

Using a Dictionary

Many people use dictionaries to find out the meaning of words or to check their spelling. However, you can find out a lot of other information if you know how to use your dictionary well.

1- WHAT'S IN YOUR DICTIONARY?

A dictionary contains an alphabetical list of words and their meanings.

Dictionaries contain other information as well as helping you spell and find the meanings of unfamiliar words. Does your dictionary have...?

- Definitions / word meanings
- Synonyms
- Pronunciation of words
- Origin of words
- Grammatical information
- English spelling
- US (American) spelling
- Parts of speech
- Plurals of nouns
- Capitalization
- Prepositional rules
- Word usage (e.g. slang)

A dictionary may help you to find the following:

- words of similar meanings
- the population of different countries like Mexico
- where expressions like "last straw" were first used
- information you felt you needed an encyclopedia to find!

2- DIFFERENT KINDS OF DICTIONARIES

You can find many different kinds of dictionaries in your library.

Examples:

- The Australian Slang dictionary
- Maths dictionaries
- Illustrated dictionaries
- Non-English language dictionaries
- Special subject dictionaries (eg horticulture, biology, etc)
- Australian English (eg Macquarie Dictionary)
- American English (eg Webster's Dictionary)

There is a variety of different kinds of dictionaries on the Internet. Check out the Reference.com site.

3- OTHER KINDS OF INFORMATION IN YOUR DICTIONARY

Most dictionaries include special sections at the front or back. These might include:

- maps
- information about geographical places
- famous people
- pictures of state or national flags
- listings of state capitals
- other lists of facts
- illustrations (such as how disc brakes work)

4- FINDING YOUR WAY AROUND YOUR DICTIONARY

How do I find all this information?

- Look in the introduction section of your dictionary.
- Make sure your edition is no more than 10 years old.

The introduction section gives:

- the explanation of the meanings of any special marks
- how to say (pronounce) words
- abbreviations and symbols
- details on how to use that dictionary

5- WORD MEANINGS

Many people use a dictionary to find the meaning of words.

- Each word that is explained in the dictionary is usually in bold type.
- Entry words may be shown divided into syllables. (e.g. cal-am-ity)
- Some words may have only one meaning.
- Some have more than one meaning.
- It might be necessary to scan all meanings to find the one that suits the context.

See the word "cunning" in your dictionary for an example of a word with multiple meanings.

6- ILLUSTRATIVE SENTENCES

Sentences that show how a word is used are sometimes included in dictionaries. The following sentence for example, might be used to demonstrate the meaning of "sarcasm".

"How unselfish you are," said the girl with sarcasm, as her brother took the biggest piece of cake.

7- INTERNET DICTIONARIES

You can use online dictionaries to look up words. Some of these sites are free. You might like to search: *Merriam-Webster's Dictionary Online (American)*

Part 2

8- CHECKING YOUR SPELLING IN A DICTIONARY

Sometimes there are two or more correct spellings of a single word. They are usually in bold type and may be treated in two ways:

- If the different spelling is used as frequently – E.g. ax or axe.
- If the main entry spelling is preferred – E.g. medieval also mediaeval.
- Different spellings of a word
- Be aware of the English and American spelling. In Australia, usually English spelling is used.

For example: colour (English) color (American)

9- PARTS OF SPEECH AND PLURALS

Dictionary entries show the part of speech.

E.g.

adj. adjective	conj. conjunction
prep. preposition	interj. interjection
adv. Adverb	pt. past tense
pro. pronoun	pp. past participle
n. noun	sing. singular
v. verb	pl. plural

An entry may show how to spell the plural form of a noun. If this is formed by adding -s or es, it is not usually shown.

If the plural is formed in a different way, the spelling is shown.

E.g.

radius n.	pl. radii
sheep n.	pl. sheep

Activity

Try this exercise on plurals of nouns.

What do you think the **plural** (more than one) is of each of the words below?

Hippopotamus

Ally

Mercy

Volcano

*remember to look for the abbreviation "pl." denoting "**plural**" in the dictionary entry.

10- HEAD WORDS OR GUIDE WORDS

- These are usually at the top of each page.
- They help you to locate a word on a dictionary page.
- If there are two guide words on the page, they show the first and last words on that page.

- Sometimes there is a guide word at the top of the left-hand page and one at the top of the right-hand page.
- The left guide word shows the first word on the left page, and the right guide word shows the last word on the right page words.
- You decide whether the word you want falls alphabetically between these two guide words.

Activity

Try this exercise to practice using guide words.

What's the Right Page? Below is a list of words from three different pages of a dictionary. In the blue box on the left-hand side there are head words (guide words) from these pages. On which pages (a, b or c) would these words be found?

a. HILT/HOLD
b. HOLDER/HOOKY
c. HOOLIGAN/HOUSEBOAT

1. History	a	b	c
2. Homage	a	b	c
3. Homework	a	b	c
4. Horoscope	a	b	c
5. Hoax	a	b	c

6. Hint	a	b	c
7. Hives	b	c	
8. Honey	a	b	c
9. Hogwash	a	b	c

11- FINDING DIFFICULT WORDS

Remember, words in the dictionary occur in strict alphabetical order. The **guide words** at the top of the page will help you.

- Find the general location of the word you are looking for. Scan the page looking for the letters you are sure of.
- Can't find the word? What other possible ways could you spell it?
- Maybe the word begins with a different letter which sounds the same?
- Perhaps the first letter is silent?

12- WORD ORIGIN: ETYMOLOGY

This tells the history of the word.

For example, in the dictionary entry for sardine:

Sar dine (sar dine) n. pl. -dines or -dine. 1. A young pilchard preserved in oil for food. 2. any of a certain similar small fish prepared in the same way. 3. packed like sardines, very much crowded [*< Latin sardina < Gk sardene, probably originally sardinian fish*]

13- PRONUNCIATION KEY

To pronounce a word, refer to the Pronunciation Key - usually in the Introduction. The symbols in the key tell you how letters are pronounced.

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