**Vocabulary**

You don't need to know all of the words in a language: for example it seems unlikely that anyone reading this has suffered from not knowing that "Zyzzyva" is a kind of tropical weevil and not a Spice Girls lyric.

So which words should we learn? Stuart Webb, professor of applied linguistics at the University of Western Ontario, has studied the process of learning vocabulary or - to give it its sexier name - language acquisition. Prof Webb says the most effective way to be able to speak a language quickly is to pick the 800 to 1,000 lemmas which appear most frequently in a language, and learn those.

If you learn only 800 of the most frequently-used lemmas in English, you'll be able to understand 75% of the language as it is spoken in normal life.

Eight hundred lemmas will help you speak a language in a day-to-day setting, but to understand dialogue in film or TV you'll need to know the 3,000 most common lemmas. However, to understand a story or a book or an article, you need to know 8, 000 lemmas.

**Seven Practical Ways to Learn Words in Context**

If you want a better vocabulary, you’ve come to the right place. Below are seven easy ways to start learning new words in engaging contexts, understanding their nuances and trying them out for yourself.

1. **The Metacognitive Model of Strategic Learning**

Although students often mention repetition to learn language … more efficient strategies may be necessary for students to learn and remember information for long periods of time. Making meaningful associations with new words and phrases can make vocabulary acquisition more effective and efficient.

1. **Read just one Times article of your choice**

Before you read any further, take a moment to look at the photo above. What words come to mind to describe it? Make a list. For fun, you might even do the exercise alongside someone else, then compare lists to see how many words you have in common.

1. **Take an interactive vocabulary quiz**

You can do quizzes by clicking on the following links:

<https://my.vocabularysize.com/select/test>

<https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2021/08/23/learning/VocabularyQuiz-FoodStars.html>

1. **Turn to TikTok to learn commonly confused words**

Differentiate between similar-sounding words with the help of Claudine James, an English teacher and member of our [first Teaching Project cohort](https://www.nytimes.com/2020/08/12/learning/60-talented-educators-join-the-new-york-times-teaching-project.html), and her popular TikTok account. [This piece pairs](https://www.nytimes.com/2021/03/16/learning/learn-10-commonly-confused-words-with-tiktok-and-the-times.html) five of her videos explaining commonly confused words, like *farther*and *further* or *affect*and *effect*, with usage examples from The New York Times.

1. **Get familiar with “high utility” words in multiple contexts.**

Whether preparing for a standardized test or just reading for fun, you have no doubt come across words like *assume, consist, potential, component*and*ultimate —*words that appear in many contexts and with shifting meanings.

1. **Revel in the language of a favorite Times columnist or critic.**

Reading the work of critics and Opinion columnists at The Times can give you a good example of how writers with distinctive voices use language to express their particular points of view.

For example, in his [review](https://www.nytimes.com/2021/07/22/arts/music/leon-bridges-gold-diggers-sound-review.html) of Leon Bridges’ recent album, The Times’s chief pop music critic, [Jon Pareles](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QU_ViAxn1W4), uses words like *grooves, languid, coiling, ache, plinking, undulating* and *brooding*to communicate how the album sounds to a reader who may not have listened to it.

1. **Make vocabulary practice routine**

Students will identify a word from a New York Times article that they are unfamiliar with, but would like to know more about or incorporate into their own vocabularies.