



Vince's Complete Guide to Learning GRE Vocabulary



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Introduction

So you need to take the GRE, and by now you know that the verbal section is riddled with vocabulary that even many native English speakers don't know.

Also, you've undoubtedly come across words that are more familiar but you're just not sure of their exact definitions.

You've probably started to learn words, but you may be running into a few common issues:

1. **You're overwhelmed.** There are so many words to learn, and not that much time.
2. **You're confused.** There are so many different *ways* to learn vocab, from apps to flash cards to books. And with so many different GRE vocab lists out there, which one is best?
3. You're studying words, **but you often forget the ones you've studied...** or some words stick and others don't.

Fear not - most people I talk to have one or more of these issues. This guide is designed to help you overcome these problems and learn as many words as you possibly can in the time between now and your GRE test date.

My Background



My name is Vince Kotchian, and I've been tutoring the GRE since 2008 here in sunny San Diego, California. I've gotten a perfect 170 on the verbal part of the test twice now, and I've co-authored a few GRE prep books and online courses.

I was an English Literature major in college, and I've been an avid reader since about age 5. I love books, and I love words. Life is nuanced, if you haven't noticed, and a nuanced vocabulary allows you to both understand others and to express yourself more clearly and compellingly - not to mention score higher on the GRE!

Over the years, I've seen a lot of people study GRE vocab, and I've observed what works and what doesn't work. This guide is my way of sharing what I've learned with you.

How This Guide Can Help

Learning vocabulary will take effort, but it doesn't have to be painful. I'm going to show you how to channel your studying energy in the most effective direction possible so you can make the most of the time you have. Here are a few things I'll cover:

- The “why” behind learning vocabulary and an explanation of the principles we'll use to learn words
- How to get started and determine which words you need to learn
- The most effective ways I've found to study those words
- How to use word roots to supplement your studying
- And finally, some final thoughts

Once you finish this guide, you'll be able to learn new words more efficiently and effectively - a skill that will make a noticeable difference in your success with GRE verbal questions.

Sound good? Ok! Let's get started.



The Principles We'll Use

Let's talk about a few principles of learning words.

Key #1: Repetition (but intelligent repetition)

I still remember my childhood best friend's phone number, even though I haven't called or thought of it in literally decades. But from age 9 through 16 or so, I probably called it 500 times.

But repetition without a system doesn't work too well when you're trying to learn 500 or 1000 different words. You don't want to study every word every single day, since that would take forever.

The solution? **Spaced repetition.**

If you review a word too soon, your brain doesn't engage as much since you still remember its definition. Study it too late, and the definition has faded completely.

The ideal time to study a word is when you're just starting to forget it, to rebuild the memory stronger than the first time... kind of like a muscle growing stronger through weight training.

For example, this chart illustrates spaced repetition used for the first 10 days of studying 250 words.

Day 1	Study words 1-25		
Day 2	Study words 26-50		
Day 3	Study words 51-75		
Day 4	Study words 76-100	Review words 1-25	
Day 5	Study words 101-125	Review words 26-50	
Day 6	Study words 126-150	Review words 51 - 75	
Day 7	Study words 151-175	Review words 76-100	
Day 8	Study words 176-200	Review words 101-125	
Day 9	Study words 201-225	Review words 126-150	Review words 1-25
Day 10	Study words 226-250	Review words 151-175	Review words 26-50

See the pattern?

Notice that if you studied words 1 - 25 on the first day, you would wait a few days to study them again (on day 4). That's just an estimate of how long it might take for the memory of those first 25 words to fade a bit. But then you don't review them again until day 9, since it takes you longer to forget them this time.

One thing to add: if you've reviewed a word more than twice and you easily remember it, add it to a "I know these" pile, and take it out of the reviewing rotation. Once a week, review any words in the "I know these" pile, and put any you've forgotten back into the normal rotation.

The whole process makes studying more efficient and effective. I highly recommend making your own spreadsheet to track when to study the words you're trying to learn, so that you can stay organized about when to review.

Key #2: Connections: Rhymes, Emotions, and Patterns



You probably know dozens if not hundreds of songs and commercial slogans by heart. We're good at remembering things that are catchy, that have patterns, that rhyme, and that evoke emotion.

