

How To Learn English: Vocabulary (Part One)

When you're learning English—or any language—one of the most frustrating things is realizing that you have a lot more ideas than you have words. There are things you know, but can't say. It's a problem that everyone has when learning a language.

The solution to this problem is clear: **vocabulary**. The more words you know—and know how to use—the better you can express yourself. But, when you know that your vocabulary isn't good enough, how do you find the words that you need? How do you learn them, so that they'll be in your 'memory' when the time comes to use them?

Today we're going to talk about finding the words that *you* need—English has a *lot* of words, the Oxford English Dictionary [contains 171,476 words](#)¹—so that you will have the vocabulary that you need, and not the vocabulary that I need. When we do this, we're going to have two basic principles: **triage** and **practice**.

Triage

To **triage** is to prioritize. The verb comes originally from medical work: when a doctor has a lot of patients and wants to help them all, he has to prioritize them into the patients he has to see first, and the patients who can wait. That way, hopefully, none of the patients die while they're waiting for care.

Learning vocabulary is not that dramatic. Words won't die if you don't learn them in time.

Triaging your vocabulary is still important, though. Everyone has a limit to how much they can learn in one day. For me, when I'm working full-time and relaxing in the evening, I think the limit is about ten words per day. (I'm learning French, now, to test my own limit.) The trick is to making sure that the ten words I learn are words that I will also use. If I only have a vocabulary of three hundred words, I want to make sure that they're words that I can use. That's why every language course starts with common verbs and nouns.

Triaging means deciding which vocabulary words are important to you. It also means deciding which words *not* to learn. Too often, my students are frustrated that they spend a lot of time 'learning English,' but don't feel like they're talking better. It's because they're learning words they seldom or never use!

Speaking perfect English is a great goal. And, with time, it's a goal that you can reach. On your way to the goal, though, you want to be as prepared as possible for the conversations that you'll be having. That's why triage is an important principle to learning vocabulary.

¹ <http://www.askoxford.com/asktheexperts/faq/aboutenglish/numberwords>

How do you triage?

Talking about triage is easy. But how do you know which words you're going to need? That takes a little more effort. If you're learning English for a reason—for your job, for vacation, to study in the U.S. or England—then you have a good start: think about the vocabulary you need for the same task in your native language and make a list. Learn *those* words in English.

Many websites offer lists of vocabulary sorted by topic. A quick Google search for “English vocabulary list” found:

- **English Zone:** [Vocabulary lists](http://www.english-zone.com/vocab/index.php?CID=5)
<http://www.english-zone.com/vocab/index.php?CID=5>
- **Many Things:** [Large English Vocabulary Lists](http://www.manythings.org/vocabulary/lists/l/)
<http://www.manythings.org/vocabulary/lists/l/>
- **Learn English Today:** [Free English Vocabulary](http://www.learn-english-today.com/vocabulary/a_vocabulary-contents.htm)
http://www.learn-english-today.com/vocabulary/a_vocabulary-contents.htm

If you want vocabulary on a specific topic, try a Google search. I tried a search for “English vocabulary list for doctors” and found plenty of results!

The next point I have to make is this: when you learn a word, as yourself if you use it in your native language. There's no sense in wasting time and energy on vocabulary you aren't going to use. When your English teacher—or textbook—includes vocabulary that you don't think you're going to use, skip it and move on to the vocabulary that you expect to need. In the worst case, you can always learn it later!

Practice makes perfect!

Maybe you've been taking English classes for half a year. You always triage your vocabulary, and you've even made a list of words that you notice yourself using a lot in your native language and you've learned them in English. Are you ready now? Probably not.

My experience is that English-learners don't know what they talk about in their native languages, because they don't think about it when they're talking. If I ask them, they tell me the topics they discuss at work, and maybe in their hobbies. But when we have casual conversations, we talk about many other things, from musicians to history.

The best way to realize what you talk about, is to start talking about it in English.

Making **small talk**, or polite conversation, with your English teacher—or someone else who speaks English—is a good way to find the words you don't know. Can you describe the problem

you had at work today, in English? Is your English good enough to describe something funny that happened on the tram the other day? Our conversations are seldom about 'just work,' or 'just school.' We talk about what happens in our day-to-day lives, and the best way to find the vocabulary you need to do that is to practice. If you realize you don't know how to complain about the company parking garage in English, look the words up! When you're in the middle of a conversation about your brother-in-law and realize that there's a joke about lawyers you like but can't tell in English, make a note and look the words up!

The more you use English to describe the world around you, instead of writing the boring paragraphs that an English teacher tells you to write, you'll find the words you want to learn. And, if you have a good English teacher, they'll be ready to give you some very colorful idioms to describe your day-to-day life.

What if you don't have a partner to talk to in English? Maybe you aren't paying for English lessons, or aren't paying anymore. What can you do? My advice is a **journal**. A journal, traditionally, is a book full of blank pages where you can write what is happening in your life. That doesn't have to be the case, though. To work on your vocabulary, my advice is to find some paper and, at the end of each day, write down the most important thing about each day. Only two or three sentences to say "Today I had a student who is an accountant. He says that I'm probably doing my taxes wrong. Now I have to find someone to give me tax advice!"

A journal like this is great practice, in general, and if you focus on always describing the most important things in your day, you'll quickly get the vocabulary you need most, and it only takes a few moments.

One last idea is this: don't forget **Bite-Sized-English.com**. At the end of every vocabulary text there are a series of questions. Don't try to answer them all, try to answer the ones that interest you. It's a good chance to express yourself, and if you make any serious mistakes in your answers, I'll correct them in the comments. That's free English help!

When I know the words I want, how do I learn them?

If you've made it this far, and you have long lists of the words you think you need, the next question becomes: how do you learn them? How do you take the words from your dictionary and get them into your head? That's going to be the topic of the next "How to learn English."

Until then, I will tell you this: learning vocabulary takes time and a little effort, but it doesn't have to be painful. You do it everyday in your native language, you can do it in English, too!