



A Commonsense Approach to Vocabulary Building

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A good vocabulary is a *sine qua non* for success in both academic and professional life. Only words learnt in context or used repeatedly in speech and writing become part of our active vocabulary. Given below are some of the most important techniques by which readers can improve their vocabulary.

“God made a web of loveliness, of clouds, stars and birds, but made not anything so beautiful as words.” Anna Hempstead Branch.

Language is an anthology of words and ‘anthology’ literally means a collection of flowers. Yes, every word is as fragrant as a fresh-blown blossom. The fragrance diffuses from the idea each word embodies. Ideation is a unique faculty only humans are blessed with. And it is through the medium of words that ideation takes place. Words thus constitute the very essentiality of the human condition. Let our motto be “words, words, words” (*Hamlet*).

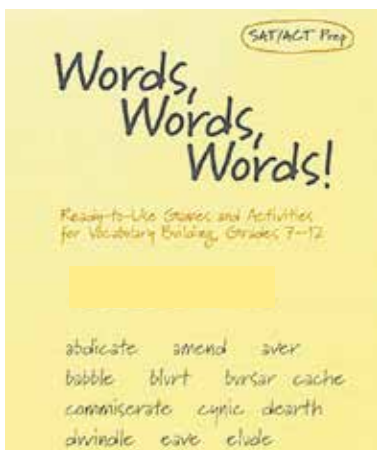
A rich vocabulary is sure to enhance the knowledge component as well as the achievement quotient of students and job seekers. Successful people have superior vocabularies. Increasing one’s word power occurs in two phases – passive and active. Passive or perceptive vocabulary refers to the ability to understand words from the context.

Active or productive vocabulary implies words that spring up spontaneously in the mind to convey an idea effectively.

How to Improve Word Power

There are umpteen books dealing with vocabulary building. Nonetheless, the word power of a large majority of even educated people is far below par. To enhance intelligent learning of new words one should read extensively and stay tuned to the audio-visual media with diligence, identifying the components that make their language effective and learning the words and phrases used, their overtones and undertones. “The finest words in the world are only vain sounds if you cannot comprehend them,” as Anatole France rightly puts it.

Only words learnt in context or used repeatedly in speech and writing become part of our active vocabulary. A new word will get etched into our mind for ever when we picture it. Furthermore, ridiculous associations



would also help stamp a word indelibly on the memory. For instance, the misspelt 'canonisation' on St. Alphonsa's commemorative stamp issued by the Govt. of India ensured a niche in our heart for 'canonisation.'

Without the help of dictionaries and the internet it is well-nigh impossible to enrich one's vocabulary. There are mainly two kinds of dictionaries. One is the Advanced Learner's Dictionaries like those published by the universities of Oxford and Cambridge. The others are more scholarly. The best one seems to be Webster's New World College Dictionary. A Thesaurus (Greek 'thesauros' = a 'treasure') is a book containing a store of words, specifically, a book of synonyms and antonyms. The Oxford Compact Thesaurus is recommended. Continual access to the internet and constant networking with professionals and scholars also help.

Reading an English book and its verbatim translation in vernacular in juxtaposition is an effective strategy to master vocabulary and the two languages. For example, reading a modern version of the Bible in both languages does really help in the acquisition of new

words and widening one's mental horizon.

Over and above the strategies already dwelt upon, there are other methods introduced by technology that provide several aids to make learning fresh words a rewarding experience. These include online word building games like crosswords and scrabble. The use of mobile phones and SMS has created a new language the main purpose of which is to send quick messages ignoring grammar and spelling. eg. "Hw r u?"

Stylistic Values of Words

It is to be emphasized that a deep awareness of the stylistic values of words is vital while speaking or writing. Here is a classic example of what happens owing to ignorance of stylistic values. "Godse assassinated Gandhiji", and "The violent mob killed the criminal." The word 'killed' can replace 'assassinated' in the first sentence, but not vice versa. The term 'assassinate' is used to designate slaying people of eminence. It follows that vocabulary development is not a matter of using several bombastic words or padding out one's language with pompous expressions. One has also to resist the temptation to use several neologisms (new words) like agelast (=one who doesn't laugh), 'balding', or 'incentivize', To quote Alexander Pope,

"Words are like leaves; and where they most abound,

Much fruit of sense beneath is rarely found."

