

Creating Your Own Dictionary

When you look up new words in the dictionary, chances are you will forget their meaning unless you write down the words and review them periodically. Keeping a log of these words will help you learn them. You can create your vocabulary log or personal dictionary by using a medium-size address book. Choose one that has a lot of white space so that you can write each word, its meaning, a sample sentence, and some synonyms. See the example below:

EXONERATE: *verb* – to officially say that someone who has been blamed for something is not guilty.

Example: Last week, a judge **exonerated** a death row prisoner of all murder charges because of DNA evidence.

Synonyms: absolve, clear, justify, acquit.

Learning new words will improve your reading comprehension and enrich your vocabulary. However, not every new word you encounter is worth learning. Instead, you should focus on words that are used often and that would be useful to you.

Usually, we can divide words into three sets: (1) words we know and use, (2) words we almost know, and (3) words that we do not know at all. Research suggests that the words we learn most easily are those we have a reason to learn. Usually these are the words that fall in Category 2: words we almost know. These words are your *Frontier Vocabulary*.

Almost knowing a word means that you already know something about it. You may have seen it several times in your reading, and you have a vague idea as to its meaning. This word is part of your *frontier vocabulary*. It is just outside the circle of words you know, and you are ready to learn it. You may also be ready to learn a Category 3 word—words that are completely unknown—if you have a specific reason for learning it (for example, a word that is important to your major.)

Once you have decided to conquer a word in your frontier vocabulary, research suggests that the only way to learn it well is to *overlearn* it. Here is how *overlearning* works:

Step 1. Write the word you want to learn in your vocabulary log or personal dictionary (address book).

Step 2. Look up the word in a good dictionary, for example, Longman's *Advanced American Dictionary*.

Step 3. Write the **dictionary definition** as in the example for the word *exonerate*. If there is more than one definition, write only the first two or three definitions because they are the most important. Also give an **example** sentence. When you review the word, reading the word in *context* (sentence) can help you remember the word's meaning more easily. Write down the word's **synonyms**.

Step 4. Write the word on a small index card or on a piece of paper. Once a day, look at the word and try to remember its definition without looking at it. Check the definition in your personal dictionary to make sure you remember it correctly.

Step 5. When you have gotten the word right ten times in a row, remove the card from your stack and mark the word in your personal dictionary with a star (*) to show that you have mastered the word. Choose a new frontier word and repeat steps 1 through 5.

Step 6. Once a week, review all the words that are marked with a star in your personal dictionary. When you correctly use a word from your frontier vocabulary in your writing, you know you have truly mastered it.

When you look up a word for which the dictionary lists multiple meanings, be sure that the meaning you select matches the *context* (sentence or paragraph) in which the word appears. For example, the verb *realize* has two different meanings: *to make real* and *to understand*. Consider the following sentences: “Mark did not *realize* that his friend had lied to him.” “J. K. Rowling *has realized* her dream of becoming a successful writer.” In the first sentence, *realize* means *understand* while in the second sentence it means *make real*. Even though the verb is the same, it has two different meanings depending on the context in which the verb is used. Thus, knowing the different meanings of a word and selecting the correct one to match its context can vastly improve your comprehension.

Sometimes you will encounter words that are important to understanding the text, but they are not words you necessarily want to memorize. In this case, write the definition of the words in the margins of the text, not in your vocabulary log. Also, you should not look up *every word* you do not understand because it would be extremely time consuming. Instead, use the dictionary only when the word seems very important, and you cannot figure out its meaning from the context. **Key words** (important words) unlock the meaning of a text and therefore need to be understood well. How can you tell if a word is a key word? Two types of words are usually key words: words that relate to the main idea in the text, and words that are repeated often in the text.