



BUILDING YOUR ENGLISH VOCABULARY: A LEARNING TOOLKIT

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NOTES

ESSENTIAL ENGLISH

Expanding your vocabulary is crucial for improving your English. This guide helps ESL learners go beyond memorising word lists, offering practical strategies, essential word groups, and techniques to boost fluency for exams, work, or daily communication.

“One language sets you in a corridor for life. Two languages open every door along the way.” – Frank Smith

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Letstalk Language Lab | Essential English Notes

Essential English

CEFR Level: B1+



Building Your English Vocabulary: A Learning Toolkit

Learning a new language is a multifaceted journey, and for ESL (English as a Second Language) learners, building a strong vocabulary is a foundational aspect of this process. Vocabulary acquisition is not just about memorising words; it encompasses understanding their meanings, usage, and the context in which they are used. A robust vocabulary is instrumental in enhancing communication, comprehension, confidence, and overall language proficiency. It is the key that unlocks the door to effective interaction, academic and professional success, and cultural understanding. This essay explores the critical importance of vocabulary learning for ESL learners and its impact on various aspects of language acquisition.



Learning vocabulary is crucial for ESL learners for several reasons:

- **Communication:** A robust vocabulary enables learners to express themselves clearly and effectively in both spoken and written English. It helps in understanding others and being understood.

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- **Comprehension:** Understanding vocabulary is key to reading comprehension and listening skills. It allows learners to grasp the meaning of texts and spoken language, making it easier to follow conversations, lectures, and written material.
 - **Confidence:** A strong vocabulary boosts learners' confidence. They can participate more actively in discussions, ask questions, and engage in social interactions without fear of not knowing the right words.
 - **Academic and Professional Success:** For students and professionals, a good vocabulary is essential for success. It aids in understanding and using technical and subject-specific terms, which is critical in academic writing, professional communication, and understanding industry-related materials.
 - **Cultural Understanding:** Vocabulary learning also includes idioms, slang, and cultural references, helping learners to better understand the cultural context of the language, which is important for social integration and cultural competence.
 - **Language Skills Development:** Vocabulary knowledge supports the development of other language skills such as grammar, pronunciation, and fluency. It forms the foundation upon which learners can build their overall language proficiency.
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Unit 1 - Learning New Vocabulary

In this lesson, we will explore the effective methods of learning new vocabulary as presented by Cambridge University. Our focus will be on strategies and techniques that facilitate vocabulary acquisition, drawing from the publication *Cambridge English Vocabulary in Use*, 4th edition, Upper-intermediate. This resource, renowned for its comprehensive approach and practical exercises, provides valuable insights into mastering English vocabulary. The selected notes aim to equip learners with the tools needed to enhance their language proficiency and communication skills.

What should you learn?

Did you know that English has over half a million words, but the average native speaker uses only about 5,000 in daily conversations? You are already familiar with many of these 5,000 words. In our vocabulary lessons, we'll help you learn those you don't yet know and teach you how to use them correctly and effectively.

In the publication, Cambridge University proposes the following structure for learning new words and phrases:

What does knowing a new word mean?

It is not enough just to know the meaning of a word. You also need to know:

- which words it is usually used with;
- its grammatical characteristics;
- how it is pronounced;
- whether it is formal, informal or neutral.

So when you learn a word you should make sure that you:

- Do not learn new words in phrases in isolation.
- Notice how words commonly go together. These are called **collocations** and include: **adjectives + nouns**, e.g. rich vocabulary, classical music, common sense; **verbs + nouns**, e.g. to express an opinion, to take sides; **nouns in phrases**, e.g. in touch with, a train set, a sense of humour; **words + prepositions**, e.g. at a loss for words, in particular.
- **Notice special grammatical characteristics of new words.** For example, note irregular verbs, e.g. undertake, undertook, undertaken; uncountable nouns, e.g. luggage; or nouns that are only used in the plural, e.g. scissors; a noun with an irregular plural, e.g. children
- Notice any **special pronunciation** problems with new words.
- Check if the word is particularly **formal or informal**, in other words, if it has a particular **register**.