The same is true for learning a new word. The more connections you build in your brain to that word, and the stronger those connections are, the more likely it is that you'll remember the definition.

For example, the word **quash** means "to reject", or "to put an end to". So we have link #1: the definition.

How about a few more links, though, to make remembering that definition easier?

Link #2 could be a mnemonic. To **quash** a rebellion, just **squash** it. The rhyme and similar appearance of "squash" helps you remember.

Link #3 could be something creative, like a sentence you invent. “My wife keeps trying to cook vegan dinners, but I **quash** those **squash** dishes since I like eating meat.” Corny, but it’s another hook.

Link #4 could be seeing the word used in a normal publication. “*The government moved quickly to **quash** the revolt.*”

This is why looking up a word you don’t know when you’re reading helps you learn it - you automatically have context to put the word’s definition into. It’s a nice way to get a feel for the appropriate usage of the word, as well.

In Chapter 3 of this guide, [“Which Words to Learn”](#), I’ll list the most helpful resources I’ve found to build connections to the definition of a word.

Key #3: Testing



There's something about knowing we'll be tested on a word that helps us remember it. It might have something to do with the fear we'll forget it driving the memory deeper into our brain.

But you don't have to wait until the real GRE to make the most of this principle - by periodically quizzing yourself on the words you're learning, you reinforce your memory of those words - since you have to recall them.

It's pretty simple: at certain intervals, maybe weekly, quiz yourself on the words you're working on that week. This works best with flashcards.

Important: Write down your results. Maybe last Sunday, you knew 153 out of 175 words you were working on that week. This Sunday, you want to look at that number and strive to surpass it.

Tracking your progress on paper for almost any endeavor in life will almost magically help you stay motivated and help you improve more quickly.

The Bottom Line

There are ways to make it easier for your brain to hold on to the definitions of words. I hope this chapter has helped you understand a little bit more of the why behind learning new vocabulary. Again, in Chapter 3, “**Which Words to Learn**”, we’ll look at specific resources to employ these principles.

Which Words to Learn

To build your GRE lexicon in an organized fashion, you’ll need a source of words to study. Well on the face of it, that’s an easy task: there are lots of GRE word lists out there. So which ones are best?

Here’s the thing: almost every word list out there is based on the words that have already appeared in official ETS GRE verbal practice material. There’s tons of overlap between each list.

To combat this redundancy, you’ll probably want to use just one list, and then supplement by looking up any words that aren’t on that list.

With that in mind, here’s my plan of attack for you:

My #1 Recommended List: [Vince's GRE Vocab Cartoons List on Quizlet](#)

25 sets

created by [Vince_Kotchian](#) TEACHER



Vince's GRE Vocab Cartoons

All 1300 GRE vocab cartoons plus 160 root word cartoons.

Interface showing a collection of GRE vocabulary sets. The sets are sorted alphabetically and include:

- A Words**: 118 terms
- B Words**: 48 terms
- C Words**: 102 terms
- D Words**: 94 terms

Each set is created by [Vince_Kotchian](#) TEACHER and includes a cartoon illustration.

My list is based on [GRE Vocab Capacity](#) - a book I co-wrote with fellow GRE tutor Brian McElroy.

I think my list is the best place to start for 4 reasons:

1. It has the most words: about 1300 vocabulary words and 160 root words
2. It has funny cartoons!
3. It uses mnemonics to help you remember the words.
4. Quizlet has great functionality to help you study the words, including quizzes.

I'll talk a lot more about vocab learning methods in the next chapter, "[Word Learning](#)".

Other GRE Vocab Lists

I made a spreadsheet ([link](#)) that shows all the words in each of 7 popular vocabulary lists:

1. Gregmat (about 700 words)
2. Magoosh (1000 words)
3. Manhattan Prep (1000 words)
4. Prep Scholar (357 words)
5. Powerscore (700 words)
6. GRE Vocab Capacity (the vocabulary mnemonics book I co-wrote with Brian McElroy -- 1300 words)
7. Greenlight Test Prep Basic and Advanced (1000 words)

Below is a screenshot from the sheet. The non-unique words have been highlighted in yellow, and each list's unique words have a white background. As you can see, there's a ton of overlap.

I also highlighted in pink any words I thought would be very unlikely to be tested by ETS.

