

Title of Module: *Expanding Your Vocabulary*

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Video 1:

Engaging New Vocabulary as You Read Authentic Texts in English

What to Do When You Encounter a New Vocabulary Item

In this learning module, we will present some effective strategies that language learning experts recommend. Reading and writing go hand in hand. A careful reader can become a better writer by absorbing ideas – and vocabulary -- from reading materials and incorporating them appropriately in writing assignments. An excellent way to expand your vocabulary is to engage actively with new words that you encounter when reading assigned texts in English. Start by trying to figure out the meaning of the new word, phrase, or idiom from its context, i.e. from the way that it is used in the sentence. Then, continue reading to see if your deduction makes sense in the context of the article as a whole. Next, look up the word or phrase in a good English-only dictionary to make sure that your guess is correct. Of course, some words are more important than others, more essential to the core meaning of the text that you are dealing with. You need to read critically in order to establish which words are central to understanding the text. Critical reading is vital, given the fact that often you have dozens or even hundreds of pages to wade through for your courses.

Here is an excerpt from “Grant and Lee: A Study in Contrasts,” by Bruce Catton (*The Norton Sampler*). Catton describes the differences in background and character between Generals Ulysses S. Grant and Robert E. Lee, who fought on opposing sides in the American Civil War. After detailing Lee’s aristocratic upbringing, Catton turns to Grant:

Grant, the son of a tanner on the Western frontier, was everything Lee was not. He had come up the hard way and embodied nothing in particular except the eternal toughness and sinewy fiber of the men who grew up beyond the mountains. He was one of a body of men who owed reverence and obeisance to no one, who were self-reliant to a fault, who cared hardly anything for the past but who had a sharp eye for the future.

As Catton advises us in his title, the article focuses on contrasts between the two generals. By considering Lee’s elite position and sophisticated environment, we can guess that Grant’s status was much more humble. Even if we don’t know what the word *tanner* means, we can assume that it is a lower-class profession, one that is suitable for life in the Wild West. Catton also uses pairs of words to emphasize his meaning, linking *eternal toughness* with *sinewy fiber*. These descriptions help us see that Grant is a solid and durable character. Similarly, men like

Grant *owed reverence and obeisance to no one*. If you know one of these words, you may be able to figure out the other.

Strategies and Ways to Expand Your Vocabulary

We recommend that whenever you encounter a new word, you keep a record of it in the following ways:

- The word itself
- The part of speech (noun, verb, adjective, etc.)
- The definition (choose the definition that makes most sense in the given context)
- Make the word “your own” by using it in a sentence that you create.
- Set a goal of 5-10 new vocabulary items per day.

Once you have learned a new word, you can make connections with other words to build your word power. For example, you could answer the following questions:

- What are the various components of the word, e.g. prefix, root, suffix, etc.?
- How many other English words can you come up with by modifying this word, e.g. by changing or eliminating the prefix, by adding a different suffix, or by giving a different form of the root? For example, if you learn the word *employ*, you can form the words *employer*, *employee*, *employment*, *unemployable*, etc.
- What synonyms can you think of for this word? Are some of these synonyms more appropriate for certain contexts, e.g. formal vs. informal, academic vs. slang, positive vs. negative connotation, etc.?

Video 2: *Understanding Idiomatic Language*

An idiom is an expression that has a certain meaning but is not meant to be taken literally. For example, “It’s raining cats and dogs” means that it is raining very hard; and “I’m so hungry I could eat a horse” means that I am very hungry. If you encounter unfamiliar idioms in your reading, expand your understanding of them by answering the following questions:

- What do people really mean when they use this idiom?
- Is this idiom appropriate for use in a formal context such as an academic essay?
- Are there other, perhaps better ways of expressing the idea contained in this idiom?
- Why do you think the author chose to use this particular phrase?

Contextualization of New Idiomatic Expressions

Take, for example, the following excerpt from “Our Semi-Literate Youth? Not So Fast,” by Andrea Lunsford (*The Norton Sampler*, p. 571), in which she examines two contrasting views (both of them negative) on the literacy of college students:

No doubt there's a grain of truth in both these depictions. But the doomsayers who tell these stories are turning a blind eye on compelling alternative narratives. As one who has spent the last 30-plus years studying the writing of college students, I see a different picture. For those who think Google is making us stupid and Facebook is frying our brains, let me sketch that picture in briefly.

Each of the idioms underlined above offers a vivid and colorful, if exaggerated, sense of the author's true meaning:

- *There's a grain of truth*: Just as a grain of rice is a tiny portion of a meal, the stories being told have an element of truth in them, but are far from being complete or accurate.
- *Turn a blind eye to something*: Obviously the critics are not literally blind, but they overlook or ignore important considerations.
- *Frying our brains*: This expression is clearly figurative rather than literal and it's a more informal register: Critics claim that Facebook is destroying our ability to think clearly.

Lunsford uses these idioms to attract the audience's attention at the beginning of her article before presenting her research findings.

Video 3: Using other Writers' Language as a Model

Borrowing Ideas from Other Writers

A great way to increase your word power is by experimenting with good writing that already exists. Among the various types of writing that you may encounter are the following: Outlines, Summaries, Reading Journals, full-length Academic Argument and Analysis Essays, and, ultimately, Scholarly Research Papers. In each case it is vital for you to fully comprehend and accurately report the words of the original authors. In certain cases you will also provide your own analysis, interpretation, and conclusions regarding what these authors have written. All of these methods provide you with an opportunity to activate your own vocabulary.

