

A Note on Learning Vocabulary

Memorizing vocabulary is perhaps the most tedious and sometimes most difficult part of learning a language, but it is absolutely necessary to do. I have failed at this task many times in the past before learning how to do it right, so here is some advice.

From day one, we expect that you will have memorized *every* vocabulary item we encounter, both in and out of class. So, the sooner you adopt a good strategy for learning vocabulary, the better off you will be.

It is impossible to "cram" vocabulary. Studies show that long sessions dedicated to the memorization of vocabulary are far less productive than short (even 3-5 minute) but more frequent sessions. So, my first piece of advice is not to set aside and devote large chunks of time to the memorization of vocabulary, for this is not only immensely boring but it is also not terribly useful. So, how can you learn such a large quantity of vocabulary items in such a short period of time?

Keep note cards with you at all times, both while you prepare a night's assignment and while you are in class. Whenever you have to look up a word, or whenever a new word is presented in class, immediately write that word down on a note card. (Do so even—and, in fact, especially—if you know you have already looked that word up, or if you find yourself struggling to remember what that word means. The more troublesome a word is to you, the more reason there is to have multiple copies of it on flashcards.) In this way, you will develop a flashcard resource that is tied directly to the course material with seemingly little effort.

Again, short bursts of vocab review is scientifically proven to be more productive than long periods devoted to the exercise. With your growing pile of flashcards with you at all times, flip through a few whenever you have a few minutes free, for instance, while you wait in line for coffee, ride the bus, or walk to class. And, you don't need to have the whole stack with you—where ever you go, just throw a small stack of cards into your back pocket. Make this a habit you do all the time, every day. I will say from my own experience that you will pick up vocabulary much more easily this way, and the process will be much less tedious.

Hint 1: I cut my 3x5 notecards into quarters, which gives me both more flashcards for my money and also makes them easier to store in my pocket.

Hint 2: You will be frustrated by just how quickly you forget vocabulary that you once knew backwards and forwards just a few days ago. So, as you flip through a stack of flashcards, put aside the cards you know well, but do not get rid of them. Every once in a while, throw some of those old cards into your new pile just to keep them fresh. This way, you will be keeping up with the new material while simultaneously reviewing the old.

Hint 3: Make associations, especially visual associations, to words you struggle with. Thus, when you see a word, that word will make you think of whatever it is that you have associated with it. Studies also show (and the ancients themselves knew this) that the more bizarre your associations are, the better you will remember that word. To give a personal example: in Latin, there are two verbs that look very similar but that mean different things: *iacit* ("he/she/it throws") and *iacet* ("he/she/it lies down"). I could never for the life of me keep these two straight until I came up with the following. I remembered the cheesy scene in old films in which a man would lay his jacket down over a puddle so that his date could walk through it without getting her feet wet. Since then, I have never mixed up *iacet* (or "jacket—to lie down") and *iacit*.

I cannot emphasize enough just how important it is to learn your vocabulary—and *every* vocab item we encounter throughout this course. You must start doing this *from day one* and keep it up *every day* over the course of the summer. No matter how good your Greek may be, you will not be able to translate anything if you do not know what the words mean. For me, learning vocabulary is one of the most tedious and boring exercises imaginable, but what I have suggested here made the process so much easier for me.