

Vocabulary

Clinic

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I. Tips for Learning Vocabulary Faster

» *Use flash cards & keep a vocabulary notebook*

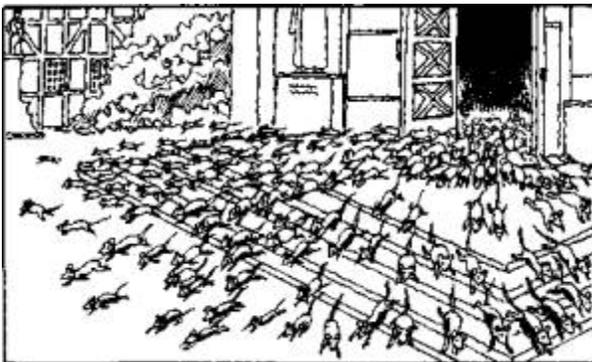
Flash card “technology” is still the quickest way to get the repetition that you need on the specific words that you need to repeat. It really works. And it is inexpensive.

Using index cards or a pack of blank business cards, write the target words and phrases on the cards, putting one language on the front and the other on the back. As you review the words, proceeding through the stack, separate the words into two piles: those you understand immediately, and those you do not. Keep going through the yet unlearned words until you attain a speedy mastery of them. This is a very unfashionable activity but there is overwhelming research evidence to show that it is a very efficient and effective learning strategy.

In addition, keep a **vocabulary notebook** that contains not just lists of words and their meanings or translations, but also some of the following: pictures, sentences comparing different meanings of the same word, charts, words sorted by category, various grammatical forms of the same word, the mnemonics used to remember the words, where the word was found or who said it and in what context, and contrasting of formal and informal words. The advantage of flashcards is that they are small and can fit into a pocket or purse easily.

» *Practice the key-word or key-sound or key-letter technique*

Our ability to produce mental images has led to a memory technique known as the key word technique. It consists of associating the target word with a word which is pronounced or spelt similarly in the mother tongue, but is not necessarily related in terms of meaning. For example, if I were studying German and came across the word *Rathaus* (meaning 'town hall') for the first time, I would note that it sounds like 'rat house' in English. I could then conjure up a visual image of rats coming out of my local town hall.



It appears to aid memory if the meaning and the key word are made to interact, as in the case above.

Some claims are also made that the more bizarre the image, the easier it will be to recall, but the evidence for this is unconvincing.

➤ *Repeat, repeat, and repeat again*

Studies have shown that words which appeared over eight times in text were more likely to be learned than words that were repeated less. Linguists are also relatively unanimous on a related issue, that repeating words aloud helps retention far better than silent repetition. Thus, sometimes only "brute" repetition will secure your memory for certain hard-to-retain items, especially when memorizing important parts and forms of words. Frequent vocal repetition impresses the forms on your "mental ear." This auditory dimension will help you recognize and recall the words later. Also seek out as many opportunities for real-life practice as you can possibly find. Try to use the vocabulary you have learned in real-life situations.

➤ *Read, read, read, and read some more*

You can increase your vocabulary through **free voluntary reading**. However, some linguists claim that we must have first acquired about 3000 to 5000 word-families before we will be able to know enough of the context to begin constructing accurate meanings for the words that we do not know. Read as much as you can in your free time and, as mentioned earlier, keep a vocabulary notebook handy to record any new words you come across.

➤ *Use categorization*

Categorization can also help learners recall new vocabulary items. For example:

strawberry	carrot	FRUIT	VEGETABLES
onion	cauliflower		
potato	peach		
cherry	pea		
pineapple	celery		
pear			

➤ *Use elaboration*

This means relating new information to information you already know. For example, if you know the meaning of 'information', it is easy to remember that the verb is 'to inform', and that 'informative' is an adjective, and that 'an informant' is someone who gives information. To gain maximum retention, vocabulary lists should be reviewed daily for a week or two and then again weekly for at least four to five weeks.