Notes

Unit 1 Exercises

1. Here are some aspects of grammar to be aware of when learning new vocabulary. Give two examples of words that reflect this aspect of grammar.
 - a. a noun only used in the plural - scissors
 - b. an uncountable noun -
 - c. an irregular verb -
 - d. a noun with an irregular plural -
2. What aspect of pronunciation should you notice about the following words?
 - a. subtle - the b is silent (not pronounced)
 - b. catastrophe
 - c. chemistry
 - d. answer
 - e. a record / to record
 - f. photograph/photographer/photographic

3. Read the text. Use words from the box to complete each 'collocations fork'

English has a **remarkable** range of words. Thanks to periods of contact with foreign languages and its readiness to coin new words out of old elements, English has a particularly large vocabulary. For example, as well as kingly (from Anglo-Saxon) we find royal (from French) and regal (from Latin). There are many such sets of words, which make it possible to express subtle shades of meaning.

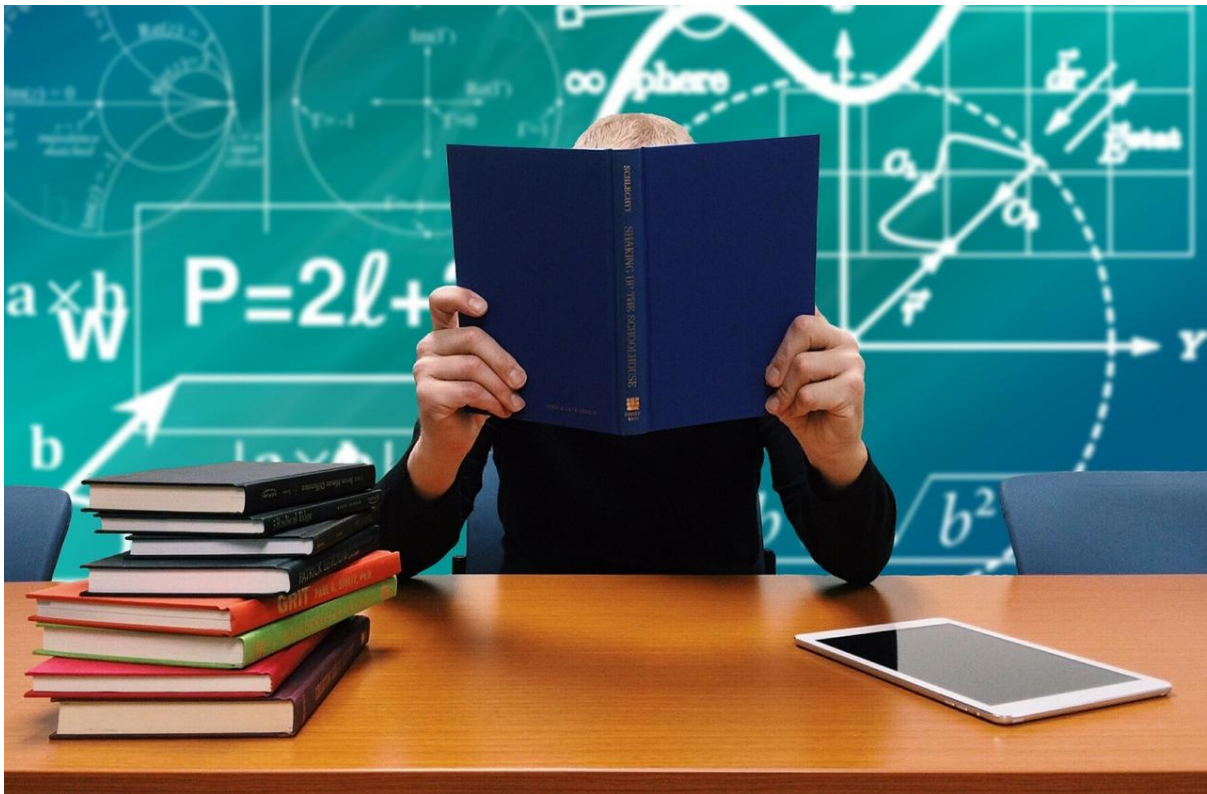
coincidence | difference | family | likeness | palace | a phrase | ~~range~~ | shade | suggestion
| a term | welcome | new words

