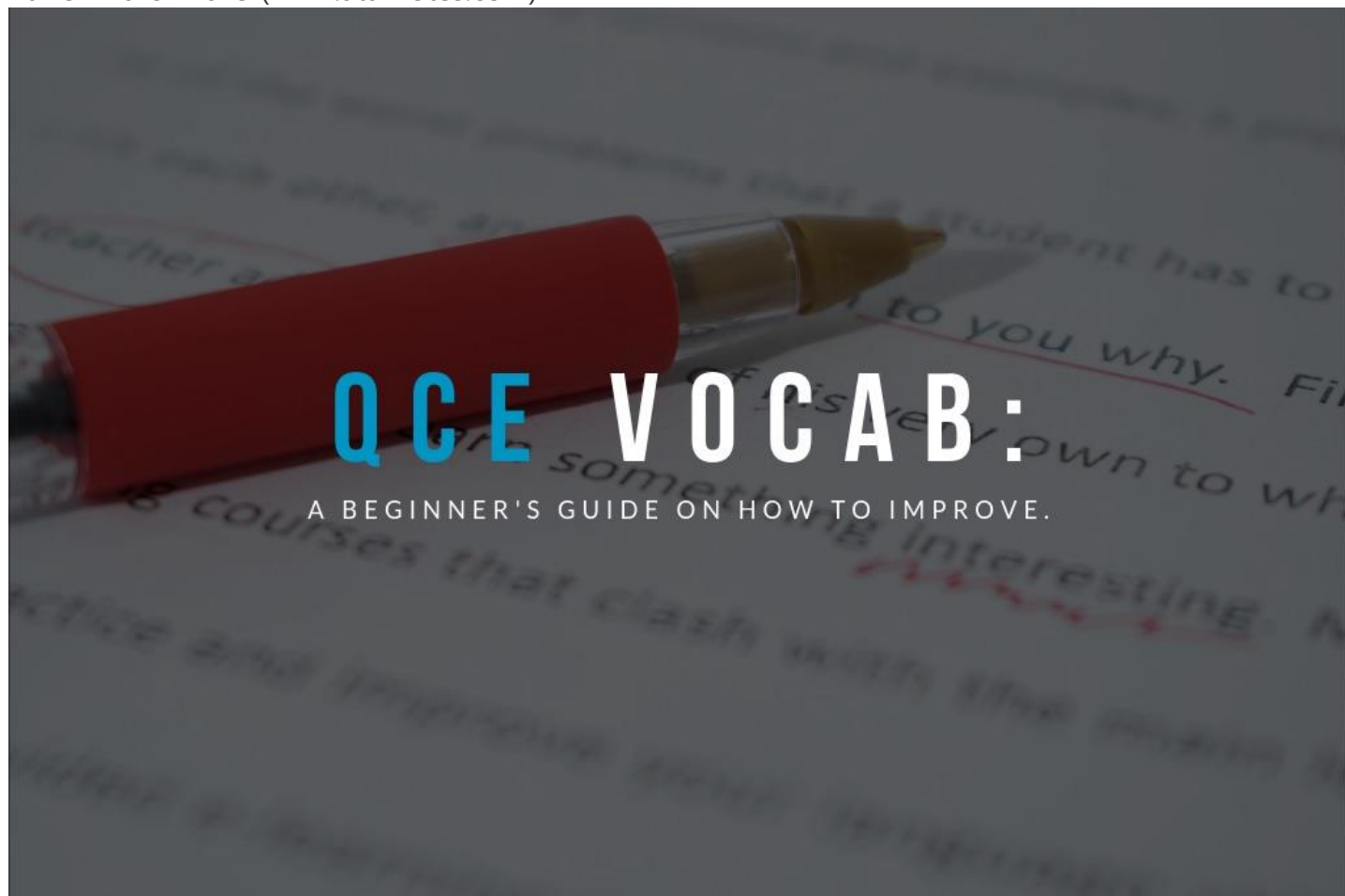


Improving QCE Vocabulary – A Beginner’s Guide

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You know that feeling when your vocabulary lets you down, and you’ve got a word on the tip of your tongue but can’t quite remember it? There’s a word for that! It’s called *lethologica*, and with the exception of some kind of spontaneous brain combustion, it’s one of the worst things that can strike in the middle of an exam.

Flash forward to this year’s end-of-year assessment, and I guarantee there’ll be students suffering the woes of *lethologica* in spite of thorough preparation. They’re confident, they’ve slept well, they had an awesome breakfast, and now they’re in the middle of the exam hall, pen poised, halfway through a paragraph... and... they’ve hit one of those dreaded mental roadblocks.

Then there’s the awful dilemma: do you sit there and wait for that epiphany – perhaps compromising precious time that you could be spending on other ideas, or do you just move on and hope that the teacher marking your work pays no attention to your mediocre QCE vocabulary?

