



Douglas College

Douglas College Learning Centre

REMEMBERING NEW WORDS: IMPROVING YOUR VOCABULARY

Learning new words is especially important as you take introductory courses in any new field, such as psychology, biology, philosophy, and business. Part of doing well in these courses is learning effective ways to learn long lists of new terms.

The best way to increase your vocabulary is to use words a lot. Read, listen, speak and write a lot. Using words is the best way to learn them. However, when you are trying to learn a lot of new words, you may find that you can't remember them all. It may seem that for every new word you learn, you forget another. In this handout, there are some different methods for learning new words. First, however, it's important to think about some general principles for learning new words.

- ◆ It's impossible to learn every new word you come across right away. You need to pick and choose words that will be useful, or that you think you will see again often.
- ◆ If you are a second language student, don't translate new words into your first language. You need to use English to learn English.
- ◆ Don't force yourself to use dictionary definitions. Describe the meaning of words in your own words; your own words will be easier to remember.
- ◆ Use the new words you are learning as often as possible. The more you use a word, the more quickly it will be yours.
- ◆ Overlearning is important in learning new words. Overlearning is studying again and again, even after you think you could never forget.
- ◆ People have different ways of learning. Try different methods and modify methods to suit your own learning style.

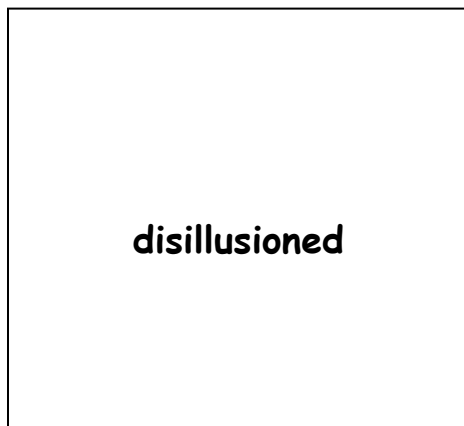
Below are some techniques you can use to help yourself remember new words you come across that you think might be useful.

The Cue Card Method

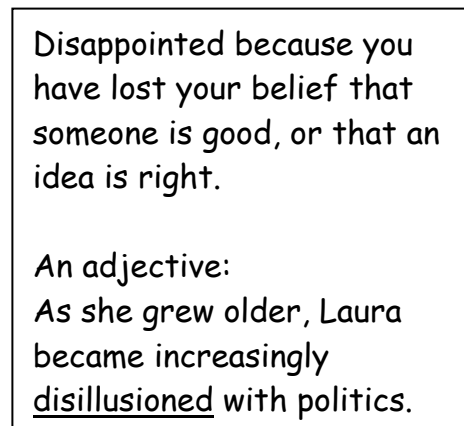
One way to learn new words is to make your own cue cards. In drugstores, stationery stores or the college bookstore, you can buy packs of 3" x 5" file cards. Once you get some cards, do the following:

1. On the front of the card, print the word or expression you want to remember. If you need help to remember how to pronounce it, you can write a phonetic spelling of the word underneath.
2. On the back of the card, write the information you need to help you learn the word. Good things to include are:
 - A definition of the word
 - A synonym for the word (a word with the same meaning)
 - A picture showing the meaning of the word
 - The part of speech (noun, verb, adjective, adverb?)
 - At least one sentence using the word.

Example:



Front



Back

3. Punch a hole in one corner of your cue cards and put the cue cards on a key ring.
4. Every day, practice with your cue cards like this:
 - ◆ Look at the word on the front of the card and say it to yourself.
 - ◆ Think or say the meaning of the word.
 - ◆ Think or say or write a new sentence using the word.
 - ◆ Check your understanding and use of the word by looking at the back of the card.

- ◆ Good times to review your cards are on a bus, right before you turn out your lights at bedtime, while you are washing dishes, etc.
5. Change the order of the cards occasionally so you can remember the words out of order.
 6. When you have practiced a word many times after you feel you really know it, take that card off the ring and put it away. Add new words to the ring to replace the old ones.
 7. Every week for a few weeks, go back and practice with the cards you took off so you don't forget them.