➤ *A final “word” about learning vocabulary...*

A small number of words make up most of the words ESL learners meet on a daily basis. These words are the essential start-up vocabulary. Without these words very little can be done or understood. Familiarity with and understanding of approximately 5000 word families is usually enough for fluent speaking, listening, and reading at advanced levels (word family = *help, helping, unhelpful, helplessness*, etc.). A level of about 3000 word families is the approximate point at which learners can learn new vocabulary from context without too much reliance on dictionaries. Try the techniques we have discussed in the newsletter and see which ones work best for you.

II. How to Study Vocabulary for the TOEFL® iBT Test

The TOEFL® exam is an English language proficiency test for students whose first language is not English and who would like to study at North American colleges and universities. There seems to be a fair amount of misunderstanding regarding TOEFL® vocabulary. Some people believe that the number of words that can be tested for this test is unlimited, making the task of vocabulary learning almost impossible. However, this is not true. The number of words that can be tested is in fact quite limited and predictable, including only words that have synonyms. Further, only academic vocabulary will appear. Thus, test-takers can prepare for the TOEFL® with targeted lists of vocabulary items and their synonyms and derivatives that are likely to appear on the test. The following are some techniques examinees can use for expanding their TOEFL® -related vocabulary base:

➤ *Learning Tips*

► **Read, Read, Read!** Most vocabulary words are learned from context. The more words you're exposed to, the better vocabulary you will have. While you read, pay close attention to words you don't know. First, try to figure out their meanings from context. Then look the words up. Read and listen to challenging material so that you'll be exposed to many new words. If you're preparing for the TOEFL®, read English newspapers, college textbooks, magazines, on a regular basis. When you come across an unknown word, write it down in a notebook. Use a good learner's dictionary to find the definition and write it in the notebook along with any derivations (i.e.: other words formed from the same root) and the part of speech (e.g.: noun). Try to use the word in an example sentence. Then write the new word on one side of a 5" x 7" index card, and the definition on the other side. Try to make 7-10 flash cards per day, and group them into categories (e.g.: biology, government, law, geography, history, etc.). Review them frequently. If you can learn 10 new words a day, that's 300 new words a month!

- ▶ **Improve your context skills.** Research shows that the vast majority of words are learned from context. To improve your context skills pay close attention to how words are used. Doing a search on a word using *dejanews.com* (for searching newsgroups) will give you many examples of how that word is used in context.

- ▶ **Practice, practice, practice.** Learning a word won't help very much if you promptly forget it. Research shows that it takes from 10 to 20 repetitions to really make a word part of your vocabulary. As we just mentioned, it really helps to write the word - both the definition and a sentence you make up using the word – in a notebook or on an index card that can later be reviewed. As soon as you learn a new word, start using it. Also, do a search on a word using *dejanews.com* to get a lot of examples of how the word is actually used.

- ▶ **Make up as many associations and connections as possible.** Say the word aloud to activate your auditory memory. Relate the word to words you already know. For example, the word GARGANTUAN (very large) has a similar meaning to the words gigantic, huge, large, etc. You could make a sequence: small, medium, large, very large, GARGANTUAN. List as many things as you can that could be considered GARGANTUAN: Godzilla, the circus fat lady, the Tokyo Dome, etc. Create pictures of the word's meaning that involve strong emotions. Think "the GARGANTUAN creature was going to rip me apart and then eat me!"

- ▶ **Use mnemonics (memory tricks).** For example, consider the word EGREGIOUS (extremely bad). Think EGG REACH US - imagine we've made a mistake so bad that people are throwing eggs at us and a rotten EGG REACHes US. Humorous little word pictures in your mind will help you remember what words mean, and they're fun to make up. Also, find out which learning style suits you best. Everyone learns differently!

