

Nelson English Usage

Digital resources for the Australian Curriculum

Reference books for English

Dictionaries

Dictionaries record the way that words have been used in the past. All modern dictionaries are based on huge databases of examples of the way English writers and speakers use words.

Dictionaries come in many sizes. As a general rule, the larger a dictionary is, the more likely it is to be useful. This is true for online dictionaries as well, including those that can be downloaded as apps. A tiny student dictionary is useful if you are a poor speller but it is unlikely to be much help with word meanings, as it will mainly give brief synonyms as meanings and it will leave out the difficult words that you are most likely to want to look up.

The availability of electronic dictionaries has revolutionised dictionary use. You can set up your Word program so that you can click on a word in an instant and learn its meaning; you can carry an iPad, iPod, Kindle or Android device that stores a dictionary of a size that would be far too cumbersome to carry with you in book form.

The information that can be found in dictionaries includes:

- how to spell a word (with any alternative spelling)
- the part of speech of a word (noun, verb, adjective, adverb, pronoun, conjunction and so on)
- how to pronounce a word
- the word broken down into syllables the meaning/s of a word
- the etymology (origin and history) of a word
- example sentences of how the word has been used in the past
- other forms the word can take – for example, the plural form, or comparative and superlative adjectives or adverbs
- usage advice
- commonly used abbreviations.

All dictionaries use abbreviations for parts of speech or for the languages from which a word is derived. It is important to know where you can find the explanation for these abbreviations, if you are going to get best use from a dictionary. Similarly, it is important to understand the system that a dictionary uses to indicate how a word is pronounced.

- 1 Locate the key to the abbreviations in your school dictionary. List three abbreviations found in the key, and their meaning.

Many dictionaries use the International Phonetic Alphabet: the advantage of this is that it will enable you to work out how to pronounce a word in any language (although it can't indicate the tonal differences that are essential in some languages). Other dictionaries devise their own system for indicating punctuation.

Thesauruses

A thesaurus groups synonyms together. Many are arranged alphabetically like dictionaries and are really lists of synonyms and antonyms. They are a quick and easy way of jogging your memory about other words that you could use while you are writing. (It is easy to go overboard using a thesaurus. See the Step Away From Your Thesaurus worksheet.)

The most famous thesaurus is **Roget's Thesaurus**. It is quite difficult to use at first, but it is valuable for any writer. You begin by looking up a word that you are interested in the very large alphabetical index at the back. You will then be referred to several numbers that indicate groups of words. For example, you are writing a horror story and realise that you have over-used the word *horrible*. You look up *horrible* in the index. You are referred to a section under the title 'Badness', because one meaning of *horrible* is 'not nice'. You will find dozens of synonyms for *horrible* with this meaning, but as well as adjectives you will find lots of nouns and verbs about 'badness'. These are probably not quite what you want, although words like rottenness and malevolence might provide some inspiration for your writing. You are referred as well to a section on 'Painfulness', because *horrible* can mean 'unpleasant', and you are referred to a section on 'Fear', because *horrible* can mean 'frightening'. Here you will find not just a wealth of adjectives that are synonyms but a large range of other parts of speech, especially nouns and verbs, to enrich your writing.

- 2 Use a Roget's Thesaurus to look up synonyms for wonderful.

Style guides

Many books have been published with advice on how to use the language. Originally, these were based on the writer's own observations – and prejudices – about usage. The rule that the infinitive should not be split, for example, had its origin in such guide books, based on a misunderstanding that English should operate like Latin.

Guide books published today can be based on large databases of the language in use. They can actually quote statistics: 60% of our collected American examples prefer this usage, but only 30% of British examples. For the first time, we can find out how the language is currently being used – rather than some an authority’s view of how it should be used.

When choosing a guide book, check to see that it is based on a large and reputable database – usually referred to as a corpus.

The accepted style guide used by Australian publishers and government departments is the *Style manual: for authors, editors and printers*. The sixth edition was published in 2002.

3 What is a split infinitive?

4 Why might you choose to use a split infinitive in your writing?