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## DICTION AND VOCABULARY POINTERS

### I. Diction

#### LEVELS OF USAGE

##### 1. Standard English:

- Formal

Formal English is usually written and is used in scholarly articles, official documents, formal letters, and any situation calling for scrupulous propriety.

- Informal (General)

Informal or General English is the language, both written and spoken, used by the educated classes in carrying on in their everyday businesses. It is the level used in most books, magazines, newspapers, and ordinary business communications.

- Colloquial

Colloquial English is the language of familiar conversation among educated people. It occurs frequently in informal writing.

Formal	Informal	Colloquial
comprehend	understand	catch on
altercation	quarrel	row
wrathful, irate	angry	mad
goad, taunt	tease	needle
predicament	problem	jam, fix
exorbitant	high	steep

##### 2. Substandard English

- Dialectical

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Words common to a particular region and not used throughout the country are part of the dialectical body of words.

- Slang

These words are unconventional. They are vivid ways of expressing an idea which has no standard equivalent. Those that are widely used have a good chance of being accepted as Standard English. After all, some words that are considered as Standard now, like *mob*, *banter*, *sham* and *lynch* belonged to the slang words before.

Ex: *stooge*, *lame duck*, *shot of whisky*, a bridge *shark*.

Most slang words however are too violent to get accepted, and some are just a reflection of some people's wish to be different. They quickly lose any precise meaning. These slang words have a poor chance of getting accepted in Standard English.

- Illiterate (or Vulgate) or Errors in Idiom

Idioms are peculiarities of language. Idioms require that some words be followed by arbitrarily fixed prepositions.

take in	agree on	angry about	argue for
take up	agree with	angry with	argue against
agree to	angry at	argue with	argue about

Some idioms demand that certain words be followed by infinitives, others by gerunds.

Infinitive	Gerunds
able to go	capable of going
like to go	enjoy going
eager to go	cannot help going
hesitate to go	privilege of going

Error in use of Idioms is unacceptable in Standard English.

## EXACT DICTION

Choose words which say precisely what you mean. It is not enough to make sure that you can be understood; you ought to make sure that you cannot be misunderstood.

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1. Choose **specific words** rather than general terms unless there's a good reason for being general.

General: For dinner we had some really good food.

Specific: For dinner we had steamed lobsters and grilled tilapia.

2. Make your verbs work. Choose **specific verbs** or verbs that signify the specific action, rather than colorless or abstract verbs (e.g. *occur, took place, prevail, exist*).

Colorless verb: He beat a hasty exit.

Specific verb: He rushed from the room.

3. Do not use **too explosive verbs** or verbs that are too explosive for their context.

Exaggerated: Her angry words pounced out upon him.

Specific verb: She scolded him.

4. Do not use the **passive voice** when unnecessary because this leads to weak constructions. The passive voice is appropriate when the doer of the action is irrelevant or unknown.

5. **Avoid jargon**. People who are fond of jargon use them to dress up words; they hope to sound more "authoritative". Certain key words betray the user of jargon. He has an unhealthy fondness for *factor, case, basis, in terms of, in the nature of, with reference to, elements, objective, personnel*.

Jargon: adverse climatic condition

Improved: bad weather

Jargon: Plant personnel are required to extinguish all illuminating devices before vacating the premises.

Improved: Employees are asked to turn out all lights before leaving the plant.

6. Choose words with the **exact connotation** required by the context. In addition to their denotation or exact meaning, words have a connotation or a fringe of associations and overtones which make them appropriate in some situations but not in others.

	Denotation	Connotation
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home	a place of residence	suggests family life, warmth, comfort, affection
house	a place of residence	emphasizes physical structure
domicile	a place of residence	has strictly legal overtones

Inappropriate: “House, Sweet House”  
“A hat to fit every skull”

## EFFECTIVE DICTION

In addition to being exact, your diction must also be effective; that is, you must make it easy and pleasant for a reader to grasp what you are saying. Keep your diction natural and sincere, be direct and concise, use fresh, unhackneyed phrases, and avoid needless technical language.

### Pretentious Language

Do not decorate your sentences with pretentious language; doing so would make you seem insincere to your reader. Do not think that originality is achieved by avoiding ordinary words.

Ordinary Word	Strained Circumlocution
spade	implement for agricultural excavation
dog	faithful canine friends
codfish	denizen of the deep
basketball player	casaba-heaver
hit the ball	smacked the horsehide

Do not also attempt to show your superiority by peppering your constructions with needless foreign words.