A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H
	Gregmat	Magoosh	Manhattan	Prep Scholar	Powerscore	Vince + Brian	Greenlight
1	abate	aberrant	abase	abate	abdicate	abase	abash
2	abet	aberration	abate	aberrant	aberrant	abashed	abate
3	abhor	abjure	abdicate	abjure	abeyance	abate	aberrant
4	abjure	aboveboard	aberrant	abscond	abjure	aberration	abject
5	abound	abrogate	abeyance	abstain	abstemious	abeyance	abrasive
6	abreast	abstain	abhor	acumen	abstruse	abhors	abscond
7	abstain	abstruse	abjure	admonish	accretion	abject	abstain
8	accentuate	abysmal	abrasive	adulterate	acerbic	abnegate	abysmal
9	accessible	accolade	abreast	advocate	acidulous	abomination	acquiesce
10	acclaim	acerbic	abridge	aesthetic	acme	aboriginal	acid
11	acolyte	acme	abscission	affectation	acumen	abort	adherent
12	acquiesce	acrimony	abscond	aggrandize	adroit	abound	admonish
13	acquisitive	adamant	abstain	alacrity	aerie	abrasive	adulterate
14	acrimonious	adjudicate	abyss	alleviate	aesthetic	abridge	adversity

Is My GRE Vocab Cartoons List Enough?

So let's say you're studying [my words on Quizlet](#). Is that enough? It kind of depends on your goals. For those of you who want to learn even more words, I have some advice.

1. Once you've learned all of my words, use [my vocab compilation spreadsheet](#) to study any words in the other lists (see above).
2. Look up words you don't know when reading. Don't forget to check the meaning of familiar-looking words to make sure you actually know their dictionary definitions!
3. Look up words you didn't know in any ETS question or reading passage **AFTER** you've finished doing the question. If you look up the word's definition *while* doing the question, you diminish its practice value.

Normal publications use "GRE words" all the time. (This kind of shows you that GRE vocab isn't that weird or obscure!)

I particularly like two sources: [The Economist](#), and [Arts and Letters Daily](#). Try reading either for 15 minutes a day, and look up any vocab you don't know / add it to your study list. The extra reading will build your verbal abilities, too.

And of course, any word ETS itself uses in a practice question or reading passage is a word they might use again on the GRE you take. Make sure you know the definitions of those words as well.

So now that we know where the words are that you need to learn, how do we best go about learning them? Stay tuned!

Word Learning

Methods

In this chapter, I'll give you what I think are the best ways to learn words given the principles I discussed in Chapter 1. Keep in mind you might want to experiment a little bit to see what works best for you.

Here are the all methods, in case you want to jump straight to a certain one:

[Method 1: Look Up The Damn Thing](#)

[Method 2: Make Flashcards](#)

[Method 3: Make a Mnemonic](#)

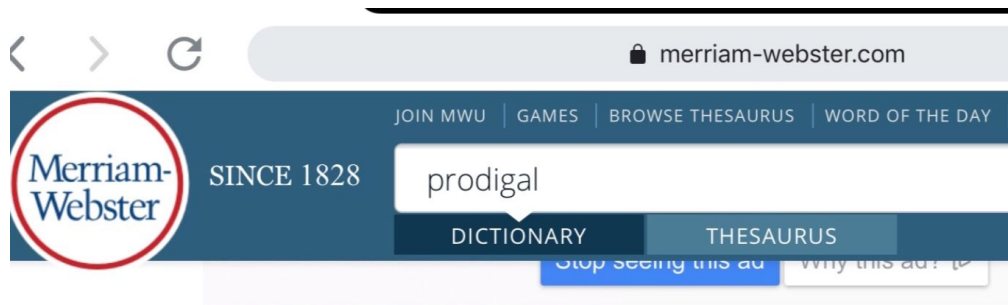
[Method 4: The GRE Vocab Movie / TV Project](#)

[Method 5: Magoosh's GRE Flashcards App](#)

Method 1: Look Up the Damn Thing

Even if you're using a pre-created flashcard, it's probably helpful for you to look up the word. Yeah, I know the flashcard you're looking at has the definition of the word, but a good online dictionary will quickly supplement that definition with lots of helpful extras.

