

# A SYSTEM FOR DEALING WITH NEW WORDS WHILE READING

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A key point is that you don't need to interrupt your reading to look up every hard word in the dictionary—in fact, experts say it's actually better to guess first. Try these tactics for making an "educated guess." You'll acquire some real understanding of how words are used rather than just long vocabulary lists and a tattered dictionary.

## Previewing new vocabulary words

Before you start to read, skim through the piece rapidly and choose a few new words that crop up repeatedly—maybe from the title or headings. Look them up in the glossary of your textbook (if it has one) or in a dictionary. Then write out quick definitions that seem to fit. Change them while you read if necessary.

## While reading

First, **SOUND** out words new to you

Use simple phonics to attempt a pronunciation. You might recognize the word when you hear it. In any case, you are reinforcing your visual memory with your auditory memory.

Next, examine the **STRUCTURE**

Look for familiar word parts, and see if you can tell how the prefixes and suffixes shape the root meaning.

Then look at the **CONTEXT**

Guess at the word's meaning from the way it is used in the sentence. You may find a running definition, or see the meaning reflected in a contrasting idea, or just be able to tell the meaning by the way the passage continues.

Only then, check the **DICTIONARY**

If you can't understand the word's meaning after using the above steps, mark the passage so you can look up the word later. Only if the word is absolutely essential to the argument of the piece should you pause and turn to the glossary or a dictionary. Reinforce your understanding of the word by writing a usable brief definition or synonym in the margin or as part of your note-taking.

**CONFIRM** guesses

It's most efficient to leave dictionary use until you have read through a piece for the first time, guessing and marking-up as you go. When you stop after a section to make notes, look up the words you marked. Read the dictionary entry thoroughly: look for derivation, structure, and examples of usage. See how close your guess was. Write out the definition in your own words. Then re-read the piece and take notes.

## Reinforcing New Vocabulary Words

Make new words part of your active vocabulary, words you can actually use. Keeping a list on note cards helps you review. This method keeps the words in context. It also calls on your different physical senses so that you learn in various ways at once. Keep returning to your cards and repeat the steps until you can do the final one with ease.

1. Say the word out loud according to the dictionary pronunciation guide.
2. Write down the word and mark it up to show its inner structure (root word + prefixes, suffixes). Keep saying it over aloud (at least in your head).
3. On the other side of the card, write down a brief definition. Then copy out the sentence where you saw the word used—and say it aloud as you write. (Later, add sentences from other readings.)
4. Read over the card periodically. Eventually try writing a sentence of your own using the word. When you can do this without even looking at the card, you've arrived!

## Further Resources for Building Vocabulary

The best way to increase and deepen your general vocabulary is to spend time reading. A newspaper or popular magazine will do, as long as you read with an active interest in the words that you find. As your "passive" vocabulary from reading increases, you will begin to be comfortable actually using new words in speech or writing. You won't need to learn them all deliberately; they will simply be there when you need them.

Thinking about words and playing with them also increases your sense of control over vocabulary. That's a principle used in many of the activities in the English Language programs at U of T. Language games are also a lifelong source of pleasure for many English speakers.

### Dictionaries

It's worth investing in a big hard-copy dictionary even if you usually use an online one. Don't underestimate the usefulness of browsing through pages of words and definitions. You'll start to see patterns and notice differences among related words. Many mid-sized "collegiate" dictionaries now include a CD, allowing you to look up words quickly and browse easily among synonyms. If you're learning English as a new language, don't rely on translation dictionaries. Instead, invest in the *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English*. Its CD-ROM includes audio pronunciations and also shows how words are used in combination.

### At the bookstore, college book sales, and library

Some books promise to increase your vocabulary in ten days or ten easy steps. Unfortunately, that's impossible. These classics are more realistic, and they are good reading in themselves.

Gyles Brandreth, *The Word Book*.

Richard Lederer, *The Miracle of Language, Crazy Language, etc.*

Robert MacNeill, *Wordstruck*.

Lewis Thomas, *Et Cetera*.

Many of those books and a multitude of others can be found in university libraries. Look in these sections and find what interests you.

- See the LB 2395 shelves for books giving advice on vocabulary skills.
- See the PE 1075 shelves for books about the history of the English language.

### In popular journalism

Heated discussions of particular word uses are a mainstay of letters to the editor and a recurrent topic for columnists on almost any topic. Watch for them and see if you agree or disagree—or just feel amused. A number of regular columns specialize in word uses, often the amusingly illogical aspects of vocabulary. One in particular has been around for years, for good reason, and is now available online:

"It Pays to Enrich your Word Power," a regular feature in *Reader's Digest* (now also online)

"Lexicon Valley," a podcast from *Slate* on the ways we use language.

### On the Web

It's easy to find word games, Q&As about controversies, and "word of the day" sites on the Web. Here are a couple to start with. Look these up to find the current links, and search for more.

Richard Lederer, *Verbivore* (articles on words, links)

Merriam-Webster's *Word of the Day* (and many other games)