



A Mr. Vig GUIDE

simple solutions for
your biggest English headaches

Vocab FAST

**Lock new words
inside your brain.
Speak to anyone.
Sound smarter.**



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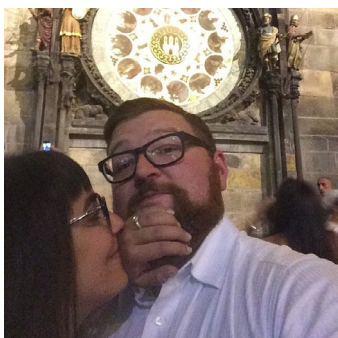
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WHY A BIGGER ENGLISH VOCABULARY?

1. Words Make You Sound Smart

A few years ago a college friend came to visit me in Prague.

I've always liked hanging out with Mike because after a few drinks there's a very good chance that he'll do something stupid.



Mike and his girlfriend and his big words visiting Prague.

So we were sitting in Café Louvre in the center of Prague, where I take all my out-of-town guests, and talking about Czech history and Jan Palach.

And Mike said, "self-immolate."

I thought about it for a minute, then I said, "What does that mean?"

I didn't know the word.

Never heard it before.

I thought, maybe Mike confused it with another word or maybe he just made it up.

"It means to set yourself on fire."

Then he used it in another sentence.

"Huh. So he does know the word," I thought to myself. "He didn't just invent it... Mike knew a word I didn't know."

That doesn't happen a lot.

*That's the
power of a good
vocabulary*

And even as the sun was coming up that morning and Mike was doing something stupid with some yogurt in the park, I was still thinking, "Mike's a smart guy..."

That's the power of a good vocabulary.

2. Words Can Make You The President

Johnson O'Connor was an American researcher who specialized in vocabulary. He wanted to know the effect it has on our lives and the best ways to improve your vocabulary.

In one of his studies, he went to companies and gave vocabulary tests to all the employees: the president, the vice presidents, the managers, the managers in the factory, all the way down to the guys working on the assembly line.

What he found was that their position in the company matched exactly with the size of their vocabulary.

The higher the position, the bigger the vocabulary.

His conclusion: vocabulary is "the best single predictor of occupational success."¹

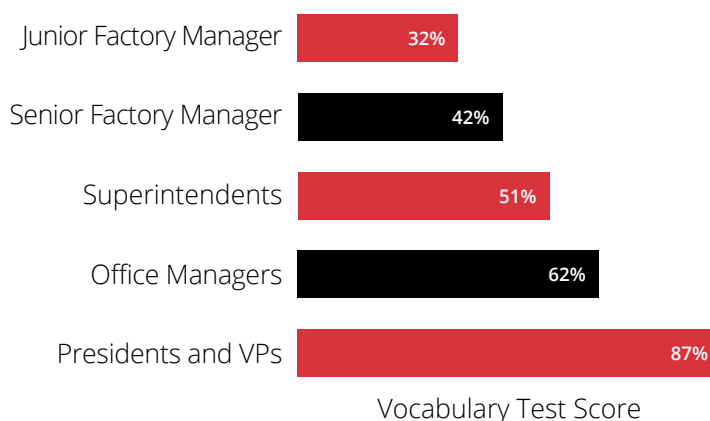
Although we've probably never met, I can assume you're toward the bottom of the graph below.

Maybe you're the president, or a manager, or at least on your way there.

And your vocabulary matches your position.

But not in English.

In English, your vocabulary matches... the foreman? Maybe the floor boss?



And you don't like that.

It's a barrier for doing your work internationally.

Your lack of English vocabulary – being able to say whatever you want as easily as you would in your native language – is holding you back.

But I also assume that if you had the motivation and determination and ability to achieve your current level of success, you can certainly learn just a few more words in English.

(Especially with what you're about to learn.)

Enjoy,

Ryan Viguerie
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P.S. If you have any comments or suggestions or feedback for me, I'd love to hear from you! You can write me at ryan@mrvig.com.

PART ONE



**THE
SYSTEM**



STEP ONE: READ

People who have large vocabularies don't go home at the end of the day and take out the dictionary.

They don't buy business English text books and memorize the lists of words at the end of the chapter.

And they don't play vocabulary games online.

They read for pleasure.

When they're on the metro, sitting on a plane, or waiting at the post office, while the world around them stares at their shoes or at their phone, they're reading.

RESEARCH STUDY #1

School children were divided into three groups.

The first group continued with their traditional daily English lessons.

The second and third groups read; either the teacher read to them, or they read alone.

At the end of the study, they tested all three groups on how much vocabulary they had learned.

And guess which groups won?

That's right, the two groups which read.²

RESEARCH STUDY #2³

Researchers gave a group of adult native English speakers the novel "A Clockwork Orange."

If you don't know the novel or the film, the main character and his friends use a lot of slang. But it's not real slang. It's slang that the author invented for the novel. In total, the book contains 241 of these invented words.

