Chapter 1

Figuring Out How Words Work

In This Chapter

- Understanding what a good vocabulary is and how it benefits you
- A quick look at the structure of English words
- Ways to build your vocabulary painlessly

Ah, vocabulary. The definitions. The functions. The alternative spellings. The memories of Friday afternoon vocabulary tests or of clandestinely looking up dirty words when you were supposed to be studying the list your teacher gave you. When you get right down to it, who *isn't* completely fascinated by the meaning, history, and current and past usage of words?

In two words: probably you. But there are two secrets that few English teachers let you in on:

- **Having a good vocabulary doesn't mean you have to have a stilted vocabulary.** It simply means you can communicate well with the group you're in.
- **Building a good vocabulary is actually fairly easy.** Forget the lists of words you got in school and the mind-numbing task of copying definitions. To build your vocabulary, you simply have to broaden your horizons and apply a few tricks.

Honest. This chapter gives you the basics.

Getting an Idea of a Good Vocabulary

During any typical day, you may be with your neighbors talking about things being *good,* with your colleagues talking about things being *exemplary,* and with your buddies talking about things being *cool.* If you use these words in the right way and at the right time, you show that you have a good command of vocabulary — you speak confidently and competently to the people you're with.

That's all a good vocabulary is. It isn't about using big words, foreign words, or obscure words. It's about using words to convey your meaning in the way you want. The trick is knowing what words are appropriate in a situation. The following list provides the general levels of English vocabulary (head to Chapter 4 for more info) along with situations in which the levels may be used:

- **Formal vocabulary:** Formal vocabulary (or *formal diction*) has a very serious tone and uses specialized or elevated terms. You hear this type of vocabulary in ceremonial addresses like speeches (especially in days of yore), eulogies, and so on. You see it in such things as legal documents. You probably rarely, if ever, need to use formal English.
- **Standard English:** Standard English is the type of vocabulary used in most businesses and schools; it conforms to the English grammar and usage rules. You use this type of vocabulary when you're interviewing for a job, speaking with co-workers or customers, giving a presentation, or meeting your future in-laws for the first time. This is also the vocabulary you use when you write a paper or a report.
- **Everyday English:** You use this kind of English when you're talking informally to co-workers or gabbing with friends. It's conversational and often uses slang.

Talkin' the Talk

Adam and Alex run into each other in the break room and chat about their work. When their boss comes in, Adam demonstrates his ability to tailor his vocabulary to his audience and to the situation.

Adam:	Hey, how's it goin'?
Alex:	Fine. Pluggin' along on my presentation. How 'bout you?
Adam:	Rotten. I gotta 3 p.m. deadline, and the project's blowing up in my face. Max isn't pullin' his weight, and Delores doesn't know what the heck she's doing.
Sarah (Adam and Alex's boss):	Hi, Adam, Alex.
Adam and Alex:	Hello.
Sarah (to Adam):	I wanted to talk about your project update. Do you have a few minutes?

Alex (to Sarah):	I was just heading back to my desk. [to Adam] Later.
Sarah:	I get the impression that you're having a few problems.
Adam:	This project *has* presented some challenges.
Sarah:	Such as?
Adam:	My biggest dilemma has been finding ways to motivate individual team members. As it is, the bulk of the work is falling predominantly on a few. Another concern I have is providing the direction the team needs to be successful.

Reaping Vocabulary's Rewards

Believe it or not (and you must believe it, or you wouldn't have bought this book), having a good vocabulary is truly a good thing. It can help you move ahead, stay abreast, and fit right in:

- **Education:** The fact of the matter is that having a strong speaking and writing vocabulary can make it easier for you to do well in school. A broad vocabulary makes not only regular study easier, but it can also help you during the many standardized tests you're likely to face. Even if you manage to avoid taking standardized tests in school, more and more businesses require personality tests, competency tests, and so on in the work force. (Chapter 13 clues you in about standardized tests and vocabulary.)
- **Communication:** Having a good vocabulary strengthens your communication skills. Not only does a solid vocabulary increase the number of words you use and understand (always a plus), but it also makes you more adept at modifying your language to suit the situation.
- **Social situations:** Ever notice how many fish-out-of-water movies Hollywood makes (you know the kind, where the guy/girl finds him/herself out of place)? Ever notice how the character reveals his or her lack of social graces in his or her dress and speech? Knowing what type of speech is appropriate in different social situations and having the vocabulary you need to speak confidently wherever you are can make you a more assured, comfortable speaker.

Trying to Make Sense of the English Language

For many reasons (most of them too ugly to go into here), English is a pretty tough language to learn. If you're a native speaker of English, you're probably familiar with the idiosyncrasies that make the language so downright mind-boggling. If you're a nonnative speaker, you may lack the familiarity that native speakers have. Either way, the following sections offer a very basic explanation for why English words are the way they are. Understanding how English words are formed and where they come from can help when you come up against unfamiliar words.

Borrowing words from other countries

One of the things that makes the English language so rich (and sometimes so overwhelming) is that English words come from — or are influenced by — lots of different languages.

The English language is essentially a Germanic language. (Other Germanic languages are German, Dutch, Flemish, and the Scandinavian languages.) English has a lot of words that reach back to its German roots: *ox, cow, meadow, grass, pig, king, knife, knight,* and *skirmish* are just a few. But, being the accommodating language that it is, English absorbed and adopted words (and parts of words) from lots of other languages, too, like Latin, Greek, French, and Spanish.

Tree, for example, comes from Old German. In English, the word *tree* means, well, "tree." We also use the word *arbor,* which is the Latin word for *tree,* to mean "tree." Arbor Day is a day for planting trees. So, in English, if you know what *tree* means, and you know that *arbor* is another word for tree, you know that anytime you see *arbor* in a word, that word has something to do with trees. What it has to do with trees depends on what prefixes and suffixes the word uses (the topic of the next section).

