

The 100 Most Important Words in English

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This list of important words was drawn up by British rhetorician I.A. Richards, author of several books including "Basic English and Its Uses" (1943). However, these 100 words are *not* a part of the simplified version of the language that he and C.K. Ogden called Basic English.

Also, we're not talking about the 100 most frequently used words in English (a list that contains far more prepositions than nouns).

And unlike the 100 words chosen by David Crystal to tell "The Story of English," Richards' words are primarily significant for their meanings, not their etymologies.

Richards introduced his list of words in the book "How to Read a Page: A Course in Effective Reading" (1942), and he called them "the most important words" for two reasons:

1. They cover the ideas we can least avoid using, those which are concerned in all that we do as thinking beings.
2. They are words we are forced to use in explaining other words because it is in terms of the ideas they cover that the meanings of other words must be given.

Here are those 100 important words:

1. Amount
2. Argument
3. Art
4. Be
5. Beautiful
6. Belief
7. Cause
8. Certain
9. Chance
10. Change
11. Clear
12. Common
13. Comparison
14. Condition
15. Connection
16. Copy
17. Decision
18. Degree
19. Desire
20. Development
21. Different
22. Do
23. Education
24. End
25. Event
26. Examples
27. Existence
28. Experience
29. Fact
30. Fear
31. Feeling
32. Fiction

33. Force
34. Form
35. Free
36. General
37. Get
38. Give
39. Good
40. Government
41. Happy
42. Have
43. History
44. Idea
45. Important
46. Interest
47. Knowledge
48. Law
49. Let
50. Level
51. Living
52. Love
53. Make
54. Material
55. Measure
56. Mind
57. Motion
58. Name
59. Nation
60. Natural
61. Necessary
62. Normal
63. Number
64. Observation
65. Opposite
66. Order
67. Organization
68. Part
69. Place
70. Pleasure

71. Possible
72. Power
73. Probable
74. Property
75. Purpose
76. Quality
77. Question
78. Reason
79. Relation
80. Representative
81. Respect
82. Responsible
83. Right
84. Same
85. Say
86. Science
87. See
88. Seem
89. Sense
90. Sign
91. Simple
92. Society
93. Sort
94. Special
95. Substance
96. Thing
97. Thought
98. True
99. Use
100. Way
101. Wise
102. Word
103. Work

All these words carry multiple meanings, and they can say quite different things to different readers. For that reason, Richards' list could just as well have been labeled "The 100 Most Ambiguous Words:"

The very usefulness which gives them their importance explains their ambiguity. They are the servants of too many interests to keep to single, clearly defined jobs. Technical words in the sciences are like adzes, planes, gimlets, or razors. A word like "experience," or "feeling," or "true" is like a pocketknife. In good hands it will do most things—not very well. In general we will find that the more important a word is, and the more central and necessary its meanings are in our pictures of ourselves and the world, the more ambiguous and possibly deceiving the word will be.

In an earlier book, "The Making of Meaning" (1923), Richards (and co-author C.K. Ogden) had explored the fundamental notion that meaning doesn't reside in words themselves. Rather, meaning is rhetorical: It's fashioned out of both a verbal context (the words surrounding the words) and the experiences of the individual reader. No surprise, then, that *miscommunication* is often the result when the "important words" come into play.

It's this idea of miscommunicating through language that led Richards to conclude that all of us are developing our reading skills all the time: "Whenever we use words in forming some judgment or decision, we are, in what may be a painfully sharp sense, 'learning to read'" ("How to Read a Page.")

There are actually 103 words on Richards' top-100 list. The bonus words, he said, are meant "to incite the reader to the task of cutting out those he sees no point in and adding any he pleases, and to discourage the notion that there is anything sacrosanct about a hundred, or any other number."

Your List

So with those thoughts in mind, it's now time to create a list of what you think are the most important words.

Sources

- Crystal, David. *"The Story of English."* St. Martin's Press, 2012, New York.
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