Reading the Dictionary

Experts believe that most English-speaking adults use between 25,000 and 50,000 words. That seems like a large number, yet the English language has over a million words. Effective readers use a dictionary to understand new or difficult words.

Most dictionaries provide the following information:
• Guide words (the words at the top of each page)
• Spelling (how the word and its different forms are spelled)
• Pronunciation (how to say the word)
• Part of speech (the function of the word)
• Definition (the meaning of the word)
• Synonyms (words that have similar meanings)
• Etymology (the history of the word)

All dictionaries have guide words at the top of each page. However, dictionaries differ from each other in the way they give other information about words. Some dictionaries give more information about the origin of the word; other dictionaries give long lists of synonyms. Each dictionary will explain how to use its resources in the first few pages.

How to Read a Dictionary Entry

The following entry from Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary, 10th edition, will be used as an example for the discussions about the kinds of information a dictionary provides.

her·bi·cide (h)ər-bə-ˌsīd ˈn [L herba + ISV = cide] (1899) : an agent used to destroy or inhibit plant growth — her·bi·cid·al (h)ər-bə-ˌsī-dəl ˈadj — her·bi·cid·al·ly ˈdəl -əˈli ˈadv
Spelling and Syllables

The spelling of the main word is given first in **bold** type. The word is also divided into syllables. The word *herbicide* has three syllables: *her-bi-cide*. Spellings of words based on this word are given at the end of the entry. This listing is especially helpful when letters are dropped or added to create a new word. The word *herbicide* changes form and spelling to become *herbicidal*, which has four syllables, *her-bi-cid-al*, and *herbicidally*, which has five syllables, *her-bi-cid-al-ly*.

**EXAMPLES** Use a dictionary to break the following words into syllables. In the spaces provided, rewrite each word, placing a dot (·) between the syllables.

1. intermit ________________________________
2. pedagogy ________________________________

**EXPLANATIONS**

1. *Intermit* has three syllables: *in-ter-mit*.
2. *Pedagogy* has four syllables: *ped-a-go-gy*.

**PRACTICE**

Use a dictionary to break the following words into syllables. In the spaces provided, rewrite each word, placing a dot (·) between the syllables.

1. scavenger ________________________________
2. tundra ________________________________

**Pronunciation symbols** indicate the sounds of consonants and vowels. Dictionaries provide pronunciation keys so that you will understand the symbols used in the pronunciation guide to a word. Below is a sample pronunciation key.