Objectively Reporting an Author's Words Through Paraphrase

An essential skill in academic writing is the ability to report another writer's views concisely. This skill requires you to put the original author's ideas in your own words by using Paraphrase. Here are some ideas for completing such exercises:

- Make sure that you understand exactly what the author is trying to express.
- Is he/she writing in an academic, journalistic, conversational, etc. style?
- Pay special attention to the author's use of tone: Is it serious, angry, apologetic, ironic, sarcastic, etc.?

- What words from your own vocabulary can you use to capture the essence of the given passage?

Here is a brief excerpt from *The Norton Sampler* to model paraphrase, style, and tone. In the article “Let Stars Get Paid,” Michael Rosenberg provides several examples of great college athletes who were severely punished for accepting money for playing football, then writes:

Look, cheating is wrong. The point here is not to excuse the cheaters. I hate cheating. The point is to redefine cheating.

The 2010-2011 NCAA [National Collegiate Athletic Association] manual says the “Principle of Amateurism” is important because college athletics are an “avocation” and ..., hang on, here comes the punchline: “student-athletes should be protected from exploitation by professional and commercial enterprise.”

Really? When an athlete sells his jersey so he can pay rent, and the NCAA suspends him, is the NCAA really protecting him? Who is the NCAA kidding? (p. 579)

We learn from the editor’s introduction that Rosenberg is a sports writer and University of Michigan fan, so we know that he loves football. The quoted lines have a very conversational style, as if he is talking face-to-face with a fellow sports fan who disagrees with him. As Rosenberg proceeds, the tone of his argument becomes more passionate – and more sarcastic. You could paraphrase this excerpt as follows:

While Rosenberg admits that these star athletes acted improperly by accepting money, he believes that the NCAA rules on amateurism need to be changed. With powerful sarcasm he attacks the NCAA for hypocritically claiming to defend college football players even as it punishes them for trying to make some money. (Elsewhere in the article Rosenberg points out that college football is a billion-dollar industry.)

Additional Opportunities to Expand Your Vocabulary

Here are some additional ways to expand your vocabulary:

- Consider what style would best convey your own views, and what vocabulary is most appropriate in order to persuade readers of your position. For example, if the original author’s tone seems too sarcastic or hotheaded, you might counter that with a calm, orderly analysis, avoiding provocative vocabulary.
- If you need help finding suitable synonyms for some of the author’s words, use a thesaurus. A thesaurus is a synonym dictionary. It provides you with various exact or near equivalents of a given word.
- Once you have chosen a synonym, double-check it with an English-only dictionary to make sure that you have made the best choice.

Additional Material: Etymology: (As an optional video to include)

Etymology is the study of the history and origin of words; what language(s) they are derived from; and how their meanings have changed over time. The etymology of a word is the history of that particular word. Modern English gets most of its grammatical structure and much of its vocabulary from Old English (Anglo-Saxon), which is a Germanic language. English has also absorbed a great deal of vocabulary from French (which is descended from Latin). Here are a few examples of etymologies:

- The English word *translation* came into the language from Middle French. It goes back to the Latin prefix *trans-*, meaning “across,” plus a form derived from *latus*, the past passive participle of the verb *ferre*, meaning “to carry.” Thus, when you translate, you *carry over* or *transfer* your meaning from one language to another. Once you have learned the etymology of the prefix and the verb forms, you can apply this knowledge to figuring out the meanings of other words, e.g.: *transcontinental* (= *across* a whole continent); *transfer* (= to move or *carry over* from one status or condition to another); *relation* (= connected, i.e. with some feature *carried over* from one side to another).
- The words *diary* and *journal* are synonyms, and it turns out that they have similar etymologies. *Diary* comes into English from the Latin *diarium* (= the record of what happened *during the day*), which is from the Latin *dies* (= *day*). The French words *jour* (= *day*) and *journal* (= record of *the day*) are related to the Latin *diurnalis* (= *daily, of the day*).
- Often the Modern English vocabulary derived from Anglo-Saxon is considered more basic, while words derived from French and Latin are considered more refined or sophisticated, e.g. *carry over* vs. *transfer*; a *go-between* vs. an *intermediary*; a *friend* vs. a *companion*. Interestingly, in the case of foods, English uses words of Anglo-Saxon origin for the farm animal, but words of French origin for the meat (i.e. the finished product): *cow* vs. *beef*; *calf* vs. *veal*; *pig* vs. *pork*; *sheep* vs. *mutton*.
- Much of the terminology in the arts and sciences, in medicine and law, and in other advanced fields comes from Latin and Greek. This includes terms that existed in ancient times, such as *philosophy* (from the Greek *philosophia* = love of wisdom) and *architect* (Greek *arkhitekton* = *chief builder*), as well as modern formations such as *astronaut* (= *space traveler*, but the literal translation from the Greek means *star sailor*).
- In some cases the original meaning of an ancient word has changed over time, e.g.: *manufacture* (from the Latin *manu factum* = *made by hand*, but now this refers to something *made by machine*), and *artificial* (originally this referred to something *made with artistry or skill*, but now it means something that is *fake, not real, inauthentic*).

List of References:

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Helpful websites include:

https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/al/globalpad/openhouse/academicenglishskills/vocabulary/academic_words/

<http://www.uefap.com/vocab/select/awl.htm>

<https://www.academicvocabulary.info/>