Like it or not, you’re going to be in this position at some point. You could swallow entire dictionaries and rote learn all the best thesauruses, but you’ll still inevitably find yourself wondering which word best conveys your point. The aim is not to learn *all* the words, though. That would be time-consuming and ultimately pointless. After all, there are plenty of words like ‘peristeronic’ or ‘erinaceous’ which, whilst delightful, are probably not going to be very useful to you.

How do you know which words are best? How can you train your brain to give you the right words at the right moment? How can you stop this *lethologica* in exam conditions before it even happens? Well that’s what this guide is going to take you through.

1. Reading widely

I'm aware that I'm quite biased in this regard because I will readily force books upon unsuspecting strangers, but reading is one of the best things you can do for your brain. Not only can it expose you to new ideas and perspectives, but it also has a variety of more covert benefits. You may not realise it, but reading also helps you acquire new phrases and sentence structures, and that by-product can be a huge advantage in boosting your writing ability.

In terms of vocabulary though, it can sometimes take more deliberate effort to improve. Part of this is due to the fact that it's pretty easy to *infer* meaning (i.e. making an educated guess) for unfamiliar words.

For example, let's take a sentence like '*Smoking causes irreparable damage to the lungs.*' Even if you didn't know what 'irreparable' means, you could kind of assume it was sort of like 'permanent' or 'serious,' which is pretty accurate. For most people, they end the process there and just keep reading, but if you go to the trouble of documenting those kinds of words, you'll find it much easier to start employing new QCE vocabulary.

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And unlike those dark pre-internet days when you'd have to crouch amongst library shelves to find reading material, your computers, phones, and tablets grant you access to so much good stuff. It doesn't have to be stuffy classic novels either – even keeping up with your favourite magazine subscription or online news publication can help. The trick is to read **just slightly above your level** so that you're still learning new stuff, but you're not totally overwhelmed. So if you're interested in politics, perhaps read through some current affairs pieces and editorials, but don't go trawling through official party documents or dry press statements that are bogged down by jargon and nonsense. Those easy-read young adult novels that have very little challenging vocabulary in them probably won't be as effective, but you have to know your own limitations before seeking out reading material. If your teachers have pointed out issues with your sentence construction or clarity, then it might be a good idea to angle for more accessible material. Or, if you're a fairly confident writer looking to take your skills to the next level, then more complex texts might be the place to look.

Then, once you've found some sophisticated or unfamiliar words, you can begin to document them.

2. Keep track of new vocabulary

A running tally of all the QCE vocabulary you acquire is going to be pretty central to your success here. It's highly unlikely you'll remember every word perfectly the first time you check the meaning, so you should endeavour to keep track as you go. Otherwise it'll be 'in one ear and out the other,' so to speak, and all your effort will be wasted.

The typical way to do this would be to write down a 'New Words' or 'Good Vocabulary' list on a page at the back of an English workbook, but this is kind of flawed in that you don't often look at the back of a workbook. This means you probably won't be continually revising your knowledge of those words – they'll just sit there for days on end, unloved and lonely. Compare this to, say, a phone or a tablet that you check and use multiple times a day. Clearly you're going to get more exposure to the latter.

I'd recommend getting one of those sticky notes apps, if you haven't already, and keep your word lists there. Try to get into the habit of flicking through these whenever you're bored or waiting for a bus or procrastinating. You might even swap out your wallpaper for screenshots of certain bits of your word lists so that you're exposed to them every time you turn on your screen. It may seem small, but these little contributions can make the process of acquiring vocabulary far simpler and more efficient than pure rote-learning.

3. Learn by association, not memorisation

Speaking of which, if you want to game the system when it comes to remembering new information, you should prioritise *association* as opposed to just forcing stuff into your head. We've all had those moments of desperation where we sat hunched over a textbook, willing our brains to somehow absorb what's on the page. But truly effective learning involves latching on to stuff you already know, and just building upon it.

For instance, if you know that 'extol' is a synonym for 'praise' (as in, *'the author extols the virtues of the American Dream,'*) then you'll be more likely to employ that word in future. But if I just told you that 'impetus' means 'something that makes a process or activity happen or happen more quickly,' then it'll be a bit more difficult for you to harness that word. Sure, you know what it means, but it probably won't come to mind when you need it.

Your internal QCE vocabulary isn't just one big table of words and definitions – it's more like a spider web of nodes and connections spiralling all over the place, so acquiring words is as simple as forging new links and adding more silk to the web.

Even in your tally of new and sophisticated words you should aim to create associations to make things easier on yourself. So rather than having a long list of words – some you know, and some you constantly forget – make mini-lists based on similar meanings. For instance, you might have a collection of adjectives to describe the different kinds of tone that an author might employ. Another one might contain all the positive characteristics that a character might exhibit, and another could chronicle the different synonyms for your high-use words like 'important,' or 'says.'