If you buy the book in a bookstore, you can look up the slang words in a special dictionary in the back of the book.

However, the subjects in the research study were given a copy that didn't contain the dictionary.

They read the book at home, in their free time. And a few days after finishing the book, they were tested on 90 of the words.

The results: On average, the readers remembered 76% of the words! That means that by just reading a short novel in their spare time – no dictionary, no studying, no memorizing – they learned 45 new words!

Not bad.

Reading for pleasure is the foundation of increasing your English vocabulary.

If you do nothing else except read every day for pleasure, your vocabulary will improve.

WHY READING WORKS

Why not just read the dictionary?

I was surprised once when a student told me she did this in her spare time.

I wasn't surprised to hear that she was also frustrated that she couldn't remember the words.

Because... where the words come from makes a huge difference.

Connections

I used to be able to speak French fairly well.

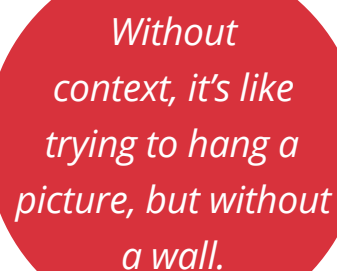
But these days, whenever I see a lost French tourist slowly wandering the confusing streets of Prague with a map in his hand, I think about offering directions, but the words just don't come fast enough any more.

I'm a typical example of "Use it or lose it."

But there's one thing in French which I haven't forgotten how to say.

About 15 years ago some French friends were visiting me in Los Angeles. We were at the Getty Museum and I wanted to explain that the original museum was closed because it was damaged during an earthquake. But I didn't know the word for earthquake.

I can still remember the weather that day – warm and sunny. I remember where we were standing – outside on a patio. And I remember what we were talking about – the founder of the museum, Paul Getty.



Without context, it's like trying to hang a picture, but without a wall.

And, I remember the word for earthquake.


Tremblement de terre.

The memory of the word is connected to all these other memories.

That's the power of learning in context.

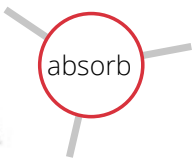
When we learn something in context, we connect it to other information.

Without context, it's like trying to hang a picture, but without a wall.

ab·sorb  (əb-zôrb', -sôrb')

