
Develop Your English Vocabulary

“Words are, in my-not-so-humble opinion, our most inexhaustible source of magic”. (J.K. Rowling's character Dumbledore in *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hollows*)

Expanding your knowledge of English words will improve your understanding of lectures and readings, and allow you to communicate clearly as you speak and write. By developing a personal system for learning new words, you will be on your way to a growing vocabulary.

Gathering Words

The first step in expanding your vocabulary is to collect relevant and useful words. First, find ways to expose yourself to new words: read and listen to a variety of books, articles, television programs, and videos (see if you can find the spelling of the new word from the subtitles). Next, you will record the new words that you discover. Write down new words as you hear or read them — use a notebook or flash cards to collect vocabulary. Later, when you have time, look up your new words in a dictionary. Write the definition and an example sentence in your notebook or flash cards. Also, as you read textbooks and class materials, pay attention to words that are used often or that are important for understanding concepts in your program. You will want to take time to learn these words.

Moving Words from Short-term to Long-term Memory

When you first hear or read a new word, it enters your short-term memory. Short-term memory can only hold new words for a brief period, usually seconds. To move the new word to long-term memory, you will need to encode, store, and retrieve the word.

- 1) When you **encode**, you give meaning to the information. As you study vocabulary, you will learn the different meanings the word can have. You may also compare the English word to similar words in other languages you know.
- 2) To **store** the material, you will use strategies to review the word's meaning. Regular review and repetition is important for learning new words.
- 3) When you use a new vocabulary word when speaking or writing, you **retrieve** it. This creates strong knowledge of the word in your long-term memory.

Strategies for Remembering Words

- 1) Create flash cards using index cards, or a memorization app (e.g. Anki, Quizzlet). Review the vocabulary words regularly. Review difficult words more often, and words that you are beginning to know better less often.
- 2) Use your senses as you learn. Associate vocabulary with pictures or gestures. This will help you recall the new words better than writing or speaking alone. Using more than one of your senses as you learn new words promotes the development of a strong word network in the brain. This helps you retrieve new words when you write or speak.
- 3) Break long words into parts. If you can remember the meaning of prefixes (e.g. con-, anti-, pre-) and suffixes (e.g. -ly, -able), it will be easier to predict the meaning of new words you encounter.
- 4) Learn new words in context. Use example sentences as you gather words. Try making up a funny story with new vocabulary.
- 5) Review often. Set aside a few minutes each day to work on vocabulary.

As you create and use a vocabulary learning system, you will grow in your ability to understand what you hear and read. You will be able to communicate your thoughts clearly and precisely.

Some material adapted from: Macedonia, M. (2015). Learning styles and vocabulary acquisition in second language: How the brain learns. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 6, 1800. doi:10.3389/fpsyg.2015.01800 and <https://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/article/vocabulary-self-study-activities>