the word; tests were given orally by the teacher, and the students had to write complete sentences in response to the question. The words came from the texts we were reading, and the intent was that the students would learn words that they’d at least encountered once. They wouldn’t be tested on every word, but if a vocabulary word was “squalid,” then a test question would be: “I walk into a squalid room. What do I see?” An adequate answer might read, “When I walk into a squalid room, I see bits of garbage all over the floor, dust bunnies on the furniture, and disorganized CDs all over the place.”

I felt this mode of testing knowledge was inadequate because some students shared answers with classmates and got away with not studying all the words. Perhaps

there may have been a slight glitch in the administration of the quiz to all 55 students at once; I believe that this form of assessment proves useful and beneficial if the students are being tested on understanding what the words mean. So when I got a chance to design vocabulary, I changed the number of words and the way the students got tested. Instead of 10 words, I gave 20. Instead of random testing, I tested all the words plus their parts of speech. My goal was three-fold: to have the students learn more words in order to build a greater vocabulary base, to have them apply what they learn in a new context, and to prepare them for standardized test-taking, which is a combination of test-taking skills, common sense, and memorization.

### *Initial Plan—The Trajectory of Things*

Because I believe that if students do the work they remember it more, I had them look up the words, parts of speech, and definition, and make a sentence for homework. I gave 20 words because I felt that 10 were too few. After the first week, I found that the students knew how to look words up and find the part of speech, but they had trouble making sentences. When I checked the homework and glanced at each sentence; it was true that they had all made sentences, but the sentences didn't make sense. I got sentences like, "Because most of the food was gone, the people left dissipate" which showed me that they understood the definition, but not how to use it. So after two weeks of this, I decided they didn't need to make sentences of the words because it didn't seem to be helping; in fact, it only seemed to confuse them more. In terms of learning and the implications of learning, I feel that although I want students to experiment with the words by making sentences, it seems inherently difficult to do so unless students have a well-founded basis of language—from semantics to syntax to mechanics.

Aside from the misuse of the words, the students did not seem to be studying hard (since I asked them how long they studied and what strategies they used) and using the words after the test. Granted that there were no specific occasions for students to actually use the words orally in class after the test, I still hoped that in their papers I would see some vocabulary words used. I tested in this way: the vocabulary word made up the blank in each sentence and in the blank, students had to write in the most appropriate word and part of speech. Each was worth \_ a point, so that if they got one or

the other right, they could get credit. The whole test was worth 20 points (see attached test).

Most of the students didn't study (I asked them) so they got bad grades. They told me, "We're never going to use these words anyways! Why do we need to know them? These quizzes don't do anything for me." At the time these questions and challenges were raised, I failed to answer my students. These were questions that I had thought about and had theoretical answers to in the back of my mind, but I wrestled for words to explain it to them in a practical way. I had no hook to catch them, and as a direct effect, most did not "buy into" doing vocabulary.

I noted that the way that they had been tested failed to require them to know how to use the word in context, something very vital, I believe, when learning vocabulary. One girl told me, "I can't take these tests! But I can tell you what all the words are, what they mean and their parts of speech! I can't take these tests!" I also saw many students not practicing the words until the test was 10 minutes away. After two tests, I saw patterns emerging, and these patterns shocked me tremendously. The students weren't studying, didn't know how to guess given context clues, didn't know the context in which a part of speech can be used, and didn't know how to figure out a word's part of speech given the way the word looks.

### *Emergency Bandaging*

So I adapted my goals to help them learn how to take tests as well as learn the words. I did not explicitly teach test-taking skills, but I wanted to give my students tools to use during tests. As I thought about this more, I asked myself, "What do they really need to know? Is it the vocabulary? Is it how to guess?" Although the gatekeeper to many opportunities in life is how one speaks, I decided that the language wasn't what my students needed at this point. I knew that no matter what I did, they wouldn't study unless they wanted to. So expending energy there was a lost cause. Did they need a grammar lesson? Maybe a small one that clued them in. At this point, however, what they really and desperately needed to know was how to survive this ugly labyrinth of tests—tests that I gave as well as tests that other teachers gave, including state required tests and standardized tests for college entrances. They needed to know how to guess and

guess wisely. In a way, my initial goal for vocabulary was thwarted—aside from learning vocabulary, I wanted them to learn how to guess on tests.

