

Chapter 2

How many words do you know?

In this chapter...

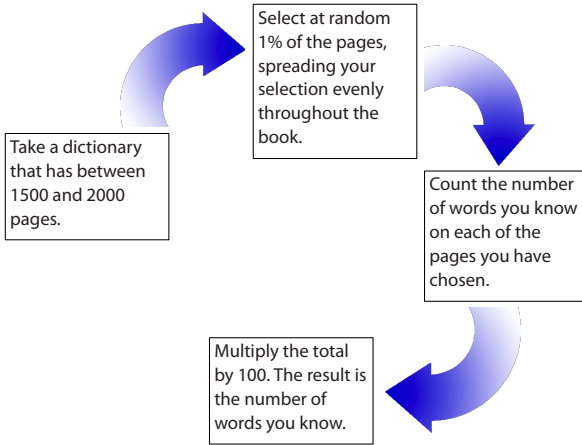
- How big is your vocabulary? (page 9)
- What is a word? (page 11)
- What do you mean by ‘know’? (page 11)
- Fitting new words into a pattern (page 14)
- Grammar (page 15)
- Grouping words by meaning (page 17)
- How precise do you want to be? (page 18)
- The company words keep (page 20)
- Location, location, location (page 21)
- To sum up ... (page 23)



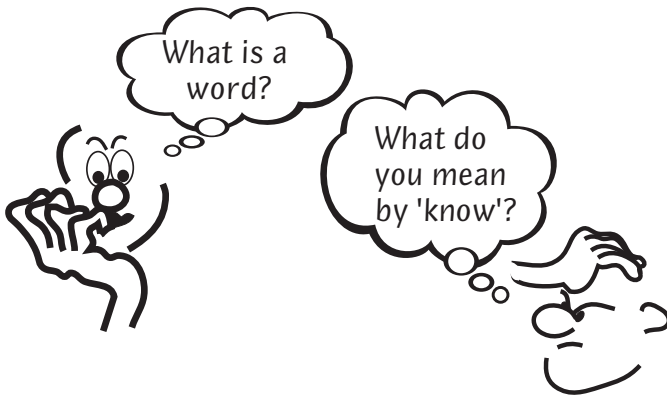
How big is your vocabulary?

People are sometimes judged by their vocabulary: ‘He’s very well educated – he uses a lot of long words.’ Some feel challenged because they feel that their own personal vocabulary is not adequate for the job they have to do. A popular feature of *Reader’s Digest* for many years was ‘It Pays to Increase Your Wordpower’. The idea that knowing a lot of words gives you some kind of ‘power’ is widespread.

But what does it mean? How many words do you know? It is sometimes suggested that you can measure this by a simple test:



The result is an estimate of the number of words you know. It sounds easy. In fact as soon as you try it, you come up against two major problems:



What is a word?

If you go through a page of a dictionary in the way suggested you soon find yourself having to make decisions about which words to count and which to ignore. Take the word ‘lament’ for example. It has two uses:

- as a verb, meaning to express sadness, grief or regret;
- as a noun, meaning an expression of sadness, grief or regret.

Do you count that as two words or one? And what about:

‘lamented’ (adjective) ?

‘lamenting’ (adjective)?

Then there are words that are clearly related to ‘lament’:

‘lamentation’

‘lamentable’

Anyone who knows ‘lament’ can reasonably claim to know these too. So for that one ‘word’ you could claim to know anything between one (rather strict) and six (rather generous) ‘words’.

What do you mean by ‘know’?

Try this experiment. Go through the following list of words and for each one write down a letter to indicate how well you know it:

- A. I know it well and would feel confident to use it.
- B. I understand what it means but wouldn’t feel confident to use it.
- C. I think I know what it means, but I’m not sure.

D. I've seen or heard it but don't really know what it means.

E. I don't think I've ever seen it before in my life.

<i>denizen</i>	<i>denounce</i>	<i>dentate</i>	<i>denunciation</i>
<i>denn</i>	<i>dense</i>	<i>denticulate</i>	<i>denutrition</i>
<i>dennet</i>	<i>density</i>	<i>dentist</i>	<i>deny</i>
<i>denomination</i>	<i>dent</i>	<i>denuclearize</i>	<i>deobstruct</i>
<i>denote</i>	<i>dental</i>	<i>denumbiate</i>	<i>deodar</i>

As you can see from this exercise we 'know' different words in different ways. (And if you put anything except 'E' against 'denumbiate' you were cheating because I made it up!)

