

BUILDING VOCABULARY

The GRE verbal section is much more than either a vocabulary or a reading test. Rather, the GRE prods you to pay attention to the relationships among words, and to the correct (or incorrect) use of words in constructions of sentences and essays. The GRE tests your *working familiarity* with language, your capacity for problem solving and attention to subtle detail.

That being said, vocabulary is still one area of content – in contrast to pure understanding – that plays a major role in your score. Certainly, there is good reason for this. One cannot express – or even have – deep or subtle thought without the language to describe. Nuanced meanings simply cannot be communicated through the written word without the vocabulary to limn our experience, or build our conceptual structures. Vocabulary, in short, is the building material for interpersonal communication and mental reflection.

Most people will tell you that there's just no substitute for reading challenging material (even beyond the requirements of school!) for building our skills with language, and increasing the breadth and depth of our vocabulary. Without question, the students who enjoy reading the most – and so are most likely to read on their own inside and outside of school – tend to do the best on the verbal sections of the GRE. Even at this late date while you're preparing for graduate school, getting into the practice of regular, challenging reading, and regularly and actively using a dictionary while you read, is a good idea that will also benefit your scores. We might say that reading is always helpful – at the very least for boosting your scores.

But trying to memorize lists of vocabulary usually doesn't get us very far, in any case. At best, we end up spending a lot of time on a practice that yields minimal results. And again, the practice of memorizing, while useful for some things like groceries and laundry, is simply not the right tool for a test like the GRE. Instead, the high scorer has to have a feeling for what is known as *semantics*, or the study of meaning and form, particularly of language. Practically speaking, you need to be less of a dictionary and more of a thesaurus to do well in the verbal section.

Vocabulary Practice: Roots, Associations and Context

Getting such a feeling involves paying attention to roots, prefixes, suffixes, sounds, flavors, colors, histories and families of words. Keep in mind that English, like all languages, wasn't born whole like Athena from Zeus's head. Ultimately, languages have evolved over time, and come from the *same root sources*. English is particularly indebted to nearly every other language on earth, for nearly all of its expressions. Once we start to get a feeling for and familiarity with these sources, we begin to more deeply understand our own language, and how to work with it.

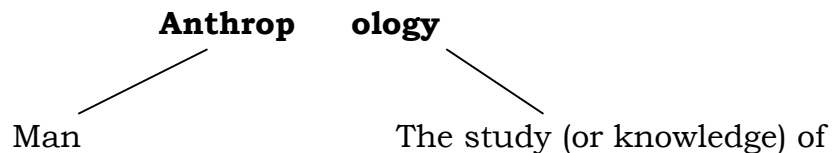
In this section, we will look at a simple practice that will, at the least, effectively improve your working knowledge of vocabulary for your next exam. More importantly, perhaps, is that it will get you thinking about and living with language in a different way.

We will take the **definition** of a new word as our starting point, and not our end.

Let's use the word *anthropology*, a word you might very well see on the next GRE.

An·thro·pol·o·gy *n.* The study of the origin and physical, social, and cultural development and behavior of humans.

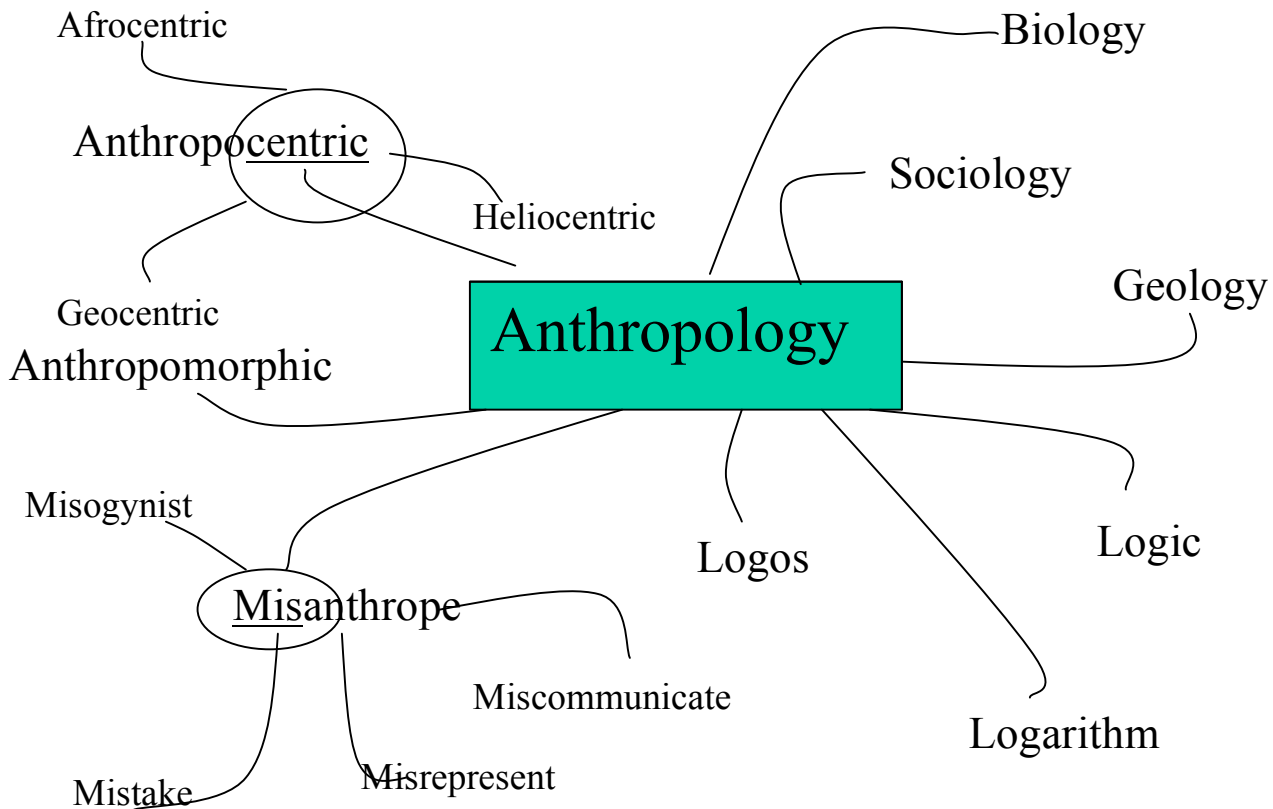
Next, we will break the word into its **roots** in order to discover its origins, to become familiar with the story behind the symbol, the form behind the form. This way, we do not simply memorize (and then forget when it's most inconvenient!). Discovering how a word and its connotations entered our lexicon and our culture helps to bring our attention to meaning. Where there is meaning, there is usually memory.



