

Vocabulary Study: A Guide

Use two reference works:

- a dictionary, one that includes etymologies .
- a dictionary of synonyms and antonyms

1. Transitive / Intransitive Verbs:

Note carefully whether a verb is transitive or intransitive. Remember, a transitive verb must be completed by a direct object; an intransitive verb does not take a direct object.

(The verb 'renounce,' for instance, is transitive. Someone renounces 'something'; people don't just go around 'renouncing'.)

2. Grammatical Patterns / Related Prepositions:

If your dictionary gives citations as examples, study carefully which prepositions are associated with the word under study. The dictionary will usually give the prepositions, sometimes in parentheses with the word, more often as part of the definition. Most dictionaries of synonyms list the prepositions clearly.

A dictionary of synonyms gives for the word 'impute' the following citation from Shaw: 'how dare you, sir, 'impute' such monstrous intentions to me?' You know from that line that the verb is transitive and that the grammatical pattern is <to impute something to someone.>

3. Pronunciation

Know how to say the word. Use the dictionary's pronunciation key, listen for the word, play the sound file on a computer dictionary, or ask. The word is not yours until you can, and do, say it.

4. Grammatical Patterns / Redundant Prepositions:

Note from the definition which prepositions are built into the word and avoid repeating them when you use the word.

The dictionary defines 'traverse' as 'to pass or move over, along, or through.' Those prepositions ('over,' 'along,' and 'through') are already included in the meaning of the word 'traverse,' so you do not want to repeat them by writing such redundancies as 'to traverse across.' (*Remember the prefix trans— ?*)

5. Synonym study

Find the words the dictionary identifies as synonyms for your word. Then find out how the new word is *different* from its synonyms. No two words have identical meanings. You must know the new idea your new word brings to your knowledge store.

6. Words Used In Definitions:

Be wary of words that appear familiar when they appear in a definition. Look them up just as you would the word under study.

The dictionary says that 'reprimand' means 'to reprove,' and, indeed, it does. But 'reprove' does not mean 'to prove again,' even though it looks as if it should. 'Reprove' means to scold or to chide; so does 'reprimand.' Watch out.

7. Etymologies:

Read carefully the etymology of each word you are trying to learn. You will quickly begin to see patterns that tie new words to words you already know. You'll learn a lot of good stuff, too.