Guidelines for Critical Reading: Dealing with Vocabulary

In this class you will be asked to read a variety of materials—essays, excerpts from serious books, newspaper articles, interviews, and op-ed pieces. I have tried to select the kinds of reading that you will encounter in your college studies. This is your chance to have someone (namely, me, your kind and understanding instructor) help you learn reading strategies that will help you deal with and become really good at digesting different kinds of written work.

A Word about the Vocabulary of the English Language

One of the biggest difficulties people encounter when trying to maintain good comprehension when reading is vocabulary. The English language is awesomely large—the largest language in the world. This is because speakers of English—including Americans—have cheerfully absorbed words from wherever they have lived and worked over the eons that the English language has been developing.

The English were originally a small, sea-faring people, and when they put their ships to sail, they encountered numerous groups in foreign lands, and in the their need to communicate with these non-English speakers, absorbed a wealth of foreign words into the English language. In addition, since England is a lush island with a moderate climate and a very long coastline, the English have been periodically invaded, and each time, the invaders imposed their language upon the English. In fact, modern English is basically a Germanic language with a big overlay of Norman French, resulting from wave after wave of invasion from the European mainland. And underneath it all is a base of an ancient Celtic language—now spoken only in parts of Ireland, Scotland, Wales, Brittany, and a few other places.

Each of these contributing language systems is very different from the others. As a result, as speakers of English we have a motley vocabulary with highly irregular spelling! Yikes! Just ask someone who is an English language learner about the headaches of learning English vocabulary and spelling! Indeed, the variability of our language, its spelling, and the numerous definitions of words means that even highly educated people encounter words that they don’t know. What to do?

Luckily, just recently I chanced to overhear an animated conversation between two students at MHCC, a conversation that dealt with this very subject. I tried not to be obvious about pulling my huge tape-recorder out of my bag and setting it up, and did succeed in taping nearly the whole thing. For clarity’s sake, I have given each student a name.

Kate: Have you read this assigned book yet, you know, The Botany of Desire, by that weird guy, Michael Pollan? I mean, I liked the book and all, but whew, what a lot of tough vocab. I mean, like, when I was reading it I would, like, run into all of these words that I didn’t know. I mean, like, not on every page, but still...
Tomás: Yeah, I know what you mean. Umm, I never know what to do when I read a book like this. I mean, you really get into what he is saying, and this Michael Pollan guy, you know, he has some really interesting, off-beat ideas, stuff that you know, makes you think about the world in a new way. I mean, I didn’t want to stop and look the words up, but all of them seemed to add to what he was saying, and it was so interesting and all. I didn’t want to stop and I didn’t want to not know what he was saying. You know what I mean?

Kate: Did you ever have Professor Smartipants? She tells her students to stop and look up every word! She says she does. (Makes a face.)

Tomás: You gotta to be kidding! No one would do that. Do you really do that?

Kate: I tried, but you know how it is, like, I couldn’t stop and look stuff up and keep track of what point the author was trying to make and all. I mean, like, I like to read and all, but this is tough.

Tomás: Then what do you do?

Kate: I have tried making a list by jotting down words I don’t know, but I hate to stop even for a minute, like, you know, you miss a little bit every time you stop, even for a minute. Look around for something to write your list on...I mean, like, when you stop at all, you have to go back and re-read what you were reading to get the drift again, and ...

Tomás: (Laughing) Exactly! But you know, I did make a list of most of the words I didn’t know in this book!

Kate: Get outta here! You didn’t!

Tomás: I did. Wanna see them?

Kate: Sure!

Tomás: Digs into his backpack and shows her a rumpled list of words with definitions scribbled after them.

Kate: You did! How did it work?

Tomás: Well, I’ll tell you my secret. I use different methods for dealing with vocab for different books. This one by Michael Pollan was super-interesting. I couldn’t stand to stop and look stuff up in the dictionary. So, for books like this, what I do is make a little list that I keep right in the book and then I look the stuff up at the end of each section. Then, when I feel like it, I go back and browse over what I read to see if things are clearer once I know what all the vocab means. Sort of like reading part of the book twice.

Kate: Are things clearer?

Tomás: Sometimes, but if I like the book...You know, it’s like replaying a part of a movie you really like over and over again. Sometimes I do that.

Kate: Yeah, I do that sometimes too, especially with... (and then goes off on the kinds of movies she does this with)...So, what other strategies do you use for tough vocab?

Tomás: For really hard books, like science books and all, I stop, write the word down and then look it up at that very moment. Usually it’s in the glossary or in the index at the back of the book. So the definition is sort of “official,” you know, like what the author really wants you to know about something. I mean, like it takes two or three times as long to
read really hard stuff anyway. So, you may as well take the time to write it down and all while you’re at it.