tr.v. ab·sorbed, ab·sorb·ing, ab·sorbs

1. To take (something) in through or as through pores or interstices.



A Dictionary Definition – No Connections

MIDDLE EAST

Jordan Struggles to Absorb Refugees



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graph LR; Syria --- civil_war[civil war]; civil_war --- fleeing_refugees[fleeing refugees]; fleeing_refugees --- Europe; Europe --- thousands; fleeing_refugees --- Turkey; Turkey --- absorbs_two_million[absorbs two million]; absorbs_two_million --- not_allowed[not allowed to apply for asylum];
```



A Newspaper Article – Lots of Connections

Emotions

Remember the research study where they divided the kids into two groups and let one group read?

Well, an important reason why the second group of kids learned more words is that the adults didn't tell them what to read. Instead, they told them they could read whatever they wanted, and then they gave them a room full lot of books to choose from.

This is what it means to "read for pleasure."

Why is this so important? Because when you're interested in something, when it's a pleasure, you're NOT BORED!

Boredom is the enemy of memory and learning.

We forget the boring – Do you remember what the weather was like last Tuesday? What you had for lunch last Wednesday?

But we easily remember the exciting, the strange, the shocking, the curious, and the new.

Do you remember where you were and what you were doing when you found out a relative died?

So when you read something that's exciting, you feel excitement.

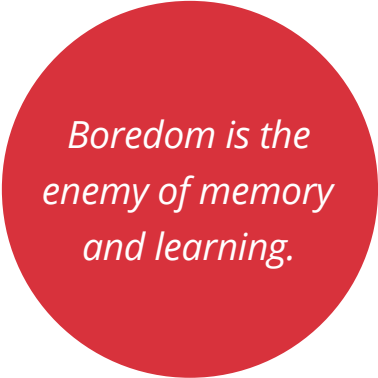
When you read something that's scary, you feel scared.

You feel emotions and you remember.

However, one person's "fascinating" is another person's "incredibly dull."

Some people love sci-fi, some hate it. Some love romance, others despise the genre.

Nobody knows what you're interested in better than you.



*Boredom is the
enemy of memory
and learning.*

This is why when you look up words in a dictionary or try to remember definitions you forget them almost as soon as you close the dictionary.

The definitions are boring.

Exception: Some people love words. They want to know where the word comes from, how old it is, what the synonyms are...

So if you're one of these people, and you think the dictionary is a fascinating book, then stick with it!

The Words Go Into Your Long-Term Memory

We've all had the experience in school where we memorize a lot of information right before a test, we take the test, and then we quickly forget everything that we learned.

But something different happens when you learn words from a book.

In one research study they gave a group of native English speakers a list of words from the novel "Animal Farm" and told them to memorize them.

For the second group, they just asked them to read the novel.

They then gave both groups a vocab test. And this time, the non-reading group won.

But, the interesting part about this is that they gave them another test. This time, three weeks later.

And this time, the reading group won!

The conclusion: words that you learn while reading go into your long-term memory.

The reason why is something called "spaced repetition."

In 1885 a German psychologist named Hermann Ebbinghaus figured out that we remember information faster, and it sticks in our heads better, if it's learned not all at once, but over a longer period of time.

Another way of saying this is that we forget very quickly. But if you review, you can remember.

And this is what's happening when you read. You see a new word. Then you see it again and again as you continue reading during the week, and each time the new words are getting hammered a little more into your memory.

MORE ADVANTAGES TO READING

If you haven't already rushed out the door to the bookstore, here are a few more advantages to reading.

Advantage 1: Anywhere, any time

You don't need a teacher. You don't need to make an appointment. And you don't need to find a parking space.

Keep a book or magazine with you wherever you go, and you'll find minutes in the day to read which will add up to hours at the end of the month.

Advantage 2: Interesting

In fact, if it's not interesting, put it down immediately and find something that is.

In school we learn to ignore the emotional side of learning. We learn that stress and boredom are a natural part of learning.

I say boredom is the enemy of learning.

If you're reading something that's boring, you won't pay attention and you won't want to continue reading it.

If you're reading something that's interesting or that you love, you'll make more time to read and you'll read more often and for longer periods of time.

So never, ever read something that you think you should read. Only read what you want to read.

Advantage 3: Low Stress

The language researcher Stephen Krashen calls negative emotions like stress “language filters.”

Just like a cigarette filter prevents the smoker from inhaling tar, negative emotions keep new information from sticking in our brain.

That’s one of the main problems with learning in school. Most of us were stressed.

But when you’re reading a novel, no one is watching you, no one is grading you and you’re not comparing yourself to anyone. Instead, you’re relaxed, you’re enjoying a meal, you’re sitting on the train, or you’re lying in bed or in the bath.