- | | | | |
|---|--------------|-------------|------------|
| | range | | |
| 1 | a remarkable | likeness | 3 a royal |
| | | coincidence | |
| 2 | to coin | | 4 a subtle |
| | | | |
| | | | |

4. Write i by the words that are informal and f by those that are formal.

- a. guys - i
- b. a minor
- c. awesome!
- d. to alight (from a bus)
- e. to feel gutted

- f. a felon
 - g. to bug someone
 - h. to zone out
5. What is the unifying factor for each group? Can you add one more word to each group?
- b. king, queen, prince, princess royalty - duke
 - c. sunshade, shady, shadow, shade, to shadow, shadowy
 - d. articulate, communicate, convey, express, put across
 - e. noun, verb, adjective, adverb
 - f. subtle, comb, lamb, crumb, debt, plumber
6. Think about the ways of learning vocabulary that you use now, and think about ways you could use more in the future.
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Unit 2 - Organising a vocabulary notebook

Organising words by meaning

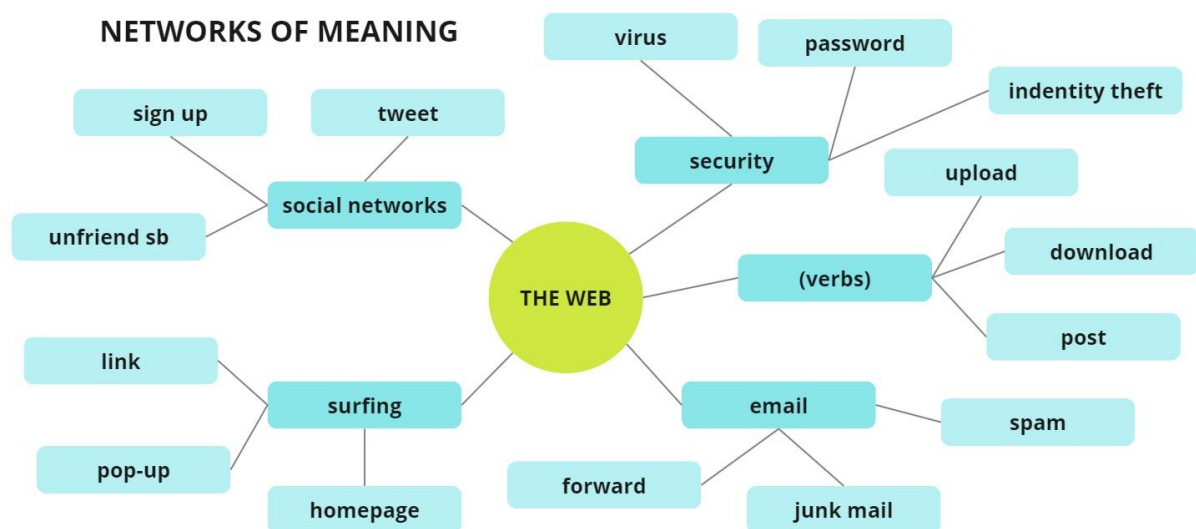
Try **dividing** your notebook **into different broad sections**, with sections for words for feelings, words to describe places, words for movement, words for thinking, etc.

Charts and tables of various kinds can help you organise your vocabulary. Here is an example for words connected with music:

Instruments	Type of Music	Verbs	Related Words
guitar	classical (not classic)	play	practice (n) practise (v)
cello	folk	strum (a guitar)	track
piano	world	perform	release (an album)

Building networks of meaning

A network diagram is useful. It can grow in whatever direction you want it to.



Collocations and fixed phrases

It is important to know how a word combines with other words (its collocations).

Always record the common collocations of a word as you meet them, e.g. win (prize, award, medal) earn (money, a high salary) gain (time, an advantage)

Where a word is often used in a fixed phrase, always record the whole phrase, e.g. in a hurry out of touch to and fro now and again

Synonyms and antonyms

When you find a synonym (same meaning) or an antonym (opposite meaning) of a word you already have in your book, enter it next to that word with a few notes, e.g.

urban ≠ rural; stop = cease (cease is very formal)

Organising by word class

Make a note of the word class of a new word (whether it is a noun, verb, adjective, etc.). Record words from the same word family together, e.g. produce (verb or noun) product (noun) productive (adjective)

Stress

Record where the stress falls on a multi-syllable word, especially if the stress changes between word classes, e.g. produce (verb) produce (noun) productive (adjective)

Note any typical errors you make or which your teacher has mentioned.

