

New ways to look at the meaning of words

As children in grade school, we learn the alphabet and then go on to vocabulary lists. Teachers, as well as conversations with friends and parents help to build our vocabulary. Soon we're talking up a storm. Later we learn to use the dictionary to look up the meaning of words with which we're not familiar and to learn new ones.

By the time we're grown, most of us have enough words in our vocabulary to carry on intelligent conversations and to write out our thoughts. Unfortunately, by adulthood, many people believe their vocabulary is sufficient and that they know enough about the meaning of words to quit learning.

Words are the means by which we communicate with one another. The more precisely you can convey your ideas to another, the better the other person will understand exactly what you mean. By taking just a few minutes each day to expand your vocabulary by understanding the various nuances of the meanings of words, you can enrich your communications exponentially. What's more, you can do this activity with your kids and give them a lifelong academic advantage with a love for the meaning of words.

Etymology is the study of word origins. Although you may think this is something best left to word geeks, knowing the origins of words can help you in many ways.

For example, if a child is taking a reading comprehension test and comes across a word he's never heard, knowing some Latin roots, prefixes and suffixes can save the day. Latin is often postured as a dead language. While Latin is not spoken today, it forms the basis for so many commonly used words in several languages.

Take the adjective, tacit. When you know the Latin root, tacere, meaning, be silent, you can set the word, tacit, in the context of the sentence in which it's used and figure out the meaning. "Joe gave his tacit approval." Tacit means unspoken, but implied.

A good Latin book is a treasure in the family library. Not only can you learn the meaning of words in English, but it's also quite helpful in learning foreign languages. The so-called romance languages, such as Spanish, French and Italian have roots in Latin.

There are a few other related books you should have in your library. A thesaurus, synonym finder and word finder serve essentially the same purpose, but you'll find slightly different formats and words in each type. A thesaurus

usually contains Latin prefixes, suffixes and roots, which is a handy feature.

Understanding the meaning of words and the variations and nuances which express a slightly different 'flavor' in that meaning can make the difference between passing or failing a test or getting or missing a wonderful job opportunity. Building your vocabulary can also be a lot of fun!