**Pronunciation Key**

```
\a\ abut \o\ kitten, F table \ar\ further \a\ ash \a\ ace \a\ mop, mar
\a\ʊ\ out \ch\ chin \e\ bet \e\ easy \g\ go \i\ hit \i\ ice \j\ job
\n\ sing \ð\ go \ð\ law \ð\ i\ boy \th\ thin \th\ the \ð\ loot \ð\ foot
\y\ yet \zh\ vision \a, k, n, œ, òe, ûe, üe, y
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Note that each letter and symbol is followed by a sample word. The sample word tells you how that letter and symbol sounds. For example, the long *a*
sounds like a in ace. And the short i has the sound of the i in bit. The symbol that looks like an upside down e (ə) is called a schwa. The schwa has a sound like uh, as in about.

Different dictionaries use different symbols in their pronunciation keys, so be sure to check the key of the dictionary you are using.

**EXAMPLES**  Use the pronunciation key reprinted in this book to answer questions about the following words. Write the letters of your answers in the given spaces.

1. con·sign (kənˈsīn)
   The i in consign sounds like the i in
   a. sit
   b. sigh

2. de·vi·ate (ˈdē-vē-āt)
   The a in deviate sounds like the a in
   a. mat
   b. day

**EXPLANATIONS**

1. The i in consign sounds like the i in sigh
2. The a in deviate sounds like the a in day.

**PRACTICE**

Using your dictionary, find and write in the pronunciation symbols and accent marks for each of the following words.

1. ouster ____________________________
2. papyrus ____________________________

**Parts of Speech**

Parts of speech indicate how a word functions in a sentence. Dictionary entries tell you what part of speech a word is—noun, verb, adjective, and so on. The part of speech is abbreviated and printed in italics. Your dictionary provides a full list of abbreviations. The following are the most common abbreviations for the parts of speech:
Read again the sample dictionary entry for *herbicide*.

As the entry shows, the word *herbicide* is a noun. Two other forms of the word are identified as an adjective (*herbicidal*) and an adverb (*herbicidally*).

### Examples

Use your dictionary to identify the parts of speech for each of the following words. A word may be used as more than one part of speech.

1. complement __________________________________________
2. before _______________________________________________
3. fly _____________________________________________

### Explanations

1. *Complement* can be used as a noun or a verb.
2. *Before* can be used as an adjective, an adverb, a conjunction, or a preposition.
3. *Fly* can be used as an adjective, a noun, or a verb.

### Practice 3

Use your dictionary to identify the parts of speech for each of the following words. A word may be used as more than one part of speech.

1. graph __________________________________________
2. angle _____________________________________________
3. degree ___________________________________________
Definitions

Most words have more than one meaning. When there is more than one definition, each meaning is numbered. Many times the dictionary will also provide examples of sentences in which the word is used.

**Example**  Three definitions are given for the word *degree*. In the spaces provided, write the number of the definition that best fits its meaning in each sentence.

1. A step or stage in a process  
2. A unit of measurement for angles and curves  
3. A title conferred on students by a college, university, or professional school upon completion of a program of study

   ____ A. Joanne changed her physical fitness activities by *degrees*; she began with short 5-minute walks and built up to 30-minute walks every day of the week.
   ____ B. John received his associate of arts *degree* from a community college and his bachelor of arts degree from a four-year university.
   ____ C. If two triangles are similar, their corresponding angles have the same number of *degrees*.

**Explanation**  
A. The correct answer is “a step or stage in a process” (1).  
B. The correct answer is “a title conferred on students by a college, university, or professional school upon completion of a program of study” (3).  
C. The correct answer is “a unit of measurement for angles and curves” (2).

**Practice**  
Here are two words, their definitions, and sentences using the words based on their various definitions. In the spaces provided, write the number of the definition that best fits each sentence. Note that one definition is not used.

A. **factor**: 1 something that brings about a result, ingredient  
   2 one who acts or transacts the business of another  
   3 a number that will divide into another number exactly

   ____ 1. The manufacturer submits the order, along with the terms and conditions, to the *factor* for approval.
   ____ 2. The *factors* of 10 are 1, 2, and 5.
   ____ 3. The doctor discovered that pollen was a *factor* in Justine’s sinus condition.
B. **plot**: 1 *n* a small area of planted ground 2 *n* the plan or main story of a literary work 3 *v* to mark or note on as if on a map or chart

4. The graph of an equation is a drawing that *plots* all its solutions.

5. Grandmother worked in the vegetable *plot* all morning.

**Textbook Aids for Learning Content Words**

**Content Words**

Many students think they should be able to pick up a textbook and simply read it. However, a textbook is written for a content or subject area, such as math, history, or English. Each content area has its own vocabulary. For example, a history textbook takes a different approach from that of a literature textbook. Different courses may use the same words, but the words often take on a new or different meaning in the context of the content area.

**EXAMPLE** The following sentences all use the word *parallel*. Write the letter of the course that would use the word in the context in which it appears.

1. The brain appears to be a *parallel* processor, in which many different groups of neuron circuits work on different tasks at the same time.
   a. mathematics  
   b. English  
2. Some writers use *parallel* structure of words and phrases for a balanced and smooth flow of ideas.
   a. mathematics  
   b. English  
3. *Parallel* lines never intersect.
   a. mathematics  
   b. English

**EXPLANATION** Use context clues to determine your answers.

1. The word *parallel* in this sentence is used in the study of the mind. So this term is used in a psychology class (d).

2. The word *parallel* in this sentence is used in an English class (b).

3. The word *parallel* in this sentence is used in a mathematics class (a).
Textbook Definitions

You do not always need to use the dictionary to find the meaning of a word. In fact, many textbooks contain words or word groups that you cannot find in a dictionary. The content word is usually typed in bold or italic print. The definition follows, and many times an example is given. Context clues are helpful.

EXAMPLE Read the following passage from a psychology textbook. Then answer the questions that follow it.

Disconfirmation is a communication pattern in which you ignore a person’s presence as well as that person’s communications. You say, in effect, that the person and what she or he has to say aren’t worth serious attention. Disconfirming responses often lead to loss of self-esteem. Note that disconfirmation is not the same as rejection. In rejection, you disagree with the person; you indicate your unwillingness to accept something the other person says or does. In disconfirming someone, however, you deny that person’s significance; you claim that what this person says or does simply does not count.


1. A communication pattern in which you ignore a person’s presence as well as that person’s communications is ________________.
2. An unwillingness to accept something the other person says or does is ________________.

