Getting the Most Out of Your Dictionary

When should you use your dictionary for reading?

THINK ABOUT IT: In what reading circumstances or situations do you think it is necessary to use your dictionary? How often do you use your dictionary? Use your dictionary as one of many vocabulary tools or strategies. Do not depend solely on your dictionary when you encounter a new word. Use context clues such as examples, synonyms/antonyms, word parts, or other vocabulary strategies first.

Different types of dictionaries

What type of dictionary do you use? Most ESL instructors recommend their students to use a dictionary that is designed specifically for ESL students.

THINK ABOUT IT: How are ESL dictionaries different from a standard dictionary for native speakers? Let's look and write down the ways that they are different.

Other tools you can use:
Besides your dictionary, consider using other types of word-level reference materials: translation dictionaries
- a computerized dictionary
- specialized dictionaries (for idioms, phrasal verbs)
- a specialized vocabulary dictionary for a narrow field of study (such as computers, nursing)
- a thesaurus
I. Finding words quickly (guide words)

The two words at the top of each dictionary page are called **guide words**. Shown on the next page are guide words from a page of a dictionary:

Above, in the sample, ‘oath’ and ‘oblong’ are the **guide words**. ‘Oath’ is the first word that will be defined on that page, and ‘oblong’ is the last word defined on the page. All the other words on the page fall alphabetically between the first and second guide word. Using the guide words will save you time because you don’t have to scan through the whole page of words to see whether you are on the right page or not. Which two words would appear on the page with ‘oath’ and ‘oblong’?

oak               object               obsess               obedient

**Practice**

Below are five pairs of dictionary guide words followed by other words. Circle the two words in each series which would be found on the page with the guide words.

1. check/chest
   cheetah       chew       cheat       cheap       chemist

2. glamour/gloss
   glare         glee       goal        glorify      globe

3. indemnity/indulgence
   in-depth      indirect   indispensable inertia

4. misery/mixed marriage
   misfortune    misuse      mistletoe   misspell   mitten

II. Using spelling hints to find a word

Do you know how to find a word in a dictionary if you are unsure of its spelling?

1. **Sound out the word.**
   Then look up the word based on how you think it is spelled.

2. **Write down the word you want to look up.** If you can’t find it, try substituting a letter or group of letter from the pairs below. For example, if a word isn’t spelled with an ‘f’, try ‘v’ or ‘ph’. Here are some common word pairs/groups:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ch/k</th>
<th>c/s</th>
<th>f/v/iph</th>
<th>gl/j</th>
<th>qu/kw/k</th>
<th>s/c/z</th>
<th>y/Il/e</th>
<th>sh/ch</th>
<th>sch/sc/sk</th>
<th>w/wh</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>able/ible</td>
<td>tious/cious</td>
<td>al/el/e</td>
<td>ancyency</td>
<td>ate/ite</td>
<td>au/aw</td>
<td>ea/ee</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>er/or</td>
<td>ie/ei</td>
<td>tion/sion/shun</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
3. Look at the consonants in the word. If they are single, try doubling some, and if they are double, try removing one.

4. Try changing the vowels if the consonant switching didn't help.

Practice
What hints could you use for the following misspelled words?

revize
kidnap
karry
inviroment

III. Different features of dictionary entries
Do you use your dictionary ONLY to look up the definitions of words? Your dictionary is an excellent resource for learning a lot about the word which, in turn, will help you to remember the word better, pronounce it, see a variety of definitions, and see other features related to the word.

1. Definitions
   Of course the main purpose for using the dictionary is to find the meaning of new words. However, it is important to remember that words often have more than one meanings, so you must find the meaning that most appropriate to the context in which you found the meaning. If your dictionary has sample sentences, use those to help you find the correct definition.

Practice:
For example, look at the entry for the word sport.