Plus, I trust an online dictionary to get the definition right a hell of a lot more than I trust a typical prep company. My favorite online dictionary is Merriam-Webster. Check out all this helpful information we get when we look up "prodigal":



prodigal adjective

prod·i·gal | \ 'prā-di-gəl 

click for pronunciation

Definition of *prodigal* (Entry 1 of 2)

- 1 : characterized by profuse or wasteful expenditure : LAVISH
// a prodigal feast
// prodigal outlays for her clothes
- 2 : recklessly spendthrift
// the prodigal prince
- 3 : yielding abundantly : LUXURIANT —often used with *of*
// nature has been so prodigal of her bounty
— H. T. Buckle

Above, we have the definitions, and there's a little icon to click to hear the word spoken aloud. Note: normally, the first definition is most common and therefore most important for you to learn.

Merriam Webster also provides a handy list of synonyms for the word you look up. Grouping words with similar meanings can be a great way to learn them.

1:19 AM Tue Sep 24

Prodigal | Definition of Pr x +

merriam

Merriam-Webster SINCE 1828

JOIN MWU | GAMES | BROWSE THESAURUS

prodigal

DICTIONARY THESAURUS

Synonyms & Antonyms for *prodigal*

Synonyms: Adjective *might as well learn all these!*

extravagant, high-rolling, profligate, spendthrift, squandering, thriftless, unthrifty, wasteful

Synonyms: Noun

fritterer, high roller, profligate, spender, spendthrift, squanderer, waster, wastrel

Above: the synonyms to prodigal.

Another cool thing MW does sometimes is to provide definitions for those synonyms to illustrate the subtle differences between meanings.

Merriam-Webster SINCE 1828

JOIN MWU | GAMES | BROWSE THESAURUS | WOR

prodigal

DICTIONARY THESAURUS

Choose the Right Synonym for *prodigal*

Adjective

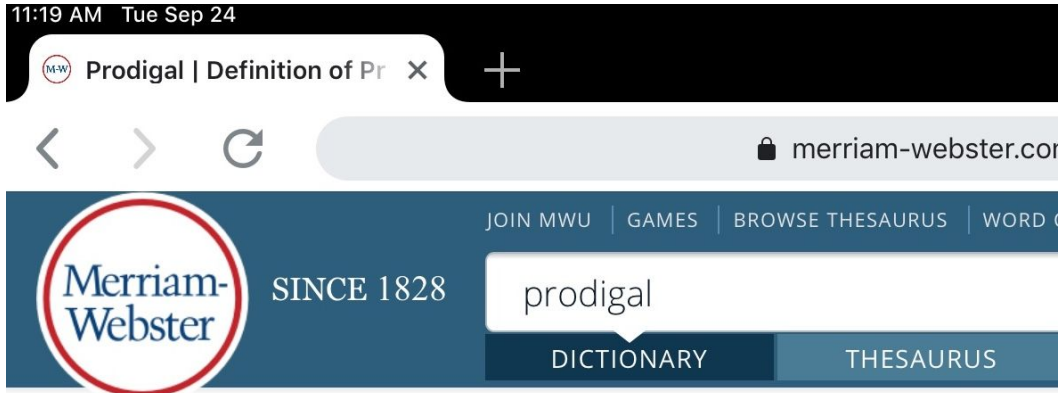
PROFUSE, LAVISH, PRODIGAL, LUXURIANT, LUSH, EXUBERANT mean giving or given out in great abundance. PROFUSE implies pouring forth without restraint. // *profuse* apologies // LAVISH suggests an unstinted or unmeasured profusion. // a *lavish* party // PRODIGAL implies reckless or wasteful lavishness threatening to lead to early exhaustion of resources. // *prodigal* spending // LUXURIANT suggests a rich and splendid abundance. // a *luxuriant* beard // LUSH suggests rich, soft luxuriance. // a *lush* green lawn // EXUBERANT implies marked vitality or vigor in what produces abundantly. // an *exuberant* imagination //

↑ great clarification of meaning nuances!

Examples of *prodigal* in a Sentence

Reading these improves your vocabulary as well as your ability to use these words properly when you write!

MW also provides sentences to give you a feel for real-life usages of the word you're studying:



Examples of *prodigal* in a Sentence

Adjective

// We sipped our beers and wondered at one another, at what was left of all that and of those *prodigal* days.