- ▶ **Get in the habit of looking up words you don't know.** If you have a dictionary program on your computer, keep it open and handy. America Online and other Internet services have dictionaries and thesauruses on their tool bars. Find them and look up any word you are not absolutely sure of. Use a thesaurus when you write to find the word that fits best.

- ▶ **Play with words.** Play Scrabble, Boggle, and do crossword puzzles. These and other word games are available for the computer, so you are not dependent on a partner to play. Also, try out the Franklin Electronic Dictionary that features built-in word games.

- ▶ **Study Latin!** Study Latin root words, prefixes, and suffixes to further expand your vocabulary, and to help you make educated guesses about the meaning of unknown words in a test situation.

► **Get excited about words!** Try to appreciate the subtle differences between words. Do you know the difference between something that *denotes* something else and something that *connotes* something else? If not, go look it up. Learn to say what you really mean and discover the joys of being able to express yourself in writing. Your future can depend on how rich your vocabulary is. It will also determine the quality of your communication. Let building your vocabulary be a lifelong proposition.

► **Study relevant word lists.** Be sure to get a copy of ESL Pro System's *1000 Key English Words & Idioms* CD-ROM. With this essential ESL vocabulary builder, your English will improve faster than you could ever imagine!

III. The Benefits of Using a Learner's Dictionary

If you use a well-written English learner's dictionary on a regular basis, you will be far ahead of most ESL learners. In fact, buying a learner's dictionary may be the most important thing you can do to help you improve your English. Using a good English dictionary is important because a good dictionary will be your personal guide to the English language. It will teach you new words, how to pronounce them, and how to use them. It will also help you better understand English texts. Successful English learners use their dictionaries all the time: when reading books, during English classes, when writing e-mail, when doing homework, when surfing the Web, and so on.

» **What is a learner's dictionary?**

There are two kinds of English-English dictionaries: dictionaries for English as a second/foreign language learners and dictionaries for native speakers. Dictionaries for native speakers usually have more words than dictionaries for learners, but the definitions are complicated, and there are fewer example sentences. Therefore, your first dictionary should be a dictionary specifically for learners. Later, as your English approaches the upper intermediate/advanced level, you will need other dictionaries — for example, a dictionary of phrasal verbs and a regular dictionary for native speakers.

» ***What to look for in a good learner's dictionary***

A good dictionary must give the phonetic transcription for every word. Phonetic transcription tells you how to pronounce a word. Without it, you won't be able to say the word properly — you will only be able to read it or write it. The transcription should be based on the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA), which is the main phonetic alphabet used all over the world.

Here is what IPA-based phonetic transcription looks like:

im-age /'ɪmɪdʒ/ *n* 1 a picture of someone or something in your mind: *As she spoke, an image of a country garden came into my mind.*

[Longman Active Study Dictionary of English]

Here, the phonetic transcription is marked in yellow. Many dictionaries (especially ones published in the USA) use their own phonetic symbols- not IPA symbols. These are a little more difficult to use, and they are not recommended for beginners. Some dictionaries give phonetic transcription only for "the most difficult words" (usually less than 5% of all words). Such dictionaries are almost useless to learners, because many English words are difficult if you are not a native speaker.

A good learner's dictionary should also include example sentences for every word. Some dictionaries give them after the definition of a word. Example sentences are marked in yellow in this picture:

diz-zy /dɪzi/ *adj* 1 having an unpleasant feeling of loss of balance and confusion, as if things are going round and round: *They danced round in circles until they were dizzy. | Climbing ladders makes me dizzy.*

[Longman Dictionary of English Language and Culture]

Example sentences are not just helpful — they are perhaps even more important than definitions. While a definition tells you the meaning of a word and (sometimes) gives you some grammatical information, example sentences have at least three advantages:

- 1) They let you check to see if you've understood the definition correctly. The meaning of a word can become much clearer if you read a few sentences with the word.
- 2) They show you how to use a word in sentences. Many words go with certain grammatical structures (e.g. *important* is often used in the phrase "*It is important to...*") or words (e.g. *weather* goes with *forecast* but not *prediction*). This is known as 'collocation' - the relationship between two words or groups of words that often go together and form a common expression. Example sentences present this information in a clear way. You can easily imitate them to make your own natural sentences.
- 3) They help you produce grammatically-correct sentences. If you read an example sentence there is a good chance that it will stay in your head, and that you will be able to build a similar sentence (or part of a sentence) to express your thoughts another day. Therefore, the more example sentences you read, the more you will be able to produce on your own.

