



## Grammar Help Sheet: Using the Dictionary

Everyone wishes to develop the ability to express himself fluently and accurately. The shortest way to develop that ability is by skillful and intelligent use of the dictionary. A good antidote for that common ailment known as self-consciousness is a command of words. The shortest road to confidence and poise is the possession and accurate use of an effective vocabulary, and the best source of material for this is the dictionary.

People often think that the dictionary is used only to look up the meanings of unfamiliar words, but there are many other facts about words that may be learned from a dictionary. These include: how words are pronounced, how words are divided into syllables, how words are spelled, how the plurals of nouns are formed, how words are put together to form compounds. We may learn synonyms of words, the meanings and uses of prefixes and suffixes, the part of speech that a word is, the principal parts of verbs, and the comparison of adjectives and adverbs. We may learn the best usage of words through illustrative sentences and phrases, and we may learn from the front and back of the dictionary rules for spelling and plurals, abbreviations, geographical and biographical names, and much other vulnerable information.

Let us consider how we can make the dictionary serve us most effectively in our study of words.

### Locating the Word Quickly

Open your dictionary. You see at once that all the words are listed alphabetically. Note that on the very top of each page are two heavily typed words. These are called guide words. The left-hand guide word is the same as the first heavily typed word on the page; the right-hand guide word is the same as the last heavily typed word on the page. The word you are looking for must come between these guide words. For example, if the guide words are shawl and sheer, you will not find sheet on that page, because the letter t comes after the letter r in the alphabet and does not come between the letters l and r.

### Capitalization

When a word should be spelled with a capital letter, the vocabulary entry begins with a capital, such as Dutch or Vatican. Words commonly capitalized sometimes have meanings in which the capital is not used. This is indicated by (not cap.) directly before that particular definition. Look up the word Puritan in your dictionary for an example. The opposite is also true, for some words not commonly capitalized have meanings that require the capital letter. Such usage is indicated by (cap.) directly before the definition. Refer to the word friend in your dictionary.

### Pronunciation

The first information that appears after the entry of the word itself is its pronunciation. The phonetic spelling after each word gives its correct pronunciation. You will find either in the front of the dictionary or on the inside of the cover a study of the different signs used to indicate certain sounds. These signs or symbols are known as diacritical marks. These marks, together with their sounds, may be learned quickly and easily. A very little concentrated study will enable you to obtain a reasonably sound knowledge of them, a knowledge that will last a lifetime. First learn the names of the important markings; know the sounds they symbolize; and then have a guide word for each symbol or mark.

## Syllables

There is a second aid to pronunciation. You will note that most of the words are broken up into groups of letters called syllables. A syllable is a word or part of a word pronounced with one vocal effort. It may consist of a single vowel (the vowels are a, e, i, o, and u) or a group of letters forming a single sound. When a complete word consists of only one sound, it is called a monosyllable, as: the letter a, the words height, drowned, breadth, teach. When two separate efforts of the voice are required to produce the word, you have two sounds or two syllables. When three separate utterances are required, you have three syllables, and so forth.

You will see at once how the syllables serve us in pronunciation. Words of more than one syllable are marked with an accent, as the first syllable of the word pa'per, the second syllable of the word re-fuse', and the third syllable of the word e-lec-tric'i-ty. The accented syllable is the one that is most heavily accented in pronouncing the word. In many words of three syllables, and in most words of more than three, two accents are used, a strong accent and a weak accent. The strong accent is indicated by a heavy accent mark, and the weak one by a light mark. The word dis'con-tent has a weak or light accent on the first syllable and a strong or heavy accent on the last syllable. Occasionally a word of many syllables has two secondary accents, or a word may have two syllables pronounced with the same degree of force, in which case it has two strong accents; as red-hot.

If you look down a printed page, you will see that the end words on some of the lines are divided, and that these divisions are indicated by a hyphen. The hyphen is always placed at the end of the line, and never at the beginning of the next one. The reason for dividing the word is to fill out the line and secure uniformity of spacing. The division must always come at the beginning of the syllable. A word may be divided on any syllable as given in the dictionary. Exceptions to this are words like any which the dictionary divides an-y. Good usage, however, prevents our dividing a word on one letter or from separating a word of so few letters.

## Usage of Words

After the pronunciation, which appears in parentheses, you will find the part of speech of each entry word indicated by an abbreviation, the meaning of which can be determined by referring to the list of abbreviations given in the front of your dictionary. When a word can be employed as more than one part of speech, its various uses are given. Remember, however, that it is the way that a word is used in a sentence that settles definitely what part of speech it is. Plurals of nouns, principal parts of verbs, cases of pronouns, and comparative and superlative forms of adjectives and adverbs are given if they are in any way irregular. You will see that it is necessary for you to make use of your understanding of basic grammar to use the dictionary effectively.

The best usage of words is recorded in your dictionary. Some words are used only in specialized senses, and this is indicated by a usage label. If a word is not of the best usage, labels as colloq., illit., dial., restrict its use or warn against its misuse.

Colloq. indicates that a word is colloquial and used only in conversation, familiar letters, and informal speeches. Colloquial words and expressions are not used in formal writing.

Illit. indicates that a word occurs primarily in the language of those without much conventional education. These expressions are often called "illiterate" or "vulgar" English and are considered incorrect in standard English.

Dial. is the abbreviation for dialectal English, indicating that a word is used only in a particular district or class, as a provincial or rural substandard form, and is not used in formal writing or speech.

Obs. indicates that a word is no longer used in either spoken or written English.



### **Synonyms and Antonyms**

After the definitions of the word, you will find synonyms and antonyms given. Those words are synonyms for one another which have the same or similar general meaning, though one or more of their other meanings may differ widely. To make your speech and writing more effective, it is suggested that you learn synonyms for the words you frequently use. By increasing your vocabulary in this way, you can avoid trite expressions and repetitions. Note carefully the interesting and informative discriminations that are given in your dictionary. A study of these will show you that completely interchangeable synonyms are rarely found; you will learn through practice to choose the word which best expresses the idea you are trying to convey.

You will find antonyms listed after synonyms. Antonyms are words that offer a sharp contrast to the entry word that has been defined. The antonyms are not of value for their own sakes as are the synonyms, but they have a value as aids to the understanding of the entry word.

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One of the best ways to add to your knowledge of words is to consult your dictionary for the meaning of every unfamiliar word which comes to your attention; learn its pronunciation; and then use it in your own writing and your own conversation. Practice will teach you to choose the definition that best suits the context.

To fix the form of a word in your memory, make use of your eyes, your ears, your hand, and your brain. First look at the word letter by letter; then look fixedly at the word as a whole, letting its picture photograph on your brain. Say it aloud, being careful to do so correctly. Finally, write the word legibly and use it in a sentence applying in some way to your own experience. If you follow these suggestions, the correct form of the word will remain with you.