— Michael Chabon, *A Model World and Other Stories*, 1991

// Mr. Bulstrode replied without haste, but also without hesitation. "I am grieved, though, I confess, not surprised by this information, Mr. Lydgate. For my own part, I regretted your alliance with my brother-in-law's family, which has always been of prodigal habits, and which has already been much indebted to me for sustainment in its present position ..."

— George Eliot, *Middlemarch*, 1872

this one illustrates the meaning better...

Above: the first sentence doesn't illustrate the meaning, but the second example does.

And finally, MW will usually provide the etymology and history of a word. Sometimes this is more helpful than others, but it's an opportunity to build another link to the meaning of the word.



First Known Use of *prodigal*

Adjective

15th century, in the meaning defined at [sense 1](#)

Noun

1561, in the meaning defined at [sense 1](#)

History and Etymology for *prodigal*

Adjective and Noun

Latin *prodigus*, from *prodigere* to drive away, squander, from *pro-*, *prod-* forth + *agere* to drive — more at [PRO-](#), [AGENT](#)

Above: sometimes the etymology really helps. In this case, not so much. Worth a look, though, for any word you're learning.

In summary, looking up a word is an easy way to not only learn its definition, but also to learn synonyms of the word, see real-world usage, and see if the word's origins remind you of its meaning.

Method 2: Make Flashcards

Assuming you're using [my list](#), you've got a whole bunch of flashcards already made on Quizlet. As you find new words to learn, make new flashcards in the same style, either on Quizlet or on paper.

To pack as much value as you can into a flashcard, here's what I'd suggest, using the word "prodigal" as an example.

Front of card: write the word, and pronunciation, so you can say it to yourself as you read it (this helps).

Front of card

Prodigal "PRAH-dig-ul"

Back of the card: write the word and the part of speech (adjective, verb, noun, etc).

Write a brief definition.

Write a sentence using the word so that the sentence evokes the meaning of the word.

Write any synonyms you can for the word that you also need to learn (get these from an online dictionary).

Prodigal (adjective): wasteful.

My prodigal friend is a "Prada gal" - she prodded me to lend her \$1500 to buy another pair of Prada shoes.

Synonyms: spendthrift, profligate

Notice the sentence I wrote evokes the meaning of the word because - at least for most of us - spending \$1500 on a pair of shoes is kind of wasteful, especially if we needed someone to lend us the money!

Also notice I'm using a mnemonic - "**Prada gal**" - to help me remember the word's definition. Get it? I'll talk more about mnemonics in Method 3, below.

Summary: By writing these things on the card, you're creating multiple links in your brain to the word's meaning, making it that much more likely you'll actually remember it.

Method 3: Make a Mnemonic

By now you know that "**prodigal**" means "**wasteful**". The perfect mnemonic, I think, to remember that definition is "**Prada Gal**" - a girl who spends her whole paycheck on designer clothes (like [Prada](#)).

If you like this method, you can make mnemonics for lots of words you're learning.

The way I do this is to just say the word aloud and see what the sounds remind me of, or I look at the spelling of the word and see if that reminds me of anything.

For example, "**avaricious**" kind of sounds like "**have our riches**", which might help you remember that "**avaricious**" means "**greedy**". If you do a quick sketch illustrating the mnemonic and sentence, so much the better!

AVARICIOUS

(adjective): greedy. “ave uh RISH us”

THINK: have our riches.

My boy band and I don't trust you as an agent - you're **avaricious** and just want to **have our riches**.



Source: [GRE Vocab Cartoons](#)

Or “**dearth**” kind of reminds me of “**dead earth**” - if you have **dead earth**, you'll have a **dearth** of viable crops come harvest time.

DEARTH

(noun): lack.
“DEARTH”

—
THINK: dead earth.

Due to the **dead earth** of our farmland,
there will be a **dearth** of food this winter.



Source: [GRE Vocab Cartoons](#)

I encourage you to try these methods to make your own mnemonics for words you're learning - if you make a good one, you may never forget the meaning of the word!

These mnemonics are based on [GRE Vocab Capacity](#) - the book I wrote with fellow GRE tutor Brian McElroy.