Passive or active?

Probably the most important distinction to make is between our active and passive vocabularies. The active vocabulary (Group A) is the list of words that we feel confident about using. The passive vocabulary (Group B) contains the words we are fairly sure we understand but which we don't really feel confident to use ourselves. Naturally your passive vocabulary is bigger than your active vocabulary-typically for an adult about 25 per cent bigger.

So one way to increase your 'wordpower' is to move words from the passive list to the active one: make sure that you really do know what they mean and how they are used and then start using them!

Secondly, you can begin to take a more active approach to your 'fringe' vocabulary, the words that fall into groups C and D: words that you think you know, but aren't really sure about and words that you recognize but don't know

the meaning of. In both cases the solution is simple: make use of a good quality dictionary.

Thirdly, you can increase the passive and ‘fringe’ vocabularies by reading more widely. Although magazine quizzes along the lines of ‘It Pays to Increase Your Wordpower’ are fun, they don’t really work, because the words in them are completely out of context. The words you have gained since leaving formal education have come into your head because you have read or heard them. They no doubt include many words you have acquired for use at work. Reading takes you away from this familiar world and into worlds of language that you might otherwise not encounter. The more serious programmes on radio and TV do the same thing. Again, you need to use a good dictionary to gain the most benefit from your reading, listening, and viewing.

Call My Bluff

A popular TV show for many years involved two teams who took it in turns to test each other’s wordpower. A team would be given an unusual word, for example *spauld*. Each member of the team would offer the opposing team a possible and plausible definition of the word. Their opponents then had to guess which one was true:

1. This is a term from an early form of croquet. To **spauld** was to prevent an opponent’s leading ball from finishing by cannoning into it and knocking it out of bounds.
2. The term **spauld** comes from the ancient craft of fletching, or putting the feathered flights on arrows. A **spauld** was a tool used by the fletcher to trim the flights to exactly the right size.
3. It’s a term from butchery. The **spauld** of an animal is its shoulder. The word later came to mean any joint of meat.

Answer: It is a term from butchery.

Fitting new words into a pattern

The approach just outlined will work, but it is a bit random. There are probably more than a million words in the English language, and an educated speaker of English may have a total vocabulary of between 25,000 and 75,000 words. For example, calculations of Shakespeare's vocabulary usually come in at around 30,000 words.

Zounds! I was never so bethumped with words
Since I first called my brother's father dad.

William Shakespeare
King John



In the ‘What do we mean by “know” ’ test you probably didn't know some of the words for a very good reason: you didn't need to. There is no particular virtue in piling up in your head words that you are never going to need to use. What you need is a system. You need to be able to fit each new word into a pattern which helps you understand:

- its grammar;
- its structure and origins;

- how it relates to other words with similar meanings;
- how it combines with other words;
- the situations in which it is used.

Grammar

It should go without saying that a new word is of little value if you don't know how to use it in a sentence. Knowing the class or classes that a word belongs to is therefore essential. It is also, sometimes, a handy way of extending your vocabulary. Many words belong to more than one class, but you may well find that you are unconsciously limiting your vocabulary by ignoring this fact. You may, for example, be accustomed to using 'articulate' as an adjective:

She was a very articulate supporter of women's rights.

but never as a verb:

She was trying to articulate the different ways in which women had been oppressed over the centuries.

When they call you articulate that's another way of saying, 'He talks good for a black guy.'

Ice-T, American musician

Structure

Some words have a simple construction: they consist of only one part and cannot be broken down further. For example:

- *string*
- *money*
- *pepper*

Others can be broken down into a number of constituent parts. For example:

- complication = com+plic+ate
- explicable = ex+plic+able
- extricate = ex+tric+ate

If you understand what prefixes like ‘com-’ or ‘ex-’, and suffixes such as ‘-able’ or ‘-ate’ contribute to the meaning and usage of a word, you have a powerful tool for understanding new words and extending your vocabulary.