Unit 2 Exercises

1. Organise the words into the topics below. Use a dictionary if necessary.

tabloid | stress | hang out with sb | exhaustion | podcast | overwork | upload a video | burnt out
blogosphere | journalist | snowed under with work | casual acquaintance | blog | be close to sb
count on sb | be under pressure

Topic	Words
a. working too much/too hard	stress
b. friendship	
c. media	

2. Organise the words more efficiently, using the chart.

rush | oversleep | ~~latecomer~~ | alarm clock | set a clock | deep sleep | fast asleep | out of breath
heavy sleeper | in a hurry | breathless | nightmare | dash | yawn | exhausted

nouns	verbs	adjectives	colocations	fixed phrases
latecomer				

Notes

3. Change the sentences using a synonym (S) or antonym (A) of the words in bold using words from the box.

~~glad~~ | spicy | deprive sb of sth | shot | dissatisfied | chilly

- I was **pleased - glad** to hear you'd passed your exam. (S)
- I got some excellent **photos** - of the Grand Canyon on my trip to the US. (S)
- She was **happy** - with the conditions they offered her in the new job. (A)
- The prisoners were **supplied with** - food and medical care. (A)
- I don't like **mild** - curries. (A)
- It's a **cold** - day today. (S)

4. Fill in the missing word forms. Then mark the word stress for each item.

noun	verb	adjective	person
perfection	perfect	perfect	perfectionist
information	inform		
politics	-		
economics		*	

economics - * Give two adjectives.

5. Think about your own learning style and which ways of organising vocabulary would work best for you.

Unit 3 - Using your dictionary

What a good dictionary tells you: the basics

A good learners' dictionary (in book form or online) can tell you about:

- **Pronunciation:** this may mean learning some symbols which are different from the letters of the English alphabet.

▪ θ th in thick	▪ ʒ s in pleasure	▪ ʊ u in put
▪ ð th in then	▪ ŋ ng in ring	▪ ɑʊ a in about
▪ tʃ ch in church	▪ æ a in bad	▪ ʌ u in up
▪ ʃ sh in she	▪ ɒ o in top	▪ ɜː ir in bird
▪ dʒ j in jam	▪ ɔː or in form	▪ ə a above

- **ɑ:** a in father
- **ɪ** i in ship
- **i:** ee in sheep
- **i** i in liberty

Cambridge [Online] Dictionary:

- <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/>
- <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/help/phonetics.html>
- **Word stress:** often shown by a mark ' before the syllable to be stressed or by underlining or bold type, e.g.

adventure - /əd'ven. tʃə/,
 western /'wes.tən/,
 complicated /'kɒm.plɪ.keɪ.tɪd/

- **Usage:** how a word is used and any special grammatical pattern that goes with it, e.g. suggest + clause (not an infinitive) – I suggest you ring her right away. NOT I suggest you to ring her right away.

Additional information

- **Synonyms** (words of similar meaning) and antonyms (opposites), e.g. mislay and misplace (synonyms), friend ≠ enemy/foe (antonyms).
- **Collocations** (how words go together), e.g. the adjective firm is often used in these collocations: firm commitment, firm grip, firm believer.
- **Whether a verb is transitive or intransitive:** catch is transitive and must have an object, e.g. He caught the ball and threw it back to me; laugh is intransitive and does not need an object, e.g. She laughed when I told her the news.
- **Whether a word is used for people and/or things.** In this entry for the adjective hurtful in the Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary online, we can see that hurtful can be used about what someone says or about someone:
- **Word class** (often as abbreviations **n** noun, **adj** adjective, etc.), and whether a **noun is countable or uncountable**.
- **Information about how words are related** to one another through meaning.

