



"The difference between the almost right word and the right word is really a large matter—'tis the difference between the lightning-bug and the lightning." — Mark Twain

Expanding Your Vocabulary for Better Wordplay



Studying Words Should be Fun

At Cornell University, my professor of European literature, Vladimir Nabokov, changed the way I read and the way I write. Words could paint pictures, I learned from him. Choosing the right word, and the right word order, he illustrated, could make an enormous difference in conveying an image or an idea.

-- Ruth Bader Ginsburg



How To Improve Your Vocabulary

I wasn't always interested in improving my vocabulary. I didn't think it was that necessary... until I started writing. That's when I noticed that certain words or word arrangements meant all the difference in the world as to whether or not you could really sink your teeth into what you were reading.

This was in 6th or 7th grade when I had a teacher that loved to write. She showed us the thesaurus and we had to use it to write and rewrite sentences.

Writing a sentence a certain way made me feel so important. Then I realized that it really made an impression on women. That's when I really amped it up. I read more, I wrote more. I chose clever language.

I'll never forget the first woman who acknowledged my writing. She said, "You write so beautifully. *Are you gay?*" 😂

Do your words pop off the page?

Can you write words that can move people to tears. Move yourself to tears?

Sometimes the order of the words could convey a totally different idea than you intended to convey:

Woman: "My girlfriend asked me to be in her wedding yesterday."

Here are Several Strategies You Should Implement Immediately to Improve Your Vocabulary:

Top 100 Books Everyone Should Read

1. *1984* — George Orwell
2. *Animal Farm* — George Orwell
3. *Pride and Prejudice* — Jane Austen



4. *Jane Eyre* — Charlotte Brontë
5. *Wuthering Heights* — Emily Brontë
6. *To Kill a Mockingbird* — Harper Lee
7. *The Great Gatsby* — F. Scott Fitzgerald
8. *The Catcher in the Rye* — J.D. Salinger
9. *The Grapes of Wrath* — John Steinbeck
10. *Of Mice and Men* — John Steinbeck
11. *Beloved* — Toni Morrison
12. *Invisible Man* — Ralph Ellison
13. *Things Fall Apart* — Chinua Achebe
14. *One Hundred Years of Solitude* — Gabriel García Márquez
15. *Don Quixote* — Miguel de Cervantes
16. *Anna Karenina* — Leo Tolstoy
17. *War and Peace* — Leo Tolstoy
18. *Crime and Punishment* — Fyodor Dostoevsky
19. *The Brothers Karamazov* — Fyodor Dostoevsky
20. *The Idiot* — Fyodor Dostoevsky
21. *Madame Bovary* — Gustave Flaubert
22. *Les Misérables* — Victor Hugo
23. *The Count of Monte Cristo* — Alexandre Dumas
24. *Moby-Dick* — Herman Melville
25. *The Scarlet Letter* — Nathaniel Hawthorne
26. *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* — Mark Twain
27. *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* — Mark Twain
28. *Great Expectations* — Charles Dickens
29. *A Tale of Two Cities* — Charles Dickens
30. *David Copperfield* — Charles Dickens
31. *Middlemarch* — George Eliot
32. *Frankenstein* — Mary Shelley
33. *Dracula* — Bram Stoker
34. *The Picture of Dorian Gray* — Oscar Wilde
35. *Brave New World* — Aldous Huxley
36. *Fahrenheit 451* — Ray Bradbury
37. *Slaughterhouse-Five* — Kurt Vonnegut
38. *Catch-22* — Joseph Heller
39. *Lolita* — Vladimir Nabokov



40. *The Sound and the Fury* — William Faulkner
41. *Light in August* — William Faulkner
42. *Mrs. Dalloway* — Virginia Woolf
43. *To the Lighthouse* — Virginia Woolf
44. *The Sun Also Rises* — Ernest Hemingway
45. *The Old Man and the Sea* — Ernest Hemingway
46. *A Farewell to Arms* — Ernest Hemingway
47. *The Stranger* — Albert Camus
48. *The Plague* — Albert Camus
49. *The Trial* — Franz Kafka
50. *The Metamorphosis* — Franz Kafka
51. *The Odyssey* — Homer
52. *The Iliad* — Homer
53. *The Aeneid* — Virgil
54. *Oedipus Rex* — Sophocles
55. *Antigone* — Sophocles
56. *The Divine Comedy* — Dante Alighieri
57. *Paradise Lost* — John Milton
58. *Hamlet* — William Shakespeare
59. *King Lear* — William Shakespeare
60. *Macbeth* — William Shakespeare
61. *The Bible*
62. *The Qur'an*
63. *The Bhagavad Gita*
64. *The Republic* — Plato
65. *Meditations* — Marcus Aurelius
66. *Nicomachean Ethics* — Aristotle
67. *The Prince* — Niccolò Machiavelli
68. *Leviathan* — Thomas Hobbes
69. *The Social Contract* — Jean-Jacques Rousseau
70. *On Liberty* — John Stuart Mill
71. *The Communist Manifesto* — Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels
72. *The Wealth of Nations* — Adam Smith
73. *The Souls of Black Folk* — W.E.B. Du Bois
74. *The Second Sex* — Simone de Beauvoir
75. *Silent Spring* — Rachel Carson