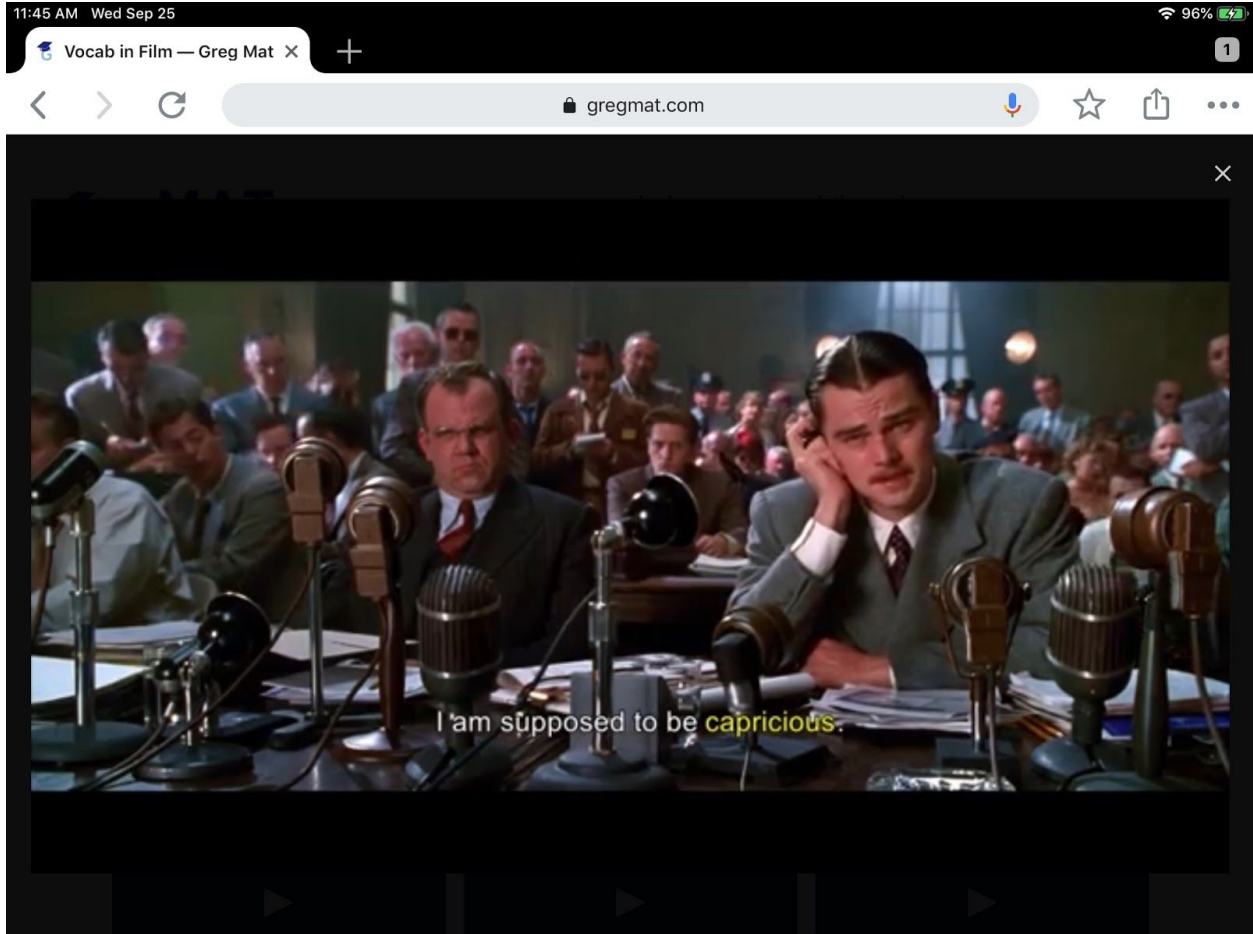
Check out all 1450+ of my illustrated GRE vocabulary mnemonics in my [GRE Vocab Cartoons](#) course, or follow me on Instagram, where I post the best ones: [@GRE_vocab_words](#).

Method #4: The GRE Vocab Movie / TV Project

[Gregmat](#) has created a fun tool to learn vocabulary words from brief movie and TV clips called [The GRE Vocab Movie / TV Project](#).