The *Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary* online allows you to see a visual display of the networks of meaning for a word, as in this display for the adjective fascinating. The Visual Thesaurus shows related adjectives.

<https://dictionary.cambridge.org/thesaurus/fascinating>

The **adjectives are grouped according to meaning**. This can be very useful when you are writing. If you want to vary your use of adjectives, you can look up the related adjectives to see which one(s) most closely expresses the meaning you need.



Unit 3 Exercises

1. Pronunciation. What English words are these?

- /edʒʊ'keɪʃən/ - **education**
- /'pɑ:spɔ:t/ -
- /'li:nɪŋ/ -
- /'lɪbətɪ/ -
- /rə'vɪʒən/ -
- /'brʌðə / -

2. Underline the stressed syllable of these words. Check your answers in your dictionary.

- | | | |
|-------------|-------------------|--------------------|
| g. unique | j. eyebrow | m. extract (noun) |
| h. elegant | k. record (verb) | n. lifestyle |
| i. urgently | l. thermometer | |

3. Look at the grammar patterns which the Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary gives for these words and then correct the sentences that follow.

supply /sə'plaɪ/ ► *verb* [T] to provide something that is wanted or needed, often in large quantities and over a long period of time: *Electrical power is supplied **by** underground cables.* ○ *Three people have been arrested for supplying arms **to** the terrorists.* ○ *The company has supplied the royal family (= provided them with something they need) for years.* ○ *At the beginning of term, students are supplied **with** a list of books that they are expected to read.*

- a. Brazil supplies coffee **at** many countries. *Brazil supplies coffee **to** many countries.*
 b. The officer supplied each soldier **a** map.

deny /di'naɪ/ verb [T] **NOT TRUE** 1 to say that something is not true: *He will not confirm or deny the allegations.* O [+ **that**] *Neil denies **that** he broke the window, but I'm sure he did.* O [+ **-ing** verb] *Neil denies **breaking** the window.*

- c. The Minister denied **to have** received any money from the oil company. (two answers)

4. Put a tick (✓) if these adjectives can be used about a person, or a thing (which could be an event, an object, a fact, an idea, etc.) or both. Use your dictionary if necessary.

Word	Person	Thing		Person	Thing
sad	✓		damp		
lucky			awkward		
content			compulsory		

5. A typical dictionary abbreviation for a noun is (n) and for an adjective (adj). What do you think these abbreviations mean?

- | | | |
|-----------------|-------------|------------------|
| a. (adv) adverb | d. (prep) | g. verb [T] |
| b. (pron) | e. UK | h. noun [U] |
| c. (conj) | f. noun [C] | i. verb [I or T] |

6. Go to Cambridge Dictionaries Online at <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/thesaurus/>. Search for the word '*damp*'. How many of the words do you know? Choose four words you don't know and look them up. Record them in your notebook.

Notes

Unit 4 - Guessing and Explaining Meaning

Working out meaning from context

There are a number of clues you can use to help you understand the meaning of an unfamiliar word.

The context in which the word is used

- **Visual clues:** for example, a picture in a book or film footage in a TV news broadcast.
- **Your own background knowledge** about a situation: for example, if you already know that there has just been an earthquake in a big city, then you will find it easy to understand the word 'earthquake' when you hear a news broadcast about it.
- **The words around the unfamiliar word:** for example, 'Tara picked one tall yellow gladiolus to put in her new vase.' Even if you have never seen or heard the word 'gladiolus', it is clear from the context that it is a type of flower.
- **Grammatical clues:** for example, it is clear that 'superstitious' must be an adjective in the sentence 'Alejandro is very superstitious and would never walk under a ladder', or that 'gingerly' is an adverb in 'Mike came gingerly down the stairs, trying to avoid all the broken glass.'

Similarity to other words you already know in English

A large number of words in English are made up of combinations of other words. You may never have seen the word 'headscarf', for example, but it is easy to work out that it is a scarf worn on the head.

Structure

A prefix or suffix may give you a clue.

Similarity to a word you know in your own (or some other) language

If your first language is of Latin or Germanic origin, you will come across many words in English that resemble words in your language. However, English has taken many words from many other languages too. So make use of any other languages you know.

