Building Your Vocabulary

Tips and Tricks for improving your repertoire

Why do I need a big vocabulary?
- To write better academic essays
- To improve formal communication
- To be better understood
- To make a good impression
- To switch "registers" effectively
  - AKA. “Code switching”

What is a “register?”
- A register is:
  - The way you speak and the words you use in a certain group or environment
    - i.e. Business talk with businessmen
  - The language that identifies a particular group or field
    - AAVE/Ebonics, “lawyer speak,” “Spanglish,” etc.
How do I learn the “language” of my field?

- **Read:**
  - Read journals, magazines, and/or research within your field of study

- **Speak:**
  - Talk to people in your field
  - Note the specialized words and/or phrases they use

- **Practice:**
  - Use the new words/phrases you learn as often as you can

What other ways can I broaden my vocabulary in general?

- **Reading:**
  - Challenge yourself to read material that is one level above what you are comfortable reading
    - I.e. If you have a college freshmen reading level, then try to read sophomore level materials
    - This is a great way to get exposed to new words!

- **Read with a dictionary by your side**
- **Never skip words just because you don’t know them.**
  - Try to get their meaning from the context of the sentence
  - Then look them up in a dictionary
  - Use the pronunciation guide in the front of the dictionary to learn the proper pronunciation
Read a variety of texts
- Read more than one newspaper and/or magazine
Watch channels like CNN and MSNBC
- These channels often have a variety of shows and discussions where great new words can be learned
- They aren’t always the most interesting but you can learn a lot

Watch specialty channels to learn specialized words
- Ie. The Science Channel has a lot of programs from which you can learn specialized science terms
  - Ex. Aurora borealis v. “northern lights”
    - These two phrases mean the same thing but scientists use one and non-scientists use the other

Practice the new words you have learned
- This helps you learn to use the words in context
- It also helps when trying to remember new words
- Don’t worry about making mistakes, you’re still learning
Recommendations

- The Longman’s English dictionary
  - This is a dictionary of American English and has some of the most commonly used words in it
  - It defines most words in under 50 words or less which makes the definitions easy to understand
  - It tells you which words are formal/informal and uses them in a sentence
  - It also gives the alternate forms of the word (verb, noun, adjective, etc.)

- Merriam-Webster Online (www.m-w.com)
  - This is a great dictionary site
  - It’s free
  - It has a lot of words
  - It also has a free thesaurus

- Find the thesaurus that goes with your dictionary
  - If you have a Merriam-Webster’s dictionary then you should get a Merriam-Webster’s thesaurus
  - You can get specialized dictionaries
    - For lawyers, college students, medical personnel, etc.
Make sure that the dictionary you use is easy for you to understand.
- If you can’t understand it then it can’t help you.
- Check to see if the dictionary has difficult to find words (like “pensive”).
- If you really want a dictionary with a lot of words then buy an unabridged dictionary.
  - They are far more expensive but if you think you’ll use it then it’s worth the money.

The Pronunciation Guide (IPA)

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Finally, remember that every word you learn had a proper use and a proper context.
Not every word you learn may be for everyday use.