

Click the ZOOM icon!



Using a Thesaurus

Nigel A. Caplan

ESL Specialist

UNC-Chapel Hill Writing Center



THE UNIVERSITY
of NORTH CAROLINA
at CHAPEL HILL

I'm Nigel Caplan, ESL Specialist at the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill. This presentation is about using a thesaurus to increase your vocabulary.

You will be able to follow this presentation better if you click the ZOOM icon – that's the PLUS key above the powerpoint slide in the top right corner.

What is a thesaurus?

- “a book that lists words in groups of synonyms and related concepts” (OED)
- Synonyms = words with similar meanings
- Antonyms = words with opposite meanings
- BUT there are no *exact* synonyms!

A thesaurus is “a book that lists words in groups of synonyms and related concepts”. This means that when you look up a word in a thesaurus, you don’t see a definition, but a list of similar words. Words that have similar meanings are called synonyms. Sometimes, the thesaurus will also give you antonyms, or words with opposite meanings. However, you should always be very careful when using a thesaurus, because there are no exact synonyms – that is, although two words might have similar meanings, you can’t necessarily replace one with the other in your own context. There may be small differences in meaning, register (formality), use (academic vs newspaper), or connotation (what a word suggests). So, a thesaurus must always be used with care.

How can you use a thesaurus?

- Avoid repetition
- Stretch your vocabulary
- Find just the right meaning

If you use it correctly, a thesaurus can help you avoid repeating the same words – so instead of using the word *problem* all the time, you could talk about an *issue*, *challenge*, or *difficulty*. It can also encourage you to find and learn new words so that you can stretch your vocabulary. And finally, a thesaurus can give you options you hadn't considered so that you can choose the word with just the right meaning.

Of course, to do this, you should always check any new word you find in a good learner's dictionary. We have a video presentation about using a learners' dictionary on the Writing Center's ESL videos page.

Thesauruses you can you

- thesaurus.com
- www.learnersdictionary.com
- Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary (online)
- ★ Oxford Learner's Thesaurus (book/CD)

There are several thesauruses that are easily available, and I'm going to demonstrate each of them in turn. Thesaurus.com mostly draws from the famous Roget's Thesaurus, which you can readily buy in book format, too. The second link is to the Meriam-Webster's Learner's Dictionary, which is available online or as a book. This, and the Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary, has a built-in thesaurus, which I'll show you. But my personal recommendation is the Oxford Learner's Thesaurus. It's not available online, but the book is not expensive and it is a fantastic resource.

thesaurus.com (Roget's)

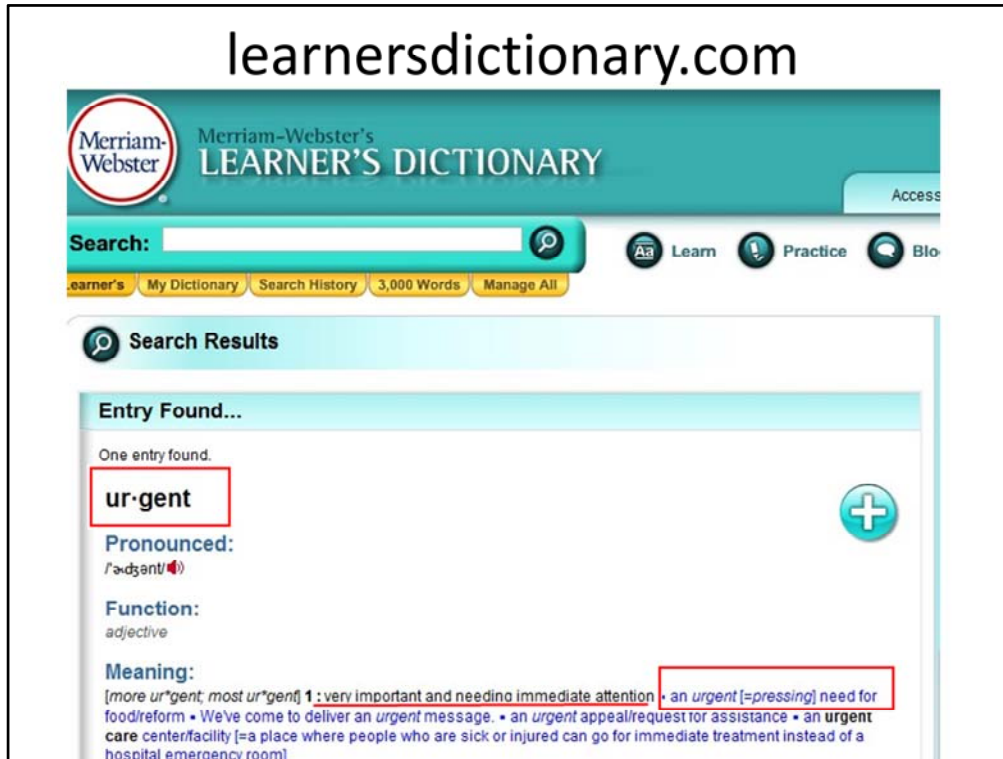
Main Entry: **immediate**
Part of Speech: *adjective*
Definition: instantaneous; without delay
Synonyms: [actual](#), at once, at present time, at this moment, [critical](#), [current](#), [existing](#), [extant](#), [first](#), hair-trigger, [instant](#), [live](#), [next](#), [now](#), on hand, [paramount](#), [present](#), [pressing](#), [prompt](#), [up-to-date*](#), [urgent](#)
Antonyms: [eventually](#), [later](#), [never](#)
* = informal/non-formal usage