The screenshot shows a mobile browser interface. At the top, the time is 11:52 AM on Wednesday, September 25, and the battery is at 96%. The browser address bar shows the URL 'words.gregmat.com'. The main content area features the word 'Capricious' in a large, bold font. Below the word, there is a definition: 'governed or characterized by caprice : impulsive, unpredictable'. To the right of the definition is a video player showing a scene from a movie. The video player has a red play button and a subtitle that reads: 'I play a few pieces myself on the violin. Prokofiev and Bartok, the Hot Canary'. The video player also has 'Watch later' and 'Share' buttons. Below the video player, there is a row of small, square thumbnails representing other video clips.

The way it works is that you'll first see a brief definition of the word alongside closed-captioned clips from a TV show or movie where that word is used in dialogue. Here's Leo using "capricious".



[Full clip for the word “capricious”.](#)

This is a unique way to learn a word’s meaning for several reasons. We all like movies and TV shows, so it’s more entertaining than most methods - which always helps. Plus, it should create a different kind of memory link in your brain that just about any other method.

The way I’d recommend using the tool is to go to words.gregmat.com and type in the word you’re learning in the search bar to see if there’s a video clip. If so, it’ll pop up, along with the definition. Sit back, watch, and boom! You’ve added another connection in your brain to that word’s definition.

You can also track your progress: click the check mark next to words you know, and click the “x” next to words you don’t, and the website will help you review the ones you don’t know.

Bonus: [This spreadsheet](#) is another way to access the GRE Movie / TV Project’s words, definitions, and videos.

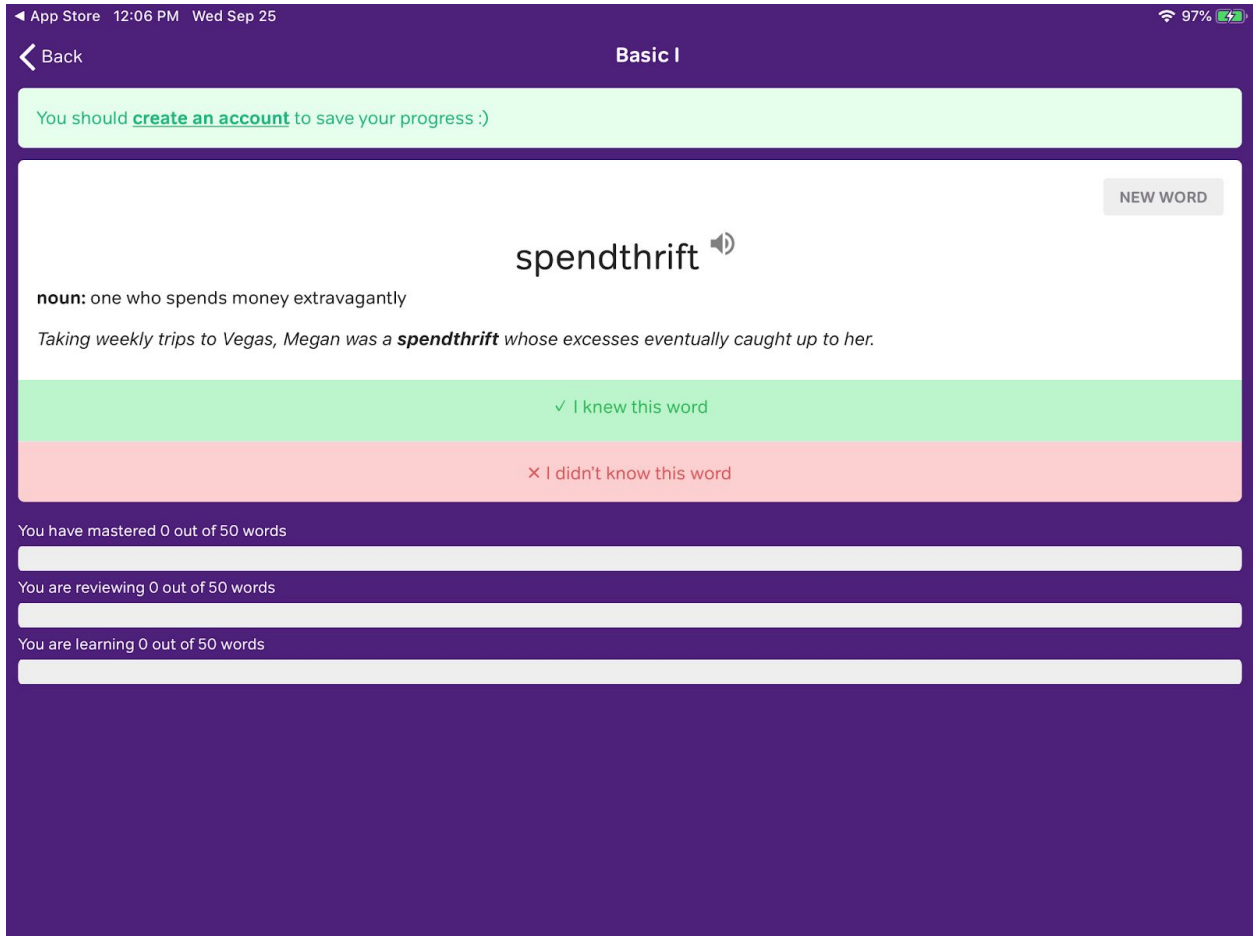
Method #5: Use Magoosh’s GRE Flashcards app

