

### Information Carrying Words

Information carrying words are the words in a sentence that we need to comprehend when following directions or instructions. This is different to the number of words in a sentence, as depending on the context and any contextual clues, some of the words and phrases are not required in order to comprehend.

#### Why information carrying words are important

Within a communication friendly environment, where practitioners embed the [Words Up early and primary adult/child interaction key messages](#), children are often supported in following directions and instructions through meaningful gestures, modelling and visual support. With this support in place, in addition to environmental clues, e.g. copying another child, a child may appear to follow more complex directions and instructions. This can mask a child's true level of oral language comprehension. You might notice this as a child who:

- only follows parts of instructions
- has variable responses
- looks confused
- looks to cues from other children and adults.

If we are aware of a child's level of understanding, it will enable practitioners to better match their directions and instructions to the child's level of oral language comprehension.

Through everyday interactions there are a number of directions and instructions that we will ask children to follow. Many of these instructions may be everyday routines that are accompanied by gesture and require minimal comprehension of vocabulary, however, a number of these will require children to comprehend different words and phrases in order to succeed.

#### Examples of information carrying words

##### No information carrying words



In this picture Sharon has a pair of scissors and a pot. Sarah says, whilst gesturing and looking at the scissors: *'Put the scissors in the pot.'*

This has no information carrying words because:

- the scissors would normally be kept in the pot
- there is **no choice** of object for Sharon to choose from, only scissors
- Sarah is pointing at the pot and looking at the scissors, gesturing the instruction.

### One information carrying word



Sarah says:

*'Put the **scissors** in the pot.'*

This has one information carrying word because:

- there is a **choice** of object for Sharon to choose from between the scissors and a crayon
- pot is not an information carrying word, as putting the scissors in the pot would be a typical task and there is **no choice** of where to put the scissors.

If Sarah had said:

*'Put the red **scissors** in the pot.'*

'scissors' would still be the only information carrying word as there is no other **choice** of colour than 'red'.

### Two information carrying words



Sarah says:

*'Put the **scissors** in the **spotty** pot.'*

This has two information carrying words because:

- the scissors would normally be kept in the pot – pot is not an information carrying word
- there is a **choice** of object for Sharon to choose from between the scissors and a crayon
- there is a **choice** of pot between the spotty pot and the stripy pot to put the scissors in.

### Three information carrying words



Sarah says:

*'Put the **red scissors** in the **spotty** pot.'*

This has three information carrying words because:

- the scissors would normally be kept in the pot – pot is not an information carrying word
- there is a **choice** of colour for Sharon to choose from between red and blue
- there is a **choice** of object for Sharon to choose from between the scissors and a crayon
- there is a **choice** of pot between the spotty pot and the stripy pot to put the scissors in.

## Four information carrying words



Sarah says:

*'Put the **red scissors** **on top of** the **spotty** pot.'*

This has four information carrying words because:

- there is a **choice** of colour for Sharon to choose from between red and blue
- there is a **choice** of object for Sharon to choose from between the scissors and a crayon
- there is a **choice** of where to put the scissors, between the spotty pot and the stripy pot
- there is a **choice** to put the scissors on top of the pot, rather than in the pot.

## Information Carrying Words in the Classroom

A typically developing child in school would be able to understand 4+ information carrying words as long as the concepts and the vocabulary were developmentally appropriate. For further information, the following guidance from the [Oral Language Toolkit](#) can be used alongside this guidance:

- [Concepts – including prepositions and adjectives](#) (including the developmental nature of language concepts)
- [Pre-teaching vocabulary](#) (the strategies for teaching new vocabulary)
- [Verbal reasoning and abstract thinking](#) (the level of concrete and abstract thought).

## Taking a developmental approach to information carrying words

When taking a developmental approach to information carrying words, it's important to note that children will be working at different levels. For children who are not at the same level as a typically developing child for their age, practitioners can support children's understanding of information carrying words by differentiating the number of information carrying words.

## With differentiation, four information carrying words can become two information carrying words



Sarah says:

*'Put the **red scissors** **on top of** the **spotty** pot.'*

In the previous example above, this was four information carrying words. For a child who is operating at a two-word level, the adult could differentiate this by:

- removing the crayons and a pot  
*'Put the **red** scissors **on top of** the **spotty** pot.'*
- gesture 'scissors' and 'on top'  
*'Put the **red** scissors **on top of** the **spotty** pot.'*
- modelling 'on top of the spotty pot'  
*'Put the **red scissors** **on top of** the **spotty** pot.'*

In the classroom there are times when we will ask children to follow a number of sequential oral instructions. A child's working memory may become overloaded when there are too many chunks of information to process at one time, and the number of information carrying words will contribute to this.



The teacher says:

*'Now you've finished, put your picture in my blue tray on the table, then put your crayons in the spotty pot before taking a book from the red tray and sitting back down.'*

Whilst typically developing children in a primary school can process instructions of up to, and sometimes beyond four information carrying words, this instruction poses further difficulties through:

- the amount of information to hold and process at one time in the child's working memory
- the number of language concepts which are needed, e.g. 'after', 'before', 'then'
- the amount of thinking time required for each chunk of information
- the lack of cues to support processing.

We could change this instruction by modelling/ gesturing **each** step in an effort to reduce working memory overload:

- **Step 1:** 'Put your picture into the blue tray'.
- **Step 2:** 'Then put your crayons into the spotty pot.'
- **Step 3:** 'Choose a book from the red tray and sit back down.'

Key visuals and labels can be used across the environment to support directions and instructions, e.g. a photograph of pieces of work in a tray and a visual of scissors on the scissor pot.