The Column Method

For this method, use regular lined paper like you put in your binder. Divide the paper into four columns. This is what the columns are for:

- Column 1: The word you want to learn
- Column 2: The pronunciation of the word
- Column 3: A definition of the word or a synonym
- Column 4: A sentence using the word, but put a blank space instead of the word.

Example:

Word	Pronunciation	Definition	Sentence
Forgery	Fór-ger-ee	A document, painting, or piece of paper money that is a false copy of the original.	The painting was actually a very clever forgery.
Irrelevant	Ee-ré-le-vant	Something not important because it is not connected with the situation or subject you are dealing with, or has no effect or influence on the situation.	Her comments seemed irrelevant to the real issue.

Put ten or twelve words on each page. Then practice the words this way:

1. Cover up columns 2, 3 and 4 with a piece of paper so that you can only see the word. Try to say the word and say what it means. Move your paper down to check if you remembered correctly. Then do the other words on the page in the same way.
2. Cover up columns 1, 2 and 4. Look at the definition and try to remember the word. Move your paper down to check that you got the word right. If you have difficulty with spelling, this is also a chance to try to remember the correct spelling of the word. Then do the other definitions on the page in the same way.
3. Cover up columns 1, 2 and 3. Read the sentence and try to remember which word goes in the sentence. Move your cover paper down to check your work. Do the other sentences on the page in the same way.