Advantage 4: Better Than a Sleeping Pill

Scientists did an experiment where they asked one group to simply go to bed and fall asleep, while they asked the second group to read before turning out the lights.

During this, they measured things like heart rate, muscle activity and breathing, which show how relaxed a person is.

And the winner? The group which read before going to sleep achieved a deeper state of relaxation.⁴

So read some easy fiction in bed and as an added bonus you’ll sleep better!

Advantage 5: Painless Grammar Lessons

As was shown in the research study I mentioned, your vocabulary isn't the only thing that will improve.

If you've ever asked a native speaker, "Why do you say this and not this?" unless he's a teacher, he probably won't be able to tell you the grammar rule. He'll just tell you, "it sounds/looks right."

And that's what you want to be able to say.

Fluent English speakers are not the ones who know the most rules and can quickly remember them in a conversation (which is not possible). They're the ones who have had so much exposure to English that the grammar feels, looks, and sounds correct.

Grammar is a pattern. Learning to recognize the pattern so that it's as automatic as driving a car only comes through exposure. And when you read, you're exposing your brain to the grammar patterns again and again.

Plus, readers are better writers. They've read good writing and can reproduce it. They also have more confidence with writing, have a better writing style, and are better spellers.

HOW TO READ

Wait! Don't skip this!

Yes, I know you know how to read. But a lot of students make mistakes in how and what they read.

So read on...

#1 No Dictionary

A lot of people tell me that "The Little Prince" is their favorite book.

Not me.

I still have nightmares of reading it during high school. I would read a sentence. Put the book down. Pick up my French-English dictionary. Look up a word. Put the dictionary down. Pick up the book. See another word I didn't know...

By the time I got to the bottom of the page, not only had I forgotten the words I just looked up, but I wanted the little prince to choke on his asteroid and die a quick death so I could end my suffering.

Not fun.

The real benefit of reading only comes to us when it's fun.

When you're relaxed and enjoying the story, the two enemies of learning – boredom and stress – are far away.

Which is not the case when you have to put the book down every sentence to look up a word in the dictionary.

Instead, do this.

When you find a word you don't know, skip it; either it's not important: there are between .5 and 2 million words in the English language and you don't need to/can't learn them all; or if it is important then you'll see it again and again and will be able to eventually understand it from the context.

But if it's a word you keep seeing *and* you can't figure it out from the context, then I give you permission to use the dictionary.

But, only use an all-English dictionary, or go to dictionary.com. When you find the word in your native language, you're reinforcing the translation habit.

Even better, do an image search in google. It's much easier to remember a picture than it is a list of antonyms and synonyms.

#2 Easy

This was another problem with "The Little Prince." When I read it in my French II class, my vocab wasn't big enough to enjoy it.

If I hadn't used the dictionary, I would have been lost.

It would have been better if the teacher had given us something easier, or focused on a frequency list for a semester.

If you can understand 80-90% of the words, that's enough for you to enjoy the story without getting lost.

But I would also say that if you understand 100% it's too easy and you won't be learning any new words.

Instead, do this.

1. Test it.

Before you buy the book or magazine or subscribe to the blog, test it by reading a paragraph or two.

You'll quickly know if you can follow the story or not.

And don't be ashamed to read children's books or teen books. Yes, you will look cooler on the metro reading a book of Chinese philosophy, but save it for later.

Here are some suggestions:

- "Goosebumps"
- The Sweet Valley High series
- "Harry Potter"
- "Twilight"

#3 Modern

A student once told me she was reading "Huck Finn."

I asked her how she was enjoying it and she told me she found it difficult.

I wasn't surprised.

Mark Twain is one of the greatest American authors and some of his books are now classics, but the problem is, he wrote over one hundred years ago and people don't talk like that anymore.

Here's a quote from Huck Finn:

"It's a dead man. Yes, indeedy; naked, too. He's ben shot in de back. I reck'n he's ben dead two er three days. Come in, Huck, but doan' look at his face—it's too gashly."

I understand it. I think it's clever.

But do you see any words you want to add to your vocabulary? Maybe something you could use during your next presentation at the annual shareholders meeting?

Instead, do this.

One advantage of reading “older” books is that you can find a lot of them for free online.

Copyright on any written material expires 70 years after the author’s death (in the US and UK).

So if you want to save some money, or if you just enjoy the classics, here are a few of my recommendations of authors whose style is still modern (translation-they’re not old and boring books).