➤ Other qualities of a good learner's dictionary:

- * **Simple definitions.** The definitions should be easy to understand. If something can be simple, it should be simple.
- * **Useful definitions.** If possible, the definitions should tell you how to use the word. Generally, longer definitions are better because they give more information.
- * **British and American English.** Your dictionary should have both British and American words. Also, both British and American pronunciation should be given.
- * **Phrasal verbs and idioms.** There are special dictionaries for these, but every English dictionary should have the most common phrasal verbs and idioms.
- * **Pictures.** Sometimes you can understand a picture better than a definition.

➤ Which one should I buy?

For your first learner's dictionary, highly recommended is the ***Collins COBUILD Advanced Learner's English Dictionary***. It's a large dictionary with IPA-based phonetic transcriptions and great example sentences for every word. But the best thing are the definitions: they are very user-friendly, and they clearly tell you how to use a word. The CD-ROM (included with the book) allows easy and fast searching, and also includes a Wordbank with lots of additional example sentences. Also recommended are learners' dictionaries from ***Oxford University Press*** and ***Longman***.

IV. How to Become a Better Speller

Of course the best (and easiest) way to be a better speller is to use a good dictionary! But ESL learners should also learn specific spelling strategies in order to become better spellers. The following is ESL Pro Systems' top ten tips for becoming a better speller.

1. This may be the best-known spelling rule:

i before *e*, except after *c*

or when sounded like "ay"

as in *neighbor* and *weigh*

Here are some words that follow the rule:

IE words: *believe*, *field*, *relief*

CEI words: *ceiling*, *deceit*, *receive*

EI words: *freight*, *reign*, *sleigh*

Some exceptions: *either*, *foreign*, *height*, *leisure*, *protein*, *weird*

"CIEN words" are another exception to the rule. These include *ancient*, *efficient*, and *science*.

2. Here's another familiar spelling rule: "Silent e helps a vowel say its name." This means that when a word ends with a vowel followed by a consonant and then silent *e*, the vowel has a long sound. That's the difference between *rate* and *rat*, *hide* and *hid*, and *cube* and *cub*.
3. Have you heard the expression "When two vowels go walking, the first one does the talking?" This means that when there are two vowels in a row, the first usually has a long sound and the second is silent. That's why it's *team*, not *taem*; *coat*, not *caot*; and *wait*, not *wiat*. Remembering this rule will help you to put vowels in the right order.
4. Learn the basic rules for spelling with plural nouns so that you know whether to use *s* or *es* and how to make plurals of nouns that end in *y* or *f*.

Here are some general rules for spelling plural nouns:

Nouns	Plural	Examples
Most nouns	add s	book, books; cup, cups; sprout, sprouts
Most nouns that end in <i>ch, sh, s, x, or z</i>	add <i>es</i>	box, boxes; bus, buses; prize, prizes
Most nouns that end in a vowel and <i>y</i>	add s	boy, boys; day, days; key, keys
Most nouns that end in a consonant and <i>y</i>	<i>y</i> becomes <i>ies</i>	baby, babies; country, countries; spy, spies
Most nouns that end in <i>f</i> or <i>fe</i>	<i>f</i> or <i>fe</i> becomes <i>ves</i>	elf, elves; loaf, loaves; thief, thieves
Most nouns that end in <i>o</i>	add s	kangaroo, kangaroos; piano, pianos; video, videos
Certain nouns that end in a consonant and <i>o</i>	add <i>es</i>	hero, heroes; potato, potatoes; volcano, volcanoes

