



Improving Vocabulary

Each person has two different vocabularies: the **passive** vocabulary is used to understand and comprehend context clues and inferences, and the **active** vocabulary is used to express thoughts and ideas. Having a good **passive** vocabulary helps in listening and reading, while having a good **active** vocabulary helps in speaking and writing.

Tips for Improving Passive Vocabulary

- Learn to recognize common word parts (prefixes, roots, and suffixes). This will help in deciphering unfamiliar words encountered while reading.
Ex: **malicious** (prefix) *mal* = bad (suffix) *ous* = full of
Definition: full of malice (evil)
See the UWC's "Common Prefixes, Suffixes, and Roots" handout for additional help.
- Examine the unfamiliar word's context. Frequently, the context gives clues to the meaning of the word. Clues could be the tone, phrases around the word, or a reaction to the word in the following sentences.
Ex: *Diana has to straighten every picture frame she sees because she dislikes **asymmetry**.*
Since the sentence implies that Diana straightens things to correct asymmetry, it can be deduced that the word "asymmetry" means a lack of straightness.
- Relate the word to a comparable word (cognate) in a known foreign language. Perhaps the meanings will be similar.
- While reading, try all the above steps before looking in a dictionary. When utilizing a dictionary, locate a definition appropriate to the context in which you found the word.

Tips for Improving Active Vocabulary

- Look for new words everywhere: television, newspapers, magazines, textbooks, lectures, or conversations with friends.
- Keep a small notebook or note cards around and write down new words and their contexts as they come up.
- After looking up a word in the dictionary, write it in a list. Keep the list and review it regularly.
- Use and reinforce a few new words every day. It has been suggested that one must use a word ten times before it becomes a part of one's active vocabulary.
- Make flashcards for review and self-testing. Write the new word and the sentence in which it was found (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 often and read regularly. The best way to experience new words and become comfortable with them is to see how other skillful writers use them.