

# **IDENTIFYING CRITICAL CONTENT**

## **CLASSROOM TECHNIQUES TO HELP STUDENTS KNOW WHAT IS IMPORTANT**

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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 rigour of the instructional strategies you implement in your class so that students meet the expectations of demanding standards of the Australian Curriculum F–10 and the Senior Secondary Curriculum.

This guide will help teachers of all year 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 behaviours, 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 practises each critical skill at more challenging levels with the intention of mastering it, giving far less time to skills already mastered.

This series of guides will support each of the above-listed behaviours, 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**

Term	Definition
AC	Australian Curriculum which sets out consistent content descriptions and achievement standards developed by the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) designed to provide a base for future learning, growth and active participation in the Australian community.
Desired result	The intended result for the student(s) due to the implementation of a specific strategy.
Monitoring	The act of checking for evidence of the desired result of a specific strategy while the strategy is being implemented.
Instructional strategy	A category of techniques used for classroom instruction that has been proven to have a high probability of enhancing student achievement.
Instructional technique	The method used to teach and deepen understanding of knowledge and skills.
Content	The knowledge and skills necessary for students to demonstrate standards.
Scaffolding	A purposeful progression of support that targets cognitive complexity and student autonomy to reach rigour.
Extending	Activities that move students who have already demonstrated the desired result to a higher level of understanding.

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 Rigour

This series of guides details essential classroom strategies to support the complex shifts in teaching that are necessary for an environment where academic rigour is a requirement for all students. The instructional strategies presented in this series are essential to effectively teach the Australian Curriculum, or standards designated by your school 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 year levels and content areas. The examples contained within are year-level specific and should serve as models and launching points for application in your own class.

Your skilful implementation of these strategies is essential to your students' mastery of the Australian Curriculum or other rigorous standards, no matter the year 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, recognises and celebrates as knowledge grows increasingly more sophisticated. Whether that standard is part of the AC or your school 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 internalised 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 skilfully 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 practised 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 modelled 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 favourites, 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 behaviours 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 non-critical 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 a primary 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 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 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. Signalling to students what is critical in the content is key to implementing an effective lesson.