

# TRACKING TERMS: A CLOSE PAPER READING ACTIVITY

## SNAPSHOT

Students read an advanced paper at the beginning of a course and compile a list of terms they do not understand. As the course progresses, the instructor defines these terms. At the end of the course, students re-read the initial paper to gain an appreciation of how much they have learned.

## LESSON PLAN

### Goals:

- Gauge students' initial understanding of material.
- Foster discussion and collaboration among students by generating a class-wide list of poorly understood terms.
- **Ensure that all students have a basic fundamental understanding of course material as terms are defined.**
- Demonstrate their learning to the students at the end of the semester.



### Class:

- Applied hydrogeology

### Background:

This activity was used in an advanced applied hydrogeology course but is widely applicable. Students in courses learning field-specific jargon for the first time must typically learn an abundance of new, complex vocabulary without much guidance. This activity helps combat confusion by having students slowly build a repertoire of terms for use in the class as well as the field more generally.

## SPOTLIGHT

In addition to being quick and easy to integrate into any upper-level classroom, this activity advances several important aims. First, it helps students visualize just how much they have learned over the semester and motivates them, building their confidence in the material. Second, it facilitates and expedites the process of learning by helping remove vocabulary barriers to understanding the material. Third, it helps level the playing field in classes (like most) where students are entering with varying degrees of background knowledge and familiarity with key terms. Fourth, it makes the learning process a collaborative one as students work through terms with peers and their instructor.

## THINGS WE LIKE

This activity helps create a more comfortable learning environment and combat imposter syndrome. Students who may otherwise feel as if their peers know the relevant vocabulary already and who may feel reluctant to ask about it as a result can see that other students share their confusion about particular terms and learn those terms alongside others. Those who may otherwise find learning the material difficult because of their confusion about vocabulary are more likely to be engaged in class and with the material, including jargon-dense primary sources, as a result of being better positioned to comprehend what exactly is being communicated.

### Procedure - Before Class:



The instructor chooses an appropriate paper for the class type and level and distributes it to students. She explains her goals, then **gives students time to read the article and compile a list of terms they cannot confidently define to a friend.**

### Procedure - During Class:



Students form small groups and compare their lists of terms, which they individually generated. Then, the class reunites to make a master list. Discussion of this list is often lively. This list is revisited throughout the semester, and terms are checked off as they are defined. **The instructor emphasizes when she is defining a list term.** This list guides students through key topics and vocabulary and provides them a metric for measuring their understanding and progress during the semester.

### Procedure - After Class:

At the end of term, students revisit the original article to see how much they have learned. A group discussion is held to summarize the activity.

### Materials:



The most important material is the selected paper. **The paper should be relevant to the course material, contain most of the key vocabulary terms of the subject area, address core methods of the subject area, and be of general interest to students.** At the start of the semester, the instructor should review the syllabus with the selected paper to ensure that she covers all of the key terms, adjusting the syllabus or the paper as necessary.

*This activity was submitted by Jennifer Cole.*

### WAYS TO ADAPT

If class time is scarce, or if the reading is particularly long or dense, have students complete the reading and initial word list outside of class. Students should feel that they have as much time as they need to comfortably think through their understanding of the terms so that they can construct a comprehensive list.

### THINGS WE LIKE

It is crucial that the instructor regularly connect list terms to class material. Students retain vocabulary better when they can draw on examples and cases, and this is particularly true where the term has a different meaning in a different context or field and lends itself to confusion. One way to strengthen this retention is to identify moments where students can apply the term. So, for example, you can call on students to generate other examples of a particular concept. Also consider extending discussion of the terms outside the classroom by starting an online, student-centered vocabulary discussion board.

### WAYS TO ADAPT

If you can't find a paper that encompasses all the key terms in the particular area, you can modify by using excerpts from different papers or passages from a wide-spanning book. One benefit of drawing on different sources is that students can see the same terms used in different contexts, helping them determine whether they have a consistent understanding of the term that is not based entirely on context clues, as can sometimes be the case when students are learning new vocabulary.

