

# ALMS Vocabulary Learning Guide

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## **A. How to use this guide**

Many language learners comment that they would like to increase their vocabulary, but what is the best way to do so? Should you write long lists of words in English with the Finnish translation next to them? If writing those lists really works for you, then why not? But, let's examine some other possibilities:

The key to learning vocabulary is to (1) define what kinds of words you need and would like to know, and then (2) decide what you need to know about the words, and (3) find the way of learning them that best fits your personal learning style. This guide will show you ways to do just that.

Remember these methods are not mutually exclusive - they can be combined and altered. And, of course, this list is not exhaustive, there are many other ways.

## **B. What kinds of words?**

To make the most efficient use of your time you should first identify exactly the type of vocabulary you want to focus on instead of trying to just learn "new words" in a random way. Spend some time thinking of the different vocabulary fields that exist. You can make large groupings such as: formal/informal vocabulary or academic/non-academic vocabulary. However, it will be helpful to subdivide those large categories into smaller ones. Here are just a few examples: vocabulary of cooking, of meetings, of sports, of university life, of music, of presentations, of debating, of introductions, of academic writing, of conferences, of faculty-specific terms, etc. It may be true that you need to improve your vocabulary in all of these fields and many more, but don't worry, that is natural. To begin with, choose one or just a small number of these fields to concentrate on. Once you get going and find yourself improving you can move on to other fields.

## **C. What do you need to know about the word?**

You should realize that words rarely exist in isolation. Instead, they are surrounded by and often depend on other words; for example, some verbs take certain prepositions, and some nouns are usually associated with certain adjectives. Also, knowing a word usually means an awareness of its spelling, pronunciation, frequency, register (is it formal/informal, academic/slang) and its grammatical characteristics. Therefore, since knowing a word often means more than just knowing the translation, it is highly recommended that you make sure that the method you choose to learn vocabulary incorporates as many aspects of the word as possible. Only you can know which aspects are most important for you. Sometimes it may only be one aspect, such as the pronunciation, or even, just the translation (it's not forbidden to just record the translation). Most likely, however, it will be a combination of several aspects.

## **D. Find ways of learning that suit you best**

This can sometimes be easier said than done, but it is nevertheless an important step. Below is a list of ways of learning vocabulary. Try as many as possible to find the style that suits you best.

- **vocabulary basics**

You may want to start your vocabulary learning by brushing up on vocabulary basics such as reviewing pre-/suffixes, compound words, how nouns become verbs and vice versa. These basic skills are important tools that you can use when encountering new words and phrases. Many vocabulary and grammar books contain tables or appendices that explain these basics.

- **using mnemonics**

A mnemonic is a technique for memorizing a word or phrase. You might remember an English word because it reminds you of another English word or it sounds like Finnish word. For example, you might remember how to spell the word “thirteen” by thinking of the Finnish “*t hirteen*” (the letter t to the gallows!). Another example would be how to remember the spelling difference between the words *desert* and *dessert*. You tell yourself that usually you want more sweets, or *dessert*, so therefore, you know to add two S’s to *dessert*. Another example would be to think of *suu kiinni* for *zucchini* or vice versa.

- **vocabulary notebook**

Instead of collecting lists of words why not make a focused vocabulary notebook? The key is to:

- 1) only concentrate on words that you want to have in your active vocabulary, i.e. words that you would like to both understand and be able to use.
- 2) experiment with a variety of ways of recording words/phrases, such as using pictures, diagrams, tables, writing opposites, using mind maps, etc.
- 3) remember that it is not enough to just know the translation of the word. You need to also know such aspects as the pronunciation, spelling, special grammatical characteristics, etc.

- **flash cards**

Flash cards are commonly used in English-speaking countries to effectively learn and practice vocabulary. Just take some index cards (or cut some regular paper into small squares). On one side write the new word in English and on the opposite side: (1) write the Finnish translation, or (2) draw a picture that explains the word, or (3) write the definition in English or Finnish.

- **games**

There are an endless number of games that you can use to learn/practice vocabulary in a fun, and in most cases, a social way. Here are two examples:

*Alias* – This well-known Finnish game is easily adapted for use in English. In its most basic form you can take some pieces of paper, write down words that you want to practice. Place them in the center of the table. Each player draws a piece of paper and tries to get their partner to guess the word based on their description. You can modify the game to suit your needs.

*charades* – one person acts out the word on the paper and the others must guess what the answer.

- **Internet sites**

[www.puzzlemaker.com](http://www.puzzlemaker.com) Make your own crossword puzzles as well as other kinds of puzzles

[www.thefreedictionary.com](http://www.thefreedictionary.com) Play Hangman, Spelling Bee, Match up, and do other activities.

[www.freerice.com](http://www.freerice.com) Learn new words while helping to end world hunger!

- **vocabulary exercises**

You can do vocabulary exercises found, for example, in course books and on the Net.

- **reading aloud**

Reading aloud works for some students as a way of practicing the pronunciation of vocabulary items. This can be a short activity that you do occasionally as you read an article or book. Or it can be a more elaborate activity, such as recording your voice pronouncing words/phrases and listening to that recording as a way of checking or testing yourself.

- **using dictionaries**

A good up-to-date learner's dictionary, such as Oxford's Advanced Learner's Dictionary, can provide you with a lot more information about a word than other dictionaries that do not take language learners into consideration.

- **making educated guesses from the context**

We don't always have an opportunity to check the meaning of a word in a dictionary or we don't want to constantly interrupt the speaker or our reading to check the meaning of a word. Instead, improve your skills as a critical guesser. It's very likely you have already been doing this for some time. Perhaps you can now become more aware of this skill.

**Kenneth Kidd 2009**