Needless Foreign Phrase	English Equivalent
<i>entre nous</i>	between us
<i>joie de vivre</i>	enjoyment of life
<i>faux pas</i>	social blunder
<i>sub rosa</i>	secret or secretly
<i>Sturm und Drang</i>	storm and stress

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### Trite Rhetorical Expressions

Guard against using hackneyed and stale expressions in your construction. Avoid clichés, hackneyed quotations, literary allusions and proverbs.

Some hackneyed expressions:

slow but sure

speculation was rife

mother nature

easier said than done

Clichéd quotations:

all is not gold that glitters

make hay while the sun shines

### Technical Language

When writing something aimed at a general audience, you should avoid technical terms which are not commonly understood, even though more words are required to say the same thing in English.

### Appropriate Figures of Speech

A figure of speech is a comparison, either stated or implied, between two things which are unlike except in one particular. Figures of speech are used to give color and vividness to writing, and they should be fresh, reasonable, consistent, and suited to the context in which they appear. When mixed, they should also not be incongruous.

Incongruous mix: This young attorney is rapidly gaining a foothold in the public eye.

### Awkward Repetitions

Do not needlessly repeat words or sounds.

Needless repetition: Probably the next problem we will tackle is the problem of rising school tuition.

Improved: The next problem we will tackle is the rising school tuition.

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## II. Vocabulary

### BUILDING A BETTER VOCABULARY

Everyone—from beginning learners in English to veterans in journalism—knows the frustration of not having *the right word* immediately available in that lexicon one carries between one's ears. Sometimes it's a matter of not being able to recall the right word; sometimes we never knew it. It is also frustrating to read a newspaper or homework assignment and run across words with meanings that elude us. Language, after all, is power. When your children get in trouble fighting with the neighbors' children, and your neighbors call your children little twerps and you call their children nefarious miscreants—well, the battle is over and they didn't stand a chance. Building a vocabulary that is adequate to the needs of one's reading and self-expression has to be a personal goal for every writer and speaker.

### MAKING IT PERSONAL

Using some durable piece of paper—white construction paper or the insides of the ripped-off covers of old notebooks—begin to write down words in small but readable script that you discover in your reading that you can't define. Read journals and newspapers that challenge you in terms of vocabulary. Pursue words actively and become alert to words that you simply overlooked in the past. Write down the words in one column; then, later, when you have a dictionary at your disposal, write down a common definition of the word; in a third column, write a brief sentence using the word, underlined.

Carry this paper or cardboard with you always. In the pauses of your busy day—when you're sitting on the bus, in the dentist's office, during commercials—take out the paper and review your vocabulary words until you feel comfortable that you would recognize (and be able to use) these words the next time you see them. The amazing thing is that you *will see* the words again—even "nefarious miscreants," and probably sooner than you thought. In fact, you might well discover that the words you've written down are rather common. What's happening is not that, all of a sudden, people are using words you never saw before, but that you are now reading and using words that you had previously ignored.

### USING EVERY RESOURCE

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Most bookstores carry books on building a more powerful vocabulary, some of them with zany names such as *Thirty Days to a More Powerful Vocabulary*. If you've got money to spare or if they're on sale, buy them and use them; they can't hurt. Books that group words according to what they have in common—more in meaning than in spelling—are especially useful.

Newspapers often carry brief daily articles that explore the meanings of words and phrases. These articles often emphasize peculiar words that won't find themselves into your working vocabulary, but they can still be fun. Often you'll find that learning one new word leads to other new words, little constellations of meaning that keep your brain cells active and hungry for more. Make reading these articles one of your daily habits, an addiction, even.

Play dictionary games with your family in which someone uses the dictionary to find a neat word and writes down the real definition and everyone else writes down a fake (and funny) definition. See how many people you can fool with your fake definitions.



**Two trucks loaded with thousands of copies of *Roget's Thesaurus* collided as they left a New York publishing house last Thursday, according to the Associated Press.**

**Witnesses were aghast, amazed, astonished, astounded, bemused, benumbed, bewildered, confounded, confused, dazed, dazzled, disconcerted, disoriented, dumbstruck, electrified, flabbergasted, horrified, immobilized, incredulous, nonplussed, overwhelmed, paralyzed, perplexed, scared, shocked, startled, stunned, stupified, surprised, taken aback, traumatized, upset. . . .**

— joke circulated on the Internet

December 2003

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A **thesaurus** is like a dictionary except that it groups words within constellations of meaning. It is often useful in discovering just the right word you need to express what you want to say. Make sure you correctly understand the definition of a word (by using a dictionary) before using it in some important paper or report. Your bookstore salesperson can provide plenty of examples of an inexpensive thesaurus. The online **Merriam Webster's WWWebster Dictionary** has access to both an extensive dictionary and a hyperlinked thesaurus. Links allow you to go conveniently back and forth between the dictionary and the thesaurus.