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4. Know your roots

This is a more optional step, but it's one that you'll probably end up doing by accident anyway. Almost all words have 'derivation,' meaning they derived from some previous word form in either English or another language. For instance, the word 'prejudice' comes from the Latin 'prae' meaning 'before or ahead of' and the word 'judicium' meaning judgement. So if you didn't know what 'prejudice' was, but you knew the root 'pre-' and the base word 'justice,' then you'd be able to guess that it had something to do with making judgements in advance – which is exactly what the word means! The same can be done for a lot of words in English: the word 'asymmetrical' means 'not symmetrical,' and 'atheist' means 'someone who doesn't believe in a deity,' so when you see a word like 'asynchronous' and you know that '-sync-' usually has something to do with being in time or on the beat (eg. 'I tapped my foot in sync with the music') then you'd know that 'asynchronous' refers to sounds or things that don't occur at the same time.

Again, some of this is based on intuitions that you will acquire automatically, but if you go to the trouble of looking up the most common Latin and Greek root words, or the high frequency prefixes and suffixes in English, you'll significantly cut down on the amount you have to memorise.

5. Use technology to your advantage

We've already spoken about how you can use your devices to keep track of QCE vocabulary, but there are many other ways technology can boost this process of learning new words. Many apps like dictionary.com have a 'word of the day' feature, and some even let you 'favourite' words by adding them to customisable lists. Even the more game-based things like 7 Little Words is a great tool for enhancing your QCE vocabulary in small doses.

The aim is to make this process feel distinct from those awful look-say-cover-write-check exercises done in primary school years. You shouldn't have to do drills with words or cram hundreds of definitions into your head to reap the rewards of good QCE vocabulary. Instead, you can use all sorts of aids to your advantage.

In fact, there are entire sites dedicated to improving your QCE vocabulary and expression. Some will let you add your own pre-existing word lists and will create flashcards or mini-quizzes if they help you learn, whereas others will provide you with words targeted at a certain reading level (pick a 'high school à university/college' level category if you can). The best ones will operate via association, so they won't just give you a word and its definition – they'll provide synonyms or sample sentences to help you see how a word works in context. And if you've got a competitive streak, you might even opt for a program that sets daily goals or challenges as a means of incentivising yourself to learn more.

6. Learn little and often

Unfortunately, it's easy to get overwhelmed though. Once your word list starts hitting the triple digits and you're getting a bit complacent with your efforts, it is extremely tempting to quit and assume that what you've done so far will be enough.

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But improving your QCE vocabulary should be too taxing a process. If you start thinking of it as a chore or a dull obligation, you're probably doing it wrong. It should just be an extension of your regular study habits; not some horrid, time-consuming distraction.

Try not to overestimate what you can handle. Printing of an array of sophisticated word lists is a great start, but if you've got thousands of words and no plan to tackle them, you're unlikely to get very far. Don't set yourself a hundred-word-per-week target, or any other arbitrary goal that will only frustrate and demotivate you. Because what will end up happening is you'll have occasional bursts of improvement every few weeks when you can be bothered, but your skills and knowledge will deteriorate in the meantime. Instead, do smaller exercises more often. And rather than thinking of it as learning X amount of words per day, try and see the process as a more gradual form of improvement. You're building a ramp, not a set of stairs! Improvement should be so continuous that it's barely noticeable. Until, that is, you get to the end of the year and realise just how far you've come.

7. Active usage is better than passive acquisition

Finally, we reach the implementation stage whereby you get to put what you know into practice. Acquiring words is one thing, but if you don't know how to actually use what you know, you'll still be at a loss in assessment tasks. As such, you should be using and reusing what you learn as often as you can.

This can start all the way back in your documentation stage if you want. Having a word bank that incorporates sample sentences is a huge help if you struggle with transferring abstract knowledge into more practical situations, and it will likely make the whole process more efficient for you. But don't forget that you're creating a study tool here too. When it comes to writing practice essays or extended responses, you should keep your word lists handy so that you learn to apply all that QCE vocabulary where appropriate. What's more, you'll start creating mental links between those words and the content you're studying. That way, when you're in exam conditions, your brain is more likely to think *'hmm, I need another word for 'unnecessary'... OH! Last time this happened, I used the word 'superfluous,' so I can use that one again!'*

This, ultimately, is the best way to overcome that foul demon of lethologica. Instead of letting it get the better of you and allowing your temporary frustration to impede the quality of your work, you can use that mental spider web to get you out of any jam. Even if you don't have the perfect word in your head, a strong QCE vocabulary will allow you to do the best you can with what you have, and that's all the assessors really expect of you.