Main Entry: **immediate**
Part of Speech: *adjective*
Definition: near, next
Synonyms: [adjacent](#), [close](#), [contiguous](#), [direct](#), firsthand, near-at-hand, [nearby](#), nearest, [nigh](#), [primary](#), proximal, proximate, [recent](#)
Antonyms: [away](#), [distant](#), [far](#)

Here's the entry for the word *immediate* from the website thesaurus.com. As you can see, there are two entries with brief definitions, to show the two main meanings of immediate – “without delay,” and “near.” However, the uses of these two sets of synonyms are very different, and the second meaning is only used in a relatively limited number of phrases, such as ‘in the immediate area’. You can see that one of the synonyms is marked for register as informal – that’s the word “up-to-date”, but it’s quite different from immediate in use. One of the words – extant – is a very infrequent word, and has a limited meaning that probably isn’t relevant to you unless you’re studying old texts.

But there are some useful words here that you might recognize and be able to use: critical, current, pressing, prompt.

The underlined words are links – you can click on them for more synonyms. So, this is a good starting point, especially if you use it with a learner’s dictionary.



So, I looked up one of the synonyms, urgent, in the M-W learner's dictionary at learnersdictionary.com. Notice that there are several meanings of urgent, and only one is related to immediate, but it has the additional meaning of *very important*. The dictionary usefully tells us that "pressing" has the same meaning in this phrase: an immediate/urgent/pressing need. However, you could not use immediate in the next example (an immediate message?) and only urgent works in the third sentence (an urgent appeal).

This dictionary, then, shows you a difference in meaning between immediate and urgent. If you want to add the idea of importance, then urgent is the better word.

Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary

im·me·di·ate /ɪ mi diːt/ adj.

1 happening or done without delay **SYN** INSTANT. *an immediate reaction / response* ◇ *to take immediate action* ◇ *RAM stores information for immediate access.*

2 [*usually before noun*] existing now and needing urgent attention: *Our immediate concern is to help the families of those who died.* ◇ *The effects of global warming, while not immediate, are potentially catastrophic.* ◇ *The hospital says she's out of immediate danger.* ◇ *The report focuses on some of the more immediate problems facing us.*

3 [*only before noun*] next to or very close to a particular place or time: *in the immediate vicinity* ◇ *The prospects for the immediate future are good.* ◇ *in the immediate aftermath of the war* ◇ *The director is standing on her immediate right.* ◇ *my immediate predecessor in the job* (= the person who had the job just before me)

4 [*only before noun*] nearest in relationship or rank: *The funeral was attended by her immediate family* (= her parents, children, brothers and sisters) *only.* ◇ *He is my immediate superior* (= the person directly above me) *in the company.*

5 [*only before noun*] having a direct effect: *The immediate cause of death is unknown.* see EFFECT *n.*

© Oxford University Press, 2005

Here is the entry for immediate in the OALD online. This dictionary has a small built-in thesaurus – you can see that for meaning 1, there is the synonym instant. This is more reliable – it tells you that for the sentences with this meaning of the word, instant is a good alternative, but you should also look it up in the dictionary.

Notice also at the bottom that this dictionary – and the M-W – gives you a paraphrase that you could use in your writing: so, another way to say “immediate superior” is to say “the person directly above me”. This tells you that immediate and direct are related, but used differently.

Again, a good learner's dictionary like this one gives you extra grammatical information – so for meanings 2 and 3 (but not 1 and 4), the adjective usually occurs before the noun – so “immediate danger” is good phrase, but “the danger is immediate” sounds awkward.

Usage Notes

WHICH WORD?

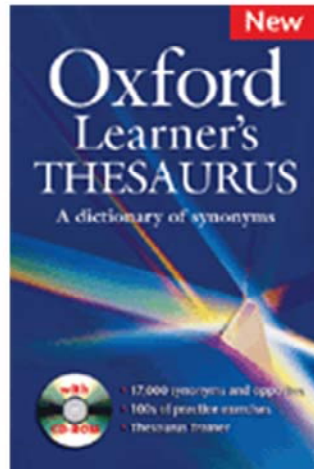
near · close

- The adjectives **near** and **close** are often the same in meaning, but in some phrases only one of them may be used: *the near future* ◇ *a near neighbour* ◇ *a near miss* ◇ *a close contest* ◇ *a close encounter* ◇ *a close call*. **Close** is more often used to describe a relationship between people: *a close friend* ◇ *close family* ◇ *close links*. You do not usually use **near** in this way.