And so, I planned a lesson that revolved around guessing strategies, parts of speech in context, and reviewing the last vocabulary test. But I only got to spend about 40 minutes targeting these problems due to time crunches. I would have gone more in-depth but there was little time. I played a guessing game with them—they had to guess the word in my head and could only ask yes or no questions. There was great engagement and many students were asking questions to guess! I was amazed at how even the quiet students guessed; only one boy didn't participate. Some students started using more school-smart approaches and began asking, "Is it a person, place or thing?" but they were still in the dark as to how that helped them guess the word in my mind. I played this game because I wanted them to actually verbalize and go through what they might feel on a vocabulary test. They had not studied, didn't know the word beforehand, and were basically in the dark. But, the one thing they did have on their side was guessing. There was no penalty for guessing.

Then I engaged them in metacognitive process of unfolding how they guessed the word in my head—I highlighted guessing strategies—namely, the process of elimination and using context clues. The questions like "Is it a noun?" allowed them to eliminate other things they were guessing and I used that to point out that this is exactly what they had to do on the vocabulary quizzes. I reported back to them that when a student had asked that question, I said yes, and another student asked, "Is the word 'dripping'?", all the students would say, "She just said it was a noun!" This showed me that they all understood what the parts of speech were, but they didn't know how to apply it. The connection between the game and their quizzes was rather weak, but it looked like they understood since they all nodded and were paying rapt attention. The weakness that I see is that there seems to be little connection made by me between the fun-ness of the game and how they could see the quiz as a game to be played. I feel almost as if a particular mindset or perspective needed to be explicitly offered to the students, and due to time constraints, I did not put forward the analogy. This lack of connection was strange to me because it showed me that they either understood this type of interactive guessing, but they couldn't guess on the test, or that they had trouble processing the vocabulary.

I then gave a mini-lecture on Parts of Speech, while they took notes. We went through the four major parts—noun, verb, adjective, adverb. They gave glowing examples of each, but when a student asked me “So how do we tell?” I realized that I had left something out, the very thing they needed—how to identify what kind of word the word was. I quickly drew up general patterns for each type of word. For example, I would write, “noun verb noun,” showing them the subject-verb-object pattern. They also seemed to “get” this, as many were taking copious notes and asking clarifying questions. But I also realize that my assumption about copious note-taking does not equate to students “getting” it; it may merely signal compliance with rote learning, and in this case, the rote learning was about copying notes from the board. I wish we had had time to go through their vocabulary quizzes after this, but there was no time left, and I was signaled to end my lesson quickly.

#### *Prior Knowledge Getting In the Way*

On one particular list of words we gave out, “reckless” was on it. Most of the students incorrectly put the word in a sentence that read, “After seeing how sad Mary became when she broke up with her boyfriend, whom she loved more than life, I’m pretty reckless about true love.” I completely understood their mistake and began to see things through their point of view; the answer makes sense, but it doesn’t fit with the meaning of the sentence. (The more appropriate answer was “disillusioned.”) If one sees how sad another is over lost love, then one wouldn’t likely be carefree about true love; one would more likely be disenchanted about the fact that there is true love. Though the logic seems clear, the subtlety of the logic could plausibly escape a 15-year-old who feels under pressure to get as many correct as possible in a timed setting. In my mind as a teacher, the logic is as clear as crystal, but in my students’ minds, it seemed that the familiarity of the phrase “reckless about love” superceded their logic and reasoning skills at the time. It seemed they had put “reckless” in because that was a phrase that they probably heard over and over again through media—“reckless about love.” My students built on incomplete evidence, and tended to ignore information that did not fit; they instead grabbed at evidence that served as confirmation for what they already knew (Norman,



42). They were applying what they knew and piecing things together without really checking for meaning.

### *The New Plan*

I felt a need that there wasn't enough review and usage of the words in the classroom though the words came from the texts we read. I wanted to review the words with them. And it wasn't that they didn't know how to look up the words in the dictionary and weren't doing that, it was that they didn't know how to use the words. So the next time, I shortened the list to about 15 words, gave them the definitions and parts of speech. While I orally gave it to them, I also gave them examples of how the words could be used. This I did in the beginning of the week and the students were tested at the end of the week. Many times, however, the quizzes were shafted and kept getting pushed back—our lack of a norm for vocabulary—which I hated, but since it was the one expendable thing, we kept putting vocabulary off.