76. *The Origin of Species* — Charles Darwin
77. *The Double Helix* — James D. Watson
78. *A Brief History of Time* — Stephen Hawking
79. *The Selfish Gene* — Richard Dawkins
80. *Guns, Germs, and Steel* — Jared Diamond
81. *Sapiens* — Yuval Noah Harari
82. *The Diary of a Young Girl* — Anne Frank
83. *Night* — Elie Wiesel
84. *Man's Search for Meaning* — Viktor E. Frankl
85. *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* — Malcolm X and Alex Haley
86. *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* — Maya Angelou
87. *Long Walk to Freedom* — Nelson Mandela
88. *The Liars' Club* — Mary Karr
89. *Educated* — Tara Westover
90. *The Year of Magical Thinking* — Joan Didion
91. *In Cold Blood* — Truman Capote
92. *The Right Stuff* — Tom Wolfe
93. *The Fire Next Time* — James Baldwin
94. *Notes of a Native Son* — James Baldwin
95. *Walden* — Henry David Thoreau
96. *The Road* — Cormac McCarthy
97. *Blood Meridian* — Cormac McCarthy
98. *The Lord of the Rings* — J.R.R. Tolkien
99. *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* — C.S. Lewis
100. *Watchmen* — Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons

If you want the fastest version

If 100 feels overwhelming, start with these 15:

- 1984
- *Pride and Prejudice*
- *To Kill a Mockingbird*
- *The Great Gatsby*
- *Beloved*
- *Things Fall Apart*



- *One Hundred Years of Solitude*
- *Crime and Punishment*
- *The Brothers Karamazov*
- *Brave New World*
- *Slaughterhouse-Five*
- *The Odyssey*
- *Meditations*
- *Man's Search for Meaning*
- *The Diary of a Young Girl*

Best way to use this list:

Don't read it in order. Alternate:

- one classic novel
- one modern or nonfiction book
- one "big ideas" book

That keeps you from feeling like you're being punished by a dead Russian on every shelf.

Read Outside Your Comfort Zone

I think every comedian should memorize one Shakespearean Sonnet every 6 months. You kill two birds with one stone: You get better at memorization and you absorb different approaches to expressing yourself with the use of language.

Other Books that Really Help with Your Comedy:

[Science of Storytelling by Will Store](#)

[Poisonous Quotes by Colin Jarman](#)



[The Theory of the Aphorism; From Confucius to Twitter by Adrew Hui](#)

And this is the book I talked about that is incredibly revealing about the understanding of mankind and why the human being has no choice except to be captivated by storytelling.

[Sapiens - The History of the Evolution of Mankind - Yuval Noah Harari](#)

Words in the Proper Order

- Lyrics
- Scripture
- Poetry
- Rap
- Internal Rhyme
- Chiasmus

Comedic Irony - Saying It Without Saying It

Roast me:

Tell me I look old without saying, "Jerry, you look old."

Jerry, you look fat.

Jerry you look out of shape.

Jerry, you don't look well.

Words Used in Recognition

Use your Dictionary! Not just for the definition but also for the pronunciation!

Nothing more embarrassing than using a word and thinking you're clever, only to be corrected on the pronunciation.

Chamomile story.



 **Exercise - Write 10 Commonly Mispronounced Words (You can look them up) Then take one and write a joke or funny story. (10 minutes).**

Why this matters

Great wordplay is not just about being clever. It comes from having more options. The more meanings, associations, shades, and alternate phrasings you can access, the faster you can reframe an idea, find a twist, or build a stronger punchline.

This workout is designed to help you think like a comedy writer instead of a student cramming a dictionary.



Part 1: One Word, Many Directions

Choose one simple word and see how many angles it gives you.

Example word:

Light

Possible meanings and associations:

- not heavy
- illumination
- pale color
- to ignite
- casual or mild
- a light beer
- a lighter
- spiritual light
- “the light at the end of the tunnel”

Your turn:

Choose 5 words and list at least 6 meanings, uses, or associations for each.