Roots

In a similar way, it is helpful to be on the lookout for words that have common roots. There is a mass of English words that have been built up on words (or parts of words) from classical Greek and Latin. Even if you have no knowledge of these languages yourself, it shouldn’t take long to work out what the original word or part of a word must have been and roughly what it meant. All these words, for example, have a common ancestor:

biography
biology
bionic
bio-diversity
biosphere

Clearly words containing ‘bio’ have something do with life. Similarly ‘**autograph**’, ‘**monograph**’, and ‘**graphology**’

suggest that words containing ‘graph’ have to do with writing. So putting ‘bio’ and ‘graph’ together in ‘biography’ gives us ‘writing about life’. A good dictionary will provide further information about such word derivations.

Grouping words by meaning

Another valuable way of gaining a grasp on the vocabulary of English is to look for patterns of meaning. Often when we speak or write, we feel that we have a choice of two or more words with similar meanings. For example, how many words can you think of to fill the space in this sentence?

‘Please leave me alone,’ she —————.

Possibles include:

<i>said</i>	<i>shouted</i>	<i>yelled</i>	<i>cried</i>
<i>screamed</i>	<i>shrieked</i>	<i>whispered</i>	<i>murmured</i>
<i>muttered</i>	<i>mumbled</i>	<i>sighed</i>	<i>gasped</i>
<i>panted</i>	<i>yelped</i>	<i>growled</i>	<i>snapped</i>
<i>snarled</i>	<i>squeaked</i>	<i>whined</i>	<i>sobbed</i>
<i>wailed</i>	<i>drawled</i>	<i>burbled</i>	<i>snorted</i>

Linguists call such groups of words ‘semantic fields’, since semantics is the study of meaning. The easiest place to find such groupings in a practical, usable form is a thesaurus. If you are stuck for the exact word for a particular shade of meaning, then a thesaurus is a valuable tool. One has to beware, however. Successful use of a thesaurus depends on two things:

- You have to know the exact meanings of the words it lists, or be prepared to research their meanings.

- You have to know exactly how they are used.

Clearly, some of the words in the list above either would be inappropriate or would take a little explaining. Think, for example, of situations in which you might say or write:

‘Please leave me alone,’ she **snarled**.

or

‘Please leave me alone,’ she **drawled**.

or

‘Please leave me alone,’ she **growled**.

How precise do you want to be?

So far we have looked at choosing between words with different shades of meaning. ‘Shout’, ‘scream’, and ‘yell’ have similar meanings but they are not the same. We will choose one of them depending on the volume, pitch, and emotional content of the sound we are trying to describe. You normally expect a scream, for example, to be higher-pitched than a shout and possibly louder. It certainly implies that the person doing it is expressing stronger emotion.

There is another kind of choice: that of precision. Consider the following sentence:

She is a very keen gardener and when I last saw her she was planting some —————.

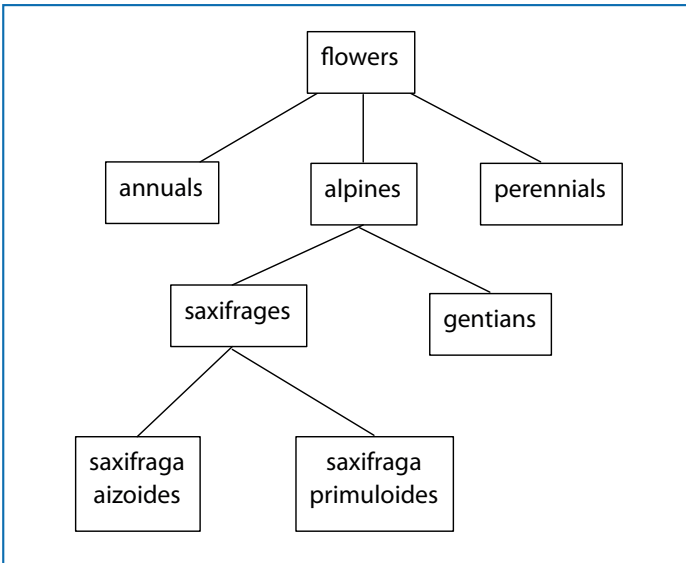
There is a large number of words we could use to fill this space. For example:

<i>alpines</i>	<i>annuals</i>	<i>begonias</i>	<i>bulbs</i>
<i>daffodils</i>	<i>daisies</i>	<i>flowers</i>	<i>gentians</i>
<i>pansies</i>	<i>perennials</i>	<i>petunias</i>	<i>saxifrages</i>

Which to choose? The answer might be: ‘The right one to describe whatever she was planting.’ While that would narrow the field, it would not provide a final answer. Suppose she was planting saxifrages; then we could use ‘saxifrages’, or ‘alpines’, or ‘flowers’. We could even say ‘saxifraga aizoides’ or ‘saxifraga burseriana’. The word(s) we choose will depend on how precise we want to be, and that in turn will depend on our audience and our purpose in addressing them. It is a question of precision.