If you have a speedy computer processor and a fast hookup to the internet, we recommend the **Plumb Design Visual Thesaurus**. Once the program is entirely loaded, type in a word that you would like to see "visualized," hit the return key, and a construct of verbal connections will float across the screen. Click on any of the words within that construct and a new pattern of connections will emerge. Try the Visual Thesaurus with several different kinds of words—verbs, adverbs, nouns, adjectives—and try adjusting some of the various controls on the bottom of the window. We do not recommend this web-site for slow machines; in fact, the bigger your monitor and the faster your computer and connection, the more satisfying this experience will be.

When people use a word that puzzles you, ask what it means! You'll find that most instructors, especially, are not in the least bothered by such questions—in fact, they're probably pleased that you're paying such close attention—but if they do seem bothered, write down the word and look it up later, before the context of the word evaporates.

## KNOWING THE ROOTS

At least half of the words in the English language are derived from Greek and Latin roots. Knowing these roots helps us to grasp the meaning of words before we look them up in the dictionary. It also helps us to see how words are often arranged in families with similar characteristics.

For instance, we know that *sophomores* are students in their second year of college or high school. What does it mean, though, to be *sophomoric*? The "sopho" part of the word comes from the same Greek root that gives us *philosophy*, which we know means "love of knowledge." The "ic" ending is sometimes added to adjectival words in English, but the "more" part of the word comes from the same Greek root that gives us *moron*.



... and "dandelion" comes from the Old French "dent de lion" for "tooth of the lion."

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Thus sophomores are people who think they know a lot but really don't know much about anything, and a sophomoric act is typical of a "wise fool," a "smart-ass"!

Let's explore further. Going back to *philosophy*, we know the "sophy" part is related to knowledge and the "phil" part is related to love (because we know that Philadelphia is the City of Brotherly Love and that a philodendron loves shady spots). What, then, is *philanthropy*? "Phil" is still love, and "anthropy" comes from the same Greek root that gives us *anthropology*, which is the study ("logy," we know, means study of any kind) of *anthropos*, humankind. So a *philanthropist* must be someone who loves humans and does something about it—like giving money to find a cure for cancer or to build a Writing Center for the local community college. (And an *anthropoid*, while we're at it, is an animal who walks like a human being.) Learning the roots of our language can even be fun!

### Some common Greek and Latin roots:

Root (source)	Meaning	English words
aster, astr (G)	star	astronomy, astrology
audi (L)	to hear	audible, auditorium
bene (L)	good, well	benefit, benevolent
bio (G)	life	biology, autobiography
dic, dict (L)	to speak	dictionary, dictator
fer (L)	to carry	transfer, referral
fix (L)	to fasten	fix, suffix, affix
geo (G)	earth	geography, geology
graph (G)	to write	graphic, photography
jur, just (L)	law	jury, justice
log, logue (G)	word, speech	monolog(ue), astrology, biology, neologism
luc (L)	light	lucid, translucent
manu (L)	hand	manual, manuscript
meter, metr (G)	measure	metric, thermometer

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op, oper (L)	work	operation, operator
path (G)	feeling	pathetic, sympathy, empathy
ped (G)	child	pediatrics, pedophile
phil (G)	love	philosophy, Anglophile
phys (G)	body, nature	physical, physics
scrib, script (L)	to write	scribble, manuscript
tele (G)	far off	telephone, television
ter, terr (L)	earth	territory, extraterrestrial
vac (L)	empty	vacant, vacuum, evacuate
verb (L)	word	verbal, verbose
vid, vis (L)	to see	video, vision, television

Authority for this chart: *The Little, Brown Handbook* by H. Ramsay Fowler and Jane E. Aaron, & Kay Limburg. 6th ed. HarperCollins: New York. 1995. By permission of Addison-Wesley Educational Publishers Inc.

## LEARNING PREFIXES AND SUFFIXES

Knowing the Greek and Latin roots of several prefixes and suffixes (beginning and endings attached to words) can also help us determine the meaning of words. *Ante*, for instance, means *before*, and if we connect *bellum* with *belligerant* to figure out the connection with *war*, we'll know that *antebellum* refers to the period before war. (In the United States, the antebellum period is our history before the Civil War.)