Words:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____

For each word, ask:

- What else can this mean?
- Where else is this word used?
- Is it literal, emotional, slang, or technical?
- Could this word belong in business, dating, religion, sports, or crime?



Part 2: Vocabulary Expansion Through Synonym Ladders

Take a basic word and build a ladder of more specific alternatives.

Example:

Walk

- walk
- stroll
- march
- limp
- strut
- wander
- shuffle
- creep
- pace
- saunter

Notice: each word carries attitude, character, and point of view.

Your turn:

Build synonym ladders for these words:

1. Angry

2. Cheap

3. Smart



4. Drunk

5. Weird

Then answer:

- Which version sounds funnier?
- Which version sounds more visual?
- Which version sounds like a real person talking?

Part 3: Turn a Plain Sentence into Better Comedy Language

Rewrite each sentence 3 ways:

1. more vivid
2. more concise
3. more playful

Example:

Plain: My boss is difficult.

More vivid: My boss treats every meeting like an interrogation. Like why do I always feel like a 12-year-old in the principal's office?

More concise: My boss is human sandpaper.

More playful: My boss has the warmth of a parking ticket.



Your turn:

1. This restaurant is expensive.

More vivid: _____

More concise: _____

More playful: _____

2. My family is noisy.

More vivid: _____

More concise: _____

More playful: _____

3. Dating is hard.

More vivid: _____

More concise: _____

More playful: _____

4. The hotel was dirty.

More vivid: _____

More concise: _____

More playful: _____

5. He's not very bright.

More vivid: _____

More concise: _____

More playful: _____

Part 4: Mine the Double Meanings

For each word below, list at least 3 possible meanings or uses.

Watch

Charge



Issue

Pitch

Current

Right

Now choose one of those words and write 3 joke premises or punchline ideas using the different meanings.

Word: _____

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

Part 5: Rewrite Familiar Sayings

Take a familiar phrase and twist it.

Example:

Original: **Time heals all wounds.**

Twist: **Time heals all wounds unless you keep checking their Instagram.**

Rewrite these:

1. Honesty is the best policy.



2. Love is blind.

3. You can't judge a book by its cover.

4. What goes around comes around.

5. Practice makes perfect.



Part 6: Aphorism and Chiasmus Play

Aphorisms are compact little truths. Chiasmus flips structure to create elegance, rhythm, and surprise.

Examples:

- *We shape our habits, and then our habits shape us.*
- *Some people use words to reveal thought; others use thought to avoid words.*
- *He didn't lose sleep over success. He lost success over sleep.*
- *"You ever realize on TV you can say you pricked your finger but you can't say you fingered your prick." — George Carlin*
- *"Julius Caesar said, 'I came, I saw, I conquered. I like to say 'I saw, I came, They rated it not suitable for television.'"*

Your turn:

Write 5 lines that use reversal, contrast, or mirrored structure.

1.

2.

3.

4.

5.

Prompt ideas:

- money / happiness
- marriage / freedom



- fame / privacy
- health / pleasure
- confidence / insecurity

Part 7: Comedy Writer's Word Bank

Create your own swipe file.

Pick one topic:

- dating
- parenting
- aging
- work
- money
- travel
- doctors
- social media

Now list:

- 10 vivid nouns
- 10 stronger verbs
- 10 colorful adjectives
- 10 phrases or clichés associated with it

Topic: _____

Nouns

1.

2.

3.



4.

5.

6.

7.

8.

9.

10.

Verbs

1.

2.

3.

4.

5.

6.

7.

8.

9.

10.

Adjectives

1.



2.
3.
4.
5.
6.
7.
8.
9.
10.

Phrases / clichés / sayings

1.
2.
3.
4.
5.
6.
7.
8.
9.
10.



Final Challenge

Take one weak joke idea you already wrote and improve it by using:

- one better verb
- one more vivid noun
- one alternate meaning
- one contrast or reversal

Original version:

Improved version:

Takeaway

A better vocabulary does not make you sound smarter.

It gives you more trapdoors, more pivots, more angles, and more ways to surprise an audience.

That's where better wordplay lives.

And we haven't even gotten to acronyms and abbreviations yet! So much to learn! 🎉



Important Note: Improving your vocabulary is one of the most important things you can do for your comedy and your writing. It's one of those side workouts that doesn't seem that important but will really have an impact on your craft.

How do you stand out from the crowd? You develop those skills that other artists ignore.

Get personal 1 on 1 Coaching with Jerry just follow [this link](#) to learn more!