Magoosh’s app has 1000 words split up into about 20 decks of 50 words. Most of the Magoosh words do overlap with Gregmat’s list, but the app has the advantage of providing you with different reviewing functionality, as well as a few more words to learn.

The app will help you track words in three ways:

1. Words you’ve mastered
2. Words you’re reviewing
3. Words you’re learning

Basically, the app will show you a word on one side of a flashcard, and you tap to see the other side of the card to get the pronunciation, part of speech, and definition, and to read a sentence using the word. Here’s a screenshot from the app:



You'll then have a choice: **"I knew this word"**, in which case the app stores it in the **"words you've mastered"** pile. You won't see it again.

Or, you'll tap **"I didn't know this word"**, in which case the app will put the word in the **"words you're learning"** pile. Words in this pile will appear again, and you'll have to click **"I knew this word"** a few times in a row for the word to make it to the **"words you've mastered"** pile.

As I mentioned in the Principles chapter of this book, it's best to review a word when you're starting to forget it. One way to do this with the Magoosh app is to [use the chart in the Principles chapter](#) to schedule when to study each deck and when to review it (using spaced repetition).

BTW, there's no rhyme or reason for which decks are harder or easier. Magoosh calls the decks "basic", "common", and "advanced", but I've seen very hard words in the "basic" decks and easy ones in the "advanced" decks. So I'd just go through all of them if you like the app.

A Note About Roots

If you haven't noticed, words are sometimes comprised of parts that have common meanings. For example:

The prefix "**in**" often means "**not**". For example, "**incompetent**" means "**not competent**".

Unfortunately, there are exceptions. "**Inflammable**" means "**very flammable**".

Some roots don't seem to have exceptions, luckily. For example, "**chron**" seems to always mean "**time**". Think "**chronological**" or "**chronic**".

Is learning roots a good use of your time? Yes, since they can often help you guess at the meaning of unfamiliar words.

Is learning roots a panacea? No, since English is messed up sometimes. Certain words have definitions that violate the common meanings of the parts of which they're comprised (like "inflammable").

The solution? I'd recommend learning 100 - 200 common roots. [Here's a source](#) I think is useful (scroll down after clicking the link). I also have about 100 root words in my [GRE Vocab Cartoons](#) on Quizlet.

Final Thoughts

I hope this guide has been helpful to give you more direction in terms of learning new words for the GRE. Here are 3 final tips to send you on your way:

1. **Be consistent.** If you want to learn 500 or 1000 new words, you can't really skip too many days. Make sure your vocab study time is carved out in your schedule.
2. **Be creative.** Engage your brain when you're studying a word. If you're reading it in context, try to visualize the sentence, and even feel whatever emotion it evokes. This all helps the meaning stick.
3. **Be patient.** There will be words that are harder to learn than others. It just means you'll have to do a little more work with them. And take heart - it's unpredictable which words will actually appear on the GRE that you take, so chances are you won't even need to know a certain word.

That's it, guys! If you have any vocab questions that this guide didn't answer, HMU. Also, [check out my GRE prep blog](#) for more helpful resources, study plans, and more.

Best,

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