
Using Dictionaries to Improve Your Writing

Knowing the right word to use is an important part communicating your message clearly. Different types of dictionaries have been created to help English learners choose the best word for each situation.

Bilingual dictionaries

A bilingual dictionary is designed to help you find the equivalent word to the word you know in your language. It assists you when you don't yet know the English word to express the concept you are trying to write. However, if you rely too much on a bilingual dictionary, your writing may sound unnatural, as words don't always translate directly from one language to another. When you use a bilingual dictionary to find a word, it is helpful to check at least one other source to confirm that this word is the best choice.

English learner's dictionaries

A learner's dictionary is one of the best tools to have for writing English. For university writing, you will want an Advanced Learner's Dictionary. Learner's dictionaries are different from dictionaries that are designed for speakers of English as a first language because they:

- Define words using simpler terms.
- Include example sentences that show how the word is used correctly.

You can use a learner's dictionary in several ways.

- a) To look up a word after finding it in a bilingual dictionary, to check that it is truly the best word for what you would like to express.
- b) To find the meaning of a word you don't yet know.
- c) Go find out how to use a word correctly. You might already know the meaning of the word, but you need more information to use it in a sentence. For example, if you are unsure of what preposition typically follows a certain verb in English, the example sentences in a learner's dictionary might give you that information.

Access the Oxford Learner's Dictionary online here: <http://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/us/>

Specialized dictionaries and vocabulary aids

Other specialized dictionaries can help you identify correct and natural sounding word choices:

- a) Collocation dictionaries (e.g. *Oxford Collocations Dictionary*): Collocations are words that typically are found together. By looking up a word in a collocation dictionary, you will see examples of how that word is used together in phrases with other words.
- b) Production dictionaries (e.g. *Longman Language Activator*): This dictionary groups words by related topics. Under the main word, other words with a similar meaning are given, along with their definitions and examples of how they are used.
- c) Idiom dictionaries/ slang dictionaries: As their name suggests, these dictionaries help you to discover the meaning of idiomatic phrases. These are expressions where the individual words do not provide clues to the meaning of the whole phrase, such as, "to let the cat out of the bag".

Visit The Learning Centres to access more dictionary resources for English learners. By choosing the right type of dictionary for your situation, you will grow in the skill of expressing yourself in a clear, precise, and natural way.