©Oxford University Press, 2005.

The other reason I like the OALD is for its usage notes. Two of the synonyms for immediate in the Roget's were near and close. If you look up these words, you'll find this helpful note explaining the difference between these close synonyms. (Read aloud)

Oxford Learner's Thesaurus



The Oxford Learner's Thesaurus is a different kind of thesaurus, in that it is written for learners of English. They call it a dictionary of synonyms, and it is really a cross between a traditional thesaurus and a learner's dictionary. It doesn't have as many entries as an ordinary thesaurus, but it has much more useful information for you, and I strongly recommend this book. You can't find the contents online, but it comes with a CD-ROM that you can install on your computer. You can buy it from any bookstore or online bookseller. And I don't get paid to say that!

immediate *adj.*

immediate • instant • prompt • instantaneous

These words all describe sth that happens or is done without delay.



PATTERNS AND COLLOCATIONS

- ▶ an immediate / an instant / a prompt / an instantaneous **reaction / response / return**
- ▶ immediate / instant / prompt **action / attention / payment / relief**
- ▶ an immediate / instant **appeal / answer / solution / result / effect / impact / improvement**
- ▶ an immediate / a prompt **start / step**
- ▶ **almost** immediate / instant / instantaneous

Here's the first part of the entry for immediate – taken from a sample page from the OLT that's freely available online.

It's telling you that there are four frequent words in this synonym set, and they are – in decreasing order of frequency: immediate, instant, prompt, and instantaneous. And you have a basic definition, which we've seen before.

Next, you see the words on a scale, which is telling you that instantaneous is the fastest, followed by immediate and instant, and finally prompt. So, an instantaneous reply is one with almost no delay at all, whereas a prompt reply occurs after a very short delay.

Under the scale, you see common patterns and collocations. This is really important for you because it tells you which adjectives, nouns, and verbs go together. You can pause the video if you want to study these words in more detail.

immediate happening or done without delay: *Carrie's immediate reaction to the news was to laugh in relief.* ◇ *Local police took immediate action when they received the bomb alert.* ◇ *The cream brings immediate relief to dry and rough skin.* **OPP delayed** ⓘ A **delayed** reaction happens some time after the event that causes it: *She's suffering a delayed reaction to the shock.*

▶ **immediately** *adv.*: *She answered almost immediately.* ◇ *The point of my question may not be immediately apparent.*

instant [usually before noun] happening or done immediately: *She took an instant dislike to me, the first time we met.* ◇ *This account gives you instant access to your money.* ◇ *The show was an instant success in New York.*

▶ **instantly** *adv.*: *Her voice is instantly recognizable.* ◇ *The driver of the car was killed instantly.*

Then, for each word in the synonym set, the thesaurus give you a definition, example sentences, opposite words, and more information. So, the opposite of immediate can be delayed. Again, these are in order of frequency, so immediate is the most common word in this set, followed by instant. You also have the grammatical information that instance is usually used before a noun, as well as the related adverbs immediately and instantly.

NOTE IMMEDIATE, INSTANT, PROMPT OR INSTANTANEOUS?
Prompt describes sth that you do; **instantaneous** describes sth that happens; **immediate** and **instant** can describe either, although **instant** is used more to describe sth that happens than sth that you do. **Prompt** action is not quite as fast as an action or reaction that is **immediate, instant** or **instantaneous**. Action can be *very/fairly prompt* but NOT: ~~*very/fairly immediate/instant/instantaneous*~~. A reaction can be *almost immediate/instant/instantaneous* but NOT: ~~*almost prompt*~~.

Oxford Learner's Thesaurus
© Oxford University Press
www.oup.com/elt

Finally, there is an extended usage note to help you choose between these four words (read).

And now you know everything you need about the word “immediate”!



Website: www.unc.edu/writingcenter/esl
Blog: eslonthehill.wordpress.com

Online evaluation: <http://tinyurl.com/eslvideo>
Your feedback is very important to us! Thank you!



THE UNIVERSITY
of NORTH CAROLINA
at CHAPEL HILL

© 2010 by [Nigel Caplan](#) and the [Writing Center at UNC-Chapel Hill](#).
Some rights reserved under a [Creative Commons 3.0 License](#) for non-commercial use only. You may link to this URL with correct attribution, but before reproducing the presentation in another format, please contact the copyright holder.



To wrap up, then, using a thesaurus can help you expand your vocabulary and make your writing more varied while also teaching you the differences and similarities between related words and expressions. As with all these resources, you will need to take some time to become familiar with using a thesaurus, but I think you'll see that it can be really useful as you increase your English vocabulary.

You can find links to all the websites I have discussed under the video and on our blog.

Thank you for watching this presentation. Please take a moment to complete a quick evaluation survey. Link under the video.

I'm Nigel Caplan in the Writing Center at UNC-Chapel Hill.