Understanding Unknown Vocabulary

# What should I do when I don’t know the meaning of a word?

In your reading for college, you may come across several words you haven’t seen before. Rather than skip over the word or look up every new word in the dictionary, it’s important to build your reading skills by working to grow your knowledge of discipline-specific words.

# Four Strategies for Finding the Meaning of Unknown Words

There are four strategies that you can use to find the meaning of an unknown word. The strategies begin with the word itself and branch out beyond the text.

* Part of Speech: The English language has four parts of speech which are relevant to understanding vocabulary
  + Noun: Person, place, thing, idea
  + Verb: Action words that describe what a noun is doing (Verbs are most commonly actions but also can be helping or linking)
  + Adjective: Describing word for a noun
  + Adverb: Describing word for an adjective or a verb
* Word Parts: Many words in the English language are made up of smaller word parts that carry their own meaning. These word parts are prefixes, roots, and suffixes. The root of a word is what carries the word’s meaning. Prefixes attach to the beginning of a word and changes the meaning (usually to make the word mean the opposite). Suffixes attach to the end of a word and determine the part of speech. For example, in the word recyclable,
  + the root (cycle) means process
  + the prefix (re) means do again
  + the suffix (able) means can do or has the ability—in other words, -able makes a word an adjective

In the English language, roots often come from Greek or Latin, but they can also come from German, Anglo-Saxon or French origins. There are many resources to help us understand the meaning of roots. Here are a couple:

[Learn that Word](https://www.learnthat.org/pages/view/roots.html) (a Prefix, Root, and Suffix dictionary)

[Online Etymology Dictionary](https://www.etymonline.com/) (this dictionary provides information about what words meant or sounded like hundreds of years ago)

[Dictionary of Affixes](https://www.affixes.org/) (Prefixes and Suffixes are types of Affixes)

* Word in Context: If you haven’t been able to figure out the meaning of the word from the word itself, look at the sentences around the word. If you’ve figured out the part of speech, you might be able to find another word that is the same part of speech with a similar meaning.
* Using the Dictionary: Using the dictionary is the last resort because it doesn’t help us understand the meaning of the word in context. It’s also really easy to look up an unknown word and then immediately forget what it means. If you look up a word in the dictionary, make sure that you still annotate the meaning of the word in your notes.

# Regardless of what strategy or combination of strategies helps you unlock a new word, make sure that you annotate the definition so that you’ll remember it for next time! ☺