Hierarchies of words

All the words in the list can be placed in a hierarchy:



As you move down the branches of the hierarchy the words become more and more precise. (And the likelihood of people knowing and understanding them decreases.)

Such hierarchies of words (or groups of **hyponyms**, as linguists term them) are also part of our way of thinking.

When we speak or write we choose a word at the right level for our purposes. If we are stuck for precisely the right word then we often have to go up a level and use a more general word than we would like-and/or find other ways of communicating our meaning.

The company words keep

Words don't, of course, exist in isolation. We combine them with other words into phrases and sentences. Certain words typically occur in combination with other words.

All the words in the list that follows have related meanings:

<i>belief</i>	<i>opinion</i>	<i>view</i>	<i>position</i>
<i>attitude</i>	<i>feeling</i>	<i>notion</i>	<i>idea</i>
<i>impression</i>	<i>suspicion</i>	<i>understanding</i>	<i>thought</i>

Suppose that we want to put them into a sentence that begins like this:

She _____ the

belief
opinion
view
understanding
etc

that ...

Which verb should we use to fill the blank? Normally you would expect either 'had' or 'held'. Can we use each of these words for all the words in the list? And are there other words we can use? Most of the time we carry these word combinations in our heads. Years of reading and listening have 'programmed' our brains to expect them. When we encounter a word for the first time, it is not so easy. Some dictionaries provide examples of usage:

suspicion

1. Suspicion is the feeling that you do not trust someone or that something is wrong in some way, although you have no evidence of this. EG Derek had always shared Lynn's suspicion of Michael. . . I had aroused his suspicions last week. . . Their friendship is regarded with suspicion by their teachers.

Collins Cobuild English Language Dictionary

Location, location, location

There is yet one more way of sorting words: according to the social situation in which you might use them. If you look at a typical entry in a thesaurus you can see that not all the words it contains are suitable for all social situations:

false accusation, false charge, false evidence, fake confession, perjured testimony, perjury ... calumny, scandal, defamation ... plant (Inf), cooked-up charge (Inf), put-up job (Inf), putup (Inf), frame-up (Inf), frame (Inf)

Bloomsbury Thesaurus

Clearly the situation where you would use the word 'calumny' is very different from that where you might refer to a 'frame-up'.

In dictionaries and other books about words you will encounter these descriptions of words:

- ☛ **formal:** This refers to vocabulary that can always be used with a wide range of audiences, including people whom you don't know. Its use will hardly ever offend, but may sound a little 'starchy' in informal situations.
- ☛ **informal, colloquial:** These words and phrases may not be suitable for use with some audiences and some

may even be offended by their use. It is advisable to avoid them if you don't know your audience well enough to judge their likely response.

- **slang:** Very informal language containing a number of specialist words. Slang is very often peculiar to one particular social group. So there is schoolboy slang and computer slang, for example.
- **taboo:** This is a sociological term and refers to words and expressions that part or all of a society has 'outlawed'. In British English this group includes words referring to sexual activities and parts of the body. As social attitudes change, words may move from being taboo into the area of slang and informal language. It is also possible for words that were once acceptable in certain social groupings to become taboo.

To sum up ...

1. Your vocabulary is the words that you know. These can be active (the words you are happy to use in speech and writing) or passive (the words that you understand when you hear them but are not yet confident to use).
2. You can increase your active vocabulary by increasing your passive vocabulary and by moving words from your passive to your active vocabulary.
3. Add words to your passive vocabulary by being aware of new words when you come across them and by making sure that you know what they mean.
4. Make passive words active by deliberately setting out to use them-but first make sure that you are confident you know what they mean and how they are used – and how to pronounce them. (Many dictionaries provide guidance on pronunciation.)
5. You should fit all new words into a pattern. This includes knowing about their grammar and usage.
6. Learn what grammatical class a word belongs to.
7. Link it to other words in the same family.
8. Find out its precise meaning and when to use it in preference to another word with a similar meaning.
9. Check that you know which other words it normally combines with.
10. Be aware of the social situations in which particular words may and may not be used.