- “The Call of the Wild” by Jack London
- “The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes” by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle
- “Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland” by C.S. Lewis
- “Crime and Punishment” by Fyodor Dostoyevsky

STEP TWO: RECORD

When you go shopping, do you make a list?

If you do, it's because you don't want to forget anything; potatoes are important.

You write down what you want to remember.

It's as simple as that.

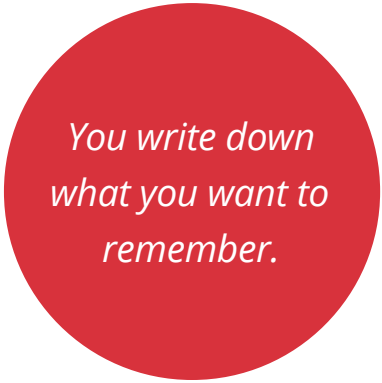
But it's not enough.

How you write them down is equally as important.

I see students on the metro all the time staring at vocab lists: English word on the left, Czech word on the right.

This is the hard way.

Follow these three rules and you'll learn faster and make the job of remembering much easier.



*You write down
what you want to
remember.*

THREE RULES OF RECORDING VOCAB

Rule #1 All English

Sometimes when I ask a student a question in English there's a pause and I can see their lips moving juuuuust a little bit. They think I don't know what they're doing, but I know....

(They are secretly translating in their heads.)

My student Jan told me about his English exams when he was in

grammar school.

The teacher would tell him a Czech word, for example, *strom*.

And he would have to say the English word – tree.

That was the exam.

Czech word – English word.

Just translation.

For years he studied lists of words, and guess what the result is: he's a translation addict.

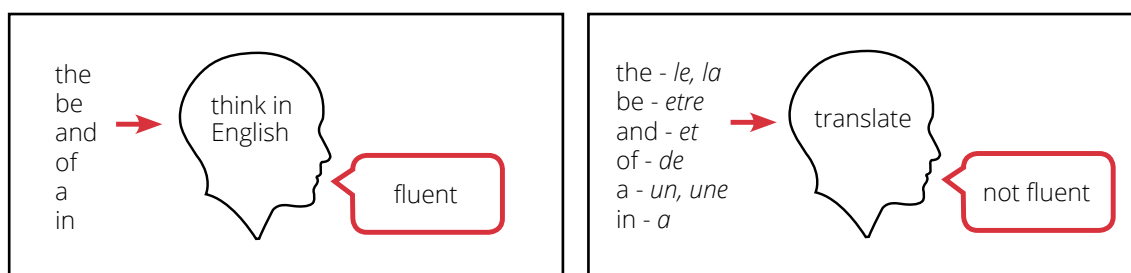
Another Czech I know (who doesn't need my lessons) tells me a different story. He's a lawyer who has international clients, and when he needs to research something for them, he does all his reading in English.

Then an interesting thing happens when his Czech colleagues ask him about the case: he has difficulty telling them! He can explain it perfectly in English, but in Czech it's a challenge.

That's because his input was 100% English. But when he tries to explain it in Czech, he's translating, which is always more difficult.

And when you use a dictionary in your native language you're inputting a translation.

So whatever you write down in your notebook, keep it 100% English.



You will never be fluent in English if you translate.

Real conversation is too fast.

You need to think in English.

Rule #2 Complete sentences

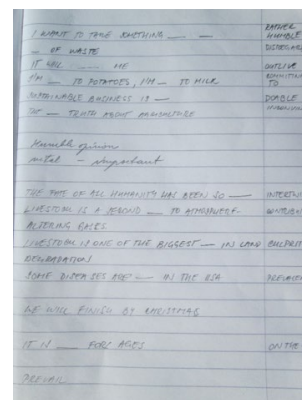
Don't just write down the new word. Write down the sentence that the word is in.

Remember the example I gave when my French friends visited me?

If I had had a notebook with me at the time, I would have written (in French):

"The original museum was damaged in an earthquake."

Why? Because it's easier to remember a word in context - when it's connected to other information.



One of my student's notebooks

Rule #3 Gaps

When you simply stare at a list of words your brain is passive.

(Remember the people on the metro staring at their lists of English words?)

It's like going to the gym and just looking the barbells.

But when you quiz yourself, your brain is active, and you're actually exercising the muscle.

In one research study, one group of students was given extra study time, while the second group was given a test.

The group who was tested remembered 35% more after one week.⁶

Psychologists call this "the testing effect."

So here's what you do:

1. Write the sentence on the left side of the page
2. Instead of writing the new word, leave a gap
(ex. _____)
3. On the right side write the word you want to learn

And here's what it would look like:

| | |
|--|------------|
| The original museum was damaged in an _____. | earthquake |
| Jordan struggles to _____ refugees. | absorb |

Then when you want to review, cover the right side of the page and quiz yourself.

STEP THREE: REVIEW

Once, a long time ago, I had a student who never reviewed.

I would teach her a new word and she wouldn't write it down, she wouldn't use it, she wouldn't even think about it.

Then a week later, I would ask her what the word meant...and she remembered!

But that's not normal.

In fact, she was a bit strange.

A normal student – even my smartest normal students – they forget words.

Forgetting is normal.

It's how our brains are programmed. It's the default setting.

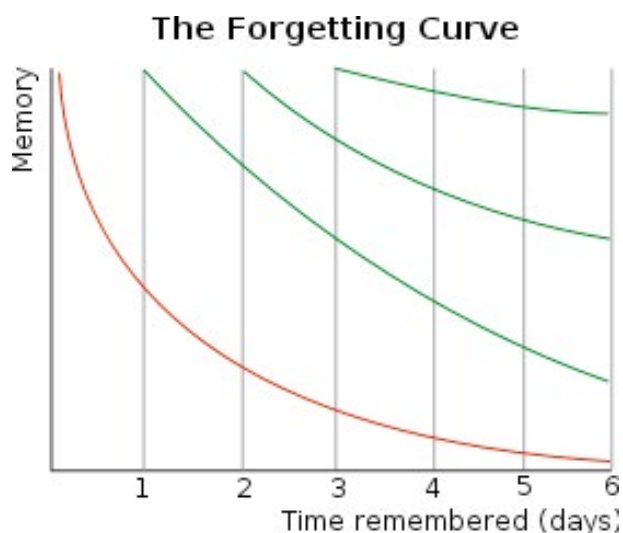
From when you wake up in the morning to when you go to sleep at night, there's a lot of information that goes into your ears and eyes. If you remembered it all, you'd probably go crazy.



So it's good that you forget. Most of it's unimportant.

But what about the important stuff? A new word, for example. How do you remember it when our brains are built to forget?

The Curve of Forgetting



The Curve of Forgetting

In 1885, the German psychologist Hermann Ebbinghaus published his famous study on memory called *"Memory: A Contribution to Experimental Psychology."*

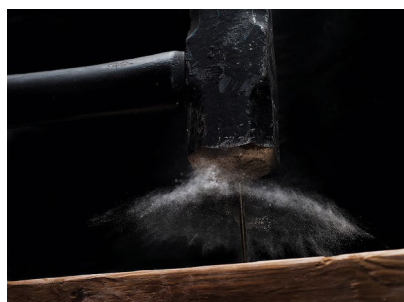
And the conclusion?

We're really good at forgetting; we can do a lot of it and we can do it very quickly.

I've read different statistics, but basically what happens is that within just one hour we forget a large amount. After 24 hours we forget an even larger amount. And after a week – all gone! (practically)

