Wordsmith’s Top 10 Tips for an Astonishing Vocabulary

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While “X Days to a Better Vocabulary” books are helpful to a certain extent, building a rich vocabulary is a journey of a lifetime. New words enter the language all the time, old words change their meaning (a few hundred years ago if you called someone nice, you’d be saying he was stupid!). Here are some practical tips that will help to enrich your verbal palette.

1. Look it Up

Next time you come across a word that you are less than certain of, try looking it up. And pay special attention to the etymology (origin of words). Here’s an example: we know that liquor often makes one prolix (speaking at excessive length). But once we look into the etymology of this word, we discover that the connection is even deeper. Both the words “prolix” and “liquor” derive from the same Latin root, liquere (to flow). Once you know this, you will never forget the word “prolix”!

2. Go Electronic

The big-book-is-too-heavy-to-open is no excuse now. You can simply use an online dictionary. In addition, most dictionaries (including the 20 volume Oxford English Dictionary) are available in CD-ROM that you can install on your computer.

3. Take It With You

Buy a portable dictionary and keep it in your car or purse. Whenever you come across a new word, don’t let it go without first checking it. Make sure you know its precise meaning and origin. Also keep a dictionary handy in your office and on the dining table. There are many handheld electronic dictionaries available that may be more convenient.

4. Read Far and Wide

Read outside your field or interests. Each field introduces you to another new set of words. If you are into science fiction, try a romance novel for a change. If you write software for a living, check out books on woodworking, for example. And read above your usual level, not those fluffy books or magazines.

5. Dig Up the Roots

If you learn your suffixes and prefixes, hundreds of new words are always at your service. For example, if you know that acro- means height or tip, you can easily figure out that acrophobia is the fear of heights and acropathy is a disease of the extremities (the end part of a limb: hand or foot). It’s the same acro- that shows up in the word acronym, because we pick the tip (the initial letter) of the words.
Have it in Writing

When you bump into an unusual word, and look it up, make sure to write it down in a notebook. Then you'll be able to refer to it later to reinforce it in your mind, and you'll also have a record of all the unusual new words you have learned.

Buddy Up

Set up a system where you share a newly discovered word with a friend or colleague. You can use it in an email, a memo, instant-messaging, etc. Use a new word a few times in a day to make it difficult to forget.

Play With Words

Cultivate a sense of fun with words. Think of increasing your vocabulary as something joyful. Play with words. Make up new words. Rearrange their letters to make anagrams. Try word games such as Scrabble, crosswords, and hangman.

The Way to Carnegie Hall

Practice, practice, practice! The same method as the one to get to the Carnegie Hall applies. Whenever you write or speak, consciously try to choose words that you haven’t used in the past. This doesn’t mean that you have to force words, but don’t be afraid to use a word that fits just because it’s not heard or read every day.

A Word A Day Keeps the Dictionary Away

Drop by drop an ocean is filled. Learn a new word every day, and soon you will have mastered hundreds of new words in just a few months.