One day, we had some extra time, and it happened to be the day before the quiz. So on a spur of a moment, I came up with a game to play with them—Around the World. The rules of the game: a student challenged the person next to them, I gave the word, and whoever came up with the definition the fastest was the winner, the winner would challenge the next person until defeated. If the winner and the challenger couldn't get the answer, then the winner got another chance with another challenger. Automatic removal from the game was if their notebooks were out and they were cheating. The students loved this game! They kept wanting to play and assured me this helped them learn the words.

We played Around the World several times more with the next few sets of vocabulary, and the students were amazingly “into” vocabulary for as long as the game continued. I gave the same quizzes and set a time limit—13 minutes for 15 fill-in-the-blanks. I wanted to simulate standardized test-taking surroundings in hopes of helping them begin readying for the SATs and SAT II's. They complained about the time crunch and whined about how little time there was. Here, another question was raised. Was it that they had too little time? Or was the culprit that they had not studied adequately? They seemed unable to apportion out the time they had in order to finish the test on time.

Though they expressed their thoughts on the time allotted for the quiz, most finished before 13 minutes. Perhaps it was that I had not prepared them for this simulation; after all, nothing in our class is timed and as pressured as this. Most of the activities in our class tended to be more student-centered, and this quiz was a frightening contrast to all that they'd been used to. The scores did go up by several points per student, but the way in which the students obtained the raised grades weren't exactly the same as those I had in my mind. They often begged for time before the quizzes so that they could "study," and I listened with disappointment because I wanted them to learn the words at home and apply them in school, in an academic setting. So while the scores were raised, they did not achieve what I wanted them to achieve—the practice of using vocabulary words in context.

### *Reflection and Analysis*

I thought about this more—why did they like *Around the World* and think it helped? It was true in that it did help because the scores for the next quiz did go up. They liked it because it was fun—it wasn't seen as “academic,” and they thought it helped because they heard the words and made associations, and under pressure, learned the words. Making associations allowed my students to be better able to relate it to the things that they did know, and in many ways, learning is about making connections and associations (Norman, 44). After all, we as adults learn new words and new knowledge by relating it to the things that we know—we form bridges so that the new knowledge is not completely isolated in the neverlands of our brains. With *Around the World*, my students were beginning to make those bridges on their own. Looking back, I can see that *Around the World* may have been the first scaffolding tool I could have used in order to help them build a broader knowledge base of words. Through the eyes of a novice teacher though, the game did not target parts of speech and application of word in context. And people who didn't study did a little better, but not a whole lot. Through the eyes of a student, it seemed as if they were “doing” vocabulary when we played the game, but because the words were without context, in retrospect, it seems unlikely that the transfer would have been made successfully between the game and the quiz.

I had believed that when I played the guessing game and presented the Parts of Speech lecture with my students that I was giving them “heuristic strategies”—“generally effective techniques and approaches for accomplishing tasks that might be regarded as ‘tricks of the trade’” (Collins et al., 42). When we started playing *Around the World*, I thought that the game would hook them into vocabulary; I wanted them to see that vocabulary was fun, do-able, and within their grasp. Unfortunately, because the words were without context and I had not made the connection between the game and the usage of the words explicit, the connection was lost to most students, resulting in not only poor quiz grades, but also a dismissal of words after the quiz.

It seems as if the students began seeing the quiz as an end-all and the game as a possible mean to an end. Because they stopped short of seeing learning the words as the beginning of a lifelong accretion of knowledge, it makes sense that they saw no relevance to the words as related to their lives. Maybe it really is a case of the words not having

any relevance to their real worlds outside school. And yet, these are the very words that come from their texts, so they have some exposure to these words.