But now, look at the second line. This is what happens when you review. Your memory goes back to 100%. And with each new review the curve starts to become less and less steep until finally it's flat and there is no more forgetting – it's in your long-term memory.

I like the analogy of a nail and hammer. A nail doesn't go in the first time. You have to hit it again and again and again.



It's the same with a new word. You have to hear it and see it and say it again and again and again. (On average, it takes 8 to 11 repetitions before a word enters your long-term memory.)

That's the bad news.

The good news is, it doesn't take a lot of time. Just a few minutes a day is enough to give the word a "hit on the head."

But it has to be every day. (At least at first.)

PART TWO



**THE
MULTIPLIERS**



ROLLING SIXES

Learning vocabulary is like playing a game where you have to roll dice to get around the board. If you keep rolling, eventually you'll get there, but you want to go faster and the way you go faster is by rolling higher numbers.

It's similar with vocab.

If you do nothing else except read every day, you will improve your vocabulary.

But it takes a while. It's like rolling ones.

However, by applying a few techniques to your reading, you can multiply the number of words you remember $\times 2 \dots \times 3 \dots \times 4 \dots \times 5 \dots$

You can start rolling sixes.



MULTIPLIER ONE: USE A MEMORY MACHINE

Imagine you have a list of 100 words.

Some words are easy, some are not.

With some it's enough to review them once a week or once a month. But others need daily hammering.

But in your notebook, the easy and the hard are next to each other.

Daily you might only need to look at 10 or 20 or 30 words. But your notebook has 100.

This is where technology makes things easier and faster.

A memory machine, or what others call a spaced repetition system (SRS), remembers which words are easy and which words are difficult, and quizzes you on the difficult words often and the easier words less often.



It's a huge time saver.

Plus, it's fun! The two most popular programs, Anki and Brainscape, both free online, resemble playing a game more than studying.

(For Anki, you need to first register at ankiweb.net, then you can download the app at ankisrs.net.)

MULTIPLIER TWO: USE ALL YOUR SENSES

When you use your eyes and your ears and your body to learn a word you'll learn it faster and remember it easier.

First, when you make a flashcard in Anki or Brainscape, include a picture that relates to the word or the story.

If you use a notebook, you could make a little drawing or print out a picture from the internet.

Second, add sound.

If you're using Anki, you can easily attach a sound file.

Go to forvo.com and you'll be able to download the native speaker pronunciation of just about any word. Or if you have a private teacher, this is something he or she could do for you during your lessons.

If you're using a notebook, you can just say the word aloud.

Third, if possible, connect a movement to the word. This is going to be easier with action verbs and might require some creativity for other words.

When I learned the Czech word for "to shoot", I looked at a picture of James Bond with a gun and said the word aloud while I imagined shooting someone with my finger.

MULTIPLIER THREE: USE THE WORD IMMEDIATELY

Whenever I'm in a group and we're telling jokes, there's always someone who stays silent and after a while sadly remarks, "I can never remember jokes."

And the reason is, after the rest of us hear a joke, we immediately look for someone we can tell it to.

And that's how we remember jokes – by telling them.

And it's the same with your vocabulary.

To move a word from your passive memory into your active, you have to simply decide to use it.

And the best time is immediately after you learn it.

The theory why this works is because seeing a word is a right brain activity, while speaking is a left brain activity. But when you have to speak about something you saw, you're involving the whole brain.


There was a research study done where they gave one group a list of words and told them to learn them.

They gave the second group the same words and told them to make a story with the words.

Then, they tested how many words they remembered, and the second group won.

And they didn't remember them a little better, but 250% better!

Here's what I recommend, as soon as you learn a new word, look around



*You have to simply
decide to use it.*

for someone to use it on.

It could be a colleague, or it could be a friend. But it would be best if it's a native speaker.

Because if you're using it incorrectly, they'll tell you or you'll see the confused look on their face.

Tip: If you have a private teacher, you can use him/her to test your new words.

MULTIPLIER FOUR: SLEEP

You probably know from personal experience that you don't remember as well – or probably do anything well – when you're tired.

But it's important not just for remembering, but also for the first step in learning - when the word first enters our memory.

The theory is that our brains need to experience REM sleep (the part of sleep where dreams occur) in order for new memories to be processed.

In a study done at Edinburgh Hospital in Scotland, two groups were told to memorise a list of words. This was done in the morning.