Denotation, Connotation and Collocation

'Denotation' means the plain meaning of a word, while 'connotation' implies an idea suggested by a word in addition to its explicit meaning. For example, 'liberal' in British English has a positive connotation denoting 'large-heartedness,' while in American English it connotes 'extreme leftist stance.' A 'collocation' is a word or phrase that teams with another word or phrase agreeably. Eg:

The Word "Freelance"

We owe the word "freelance" as a person who offers his services in exchange for money to Walter Scott who first used it in *Ivanhoe*.

'strong tea' (not powerful tea), 'commit suicide' (not do suicide) .

"Obama Speech Sparks Misuse of Enormous Proportions," ran the headline in the Chicago Tribune dated January 23, 2009, following a controversial use of the word 'enormity'. American wordsmiths were offended when the President himself repeatedly used the word 'enormity' in place of 'enormousness', since enormity describes a 'great evil' and not size.

"Many a treasure besides Ali Baba's is unlocked with a verbal key," Henry Van Dyke.

The following section deals with the practical needs of the reader, and seeks to provide the necessary motivation avoiding the boredom associated with conventional language learning. A few useful keywords of select categories are furnished with a view to ramping up one's urge to enlarge the vocabulary.

American & British English

fall	-	autumn
schedule	-	timetable
washroom	-	toilet
homemaker	-	housewife
gas (oline)	-	petrol

Anniversaries / Jubilees

Year	1	-	paper
	5	-	wood
	10	-	tin
	15	-	crystal
	20	-	porcelain
	25	-	silver
	30	-	pearl
	35	-	coral
	40	-	ruby
	45	-	sapphire
	50	-	gold
	55	-	emerald
	60	-	diamond
	65	-	blue sapphire
	70	-	platinum
	75	-	platinum (in S. Asia)
	80	-	oak
	100	-	centenary

Antonyms

brisk	x	sluggish
confidence	x	diffidence
progress	x	regress
sacred	x	profane
prosperity	x	adversity

False Antonyms

inflammable	=	flammable
invaluable	=	valuable
exterminate	=	terminate
unloose	=	loose
fat chance	=	slim chance = no chance

Clipped Words

bus	-	omnibus
fan	-	fanatic
recap	-	recapitulation
outpatient	-	outside patient
promo	-	promotional

Confusables

desert	-	a dry land
dessert	-	sweet food at end of a meal
compliment	-	a polite expression
complement	-	that which completes
alternate	-	happening one after the other repeatedly
alternative	-	another choice
disinterested	-	not involved, indifferent
uninterested	-	not interested

Similar but Different

artist	-	one who paints, draws, or sculpts
artiste	-	an entertainer like a dancer, singer or actor
contagious	-	spreading through touch
infectious	-	able to pass a disease to others
marriage	-	the official ceremony at church/temple/registry office
wedding	-	occasion comprising a marriage ceremony, reception etc
envy	-	wishing you had what another person has
jealousy	-	extremely careful in protecting something eg. a jealous wife

Eponyms: a word deriving from the name of a person, place etc.

- boycott** - from Captain Charles Boycott who led the jettisoning of British goods during the American War of Independence
- caesarian** - Julius Caesar is presumed to have been the first to be delivered through a caesarian section
- joyial** - cheerful – from Jove or Jupiter
- Mentor** - Friend of Ulysses who groomed Ulysses' son during his long absence to fight Troy.
- badminton** - a place in England where the game was first played

Euphemisms : use of a word or phrase less offensive

- | | | | |
|---------------|-------------|---------------------|--------------|
| remains | - dead body | sex worker | - prostitute |
| Afro-American | - negro | to ease oneself | |
| hair stylist | - barber | /to relieve oneself | - to urinate |

One-word Substitution

- | | |
|---|-------------|
| A young person with exceptional qualities | - prodigy |
| One who doubts commonly believed principles | - sceptic |
| An elephant driver | - mahout |
| Deliberate falsifying of records or adulterating food | - to doctor |
| One who is blamed for the misdeeds of others | - scapegoat |

Portmanteau Words/Blends

- | | | | |
|---------|--------------------------|-----------|-------------------------|
| netizen | = internet + citizen | fortnight | = fourteen + nights |
| intel | = integrated electronics | medicare | = medical + care |
| | | internet | = international network |

Prefixes & Suffixes (Affixes)

New words can be created modifying the root word using affixes using prefixes or suffixes.

