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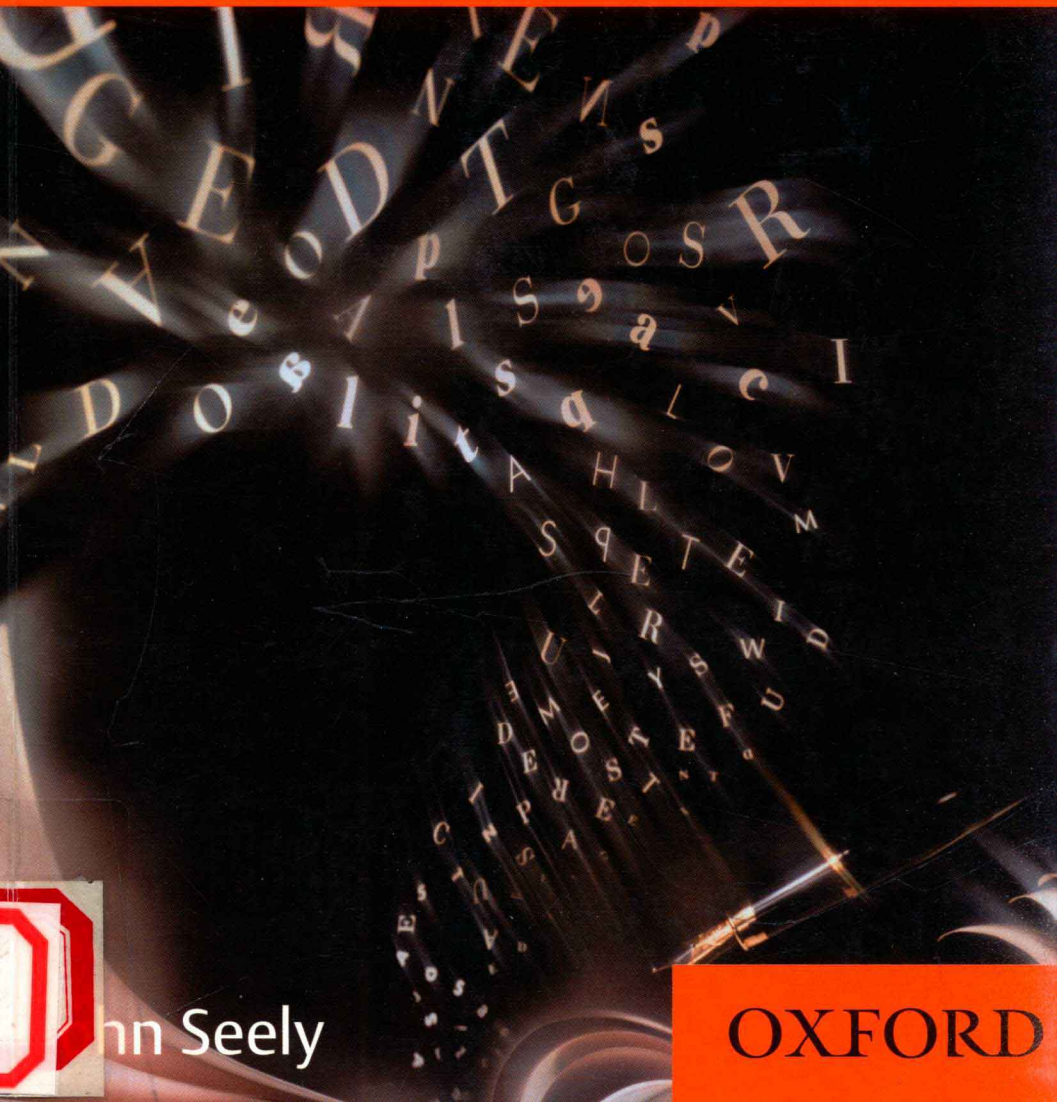

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John Seely

Cartoons by Beatrice Baumgartner-Cohen

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One Step Ahead ...

The *One Step Ahead* series is for all those who want and need to communicate more effectively in a range of real-life situations. Each title provides up-to-date practical guidance, tips, and the language tools to enhance your writing and speaking.