Most of these students have not been privileged with silver spoons in their mouths. In fact, most of them work after school in order to make a little money. In their workplaces and among friends, how often would they get to use words like “ignominious” and “capricious”? Many of my students have been latch-key students since they can remember and their families offer little, if any for some, support. This is a consideration I’ve taken since I wonder how many of their other teachers have required them to take more responsibility and own up to the fact that they’ve been spoiled rotten by the current education system. Most of my students don’t aspire to go to a four-year university, and the teachers they encounter reinforce this. Due to such disparaging reinforcement, students have often reached the bare minimum and been told that they are doing well. Is their reluctance to study, perform, and aspire higher in part a result of what they’ve been told they cannot do? Should this be the case, how can I make the words more accessible for them so that their confidence level can grow? It seems to me that if I want my students to practice using the words, then I could plan some time in class for them to demonstrate their understanding of the word.

I ask the question respectfully in a reflective manner because I am now more aware of the words that I choose for them to learn. Even as I write that, I realize that vocabulary is a very teacher-centered activity. If I want students to connect to the words and the usage of the words, don’t I have to delegate authority and put it on them to learn and use the words (Cohen, 104)? The delegation of authority comes from me, but the responsibility is theirs. In order to delegate authority in a way that causes my students to want to learn and use vocabulary, though, I also have to create a meaningful context in which they can use the words, and not partially as I did in *Around the World*. Granted, there is no perfect context for teaching vocabulary since it is at this time so removed and divorced from the study of literature. Much of our vocabulary expansion seems to be separate from the other things we do in class; there is a set-aside time for vocabulary that comes on Mondays, Thursdays, and Fridays. What message is that sending to the students? Am I reinforcing that vocabulary is indeed just a part of our curriculum, but not really an essential tool to our literature study? Or am I telling my students that the

value of vocabulary is priceless, and therefore I want them to have access to such a treasure?

The issue of practice invites some discussion about scaffolding, which is “the support the [teacher] gives [students] in carrying out a task” (Collins et al., 8). Have I really scaffolded well for my students’ success? By “success,” I don’t mean the marks on the quizzes, but rather their ability to use the words because the “task,” as it were, was to know how to use the words in context. At one point, one of my girls complained that it was so hard and she couldn’t do this test, but she could tell me all the words, their definitions, and their parts of speech. Did I then not prepare them to study in a way that would scaffold for their success? To the extent that most students could regurgitate the words, parts of speech, and definition, I scaffolded well. “It is essential that students . . . build ‘automatic’ sight vocabulary . . . For [such an] abstract and decontextualized form of learning, various forms of . . . teaching may be most effective, but they are not sufficient” (Tharp and Gallimore, 16). And to the extent that I wanted the words to become a part of their lives, I failed to scaffold. I neglected to awaken their minds to life through the vocabulary so that they would want to apply it in their lives. I realize that “students cannot be left to learn on their own; teachers cannot be content to provide opportunities to learn and then assess outcomes. . . . Minds must be roused to life” (Tharp and Gallimore, 21). In essence, much of the vocabulary component of our class was a self-learning for the students. I gave the words, told them to study, played an occasional game with them, and assessed the outcome with a quiz. Writing out the process seems like such a dead process, and it is blatantly clear to me why my students did not relate to the vocabulary. I hardly blame them. After all, as a student, I only put myself into the work I’m required to do if it has significance for me.

Another question that is raised, more importantly, is whether my assessment mode matches what I want my students to learn. Is this the most appropriate form of assessment for a body of knowledge that I want my students to retain, apply, and use? Any assessment is full of loopholes and isn’t perfect, but is this quiz format so much less than perfect that it does not even demonstrate what they know? Granted, the assessment for vocabulary falls short of being authentic. As Black and William state, “The tests used by teachers encourage rote and superficial learning even when teachers say they want to

develop understanding” (Black and Williams, 141). In other words, the quizzes can be ineffective tools of learning. Looking at the series of lessons and new plans on vocabulary, perhaps the method of reinforcement didn’t match the form of assessment. I wanted students to develop understanding, but instead, the fill-in-the-blank quiz only encouraged memorization and some application.

A more authentic form of learning could have been to ask students to find their own vocabulary words in the text they are reading, examine how it is used in the text, and make a sentence of their own, in pairs, that could demonstrate their understanding of the word in context. Following that, a more authentic assessment might look something like asking them to write down the part of speech and definition of the word and then asking them to construct a new sentence with each word so they can demonstrate their understanding. This could be done in pairs to ensure accountability as well. By doing so, I have delegated authority, put the onus on them to learn words, and helped them be accountable to each other for learning the words. I feel as if this is more of a “bottoms-up” approach rather than a “top-down” approach. In letting students discover and explore, I have also helped them become self-directed learner, I scaffold by letting them use the text as guide instead of me as a guide, and the assessment is more accessible to them.

