



7.4

Using a dictionary or thesaurus

Using an online dictionary

If you are working on a computer with internet access, you can look up a word online. In fact you can obtain a definition of most words just by typing the word into Google. For many words, a definition will appear at the top of the search results; for others you will have to click on a link, such as www.collinsdictionary.com.

If using an online dictionary like the *Collins English Dictionary*, you may have to scroll down to see numbered alternative meanings. The commonest meanings are usually given first. You should be able to work out which one fits the word in the sentence you are trying to understand, especially if you read the example phrases that are often provided.

For example, if you look up the word *vice* in the *Collins English Dictionary*, you will see three main meanings for the word used as a noun. Under the first (1), six slight variations are given, beginning with 'an immoral, wicked, or evil habit, action, or trait'.

If you scroll down, you will find, under (2) and (3), two completely different meanings for the word as a noun.

So, *vice* as a noun could mean:

- 'an immoral, wicked, or evil habit, action, or trait'
- 'an appliance for holding an object while work is done upon it, usually having a pair of jaws'
- 'a person who serves as a deputy to another'.

In the Dickens phrase 'develop the vices that make him odious', which of these meanings is likely to be correct?



Some online dictionaries, including the *Collins English Dictionary*, also enable you to click on a speaker icon to hear the word pronounced. For example, how do you think the words ‘engender’ and ‘avarice’ are pronounced? The *Collins English Dictionary* will tell you.



Some online dictionaries, including the *Collins English Dictionary*, will also give you the word's **derivation** (where it comes from). For example, for 'avarice', you will find:

C13: from Old French, from Latin *avaritia*, from *avārus* covetous, from *avēre* to crave.

This means that the word was first used in the 13th century, and came from Norman French. It entered Norman French from Latin, and came originally from a Latin verb meaning ‘to crave’. The line marked over the ‘e’ tells us that the Latin word is pronounced with a long vowel, like the sound in *bear*, not *berry*.

Using a dictionary in book form



You may find more information in a dictionary in book form than in an online one, especially if you use a large one such as the *Collins English Dictionary* or the *Concise Oxford Dictionary*. Some of this is given in abbreviated form.

Examples are:

- *n.* (noun)
- *v.* (verb)
- *adj.* (adjective)
- *adv.* (adverb)

You will find all abbreviations used at the front of the dictionary. You should also find a guide to the way that pronunciation is shown.



To use a book-form dictionary, you will need to understand **alphabetisation**. First, you need to know the order of the alphabet. Then you need to apply it letter by letter:

- harm
- harmful
- harmless
- harmonica
- harmonise
- harmony

You can speed up your search if you know that the first complete word entry for a verso (left-hand) page is given at the top-left of that page, and the last word of a recto (right-hand) page is given at the top-right of the page. This means you can tell at a glance what the alphabetical range of the two pages will be.

Making better word choices will enable you to write precisely and concisely. See Topic 7.2.

7 Vocabulary and spelling

Using a thesaurus to find synonyms and related words

Look up the following words in a dictionary: epistle, eradicate, voracious, amiable. Write sentences containing them. Then use a thesaurus to find alternatives for each word.

Using a thesaurus is one of the best ways to increase your vocabulary, giving you a wider range of words to choose from, and helping you to be more precise. A thesaurus, online or in book form, will give you a range of words that are *close* in meaning to the one you look up. If they mean exactly the same thing – although the tone may be different, as in *ask* and *enquire* – they are **synonyms**. However, the words listed in the thesaurus may only be broadly similar.



For example, if you look up *ask* in the Collins online *English Thesaurus*, the first list of related meanings is:

- inquire, question, quiz, query, interrogate.

This could be useful if you wanted a replacement word because you had already used *ask* a lot, or if you wanted to be more precise. However, you cannot just substitute one word for another:

'Do you sell chocolate biscuits?' she *inquired*. ✓

'Do you sell chocolate biscuits?' she *interrogated*. ✗

The suspected spy was *interrogated* for three days. ✓

The suspected spy was *asked* for three days. ✗

Antonyms – opposites

Antonyms are the opposites of words. Not all words have opposites. Many opposites can be formed using **prefixes** (see Topic 7.5). Other opposites are completely different words, not formed using prefixes or suffixes, as in:

- beautiful – ugly
- clever – stupid
- relaxed – tense.

Again, these just have to be learned. However, some books of antonyms are available, and the *Collins English Thesaurus* (www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english-thesaurus) offers opposites beneath the meanings for many words.

Progress Check

1. What is meant by the *derivation* of a word?
2. Put in alphabetical order: absolutely, aardvark, abstain, acute, absolve, accessory, ace
3. What are *synonyms* and *antonyms*?
4. Why must you take care in using a thesaurus to find replacement words?