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1 Introduction

'I am a bear of very little brain and long words bother me', said A. A. Milne's Winnie the Pooh. There are occasions when many of us share Pooh's feelings about our capacity to cope with words. The sheer volume of new words that seem to flood into the language every day is daunting. On the Internet there are whole websites devoted to new words. Some even offer to deliver a new word by email every day. And what words! Could you, for example, put a meaning to *geocaching, evangineer, plutography,* or *velcroid*? If the answer is 'no'—well, neither could I until I started writing this book.

It's almost certain you could manage pretty well without those four words (although I must confess to a sneaking attachment to *velcroid*) and the thousands of others that are coined each year. On the other hand, many people feel that they would like some help in coping with the words that already exist and are well established in the language. It is to these readers that this book is addressed.

So what *One Step Ahead: Words* offers is a comprehensive strategy to tackling vocabulary. The book is divided into two parts:

Part A

This part of the book outlines a strategy for tackling vocabulary and provides information on a wide range of topics:

Chapter 2: How many words do you know?
An overview of what we mean by a person's 'vocabulary', and how we can set about selecting the best word for a particular situation.

Chapter 3: Looking words up
How to choose and use dictionaries, thesauruses and other word books.

Chapter 4: Effective communication
Assessing the level of your audience and choosing the best words for clear communication.

Chapter 5: When the words get in the way
Adjusting your vocabulary to fit the social situation in which you are communicating. Taboo, euphemisms, slang and jargon.

Chapter 6: Where do English words come from?
A brief survey of the history of English showing the influences of different languages and cultures over the years.

Chapter 7: Newspeak
New words today—where they come from and why they are coined.

Chapter 8: The grammar of words
A brief and simple introduction to some of the grammatical words you need to be able to talk about words: noun, adjective, verb, adverb. How words are built up: stem, prefix, suffix.

Chapter 9: Getting a grip on words
An overview of the strategy.

Part B: Reference section

- **Word classes**
  More about the grammar of words.
- **Prefixes**
  A list of the commonest prefixes with meanings and examples.
- **Suffixes**
  How we use suffixes to make new words.
- **Confusables**
  A list of the words most commonly confused with explanations of their meaning and sample sentences.
- **Glossary**
  Explanations of the technical terms used in this book.
- **Resources**
  Useful word books and websites.

2 How many words do you know?

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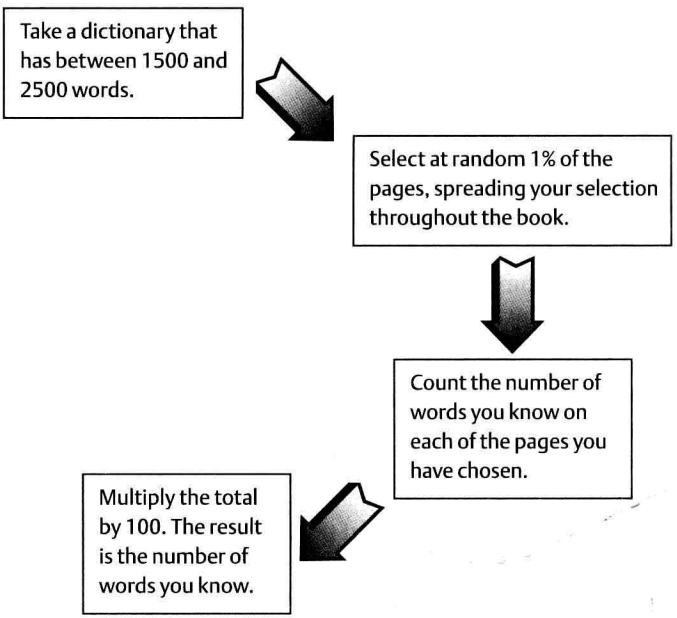
Building your vocabulary

People are sometimes judged by their vocabulary: 'He's very well educated; he uses a lot of long words.' Some feel challenged because they feel that their own personal vocabulary is not adequate for the job they have to do. A popular feature of *Reader's Digest* for many years was 'It Pays to Increase Your Wordpower'. The idea that knowing a lot of words gives you some kind of 'power' is widespread.