➤ **Some Exceptions:**

Certain English nouns change a vowel sound when they become plural. These include *goose- geese; man- men; mouse- mice; and tooth- teeth.*



Some nouns don't change at all when they become plural. These include *deer, fish, sheep, and species.*

A few nouns have plural forms that are left from Old English. These include *child- children* and *ox- oxen.*

5. In general, though, memorizing rules isn't the most effective way to learn spelling. Most rules have exceptions—and besides, you are best at learning words that you have made an effort to understand. A good way to understand a word is to break it into syllables. Look for prefixes, suffixes, and roots. Practice each short part and then the whole word.

dis-ap-pear-ing
tra-di-tion-al

After you break apart a word, ask yourself: How is this word like other words I know? Spelling the word *traditional* may make you think of spelling *functional* and *national*. Finding patterns among words is one of the best ways to learn spelling.

6. It's also helpful to try making up a funny memory aids. For example, do you have trouble remembering which has two s's - *desert* (arid land) or *dessert* (a sweet treat)? Remember that with dessert, you'd like a *second* helping. Similarly, do you have trouble remembering how to spell *separate*? Remember that there's a *rat* in the middle.
7. Another kind of memory aid is to make up a sentence in which the first letter of each word can be used to make the spelling word. The sillier the better as these types of sentences may be easier to remember.

chili: **c**ats **h**ave **i**nteresting **l**ittle **i**deas

physical: **p**lease **h**ave **y**our **s**trawberry **i**ce **c**ream **a**nd **l**ollipops

8. Make sure that you are pronouncing words correctly. This can help you to avoid some common spelling errors, such as *canidate* instead of *candidate*, *jewelery* instead of *jewelry*, and *libary* instead of *library*.
9. Put together a list of words that you find difficult to spell. Go over your old papers and spelling exams to track down these troublemakers. Once you've got your list in hand, see if some of the tips above will help you.
10. Be aware of the differences between British and American spelling.

Most dictionaries include both spellings and will make note of the two spellings. Usually the differences are noted in one of two ways:

In many US dictionaries the difference is included in the headword with the variation in parentheses:

For example: colo(u)r

Here is a list of the main differences between British and American spelling:

British	American
-our (honour)	-or (honor)
-re (centre)	-er (center)
-ogue (dialogue)	-og (dialog)
-ence (defence)	-ense (defense)
-ise 1 (recognise)	-ize (recognize)

American English spelling sometimes does not double the consonant at the end of a word, while British English spelling does, especially when the consonant is an 'l'.

For example: travel, traveller, travelling (British) and travel, traveler, traveling (American)

Try to use these tips when you write English, and you too can become a better speller!

V. Learn More Vocabulary by Studying Affixes

Most words used in the English language today were not originally English. These words were borrowed from other languages. The majority of English words have Latin or Greek origins. When taking the TOEFL test, it is helpful to know some of these origins or "roots" of English vocabulary. It may be possible to guess the meaning of an unknown word when one knows the meaning of its root. Knowing prefixes and suffixes can also assist in the process.

An English word can consist of three parts: the root, a prefix and a suffix. The root is the part of the word that contains the basic meaning (definition) of the word. The root is the base element of the word. A prefix is a word element that is placed in front of a root. A prefix changes the word's meaning or makes a new word. A suffix is a word element that is placed after the root. The suffix changes the word's meaning as well as its function (use). Prefixes and suffixes are called *affixes* because they are attached to a root.

