

BOX 8.12

Word Detectives

When students approach unknown words *metacognitively* and *metalinguistically*, they become “word detectives” and ask themselves a number of questions that help them decide how to proceed:

- How well do I need to know this word to understand this text?
- Is this a word I’ve often seen before (in this unit, in this subject) and need to learn?
- Do I recognize any word parts that I can use to help define this word (roots, affixes)?
- Does the context provide any clues?
- Is the word followed by an example or description that can help?
- Do commas, parentheses, or dashes set off a definition?
- Is there a family of related words being used repeatedly that can orient me to the meaning?
- Does information from the dictionary make sense in this context?
- Do I know enough about this word to go on?

Teaching students to become effective word learners begins with teaching them to be “word detectives” and make judgments about the words they need to learn. Not all unfamiliar words can or should be the focus of deliberate attention, but because many students have a tendency to read past unfamiliar words, the first step is supporting students to monitor their comprehension. For example, when a group of three girls in Will Brown’s Introduction to Chemistry class claim they had no problems with the text they just read, all the same, Will asks them to pick out a few words they may have “read past.” The girls stall, so Will suggests the term “substantially” from the text. Because they cannot explain its use, Will advises them of the importance of being aware of choosing to read past unfamiliar words:

Sometimes you might let words like that go, but I want you to bring that to a conscious level. I want you to make to a conscious decision whether to skip a word or not.

Once students are deliberately noticing unfamiliar words, they must decide whether a particular word seems important to understand, whether there are any morphological or textual clues they can use to figure it out, and whether, if they must resort to the dictionary, the given meaning makes sense. Box 8.12 lists the questions students can ask themselves about how or whether to persist in defining an unfamiliar word.

As word detectives, students often decide they are able to move on without arriving at a precise definition of an unfamiliar word. However, if they (or the