But what does it mean? How many words do you know? It is sometimes suggested that you can measure this by a simple test:



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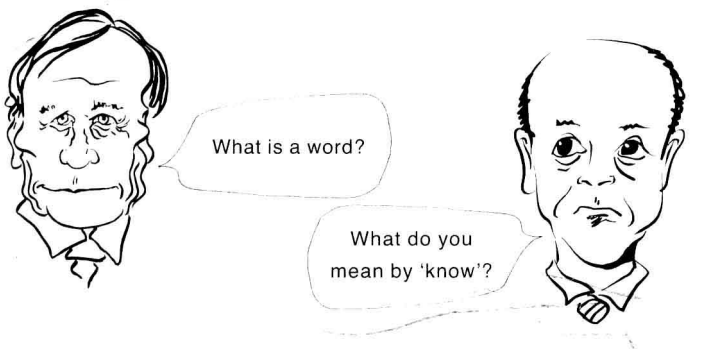
It sounds easy. In fact as soon as you try it, you come up against two major problems:



What is a word?

If you go through a page of a dictionary in the way suggested you soon find yourself having to make decisions about which words to count and which to ignore. Take the word 'lament' for example. It has two uses:

- as a verb, meaning to express sadness, grief or regret;
- as a noun, meaning an expression of sadness, grief or regret.

Verbs, nouns, and adjectives are explained in Chapter 8, and in the Glossary

Do you count that as two words or one? And what about:

'lamented' (adjective) ?

'lamenting' (adjective)?

Then there are words that are clearly related to 'lament':

'lamentation'

'lamentable'

Anyone who knows 'lament' can reasonably claim to know these too. So for that one 'word' you could claim to know anything between one (rather strict) and six (rather generous) 'words'.

What do we mean by 'know'?

Try this experiment. Go through the following list of words and for each one write down a letter to indicate how well you know it:

A I know it well and would feel confident to use it.

B I understand what it means but wouldn't feel confident to use it.

C I think I know what it means, but I'm not sure.

D I've seen or heard it but don't really know what it means.

E I don't think I've ever seen it before in my life.

denizen	denounce	dentate	denunciation
denn	dense	denticulate	denutrition
dennet	densify	dentist	deny
denomination	dent	denuclearize	deobstruct
denote	dental	denumbiate	deodar

As you can see from this exercise we 'know' different words in different ways. (And if you put anything except 'E' against 'denumbiate' you were cheating because I made it up!)

Passive or active?

Probably the most important distinction to make is between our active and passive vocabularies. The active vocabulary (Group A) is the list of words that we feel confident about using. The passive vocabulary (Group B) contains the words we are fairly sure we understand but which we don't really feel confident to use ourselves. Naturally your passive vocabulary is bigger than your active vocabulary—typically for an adult about 25 per cent bigger. So one way to increase your 'word-power' is to move words from the passive list to the active one:

make sure that you really do know what they mean and how they are used and then start using them!

Secondly, you can begin to take a more active approach to your 'fringe' vocabulary, the words that fall into groups C and D: words that you think you know, but aren't really sure about and words that you recognize but don't know the meaning of. In both cases the solution is simple: make use of a good-quality dictionary.

Thirdly, you can increase the passive and 'fringe' vocabularies by reading more widely. Although magazine quizzes along the lines of 'It Pays to Increase Your Wordpower' tests are fun, they don't really work because the words in them are completely out of context. The words you have gained since leaving formal education have come into your head because you have read or heard them. They no doubt include many words you have acquired for use at work. Reading takes you away from this familiar world and into worlds of language that you might otherwise not encounter. The more serious programmes on radio and TV do the same thing. Again, you need to use a good dictionary to gain the most benefit from your reading, listening, and viewing.

Call My Bluff

A popular TV show for many years involved two teams who took it in turns to test each other's wordpower. A team would be given an unusual word, for example ***spauld***. Each member of the team would offer the opposing team a possible and plausible definition of the word. Their opponents then had to guess which one was true:

1 *This is a term from an early form of croquet. To* ***spauld*** *was to prevent an opponent's leading ball from finishing by cannoning into it and knocking it out of bounds.*

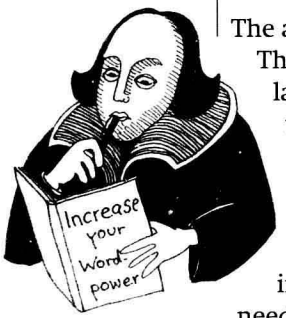
2 *The term* ***spauld*** *comes from the ancient craft of fletching, or putting the feathered flights on arrows. A spauld was a tool used by the fletcher to trim the flights to exactly the right size.*

3 *It's a term from butchery. The* ***spauld*** *of an animal is its shoulder. The word later came to mean any joint of meat.*

2 How many words d you know?

Answer

he correct answer
3, 'a joint of meat'.