### Prefixes showing quantity

Meaning	Prefixes in English Words
half	<u>semi</u> annual, <u>hemis</u> phere
one	<u>unicycle, <u>monoarchy, <u>monorail</u></u></u>
two	<u>binary, <u>bimonthly, <u>dilemma</u>, <u>dichotom</u>y</u></u>
hundred	<u>cent</u> ury, <u>centi</u> meter, <u>hecto</u> liter
thousand	<u>milli</u> meter, <u>kilo</u> meter

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### Prefixes showing negation

without, no, not	<u>a</u> sexual, <u>an</u> onymous, <u>i</u> llegal, <u>im</u> moral, <u>in</u> valid, <u>ir</u> reverent, <u>un</u> skilled
not, absence of, opposing, against	<u>non</u> breakable, <u>antacid, <u>antipathy, <u>contradict</u></u></u>
opposite to, complement to	<u>counter</u> clockwise, <u>counterweight</u>
do the opposite of, remove, reduce	<u>de</u> horn, <u>de</u> vitalize, <u>de</u> value
do the opposite of, deprive of	<u>dis</u> establish, <u>dis</u> arm
wrongly, bad	<u>mis</u> judge, <u>mis</u> deed

### Prefixes showing time

before	<u>ante</u> cedent, <u>fore</u> cast, <u>pre</u> cede, <u>pro</u> logue
after	<u>post</u> war
again	<u>re</u> write, <u>redundant</u>

### Prefixes showing direction or position

above, over	<u>super</u> vise, <u>supererogatory</u>
across, over	<u>trans</u> port, <u>trans</u> late
below, under	<u>infra</u> sonic, <u>infra</u> structure, <u>subterranean, <u>hypodermic</u></u>
in front of	<u>proceed, <u>prefix</u></u>
behind	<u>recede</u>
out of	<u>erupt</u> , <u>explic</u> it, <u>ec</u> stasy
into	<u>in</u> jection, <u>immerse</u> , <u>encourage</u> , <u>empower</u>
around	<u>circum</u> navigate, <u>perimeter</u>
with	<u>coexist</u> , <u>colloquy</u> , <u>communicate</u> , <u>consequence</u> , <u>correspond</u> , <u>sympathy</u> , <u>synchronize</u>

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Suffixes, on the other hand, modify the meaning of a word and frequently determine its function within a sentence. Take the noun *nation*, for example. With suffixes, the word becomes the adjective *national*, the adverb *nationally*, and the verb *nationalize*.

See what words you can come up with that use the following suffixes.

- Typical **noun suffixes** are -ence, -ance, -or, -er, -ment, -list, -ism, -ship, -ency, -sion, -tion, -ness, -hood, -dom
- Typical **verb suffixes** are -en, -ify, -ize, -ate
- Typical **adjective suffixes** are -able, -ible, -al, -tial, -tic, -ly, -ful, -ous, -tive, -less, -ish, -ulent
- The **adverb suffix** is -ly (although not all words that end in -ly are adverbs—like friendly)

## USING YOUR DICTIONARY

The dictionary should be one of the most often used books in your home. (We'll allow room for sacred texts here.) Place the dictionary somewhere so that you can find it immediately and use it often. If you do your reading and homework in the kitchen and the dictionary is on a shelf in the den or bedroom, it's too tempting to say "I'll look it up next time."

The home dictionary should be large enough to contain much more than just spellings. It should contain extensive definitions, word origins, and notes on usage. Carrying in your purse or backpack a pocket dictionary with more concise definitions is also a good idea. Get in the habit of turning to it often. A well worn dictionary is a beautiful thing.

## USING THE INTERNET

You can use the internet as an aid to vocabulary development by exploring the abundant opportunities for reading available on the World Wide Web.

## PRETENTIOUSNESS

An extensive vocabulary can be a powerful writing and speaking tool; it can also be misused, made to make others feel powerless. Never use a five-dollar word where a fifty-cent word will do the job just as well or better. Do we really need *utilize* when a three-letter word, *use*, will nicely suffice. *Risible* is a lovely word, but is it worth sending your readers to the dictionary when *laughable* is at hand? It's a good question. On the other hand,

English III

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don't cheat yourself or your readers out of some important nuance of meaning that you've discovered in a word that's new to you. At some point you have to assume that your readers also have dictionaries. It's sometimes a tough line to draw—between being a pedantic, pretentious boor (Oh, there are three dandies!) and being a writer who can take full and efficient advantage of the English language's multifarious (another one!) resources.

The effectiveness of our writing depends to a great extent upon our vocabulary. To improve your vocabulary, please read extensively, and include the dictionary in your reading list.

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