But remember that some words are false friends – they sound as if they mean the same but they have a different meaning. For example, **gift** in English means a present but in German **Gift** means poison.

Explaining unknown words

The following expressions are useful when you are trying to explain what a word or expression means:

- It's probably something (a bit) like (a chair) ...
- It's got to be something you use for (painting pictures / cleaning the kitchen floor) ...
- It's a kind of (bird / musical instrument / building) ...

- I think it must / could mean ...

Unit 4 Exercises

1. Look at the following text. Before you read it, see if you know what the underlined words mean.

A tortoise is a shelled reptile famed for its slowness and longevity. The Giant Tortoise of the Galapagos may attain over 1.5 metres in length and have a lifespan of more than 150 years. Smaller tortoises from Southern Europe and North Africa make popular pets. They need to be tended carefully in cool climates and must have a warm place in which they can hibernate.



Which of the underlined words can you guess from the context or using any other clues?

2. Use the context to work out what the words in bold mean. Explain them using one or other of the expressions in “*Explaining unknown words*” on the previous page.
 - a. Above the trees at the edge of the meadow, a **buzzard** hangs for a moment on the wind before soaring towards the hills. *I think a buzzard must be a kind of bird.*
 - b. According to some sources, the water **vole** is one of the most rapidly declining creatures in Britain and a new survey is now being carried out to determine how serious the threat of extinction really is.
 - c. Using a large **chisel** and a hammer, Jack managed to knock down the old garden wall.
 - d. Kate carried in a delicious chicken and noodle soup in a large **tureen** and we enjoyed several bowls each.
 - e. We often used to walk up to the cliff top where we would **clamber** over the farmer’s gate and go right to the edge where the view was better.
 - f. Some people get really **ratty** when they haven’t had enough sleep.
3. Use your knowledge of other basic English words to help you work out the meanings of the words and expressions in bold. Rewrite them using simpler words or explanations for the underlined words and phrases.
 - a. It says on the can that this drink is **sugar-free**. - *this drink doesn't contain sugar*
 - b. I find Caitlin a very **warm-hearted** person.
 - c. I’ve been **up to my eyes** in work ever since I got back from holiday.
 - d. We walked down a **tree-lined** street towards the station.
 - e. The little boys were fascinated by the **cement mixer**.

- f. More and more shops now have their own special **store cards** and offer you a discount if you use one of them.

4. Use your knowledge of prefixes and suffixes to suggest what these phrases mean.

- a. to redirect a letter - *to send it to a different address*
- b. uncontrollable anger
- c. pre-dinner drinks
- d. bi-monthly report
- e. my ex-boss
- f. anti-tourist feelings
- g. to disconnect the telephone
- h. undelivered letters

-END-

Answers

Unit 1

Question 1

Possible answers:

- a. trousers, clothes, tights
- b. furniture, information, advice, luggage
- c. teach, read, write, put
- d. tooth, foot, mouse, goose

Question 2

- a. the final e is pronounced as a syllable
- b. the ch is pronounced like a k rather than like the ch in church
- e. the w is silent (not pronounced)
- f. the stress is on the first syllable in the noun and the second syllable in the verb
- g. the stress is on the first syllable in **photograph**, the second in **photographer** and the third in **photographic**

Question 3

- 2. to coin a phrase, new words, a term
- 3. a royal family, palace, welcome
- 4. a subtle suggestion, shade, difference

Question 4

- a. I (it can mean men or it can be used to address a group of people which includes both men and women)
- b. F (it means a person who is legally under-age)
- c. I (it means Wonderful! / Amazing!)
- d. F (it means to get off a bus)
- e. I (it means very upset)
- f. F (it means someone who has committed a serious crime)
- g. I (it means to annoy or disturb someone)
- h. I (it means to lose concentration)

Question 5

- a. words in the shade word family - lampshade, eye shadow
- b. synonyms of express - state, say
- c. parts of speech - preposition, conjunction
- d. words with a silent b - dumb, limb

Unit 2

Question 1

- a. stress exhaustion overwork burnt out snowed under with work be under pressure
- b. hang out with sb casual acquaintance be close to sb count on sb
- c. tabloid podcast upload a video blogosphere journalist blog