Kate: My super-smart know-it-all older brother does that. Only he makes flash cards when he is looking stuff up, but I have never had the motivation to do that. He says that as long as he has to look stuff up to see what it means, he may as well make a flash card. I haven’t taken any science classes yet, so I may do the flash card thing when I do. What about easy books, I mean, like what do you do then?

Tomás: To tell the truth, what I usually do is try to figure out what the words mean from the context. Sometimes when I am feeling really lazy, I won’t even do that. If I can understand the text, sometimes I don’t bother. I mean, like the words just kind of seem to sink in when you read them anyway, so I figure that new or unfamiliar words will do the same. As long as I can understand the material pretty well, I don’t worry about it. Now tell me, what do you do?

Kate: I’ll tell you. It’s like exactly what my mother told me NEVER to do. (Embarrassed) I mean, like, I didn’t do it to spite her or anything, you know. But what I do (hesitates) ...is... I mean when I own the book, this is what I do... I read with a highlighter in my hand. I highlight words all the time. I highlight stuff all the time. I highlight words I don’t know. I write in the margins. And not just the vocab, but lots of other stuff as well. You should see what I wrote in Botany of Desire!

Tomás: Let me see.

Kate: (Rustles around with her book bag, removing her lunch, a water bottle, and some other stuff.) Here it is. Check it out!

Tomás: Yeah! (Laughing really hard) I see it. I bet the librarians run after you with a hatchet when they see you coming!

Kate: (Horrified) Not at all! I mean, I only do this to books I own—like, my own books. I would never do this to a library book!

Tomás: Wow! Then what happens when you have to read a library book, or the book that belongs to the teacher, or to the classroom?

Kate: Well, it’s like this: Like, if I like a book and feel a need to write in it a lot, I buy it.

Tomás: Get outta here! That could be expensive.

Kate: I feel it’s worth it, because, like, all of my notes are right in the book. I mean, like I go on-line to Powells (a bookstore) and see if I can get a used copy or a paperback. I usually can. Then, when the book is mine, I look up stuff and then I write right in the book. I highlight stuff first, and then look it up when I get to a good spot when I know I can quit reading for awhile. Sometimes, (laughing) I think about it right before I go to bed and then have to look a bunch of words up on the computer before I can get to sleep!

Tomás: But you can’t do that with every book...

Kate: You know it! Here’s what I do! I believe in Post-Its®, man. I mean, I should buy stock in the company or something. Like I use millions of them. I put Post-Its on the page, sometimes right next to or over a word I want to look up. I write notes on them. Wanna see the book I borrowed last week from my teacher?
Tomás: *(Laughing and brimming with curiosity)* Of course! Hey, bring it on!

Kate: *(Pulls out another book, which she fans for Tomás, showing him all of the pages, many of which have yellow and pink *Post-It* notes all over them.)*

Tomás: That’s rich! I’ll try that sometime. Never thought of it until you showed me.

Well students, now you know the ugly truth about looking up words that our large, lovely, and well-endowed language has given us. Your job is to figure out, just like Kate and Tomás did, what methods work for you.

Regardless of what methods you use, I do want you to jot down a list of interesting words you encounter in this class and in your life outside of school. We will share words that are pertinent to our readings for this class, so be sure to stash these vocabulary words in your vocabulary section of your portfolio. The criterion I want you to use for words to share in class are words that you found really interesting and/or fun, words that you would like to have in your own vocabulary, and are pertinent to our readings in class.

Many words in English are composed of Latin (from the Norman French, which is a Latin-derived language) or Greek roots. If you learn a bunch of these, you will be able to decode new words when you run into them. This will especially be the case when you have context clues to guide you and trip your memory about what these roots mean. We will work on all of these strategies. So, when you look up words in the dictionary, or on-line, make sure that you notice the roots of the words you look up. You will soon learn, without thinking about it twice, a whole passel of Greek and Latin roots. Be sure to add the following web addresses to your favorites/bookmark files on your home computer and/or laptop:

http://www.yourdictionary.com/index.shtml [one of my current faves because it has a free audio pronunciation feature!]
http://www.m-w.com/ [also one of my faves due to the free audio pronunciation feature]
http://dictionary.reference.com/ [excellent, and especially good on word roots]
http://www.alphadictionary.com/index.shtml [a compilation of other on-line dictionaries with lots of annoying advertising]
http://www.word2word.com/dictionary.html [a free word-to-word translator dictionary]
http://www.etymonline.com [an excellent source of information about histories and roots of words. For some real fun, look up swear words and dirty words for some interesting reading. Many of these words have a long history, and some of these words only in the past few centuries have become verboten—at least as far as polite conversation is concerned.]

Good luck, and do try all of these techniques! In this way, you will be equipped to handle very different kinds of texts and reading while you are in this course and in college, and later on, in life.