

Word Splash

Primary source texts can prove challenging for high school readers, but laying the groundwork before students begin to read can significantly improve the likelihood of their understanding the text. Word splash is a preparatory strategy. It allows students to encounter vocabulary words and concepts before engaging with the text, and it helps them to explore the possible connections among those ideas. Speculation on what the text may say can generate interest. Even if it doesn't do that, at least it focuses the students' attention on the topic. Word splash supports students who are less capable readers and develops a sense of discovery in all students.

Preparing to Read

Think of the work—mostly subconscious—your brain does when you catch sight of a news headline. You summon what you know about the terms in the headline. You recall previous articles or conversations about the topic, some providing deep background, others noting recent developments. You probably relate the headline to other, unrelated events, drawing from your personal experience, events from world history, or even scenes from movies or novels. Feelings are activated: frustration, anger, compassion, satisfaction, or any number of emotions. All of this brain work helps to prime your brain to be interested in the topic, to call up energy to tackle the task of reading the article, and to provide a frame of reference for the terms and concepts you will encounter.

When teachers assign primary source reading, students may come with little brain preparation. Terms may seem completely unfamiliar to them, and they may not recall any previous reading or discussion on the topic. They may be unable to relate the terms in the title or opening sentence to anything in their own experience or to place the topic into a historical or personal context. When this happens it's a natural reaction for thinking to shut down.

But when students can make connections between new knowledge and existing knowledge, and when they can place new ideas in a context, they feel ready to move forward with learning. Students are less likely to feel overwhelmed by new ideas when they begin to recognize that some of the ideas are already familiar and that they relate to things they already know or have experienced. This is the purpose of the word splash: it prepares the students to read.

Creating a Word Splash

You can create a word splash for your students by doing the following:

- Read through the text.
- Identify key words, phrases, and concepts.
- “Splash” the terms on a piece of paper, writing them out by hand to allow for interesting variations in size, text design, and random placement on the page.

The key to creating an effective word splash is thoughtful reading of the text. Use text headings to identify organizing principles. Note the hierarchy of headings to grasp the relationship among ideas. Look for key concepts the students will need to explore in order to understand the text and terms that will provide the



basic vocabulary they need to discuss the topic. Try to achieve a mix of the familiar and new so that students can have some success but also encounter a challenge when they define terms. Ideally a word splash contains twenty to twenty-five terms.

When you have completed the word splash, be sure there are terms students should know as well as terms they probably will not know. Also check for terms that bear some connection to each other: similar terms, terms that represent a causal effect, and terms that offer opposing or contrasting ideas. You may include words that represent examples of other terms, assumptions that form the basis for conclusions, or conclusions that result from combining ideas.

Using a Word Splash

Distribute copies of the word splash you have created, and retain one copy to show on a projection device. In small groups the students may read and discuss the terms on the page. Direct them to complete the following tasks:

- Identify familiar terms and discuss their definitions.
- Identify unfamiliar terms and guess their meanings.
- Draw lines connecting terms to indicate relationships among ideas, labeling the lines to indicate how the terms are connected.
- Predict points the article may make about the topic.

Bring the small groups together into a large group and ask questions that encourage the students to share definitions, predictions, and the relationship of the source to the topic. Be sure to ask probing questions so the students have the opportunity to explain how they made connections and to share what else they know about the topic.