Zounds! I was never so bethumped with words since I first called my father dad.

King John

Fitting new words into a pattern

The approach just outlined will work, but it is a bit random. There are probably more than a million words in the English language, and an educated speaker of English may have a total vocabulary of between 25,000 and 75,000 words. (Calculations of Shakespeare's vocabulary usually come in at around 30,000 words.) In the list on page 10 you probably didn't know some of the words for a very good reason: you didn't need to. There is no particular virtue in piling up in your head words that you are never going to need to use. What you need is a system. You need to be able to fit each new word into a pattern which helps you understand:

- its grammar;
- its structure and origins;
- how it relates to other words with similar meanings;
- how it combines with other words;
- the situations in which it is used.

Grammar

It should go without saying that a new word is of little value if you don't know how to use it in a sentence. Knowing the class or classes that a word belongs to is therefore essential. It is also, sometimes, a handy way of extending your vocabulary. Many words belong to more than one class, but you may well find that you are unconsciously limiting your vocabulary by ignoring this fact. You may, for example, be accustomed to using 'articulate' as an adjective:

She was a very **articulate** supporter of women's rights.

but never as a verb:

She was trying to **articulate** the different ways in which women had been oppressed over the centuries.

*When they call you **articulate** that's another way of saying 'He talks good for a black guy'.*

Ice-T, American rap musician

Structure

Some words have a simple construction: they consist of only one part and cannot be broken down further. For example:

string money pepper gossip buggy

Others can be broken down into a number of constituent parts. For example:

complication = com + plic + ate

explicable = ex + plic + able

extricate = ex + tric + ate

If you understand what prefixes such as 'com-' and 'ex-', and suffixes such as '-able' and '-ate' contribute to the meaning and usage of a word, you have a powerful tool for understanding new words and extending your vocabulary.

Roots

In a similar way, it is helpful to be on the lookout for words that have common roots. There is a mass of English words that have been built up on words (or parts of words) from classical Greek and Latin. Even if you have no knowledge of these languages yourself, it shouldn't take long to work out what the original word or part of a word must have been and roughly what it meant. All these words, for example, have a common ancestor:

biography **bio**logy **bio**nic **bio**-diversity **bio**sphere

Clearly words containing 'bio' have something do with life. Similarly 'auto**graph**', 'mono**graph**', and '**graph**ology' suggest that words containing 'graph' have to do with writing. So putting 'bio' and 'graph' together in 'biography' gives us 'writing about life'. A good dictionary will provide further information about such word derivations.

bionic
adj.
1 relating to or denoting the use of electro-mechanical body parts instead of or as well as living ones.
2 informal having ordinary human powers increased by or as if by the aid of such devices.

Concise Oxford Dictionary

Grouping words by meaning

Another valuable way of gaining a grasp on the vocabulary of English is to look for patterns of meaning. Often when we speak or write, we feel that we have a choice of two or more words with similar meanings. For example, how many words can you think of to fill the space in this sentence?

'Please leave me alone,' she _____.

Possibles include:

said	shouted	yelled	cried	screamed
shrieked	whispered	murmured	muttered	mumbled
sighed	gasped	panted	yelped	growled
snapped	snarled	squeaked	whined	sobbed
wailed	drawled			

Linguists call such groups of words 'semantic fields', since semantics is the study of meaning. The easiest place to find such groupings in a practical, usable form is a thesaurus. If you are stuck for the exact word for a particular shade of meaning, then a thesaurus is a valuable tool. One has to beware, however. Successful use of a thesaurus depends on two things:

- You have to know the exact meanings of the words it lists, or be prepared to research their meanings.
- You have to know exactly how they are used.

Clearly, some of the words in the list above either would be inappropriate or would take a little explaining. Think, for example, of situations in which you might say or write:

'Please leave me alone,' she snarled.

or

'Please leave me alone,' she drawled.

or

'Please leave me alone,' she growled.

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