

How do I decide which words to learn?

This is an important question. There are a lot of words in English compared with many other languages, and it is impossible to know them all — even native speakers frequently meet words they have never seen before in their reading.

Look at any page in something you're reading at the moment (e.g. a newspaper or book) — how many words on the page do you not know?

Even if there is only one word on every page that you do not know, it will slow down your reading a lot if you have to stop to look up a word in the dictionary every page. And with 3 or 5 unknown words on each page...

Luckily, though, not every word needs to be looked up and remembered:

- (a) some words can be *guessed from the context*;
- (b) many words are *not common* — you may not meet them again for years (if ever) — and are therefore *not worth learning*;
- (c) some words are common or important, and are therefore worth learning.

Here are some steps that may help you decide if a word is worth learning:

1. Try to guess the meaning. If you can guess the meaning, carry on reading. If not, go to step 2.
2. Does the word seem important? (Check in a bilingual dictionary. Is the meaning given an important one?) If not, carry on reading. If it is, go to step 3.
3. Is the word common? You can check this by looking it up on <https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/> and seeing how the word is ranked by the 'word frequency' bar on the far right-hand side of the page. The chart overleaf may help you decide if the word is worth learning:

And now...

If you would like any help or advice, or just a chat about your progress, please get in touch - **we are here to support your independent learning!** To contact us:

- Make an appointment to see an adviser. For details of advisers and their availability, please go to <https://ilang.cle.ust.hk/language-adviser-timetable/>.

- E-mail your questions to iLANG (lcilang@ust.hk).
- Ask at the reception counter of the Language Commons — if the receptionist cannot help you directly, s/he will pass your query on to one of the advisers.

What else can you do?

- Browse the many physical (<https://ilang.cle.ust.hk/language-commons/#resources>) and online materials (<https://ilang.cle.ust.hk/resources-vocabulary/>) for Vocabulary.
- Join a Vocabulary activity or short course (<http://ilang.cle.ust.hk/vocabulary/>).

1 red dot	Used rarely, the word is in the lowest 50% of commonly used words in the Collins dictionary
2 red dots	Used occasionally, the word is one of the 30 000 most commonly used words in the Collins dictionary
3 red dots	In common usage. The word is one of the 10 000 most commonly used words in the Collins dictionary
4 red dots	Very common. The word is one of the 4000 most commonly used words in the Collins dictionary
5 red dots	Extremely common. The word is one of the 1000 most commonly used words in the Collins dictionary

Note

The introductory leaflet in this series is the leaflet *Learning Vocabulary (VI)*.

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