

Building Vocabulary



There are two basic levels of vocabulary: recognition and general use. Recognition vocabulary refers to words we visually recognize, though we may not know the precise definitions. General-use vocabulary consists of words we know and use consistently in speaking and writing. The goal of vocabulary building at the university level is two-fold: to transfer words from the recognition level to the general-use level and to add new words to the recognition level that will later be transferred. There are numerous ways to approach vocabulary building. Here are some basic strategies. In addition to using this handout, consult with your professors about other resources available for enhancing your vocabulary.

Learn Words from Context

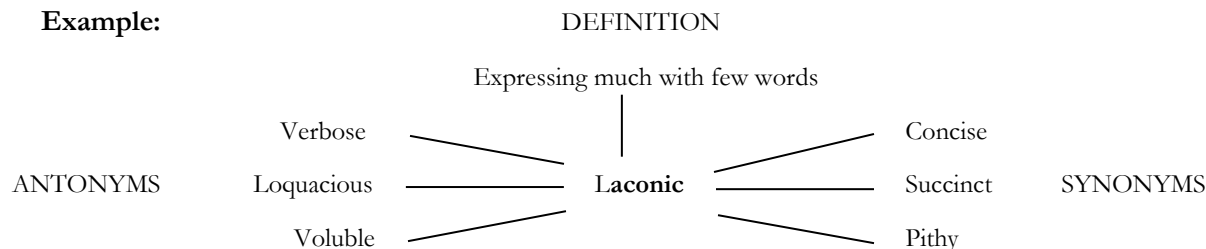
If you encounter a word and do not have a dictionary readily available, sometimes you can learn what you need to about the word from its context. Be careful, however—using this method alone won't help you learn the precise definition. Without that definition, you may misuse the word later.

Look Up Words

When building your vocabulary, consistently research words that you encounter in your daily reading. Dictionaries are an especially helpful tool for looking up both archaic and recently-created vocabulary words. You can also use a thesaurus or basic online search to help you define terms.

Learn Synonym and Antonym Pairs

Every time you learn a new word, learn its synonyms and antonyms. This will increase your understanding of the word itself and add words to your vocabulary. You may also use a dictionary, thesaurus, or textbook to learn other words associated with the new words you are learning. You can create words maps or use flash cards to memorize connections and differences.



Use New Words in Speaking and Writing

Until you actually use the word, it will never enter your general-use vocabulary. Consciously find ways to use your new words. Through conversation or feedback on written communication, you will begin to get a feel for the convention, connotation, and suitability of different words in various situations. The repeated use of words is essential as you transfer new words from recognition to general use vocabulary.

Study Other Language Influences

The study of Greek and Latin affixes (prefixes, roots, suffixes) is a great auxiliary method to building an English vocabulary. For example, understanding that the Latin prefix “sub-” means “under” can help you understand such words as subconscious, subliminal, subaltern, and others. French, German, and Hebrew are other languages that can be helpful in understanding vocabulary because of their strong influence on the English language.