- | | |
|-------------------------|--|
| ambi..... (both) | - ambidextrous(= able to use both hands with equal skill) |
| ante..... (before) | - antediluvian (= very old-fashioned), ante meridiem(= a.m.) |
| bene (good) | - benign, benevolence |
| able (able to do) | - capable, probable |
|wise (related to) | - clock-wise, lengthwise |

Synonyms

- | | |
|----------|---|
| creative | - constructive, imaginative, innovative, original, |
| active | - agile, alert, dynamic, energetic, enterprising, vigorous, vivacious |
| skilful | - adroit, clever, dexterous, proficient |

Numbers Used as Words

- | | |
|-------------------------|--|
| 20 : 20 vision | - perfect vision |
| million dollar question | - a very important |
| on cloud nine | - extremely happy and excited |
| fourth estate | - the media |
| seven-year itch | - extra marital relationship after a few years of marriage |

Gender

bachelor	x	bachelor girl /bachelorette
alumnus	x	alumna
comedian	x	comedienne
fiance	x	fiancée
confirmed bachelor	x	spinster

Etymology (root)

Etymology deals with the origin and development of a word, tracing it to its original source or root. Once the root of a word is identified, the numerous words originating from the same can easily be learnt. The Latin infinitive 'specere' (= to see) derives from the Sanskrit 'spasati' meaning 'he/she sees.' Given below is a list of words originating from 'specere': aspect, conspectus, conspicuous, expect, inspect, prospect, respect, special, species, specific, specimen, specious, spectacle, spectator, spectre, spectrum, speculate, spy – the list lengthens. The word 'love' used in Tennis and Volleyball to indicate zero points, derives from the French word 'l'oeuf' which means 'egg' resembling the sign 'zero', mispronounced 'love'. Similarly, the word 'mayday' used by ships and aircraft as a distress call for help, originates from French 'mayder' meaning 'help me', pronounced 'mayday'.

Priya (Sanskrit)	– friend, free
Daru (Sanskrit for 'tree')	– tree, truth
Logos (Greek for 'word')	– logic, analogy
Cordis (Latin for 'heart')	– cordial, accord. Sanskrit 'hrut'
Credo (Lat – 'I believe')	– creed, accredit

This article deals with vocabulary expansion only peripherally in as much as the topic is a mind-boggling expanse of a million plus words. Apparently simple words like 'set' and 'put' have got varying meanings in around 400 combinations. Naturally, abbreviations, acronyms, collective nouns, homonyms, loan words, nationality nouns (opposite gender),



phobia-mania, redundancy, various figures of speech etc. could not be covered in this brief study. However, a few more categories with just one example each are mentioned: archaic (eg. thou); colloquial (eg. blowhard = a boaster); dated (eg. perchance); disapproving (eg. newfangled = recent but unnecessary); formal (eg. admonition = warning); figurative (eg. a crossroads of life); humorous (eg. ankle-biter); informal (eg. 'for keeps' meaning for ever); literary (eg. aflame = burning, excited); offensive (eg. half-caste = having parents of different castes); slang (eg. beef up = to improve something); taboo (eg. bloody); technical (eg. accretion = gradual increase).

English language passed the Million Word stage on June 10, 2009. Though words from other languages too ('Jai-Ho' was Hindi's nominee) aspired to be the historic millionth word, the controversial decision fell in favour of 'Web 2.0'. As per the estimate of the Global Language Monitor dated January 1, 2014, the number rose to 10,25,110. This includes the names of innumerable chemicals and other scientific entities many of which are far from common use. It is presumed that by the end of 2016, the total number of words in this eternally inchoate language will have been one million and fifty thousand, a ball park figure.

Sylvia Plath and the Word 'Dreamscape'

The use of the word 'dreamscape' as an imagined location for a dream was coined in a poem *The Ghost's Leavetaking* by Sylvia Plath. She also invented 'grrring' to describe the sound made by alley cats.