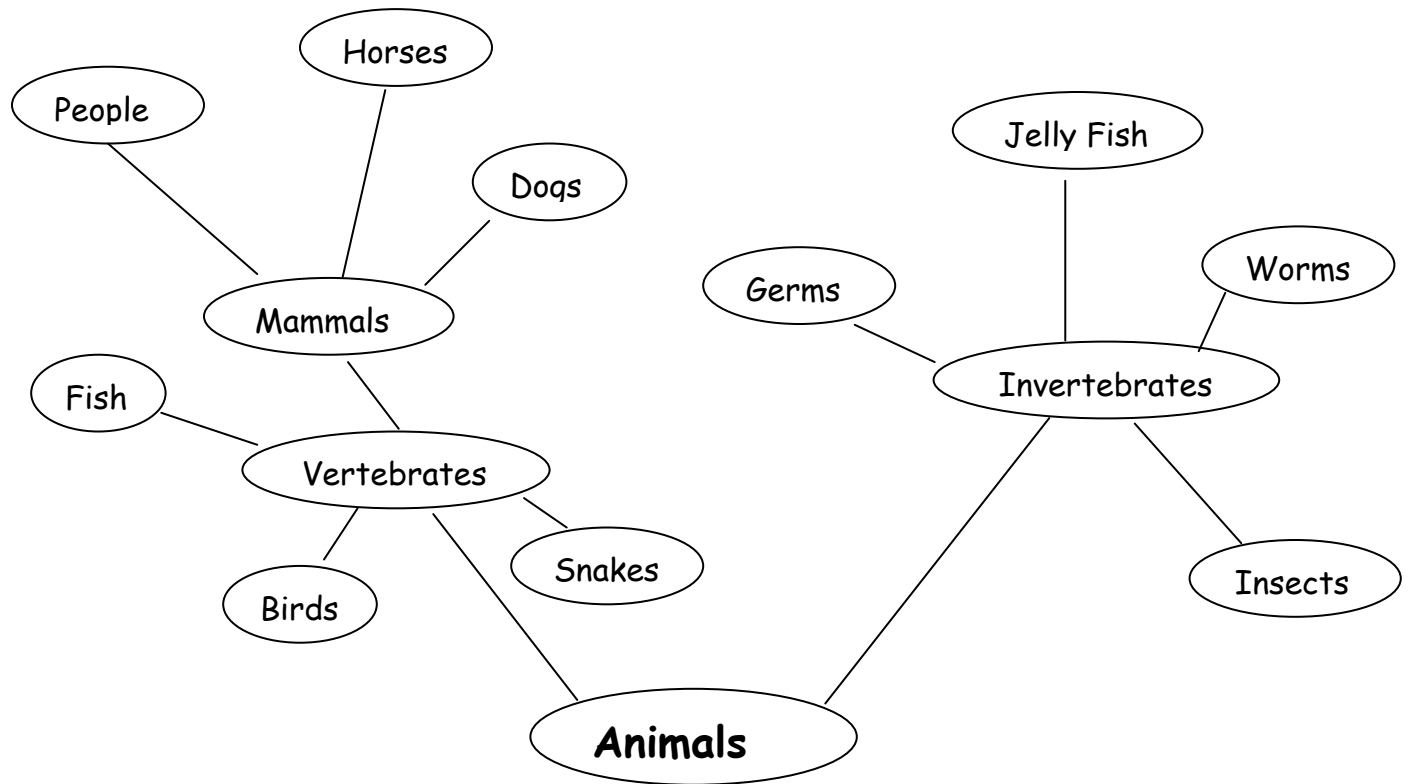
The Web Diagram Method

People remember things best when they relate them to other things they know, or connect words to a group of other words that are of a similar category. This idea is used in the web method. In the web method, you relate words to other words and put words in categories.

When you choose a word to learn, you first think of other words with related meanings. Think of other words that have the same function and are used in the same subject area. For example, if you want to learn the word “vertebrates” (animal that has bones), you might think of other words you can use to describe types of animals. You might think of *invertebrates*, *fish*, *birds*, *mammals* and *insects*. You might also think of examples of animals: *dogs*, *worms*, *horses*, and *jelly fish*.

Then draw a web diagram like the one below showing the words and their relationships. Large sheets of paper are often used for this, but ordinary sized paper can also work. At the centre of the web, you could write the heading: **Animals** in a circle. Around the heading, draw lines out like spokes from a wheel and put the biggest division of animals in a circle at the end of each spoke: **Vertebrates** and **Invertebrates**. You can continue this by thinking about different types of each division such as for vertebrates, you could put specific examples of each type by drawing more lines and circles. When you have too much information to fit on one page, choose one part of the tree and use it as a heading for a new web.

Example:



Creating your web diagram helps you learn the new words. You can also study the web diagram by looking at it and going over the words and categories. If you do big web diagrams, put them on your wall and study them while you brush your teeth or before you go to sleep at night.

The Personal Dictionary

The personal dictionary is good to make after you have practiced words intensively using one of the other methods. It is useful not only for reviewing the meanings, but also for checking the spelling of words you frequently spell wrong. When you feel you have a good knowledge of the word, put the information in a personal dictionary. This is what to do:

1. Use a thin binder with dividers.
2. On the dividers, write the letters of the alphabet.
3. Put one or more pages of regular lined paper between each divider.
4. When you feel confident about your knowledge of a new word, add it to your dictionary on the lined pages. Use the word's first letter to guide you to the

right dictionary page. Put the word, the pronunciation, the part of speech (noun, verb, adjective, adverb?), a definition or synonym and a sentence using the word on the page.

Example:

M – N

Word	Part of Speech	Pronunciation	Definition	Sentence
Magistrate	Noun	Má-jis-trayt	Someone who judges less serious crimes in a court of law.	The magistrate was the one who sentenced that thief.

5. Everyday, review your words for a letter of the alphabet. This will help you to keep your knowledge of the words fresh.
6. When you are writing something and you can't remember the exact word or its spelling, go into your dictionary to search for the word.

Conclusion

These are just a few methods you can use to help you remember new words and increase your vocabulary. They may seem like a lot of work, but other students have found them to be very effective in helping them. Whatever method you choose to work with, remember to consistently practice learning your words. It is the only way words and definitions will stay in your head.