In the evening the first group was tested. But the second group wasn't tested until the following day – after they had slept.

And the winner – the group who had a good night's sleep.⁷

I'm sure you're already an expert on sleeping, and how to get enough sleep shouldn't be too hard to figure out.

But here's something maybe you didn't know: using your phone, tablet or computer before going to bed is hurting your sleep quality.⁸

The light that comes from these devices is known as "blue light" and it gives the same message to our brains as walking outside on a sunny day, which is, "Stay awake!"

Not only is it harder to fall asleep after using a blue light device, the quality of your sleep is not as good.

So you can either dim the light of your devices, or install a program that does it automatically, or even better, turn everything off one or two hours before bed and read a book!

PART THREE



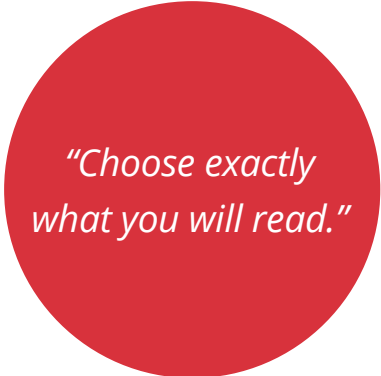
THE

ROUTINES



PREPARATION

Has this ever happened to you? You decide to start exercising – let’s say, running – and when the time comes to get out the door for your run, you look around for your shoes, you go through your drawers to decide what to wear, you check the music on your ipod....



*“Choose exactly
what you will read.”*

And then soon you’re having a different conversation in your head: “It’s getting late...I won’t have time now...I’m getting hungry...I’ll go tomorrow.”

And you don’t go.

To prevent this, prepare in advance – the day or night before.

Here’s how to prepare for your new daily vocab routine.

FIRST: Get it

Choose exactly what you will read. If it’s a book, buy it or download it. If it’s a blog or an article, print it or download it. Get it before the time you will read it.

Then, the night before, put it by the door, on your device, or in your bag.

SECOND: Schedule it

I used to have a hard time swimming; not swimming in the water, but just getting to the pool.

Some days I would go, and other days I wouldn’t.

Then one day I noticed something: I noticed that I always did the things I had written in my schedule – classes, meetings, calls, appointments, etc. But the things I had not written in my schedule, like swimming, I would only sometimes do.

So I did an experiment. At the beginning of the week I found the free time in my schedule and I wrote down “swimming.” And magically, every day where I had written “swimming” ...I went swimming.

The lesson here is, if you want something to happen – if it’s important – schedule it. Write it down and put it next to all the other important things in your day. Even if you just have ten free minutes, write down “English.”

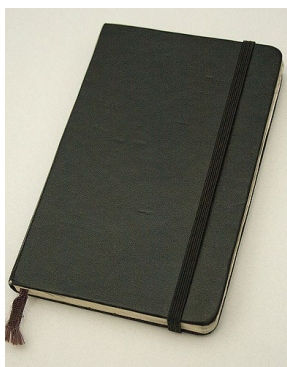
*If you want
something to
happen,
schedule it.*

THIRD: Buy a notebook

And after you buy it, I recommend you pick one place, one physical location, and this will be the place where your notebook “lives.”

One of the most common problems my students who use notebooks have is remembering where it is.

Our goal here is to make your routine easy, automatic, and eventually a habit. If you’re always wondering “Now where did I put that notebook...?” it’s going to be much harder.



So pick your purse, your desk, your bag...and this is where you will always keep your notebook. No more thinking required.

Or even better, use Anki, and your words will living in your phone. (And when was the last time you forgot to leave the house without your phone?)

THE MAGICAL POWER OF DOING THE SAME THING EVERY DAY

For years, I used to ask my students:

“Did you review your vocabulary?”

And the answer I usually got...

“No.”

And I understood why: We’re all busy. We all forget things from time to time. And we’re all tired at the end of the day.

But then one day my students stopped telling me they were too busy or that they forgot.

The change began when I started asking the question:

“When was the last time you were too busy to brush your teeth?”

If you’re older than five, brushing your teeth is just one of those things you don’t have to think about.

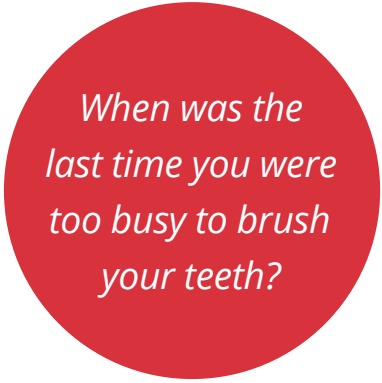
It’s become automatic. It’s a habit. It’s part of your routine.

You brush your teeth even if you can barely keep your eyes open and even if you worked 15 hours straight with no time for lunch.

So what if English was like brushing your teeth?

I will say that not only is it a good idea, it’s the only strategy that will give you the results you need.

The only hope of making progress is to make daily improvements.



When was the last time you were too busy to brush your teeth?

And the only hope of doing something daily is to make it a routine.

That's what we're going to do in this final part.

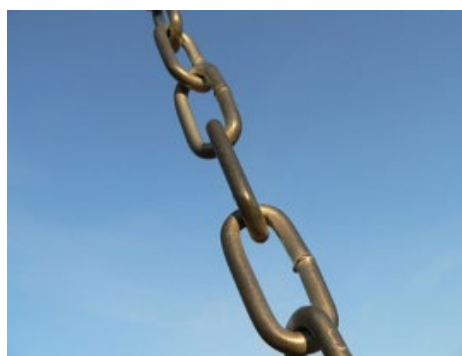
But first, let's understand habits a little better.

And back to the teeth brushing example...

HABIT CHAINS

Brushing my teeth isn't my only evening habit. Before I brush them, I also floss them. And after I brush them, I wash my face.

Habits don't exist in isolation. They're connected to each other, like links are connected to each other to form a chain.



Links in a chain

That's the first thing you need to understand.

The second thing is that in each habit chain there's an event that begins the chain.

For my evening habit chain, the event that triggers it is that I have the thought, "It's time for bed."

Let's call these events "anchor chains."