EXPLANATION The author knows that these words, or the specific uses of these words, may be new for many students, so the words are set in bold print and definitions are given.

1. disconfirmation
2. rejection

PRACTICE Read each of the following textbook passages. Then write the definition for each of the words in bold print.

1. To say that $x + 4 < (is less than) 10$ and $x < (is less than) 6$ are equivalent is to say that they have the same solution set. For example, the number 3 is a solution to $x + 4 < 10$. It is also a solution for $x < 6$. The number –2 is a solution
of \( x < 6 \). It is also a solution of \( x + 4 < 10 \). Any solution of one is a solution of the other; they are equivalent.


**equivalent**

2. To borrow the useful terms of the English novelist E. M. Forster, characters may seem flat or round. A **flat** character has only one outstanding trait or feature: for example, the stock character of the mad scientist, with his lust for absolute power and his crazily gleaming eyes.


**flat**

3. **Codependence** refers to a self-defeating relationship pattern in which a person is “addicted to the addict.”


**Codependence**

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**Glossary**

Because each subject area has its own special vocabulary, many textbooks provide a special section called a glossary. A **glossary** is a list of words and their meanings. Sometimes the glossary is placed in the side margins on a textbook page; sometimes the glossary is a separate section in the back of the book. The words in a glossary are placed in alphabetical order. They give the word, the spelling, and the meaning of the word or words only as they are used in that subject area or textbook.

**EXAMPLE** Read the following sample glossary from an English composition handbook. In the spaces provided, write **T** if the statement is true or **F** if the statement is false.

**Glossary of Fallacies**

- **Ad hominem attack** Attack on a person’s character to win an argument or point. The term means “against the man” or “against the person.”
- **Bandwagon appeal** An attempt to cause a person to assume a view or take action due to peer pressure.
- **False cause** An error in thinking that assumes one event causes another.
- **Hasty generalization** Drawing a conclusion about a population based on a sample that is not large enough.
1. Jeremy made a hasty generalization when he gave credit to making a perfect score on his math test to the rabbit’s foot he carried for good luck.

2. Elected public officials often face ad hominem attacks about their private lives during election campaigns.

3. Bill’s decision to smoke cigarettes because his friends all smoke is an example that a bandwagon appeal may actually work.

4. The word fallacies suggests errors.

EXPLANATION
1. False; Jeremy committed a false cause error.
2. True
3. True
4. True

EXERCISE Test 1

Vocabulary-Building Skills

A. Look over the following entry from Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary. Then mark the numbered items T (true) or F (false), based on the entry.

My·o·pia \mi-ˈō-pē-ə\ n [NL, fr. Gk myôpia, fr. myôp-, myôps] (ca. 1752)
1 : a condition in which the visual images come to a focus in front of the retina of the eye resulting esp. in defective vision of distant objects
2 : a lack of foresight or discernment: a narrow view of something – my·o·pic \ˈō-pik, -ˈā-\ adj – my·o·pi·cal·ly \-pē-k(ə)lē\ adv

1. The entry gives three forms of the word myopia.
2. Myopia can be a way of thinking about a topic.
3. Myopia has three syllables.
4. The y in myopia sounds like the y in yard.
5. Myopic is a noun.
B. Look over the following list of words from the glossary of the college textbook *Access to Health*. Based on the definition of each word and the context of each sentence, label each statement T if it is true or F if it is false.

**Glossary**

- **Stress**: Mental and physical responses to change.
- **Stressor**: A physical, social, or psychological event or condition that requires adjustment.
- **Adjustment**: The attempt to cope with a given situation.
- **Strain**: The wear-and-tear sustained by the body and mind in adjusting to or resisting a stressor.

1. **6. Stress** is usually the result of an internal state of emotional tension that occurs in response to the various demands of living.
2. **7. An angry parent is an example of a stressor.**
3. **8. Adjustments** are used as a last resort in response to stress.
4. **9. Strain** is always a physical problem.
5. **10. Binge eating may be an unhealthy adjustment to the stress caused by low self-esteem.**

**REVIEW Test 2**

**Vocabulary-Building Skills**

A. Look over the following entry from *Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary*. Then mark each item T (true) or F (false), based on the entry.

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1. The noun myriad comes from a Greek word meaning “ten thousand.”
2. The word myriad can be used as a noun or as an adjective.

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3. The word *myriad* has four syllables.

4. The *i* in *myriad* sounds like the *i* in *sigh*.

**B.** Look over the following list of words from the glossary of an ecology textbook. Based on the definition of each word and the context of each sentence, label each statement **T** if it is true or **F** if it is false.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Glossary</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Alluvial</strong> A water-carved canyon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Arroyo</strong> Related to material deposited by running water</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Playa</strong> A natural, low water basin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Topography</strong> The physical structure of the landscape</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

5. The **topography** of a desert is made up of lush vegetation.

6. **Playas** can receive water that rushes down a hill.

7. After a violent storm, soil that has been shaped into **alluvial** fans stretch across the desert.

**C.** Look over the following list of words from the glossary of an English handbook. Based on the definition of each word and the context of each sentence, label each statement **T** if it is true or **F** if it is false.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Glossary of Usage and Terms</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Annotation</strong> A brief note you write about a text while reading it by making marks such as underlining, circling, and highlighting. Notes can be words, phrases, questions, or statements.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Paraphrase</strong> A restatement in your own words of the author’s ideas and structure. A paraphrase closely follows the original source, pulls in many details, and may be as long as the original text.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Summary</strong> A condensed version of a text in which you explain the author’s meaning fairly and accurately in your own words. A summary focuses on the author’s main idea and is shorter than the original text.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

8. **Annotations** are written directly on the pages of a textbook.

9. A **summary** is longer than a **paraphrase**.

10. **Paraphrasing** is an effective reading and writing skill when the order of the author’s ideas is important for emphasis.
## Effective Reader Scorecard

### Vocabulary-Building Skills

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Test</th>
<th>Number Correct</th>
<th>Points</th>
<th>Score</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Review Test 1</td>
<td></td>
<td>×</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Review Test 2</td>
<td></td>
<td>×</td>
<td></td>
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