



# AP DIGEST

An Advanced Placement Program Student Resource  
Advanced Academic Services  
Austin Independent School District

## Effective Ways to Build Your Vocabulary

### 1. *Be Aware of Words*

Many people are surprised when they are told they have small vocabularies. “But I read all the time!” they protest. This shows that reading alone may not be enough to make you learn new words. When we read a novel, for instance, there is usually a strong urge to get on with the story and skip over unfamiliar or perhaps vaguely known words. But while it is obvious when a word is totally unknown to you, you have to be especially aware of words that seem familiar to you but whose precise meanings you may not really know.

Instead of avoiding these words, you will need to take a closer look at them. First, try to guess at a word's meaning from its context—that is, the sense of the passage in which it appears; second, if you have a dictionary on hand, look up the word's meaning immediately. This may slow down your reading somewhat, but your improved understanding of each new word will eventually speed your learning of other words, making reading easier. Make a daily practice of noting words of interest to you for further study whenever you are reading, listening to the radio, talking to friends, or watching television.

### 2. *Read*

When you have become more aware of words, reading is the next important step to increasing your knowledge of words, because that is how you will find most of the words you should be learning. It is also the best way to check on words you have already learned. When you come across a word you have recently studied, and you understand it, that proves you have learned its meaning.

What should you read? Whatever interests you—whatever makes you want to read. If you like sports, read the sports page of the newspapers; read magazines like *Sports Illustrated*; read books about your favorite athletes. If you are interested in interior decorating, read a magazine like *House Beautiful*—read it, don't just look at the photographs.

Often people with very low vocabularies don't enjoy reading at all. It's more of a chore for them than a pleasure because they don't understand many of the words. If this is the way you feel about reading, try reading easier things.

Newspapers are usually easier than magazines; a magazine like *Reader's Digest* is easier to read than *The Atlantic Monthly*. There is no point in trying to read something you simply are not able to understand or are not interested in. The important idea is to find things to read you can enjoy, and to read as often and as much as possible with the idea of learning new words always in mind.

### 3. *Use a Dictionary*

Most people know how to use a dictionary to look up a word's meaning. Here are some pointers on how to do this as a part of a vocabulary-building program:

**Have your own dictionary.** Keep it where you usually do your reading at home. You are more likely to use it if you do not have to get it from another room. At work, there may be a good dictionary available for your use. At home, most people do not have a big, unabridged dictionary; however, one of the smaller collegiate dictionaries would be fine to start with.

**Circle the words you look up.** After you have done this for a while, your eye will naturally move to the words you have circled whenever you flip through the dictionary. This will give you a quick form of review.

**Read the entire entry for the word you look up.** Remember, words can have more than one meaning, and the meaning you need for the word you are looking up may not be the first one given in your dictionary. Even if it is, the other meanings of the word will help you understand the different ways the word is used.

Also, the word's history, usually given near the beginning of the entry, can often give a fascinating picture of the way the word has developed its current meaning. This will add to the pleasure of learning the word as well as help you remember it.

#### ***4. Study and Review Regularly***

Once you have begun looking up words and you know which ones to study, vocabulary building is simply a matter of reviewing the words regularly until you fix them in your memory. This is best done by setting aside a specific amount of time each day for vocabulary study. During that time you can look up new words you have noted during the day and review old words you are in the process of learning. Set a goal for the number of words you would like to learn and by what date, and arrange your schedule accordingly. Fifteen minutes a day will bring better results than half an hour once a week or so. However, if half an hour a week is all the time you have to spare, start with that. You may find more time later on, and you will be moving in the right direction.

In order to review words effectively, all the information on a word should be kept in one place—in a notebook, for example, or on an index card. Index cards are convenient because the words can be placed in alphabetical order, which makes them easy to find when reviewing; and the cards can be carried around with you, so you can study them anywhere. You should try to be systematic about studying, so that you are sure to review each word at least once every couple of weeks.

Do not throw cards away, though; you can get a great feeling of accomplishment by looking at the growing stack of words you have learned and by occasionally glancing at an old card and thinking, "Once I actually didn't know the meaning of this word!".

You can expand your vocabulary almost as fast as you wish. There are countless examples of people who have done so. Remember, you started out in life knowing no words, and now you know thousands. You can learn many more. Why not start today?

O'Connor, Johnson. Johnson O'Connor Research Foundation. Available online at <http://www.jocrf.org/resources/EffectiveWays.html>