Which definition for “sport” from above fits the context for the following sentence?

a) Greg sported a new outfit for the party.

b) Greg is a good sport.

c) Greg likes to watch sports.
2. **Grammatical information**

Pay close attention to the additional *grammatical information* that the dictionary provides:

- Parts of speech: nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs, prepositions...
- Countable/uncountable nouns: [C] [U]
- Irregular verb forms: grow/grew/grown
- Alternative spellings: theater/theatre
- Irregular plural forms: goose/geese
- Comparatives: good/better/best

Your dictionary has a guide to explain what the grammatical symbols are. You should become familiar with that guide.

3. **Synonyms**

When you are looking up your new word, why not learn other words along with it? Most dictionaries contain synonyms (words that have a similar meaning) and/or antonyms (words that have the opposite meaning) for most of the words.

**Practice**

Can you find a synonym or antonym for the following words:

1. monogram

2. grudge

3. diligent

4. **Usage notes**

In some ESL dictionaries, many words give information about American culture. Your dictionary may also contain a wide range of usage notes, many of which provide relevant cultural information.

**Practice**

Look up the following words in the dictionary and discuss the accompanying usage notes:

1. blue-collar

2. bathroom
5. **Idioms/Phrasal verbs**

An idiom is a phrase or expression that has a different meaning form the individual words. Most ESL dictionaries include information about many common idiomatic expressions in English.

**Practice:**
In the example below, which meaning of the expression “head over heels” is an idiom?

**head over heels:** a. to fall down: *He fell head over heels down the stairs.* B. to fall in love: *He fell head over heels in love with her.*

When you hear a new idiomatic expression, you can try to look it up by checking one of the major words in the idiom. For example, in the above idiom, try “head” and “heels” to find the location of the idiom in your dictionary.

**Practice**
What do the following idioms mean? Look them up in your dictionary.

1. beg to differ

2. or else

6. **Pronunciation**

To fully know and understand and be able to use a new word, it is important to know not only the definition, but also the pronunciation of the word. Knowing the pronunciation of the word will allow you to use the word in your speech clearly, and it will also help you to recognize the word when you are listening to others.

Many students ignore the pronunciation of a word because they are unfamiliar with the phonetic symbols that are used by the dictionary to explain the various sounds used in the word. However, a bit of time spent reviewing and practicing with the dictionary’s pronunciation guide will help you to comfortably understand the phonetic symbols used for each word in the dictionary.

The pronunciation of a word is written using phonetic (sound-based) letters. Some of those letters are similar to regular English letters, but others may be new to you. The phonetic letters are always enclosed between brackets [ ] or slashes / / right after the word in the dictionary.
The dictionary pronunciation can tell you three separate pieces of information:

1. **the individual sounds used in the word.** This is an important piece, especially given the mismatch between the sounds and spellings of English.

2. **the number of syllables.** Some dictionaries put a dot or hyphen between syllables, but others don't. If your dictionary does not, it is still easy to figure out the number of syllables. Simply count the number of vowel sounds in the phonetic spelling of the word. For each vowel sound, there is a syllable.

3. **the syllable stress.** Which syllables in a word get the stress? Accent marks ('') in front of/behind/on top of a syllable (depending on the dictionary you use,) show which syllable gets stress in the word.

Take a minute to find the pronunciation guide for your dictionary. How are accent marks used to show stress in your dictionary? Does your dictionary separate syllables?

**Practice**
How do you pronounce the following words? Look up the word in the dictionary and write down the phonetic spelling of the word (with stress marks). Then, using your pronunciation guide, determine the number of syllables and pronunciation of the word.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>word</th>
<th>phonetic spelling</th>
<th>Number of syllables</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>handkerchief</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>papyrus</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>quiche</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>conscientious</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**IV. Additional features of your dictionary**
Page through your dictionary, particularly at the beginning and end. What additional features does your dictionary contain? Write some of them below.

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V. Dictionary CD-ROM

Many dictionaries contain CD-ROMs with them. Have you used yours on a computer? The CD often gives the pronunciation of words, and the CD allows you to type in pieces of words to quickly find the word you are looking for. In addition, most CDs have accompanying exercises to practice your dictionary skills.