Other anchor chains are: waking up, getting in your car/on the metro, in the morning, arriving at the office, and eating meals.

And the third thing to know is...

HOW TO ADD AN ENGLISH HABIT TO THE CHAIN

Habits are strong. But the habits closest to the anchor are the strongest. And the further the links gets from the anchor, the weaker it is.

Let me give you an example from my morning habits.

Morning habit # 1 is drinking a glass of water. As soon as I put my feet on the floor, I see the glass on my nightstand and I drink it.

But morning habit # 27 is folding my clothes and putting them in the dresser. If I have time, I do it. If I don't, I leave them on the chair.

So the lesson is, if you want to increase your chances of doing your new English habit, put the link as close as you can to the anchor event.

ROUTINE 1: METRO ROUTINE

Anchor Link: Get on the metro/tram/bus

English Link 1: Take out your book and read

Anchor Link: arrive at the office

English Link 1: Record the new words

English Link 2: Review words from previous days

Variation: Add a quick review on the metro either before or after you read.

ROUTINE 2: FIRST THING IN THE MORNING, LAST THING AT NIGHT ROUTINE

Anchor Link: Get in bed

English Link 1: read before falling asleep (underline new words)

Anchor Link: Wake up

English Link 1: Record words from the previous night

English Link 2: Review words from previous day

Variation: Read at night and review in the morning. Then at the weekends set aside an hour to record the new words.

ROUTINE 3: THE FIRST TEN MINUTES AT THE OFFICE ROUTINE

Anchor Link: Arrive at the office

English Link 1: Read the news in English

English Link 2: Record the new words

English Link 3: Review words from previous articles

START WITH JUST ONE MINUTE AND ONE WORD

The hardest part of doing anything new is starting.

The second hardest part is continuing.

But when you make starting ridiculously easy, and failing incredibly difficult... it's easy to start and easy to continue.

In his book "One Small Step Can Change Your Life", the author, Dr. Robert Maurer, tells the story of a patient who was overweight and unhealthy. He wanted her to start exercising, but he knew if he simply told her to exercise thirty minutes every day, she would try, fail, and then feel bad.

So instead, he gave her a ridiculously easy first goal: march in front of the TV for one minute every evening.

Not only did she do it, but she felt good about accomplishing the goal.

And because it was so easy, it wasn't hard to add another minute, and then some walking and then some running, until eventually she was exercising every day for thirty minutes.

But if she had started with the final goal, she might not have started and she almost definitely would have quit.

So one minute of reading and one new word a day will be your ridiculously easy vocab goal.

ABOUT RYAN

A long time ago, my great, great grandparents left their homes in France, Ireland, Germany and England.

They went to America to start a new life.

About 150 years later, I came back.

And I've been in Prague, the capital of the Czech Republic, since July 2004.

Prague is also where my teaching journey began.

It started in the usual place, a classroom.

But when I saw that the usual methods – grammar, text books, memorization – were not doing their job, I began to look around for something else.



What I found was research studies, sports psychology, and polyglots, all who contradicted the way most of us learned languages in school, and unfortunately still do out of habit as adults.

You can read more about my ideas on learning English and sign up for my weekly tips at mrvig.com.

Cheers,

Ryan Viguerie

SUGGESTED READING

One final research study for you.

Language students were divided into two groups – fluent and not-yet fluent – and asked if they used a language program (books, software, cds, etc.).

The result was that the not-yet successful students had bought and used twice as many programs as the fluent students.⁹

One conclusion you can make from this is that you should stick with one program. Or instead, watch TV and listen to podcasts.

I agree with that.

But I think it also reveals something else.

When you buy a computer program (or attend a language course, or hire a teacher) – and that's all you do – you're unconsciously saying "you do the work for me."

But the person who spends just a little extra time and downloads an ebook about vocabulary, or watches a video about memory, or reads a book about habits, is saying something else, which is, "No one else is going to do this for me. I have to learn how to do it myself."

He has taken responsibility for himself.

And that's why he will be successful.

Because you're reading this, I think you're the second type of person.

So if you want to continue to learn more about learning, here are some books and materials I've found useful. Maybe you will, too.

BOOKS

"The Power of Habit" by Charles Duhigg

(or if you want to save time, you can download a much shorter ebook on habits at markmanson.net/the-habits-ebook)

"Fluent Forever" by Gabriel Wyner

"Effortless English" by A.J. Hoge

VIDEOS

Stephen Krashen

Youtube.com, search: "Stephen Krashen language acquisition"

PODCASTS

Effortless English Podcast

www.podbay.fm, search: "A.J. Hoge"

End notes

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