Question 2

nouns	verbs	adjectives	colocations	fixed phrases
latecomer alarm clock nightmare	rush oversleep dash yawn	breathless exhausted	set a clock deep sleep fast asleep heavy sleeper	out of breath in a hurry

Question 3

- b. shots
- c. dissatisfied
- d. deprived of
- e. spicy
- f. chilly

Question 4

noun	verb	adjective	person
perfection	perfect	perfect	perfectionist
information	inform	informative	informer/informant
politics	-	political	politician
economics	economise	*economic/economical	economist

Question 5

Possible ways to organise your vocabulary include relating new words to your own personal experience (e.g. if you learn new colour words, what things do you have in those colours - a purple sweater, an orange mug?). You can also divide your notebook (whether paper or digital) into topic areas (e.g. words to do with food, with travel, etc.). You could keep a digital notebook on your computer or mobile device; lists or words you type in can then be sorted alphabetically or searched very quickly.

Unit 3

Question 1

- b. passport
- c. leaning
- d. liberty
- e. revision
- f. brother

Question 2

- b. elegant
- c. urgently
- d. eyebrow
- e. record (verb)
- f. thermometer
- g. extract (noun)
- h. lifestyle

Question 3

- b. The officer supplied each soldier with a map.
- c. The Minister denied having received any money from the oil company. / The Minister denied that he/ she had received any money from the oil company.

Question 4

Word	Person	Thing		Person	Thing
sad	✓	✓	damp		✓
lucky	✓	✓	awkward	✓	✓
content	✓		compulsory		✓

Question 5

- b. (pron) pronoun
- c. (conj) conjunction
- d. (prep) preposition
- e. UK British English usage
- f. noun [C] countable noun
- g. verb [T] transitive verb
- h. noun [U] uncountable noun
- i. verb [I or T] verb which can be transitive or intransitive

Unit 4

Question 1

The picture is a good clue to help you understand **tortoise**. You may recognise the word **shell** in **shelled** (as in **egg shell**, for example). Similarly, your knowledge of **long** and **life** together with the context should enable you to work out what **longevity** and **lifespan** mean. The whole context of the sentence should help you to work out the meaning of **attain** and **tended**. Some of the underlined words may be similar to words in your own language, which can be another useful way of working out the meaning of a word you have not seen before. The meanings of the underlined words are provided here for you to check your answers.

- shelled: with a shell or hard protective cover
- reptile: kind of animal that lays eggs and uses the heat of the sun to keep its blood warm (e.g. crocodiles, snakes)
- famed: well-known (famous)
- longevity: living a long life
- attain: reach
- lifespan: time from birth to death
- tended: cared for
- hibernate: go into a sleep-like state throughout the winter (as some animals and insects do)

Question 2

Possible answers:

(These answers all give correct information in more detail than you needed to provide in your own answers.)

- b. A vole must be a kind of small animal, something like a mouse perhaps.
- c. A chisel could be a kind of tool that can be used for chipping away at something or for breaking it. I think it's probably something that could be used by sculptors but that bigger ones might also be used for destroying structures.
- d. A tureen must be a kind of very large bowl, a bit like a pot, used for soup.
- e. To clamber probably means something like climbing with difficulty.
- f. Ratty must be a bit like bad-tempered.

Question 3

Possible answers:

- b. I find Caitlin a very kind person.
- c. I've been terribly busy with work ever since I got back from holiday.
- d. We walked down a street with trees along both sides of it towards the station.
- e. The little boys were fascinated by the machine used for mixing cement.
- f. More and more shops now have their own special credit cards that can only be used in one specific
- g. chain of shops and offer you a discount if you use one of them.

Question 4

- b. anger that can't be controlled
- c. drinks before dinner
- d. a report that comes out either twice every month or every two months (both meanings of bi-monthly exist)
- e. the person who used to be my boss (and no longer is)
- f. feelings that are hostile to tourists
- g. to break the telephone connection (e.g. by unplugging it from the wall or by doing something at the telephone exchange so that calls can no longer be made, possibly because a bill has not been paid)
- h. letters that have not been delivered to the people they were addressed to

-END-