



Improving Your Vocabulary

There are two different vocabularies: the **passive** vocabulary is used to understand and comprehend what is read from context clues and inferences, and the **active** vocabulary is used to express thoughts and ideas. Having a good **passive** vocabulary helps us understand what we're reading; having a good **active** vocabulary helps us when we're writing.

4 Steps for Improving the Passive Vocabulary

- Learn to recognize common word parts (prefixes, roots, and suffixes). This will help you decipher unfamiliar words encountered while reading.
Example: predetermine (prefix) pre=before definition=to determine beforehand
- Examine the unfamiliar word's context. Frequently, the context gives clues to the meaning of the word.
- Relate the word to a comparable word you know in a foreign language. Perhaps the meanings will be similar.
- While reading, try all the above steps before making a trip to the dictionary. When utilizing a dictionary, locate a definition appropriate to the context in which you found the word.

6 Steps for Improving the Active Vocabulary

- Look for new words everywhere: television, newspapers, magazines, textbooks, lectures, conversations with friends, etc.
- Keep a small notebook or note cards with you so that you will be able to write down new words and their contexts as they are encountered.
- Personalize your dictionary. Every time you have to look up a word in the dictionary, mark a small dot or the date in the margin beside the word. If you do this regularly, it will become a record of words you have needed. When you have looked up a word three times, it is time for that word to be made a part of your active vocabulary.
- Use and reinforce a few new words every day. (It has been stated that one must use a word ten times before it becomes a part of one's active vocabulary.)
- Make flashcards so that you can review and test yourself. Write the new word and the sentence in which you found it (context) on the front of the card; then, write the definition and another sentence containing that word on the back. Look through the cards at free moments during the day—while standing in the grocery line, doing mindless chores, or waiting between classes.
- Read! Read often! Read regularly! Read good books! The best way to experience new words and become comfortable with them is to see how other skillful writers use them.