Knowledge of affixes can not only help you identify a word's form and function, but can also help you expand your vocabulary. Below is a list of common affixes:

» Prefixes

Prefix		Meaning	Examples
a-	<i>also an-</i>	not, without	atheist, anemic
a-		to, towards	aside, aback
		in the process of, in a particular state	a-hunting, aglow
a-		of	anew
		completely	abashed
ab-	<i>also abs-</i>	away, from	abdicate, abstract
ad-	<i>also a-, ac-, af-, ag- al-, an-, ap-, at- as-, at-</i>	movement to, change into, addition or increase	advance, adulterate, adjunct, ascend, affiliate, affirm, aggravate, alleviate, annotate, apprehend, arrive, assemble, attend
ante-		before, preceding	antecedent, ante-room
anti-	<i>also ant-</i>	opposing, against, the opposite	anti-aircraft, antibiotic, anticlimax, Antarctic
be-		all over, all around	bespatter, beset
		completely	bewitch, bemuse
		having, covered with	bejewelled
		affect with (added to nouns)	befog
		cause to be (added to adjectives)	becalm
com-	<i>also co-, col-, con-, cor-</i>	with, jointly, completely	combat, co-pilot, collude, confide, corrode
contra-		against, opposite	contraceptive
counter-		opposition, opposite direction	counter-attack, counteract

de-		down, away	descend, despair, depend, deduct
		completely	denude, denigrate
		removal, reversal	de-ice, decamp
dia-	<i>also</i> di-	through, across	diagonal
dis-	<i>also</i> di-	negation, removal, expulsion	disadvantage, dismount, disbud, disbar
en-		put into or on	engulf, enmesh
		bring into the condition of	enlighten, embitter
		intensification	entangle, enrage
ex-		out	exit, exclude, expand
		upward	exalt, extol
		completely	excruciate, exasperate
		previous	ex-wife
extra-		outside, beyond	extracurricular
hemi-		half	hemisphere
hyper-		beyond, more than, more than normal	hypersonic, hyperactive
hypo-		under	hypodermic, hypothermia
in-		<i>also</i> il-, im-	not, without
		<i>also</i> il-, im-, ir-	in, into, towards, inside
infra-		below	infrared, infrastructure
inter-		between, among	interact, interchange
intra-		inside, within	intramural, intravenous
non-		absence, negation	non-smoker, non-alcoholic

ob-	<i>also oc-, of-, op-</i>	blocking, against, concealing	obstruct, occult, offend, oppose
out-		surpassing, exceeding	outperform
		external, away from	outbuilding, outboard
over-		excessively, completely	overconfident, overburdened, overjoyed
		upper, outer, over, above	overcoat, overcast
peri-		round, about	perimeter
post-		after in time or order	postpone
pre-		before in time, place, order or importance	pre-adolescent, prelude, precondition
pro-		favouring, in support of	pro-African
		acting for	proconsul
		motion forwards or away	propulsion
		before in time, place or order	prologue
re-		again	repaint, reappraise, reawake
semi-		half, partly	semicircle, semi-conscious
sub-	<i>also suc-, suf-, sug-, sup-, sur-, sus-</i>	at a lower position	submarine, subsoil
		lower in rank	sub-lieutenant
		nearly, approximately	sub-tropical
syn-	<i>also sym-</i>	in union, acting together	synchronize, symmetry
trans-		across, beyond	transnational, transatlantic
		into a different state	translate

ultra-	beyond	ultraviolet, ultrasonic
	extreme	ultramicroscopic
un-	not	unacceptable, unreal, unhappy, unmanned
	reversal or cancellation of action or state	unplug, unmask
under-	beneath, below	underage, undercarriage
	lower in rank	undersecretary
	not enough	underdeveloped

» Suffixes

Noun suffixes

-acy, -cy
 -age
 -al
 -ance, -ence
 -ate
 -dom
 -er, or

Example

sufficiency
 postage
 rehearsal
 appearance
 primate
 kingdom
 professor

Verb suffixes

-ate
 -en
 -ed
 -ify
 -ize

Example

compensate
 liken
 played
 quantify
 capitalize

Adjective suffixes

-able, -ible
-ese
-ful
-ic
-y

Example

delectable
Japanese
fruitful
economic
fishy

Adverb suffixes

-ly
-ward
-wise

Example

possibly
backward
clockwise

QUIZ

Without using a dictionary, try to figure out the definitions for the italicized words in the sentences below. The answers are at the end of the quiz.