### *Conclusion*

Surrounding the issue of teaching vocabulary is an even greater matter: that of language. Language is one of many gatekeepers and many of my students do not realize this though they know it has barred them from opportunities before. The way one speaks and writes determines, to an extent, where one might fall in the social ladder. I refer to the middle-class American English, as we know it, and that which we use for academic discourse. Though this is unfortunate, this is oftentimes true. The ability to speak, write, and use academ-ese is often underrated and only implicitly taught to students. Many are judged based on their ability to “talk the talk”; it’s a key to mobility in our culture. In a way, I see the arguments of Hirsch coming into play because having a wider vocabulary

is a form having cultural literacy.\* If in conversation with figures of authority, or those who consider themselves “above” my students, my students understand the words being used, or even the simple recognition of certain vocabulary words, my students will have gained some entrance into a new world, a new class. If in the same exchange, my students can bring up vocabulary, then they will have propelled themselves further into this new class.

But the key to this mobility is in wielding the words—not keeping them inside. Even if my students’ ideas are brilliant, they may not get to demonstrate those ideas if they cannot speak or write to their audience appropriately. The articulation of any idea, no matter how inchoate, is shaped by language—language shapes ideas. Once my students can dress their ideas with words, they have expressed themselves. It does no one, including the thinker, any good if the idea remains in his/ her head. No one awards points to ideas that are not articulated. The importance of being able to and having the tools by which to communicate with words is tremendously powerful, and though it’s true that we can express our ideas using simple language and simple sentence structures, the power of ideas may not come across as clearly. In order to enter the culture of power, my students need to have some leverage with which they were not born. My students need to know that a small part of what I’m trying to do is to expand their horizons through vocabulary so that they might be able to compete just as those who have had silver-spoons in their mouths.

Vocabulary should be more than rote knowledge because it hardly ever happens in real life that words are quizzed. As I have reflected about this case and thought more about it in retrospect, I can see that my future vocabulary lessons will be less teacher-directed and more student-centered. I also see a real need for myself to delegate authority to my students. Being upfront with them about why they are learning these words and how it will help them later on needs to be a conscious statement I make to my students. More importantly, the assessment I choose for my students to demonstrate the mastery they have over their understanding needs to be authentic to what I am intending for them to learn; the assessment must be authentic.

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\* Please note that although I question Hirsch’s argument about how one gains cultural literacy, I agree with his idea that cultural literacy is a key to mobility and entrance to different classes of people. This by all means does not mean that I concur with him completely.

My students didn't buy into vocabulary because they hadn't bought into why language is so important and why it can change their lives in the long run. I do not think that they saw or experienced the power of language, and the whole culture of power that it carries. For many adolescents, especially my students, speaking in an academic way without the use of slang only receives the designation, "nerd." And who, at 15-years-old, would willingly be marked as such unless s/he were extremely confident about her/ his identity? For them as adolescents, the moment and the present are of utmost importance. If they cannot see the relevance now, then it is most likely that they will not engage in the activity. As a teacher, one of my goals is for them to see beyond what is present at hand and think critically about how what they're doing impacts their futures.

As a teacher, I want to be scaffolding for their success. I desire that my teaching allows students to learn a piece of knowledge in a meaningful context, and by having done so, my students will then apply what they have learned into their lives. I want them to transfer what they learn in my classroom so that it will go beyond academic settings. I realize that in order for them to be able to transfer independently, I have to help my students become self-directed learners. In order to have self-directed learners, I have to scaffold for my students in such a way that it puts all students on the same page to begin with and then remove scaffolding gradually. Scaffolding also implies that whatever I do is interrelated with the goals of my class—as a physical scaffold is indispensable to the building of a house, so I must scaffold in the parameters of my curriculum. As it stands now, vocabulary remains an isolated component in my curriculum, but it is not yet a part of my curriculum. Scaffolding, teaching, and learning should take place within one circle—that of the curriculum so that it fits in just as one word with another in a sentence, a sentence with another in a paragraph, to form a whole that is coherent and meaningful.



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