As it turns out, the root, *anthrop-*, is derived from the Greek word for ‘man (human)’. We see examples of its uses (and **associations**) in words such as *anthropocentric* (‘regarding the human as the central fact, or final aim of the universe’) and *anthropoid* (‘resembling a human being’). Less familiar might be the word, *misanthrope* (‘someone who hates or scorns humanity’).

The root, *-logy*, similarly comes from the Greek word, *lógos*. *Lógos* has a remarkably wide spread of meanings, ranging from ‘speech, saying’, to ‘reason, reckoning, calculation.’ The more ‘verbal’ end of this spectrum has given English the suffixes – *logue* and –*logy*, as in *dialogue* (‘a conversation between two or more persons’), *tautology* (‘a statement that is always true because it contains all possibilities’), *biology* (‘the study of life systems’), *sociology* (‘the study of human society’). The ‘reasoning’ component has contributed to such words as *logic*, *logistics*, and *logarithm* (coined by the English mathematician John Napier from Greek *logos* ‘ratio’ and *arithmós* ‘number’ – the source of English *arithmetic*).

Notice how we represent it below:



The point is to make a map, rather than a list, of how each part of our new word functions with other, related words. The human mind is not designed to sort lists; it is designed to find pattern, to know difference and to know contrast. Noting what you learn in a map helps you remember with a great deal more power and effect than anything like “traditional” methods of learning vocabulary (flash cards, etc). Try a map of word associations and families for yourself only once, and you will have no doubt.

Finally, we will use our new word in a **sentence**:

Students of **anthropology** know how easily most people are swayed by politicians who sound certain of themselves, regardless of the logic (or lack thereof) in their positions.

Or, we might make up a sentence that has a ‘kick’ to it. That is, we might take advantage of an artifact of memory: things or events that contain emotional charge are more likely to be remembered.

Students of **anthropology** know that defensive linemen aren’t *really* throwbacks to man in his earlier stages of

development – in fact, Cro-Magnon man may have been much bigger than the Neanderthal, but he couldn't play football.

If the above sentence made you laugh – or if it made you groan – you're probably much more likely to remember that *anthropology* means 'the study of man.' Another tactic is to make our sentence as *visual* as possible, taking advantage of another mnemonic artifact:

Students of **anthropology** sometimes spend years in the jungles, studying our decidedly hairier cousins – primates – for what their societies can tell us about our own.

In this case (at least for me), the phrase 'decidedly hairier cousins' gives me a visual image. The next time I see the word *anthropology*, I'm much more likely to recall this image, and then have the possibility of reconstructing this sentence. . which would lead me back to my memory of the meaning.

Another way of remembering this word is to pair it with a *mnemonic trigger*. Such a trigger would (usually) have a phonic theme in common with the word, together with either an image or conception that prompts you to recall meaning. In the case of anthropology, we might use, 'Did Ann throw apology for not knowing his society?' It's bad – but maybe it's better because it is. Good or bad, however, just the fact that we were creative and imaginative has solidified our sense of meaning here.

Keeping a notebook for new words between now and your next official GRE is a great idea, and perhaps essential for the serious student. In learning to work with language, beginning to understand semantics, and be comfortable in verbal expression, there is no substitute for experience: experience that includes thinking, speaking, reading and listening. The vocabulary practice in this chapter is designed to work with some of the fundamental and core elements of such experience in a short time. If you stay consistent with your practice, and incorporate it into your daily routine, you'll experience significant progress – not only on your GRE, but in your overall expression and capacity for critical thought.

Another simple but powerful tactic is to use a word a day from your vocabulary list, in your everyday conversation. You'll be quite surprised at how such an exercise not only gets you using words in context, and so solidifying their meanings in your own system of expression, but also how it gets you thinking about language in a different way. Such a simple exercise quite simply brings your consciousness to the use of language, the main ingredient in any sort of progress.

Summary:

When you enter into your vocabulary journal each time, each day, be sure to include the following fundamental steps:

1. The new word (spelled correctly)
2. The **definition** of the new word (from the dictionary)
3. The **origins** of the word: its **roots** and development. It's often helpful to try and discover the story behind the word. A good dictionary of word origins can be most helpful.
4. **Associations**: words that are derived from similar roots and meanings
5. A complete **sentence** that expresses your understanding of the new word, and includes an evocative phrase to trigger your memory
6. A mnemonic, *phonic* trigger for the new word
7. Any synonyms or antonyms that come to mind – even if they are “weakly” related

Try to record just two or three new words every night, being as thorough as possible. Stretch your imagination as you think about the relationships between new words and words and phrases that are already familiar.

Also, notice *how* you write down these words and steps in your notebook. Do you list them? Or, can you think of a more appropriate written structure to represent the relationships?