1. Oxygen is an *invisible* gas.

- **Definition:** _____
- **Prefix:** _____
- **Root:** _____
- **Suffix:** _____
- **Part of speech:** _____

2. Barbara talks *incessantly*.

- **Definition:** _____
- **Prefix:** _____
- **Root:** _____
- **Suffix:** _____
- **Part of speech:** _____

3. The school board *allocated* some money for the purchase of computer equipment.

- **Definition:** _____
- **Prefix:** _____
- **Root:** _____
- **Suffix:** _____
- **Part of speech:** _____

4. There are laws against *indecent* behavior.

- **Definition:** _____
- **Prefix:** _____
- **Root:** _____
- **Suffix:** _____
- **Part of speech:** _____

5. Ever since he was sick, Vincente's hair has looked flat and *lusterless*.

- **Definition:** _____
- **Prefix:** _____
- **Root:** _____
- **Suffix:** _____
- **Part of speech:** _____

6. Yoko is reading a *nonfiction* book.

- **Definition:** _____
- **Prefix:** _____
- **Root:** _____
- **Suffix:** _____
- **Part of speech:** _____

7. It finally *occurred* to Saul that the more he studied the better grades he received.

- **Definition:** _____
- **Prefix:** _____
- **Root:** _____
- **Suffix:** _____
- **Part of speech:** _____

8. Some products have *disclaimers* written on their packages.

- **Definition:** _____
- **Prefix:** _____
- **Root:** _____
- **Suffix:** _____
- **Part of speech:** _____

9. Carlos placed the camera on a *tripod*.

- **Definition:** _____
- **Prefix:** _____
- **Root:** _____
- **Suffix:** _____
- **Part of speech:** _____

10. Katrina was *readmitted* to school after a year off.

- **Definition:** _____
- **Prefix:** _____
- **Root:** _____
- **Suffix:** _____
- **Part of speech:** _____

[View Answer Key](#)

VI. The Importance of Learning Idioms

➤ What are idioms?

Idioms are words, phrases, or expressions that are unusual either grammatically, as in “*Long time, no see!*” or in the sense that there is a meaning that cannot be derived from the conjoined meanings of its elements, as in “*It’s raining cats and dogs!*” Every language has idioms, and they are often difficult for learners to understand and use appropriately.

Example:

Literal meaning (not an idiom):

”Before the bartender made the drink, she broke the ice with a small hammer and dropped it into the blender.”

Idiomatic meaning (an idiom):

”Before the conference began, the speaker broke the ice with a joke.”

Thus, this expression has two different meanings:

(to) break the ice

1. to make a beginning
2. to get through the first difficulties in starting a conversation or discussion.

A **phrasal verb** is another type of idiom you will frequently hear in spoken English. A phrasal verb is a verb + preposition structure and is sometimes referred to as a **two-word** or **three-word verb**. A phrasal verb has a special meaning that is different from the meaning of the individual words.

Examples:

back out

-withdraw from a promise or agreement

put off

-delay, postpone

show up

-appear, come

Idioms and phrasal verbs are used extensively in spoken English. On the TOEFL® test, some of the answer choices in the Listening section may try to trick you by giving literal meanings (exact, dictionary meaning) of the words in an idiomatic expression.

Example:

(Woman) *When do you intend to do something about the dishwasher?*

(Man) *Do you have to bring that up again?*

(Narrator) *What does the man mean?*

(A) He wants the woman to carry his dishwasher upstairs.

(B) He asks the woman to bring him something.

(C) He asks the woman if she needs anything.

(D) He does not want to talk about the dishwasher.

The man used the idiom *bring that up*. In this context, *bring up* means *mention* or *raise the topic* of the dishwasher. The woman mentions the dishwasher, and the man infers that he does not like being reminded of this topic. Therefore, the best answer is (D). The first and second answer choices give literal meanings of *bring up*. The third choice does not fit the context; the man is not asking the woman if she needs anything.

Why do you think the man does not like being reminded of the dishwasher?

As you have just seen, idioms are an important part of the English language, and you may be tested on them at some point. An appreciation of such expressions and a feeling for how and when they are used can really improve your ability to read in English and to understand everyday conversation. But how can you make sense of the enormous variety of idiomatic expressions that exist in everyday speech and writing?

One approach is to take certain basic key words in the target language and organize your notes selectively around them. For example, the English word *head* is the key word in a large number of idioms. A well-known idiom dictionary lists no fewer than 40 idioms in everyday use that contain this word. Other productive key words to look up in a dictionary for this purpose include colours, common animals, parts of the body, basic adjectives (eg: *long*, *fast*), and natural phenomena (eg: *wind*, *sun*).

Another strategy is to compare idioms in the target language with idioms in your first language. This can be both an interesting exercise and a means of remembering idioms more effectively. To take the first example in this article, you can also be “up to your eyes in work”. In French and Italian one is *submerged* in it, in German *suffocated* in it, in Spanish either *inundated* in it or *up to one’s eyes* in it and in Serbian you have it *over your head*. By the way, the expression “*It’s raining cats and dogs*” is very old-fashioned. These days people are much more likely to say *it’s pouring*, *it’s tipping it down* or, most commonly, *it’s p*ssing down!*

ESL Pro Systems offers an excellent learning resource for idioms, the [1000 Key English Words & Idioms](#) CD-ROM. Each idiom is clearly defined and used in an example sentence. Check our web site at www.esl-pro.com for more information.

Answers - Quiz

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- 1.) *invisible*
 - **Definition:** cannot be seen
 - **Prefix:** in
 - **Root:** vis
 - **Suffix:** ible
 - **Part of speech:** adjective

- 2.) *incessantly*
 - **Definition:** without stopping, constantly
 - **Prefix:** in
 - **Root:** cess
 - **Suffix:** ant
 - **Suffix:** ly
 - **Part of speech:** adverb

- 3.) *allocate*
 - **Definition:** to distribute for a specific purpose
 - **Prefix:** al
 - **Root:** loc
 - **Suffix:** ate
 - **Suffix:** ed
 - **Part of speech:** verb

- 4.) *indecent*
 - **Definition:** not conforming to standards, not appropriate
 - **Prefix:** in
 - **Root:** dec
 - **Suffix:** ent
 - **Part of speech:** adjective

- 5.) *lusterless*
 - **Definition:** without shine, dull
 - **Root:** lust
 - **Suffix:** less
 - **Part of speech:** adjective

- 6.) *nonfiction*
 - **Definition:** literature that is based on fact, not fiction
 - **Prefix:** non
 - **Root:** fict
 - **Suffix:** ion
 - **Part of speech:** noun

- 7.) *occurred*
 - **Definition:** to come to mind, happen
 - **Prefix:** oc
 - **Root:** curr
 - **Suffix:** ed
 - **Part of speech:** verb

- 8.) *disclaimer*
 - **Definition:** a denial of legal responsibilities and demands
 - **Prefix:** dis
 - **Root:** claim
 - **Suffix:** er
 - **Part of speech:** plural noun

- 9.) *tripod*
 - **Definition:** a three-legged stand
 - **Prefix:** tri
 - **Root:** pod
 - **Part of speech:** noun

- 10.) *readmitted*
 - **Definition:** allowed in again
 - **Prefix:** re
 - **Prefix:** ad
 - **Root:** mit
 - **Suffix:** ed
 - **Part of speech:** verb