English has adopted numerous words from other languages. (*Garage,* for example, is actually a French word; *piano* is an Italian word.) And if English didn't adopt the whole word, as is the case with many Greek and Latin words, it probably took parts of it. *Hexagon* uses two Greek elements: *hexa* meaning "six," and *gon* meaning "angles." *Triumvirate* uses Latin elements: *trium* meaning "three," *vir* meaning "man," and *-ate*, a suffix meaning "acted upon in a specific way." A *hexagon* is a six-sided object; a *triumvirate* is a group of three people who are in power in some context. Chapters 11 and 12 offer many more examples of foreign-born English words.

Breaking out word elements: Prefixes, roots, and suffixes

A strong understanding of common prefixes, roots, and suffixes can go a long way toward improving your vocabulary. The root is a word's foundation. Prefixes and suffixes are elements that are attached to the root to shape the word's meaning. For example, one of the most common prefixes is *un-*, which means "not or against." Stick that prefix in front of almost any word, and you have that word's opposite:

patriotic → unpatriotic (not patriotic)

predictable → unpredictable (not able to be predicted)

reliable → unreliable (not reliable)

Suffixes come at the end of the word and usually indicate what part of speech the word is. (Knowing the part of speech is important, not only for defining a word but also for using it correctly.) Using the earlier example of the Latin root *arbor* (meaning "tree"), you can assemble a lot of different words simply by attaching different suffixes:

- *Arboreous* uses the suffix *-ous,* which means "full of." So that word means — you guessed it — "full of trees." The *-ous* suffix makes adjectives (adjectives modify people, places, or things):

  Correct: The terrain was dark and arboreous.

  Incorrect: If a tree falls in the arboreous and no one is around to hear, does it still make a noise?

- *Arboreal* means "of or relating to trees." The suffix *-al* means "of or relating to" and turns words into adjectives:

  Correct: Arboreal animals live in trees.

  Incorrect: The animal lives in an arboreal.

- An *arborist* is one who works with and cares for trees. The suffix *-ist* means "one who does." As such, *-ist* makes the word a noun.

  Correct: We had to call in an arborist to help us transplant the trees in the back yard.

  Incorrect: The arborist book shows all kinds of trees.

Both prefixes and suffixes modify the root. By knowing what each element means, you can get a general idea of the word's definition, which is often all you need to make sense of what's being said or read. The chapters in Part II are devoted to roots, prefixes, and suffixes.

Assembling blended words

In addition to taking words wholesale from other languages and combining roots with prefixes and suffixes to make words, English also creates words by sticking two complete words together. By knowing what each word means by itself, you can get a general idea of what the combined (or *compound*) word means. Check out these examples:

backbone = spine

freshman = first-year student

eggshell = exterior of an egg

cost-effective = economical

bedspread = comforter

Sometimes, when the words come together, a few letters get squeezed out. These types of words are called *portmanteau words:*

agriculture + business = agribusiness (business related to farming)

basket + cart = bascart (shopping cart)

cafeteria + auditorium = cafetorium (area used as both a cafeteria and an auditorium)

tangerine + lemon = tangemon (hybrid fruit of a tangerine and a lemon)

You may not use any of these hybrid words every day, but seeing how they're composed can help you decipher other portmanteau words you come across.

Figuring out English oddities, peculiarities, and quirks

Here's the rub — and it's a particularly abrasive one for people who are learning English as a second language: Sometimes, there's no way, other than context, to tell what an English word means. Why? Because English is full of oddities.

The result of such a rich linguistic heritage — English words, German words, French words, Spanish words, Greek and Latin words, word parts from everywhere, combined words, blended words, and so on — is that the English language has few rules you can rely on all the time:

- Many words spelled similarly don't sound alike. *Bomb, comb,* and *womb* don't rhyme with each other: You say "bom," "kohm," and "woom." Sometimes, words spelled exactly the same are pronounced differently: *tear* (teer), "a teardrop," and *tear* (tehr), "to rip," for example.

- Many words spelled differently *do* sound alike: *Write, right,* and *rite* are all pronounced the same but mean different things. These types of words are called *homophones.*
- One word can have various meanings: *Pool* (the place to swim), *pool* (the billiards game), *pool* (to put together) — and that's not even all of the definitions of pool. These types of words are called *homonyms,* and English is absolutely full of them.

These types of odd words plague all English speakers, native and otherwise. When you come up against them, the best you can do is use the context of what is being said or written, or, if you still aren't sure, head to a dictionary. For more examples of homonyms and homophones and strategies for keeping them straight, head to Chapter 9.

Improving Your Vocabulary the Easy Way

One of the best — and most enjoyable — ways to improve your vocabulary is to read. Read as much as you can from as many different sources as you can find: books (popular, classic, fiction, nonfiction), cereal boxes, magazine articles, the conversation in an online chat room, newspaper stories — you choose.

Another fun way to increase your vocabulary is to simply try new things. Take an art class and learn words like the noun *serendipity* (ser-un-*dip*-uh-tee), which means "happy accident." Go to an opera or an art film, or help out at your local theater. Join a cooking club or a book club. Take up bird watching, woodworking, or any other activity that sparks your interest. Broaden your horizons, and your vocabulary will grow as a consequence.

Of course, there are plenty of other tips and techniques that you can use to build your vocabulary (and none of them require reading a dictionary). You can keep a journal of the unfamiliar words that you hear or see; you can play all sorts of word games, like Scrabble and Boggle; you can work daily or Sunday crossword puzzles in your local newspaper; and more (Chapter 2 gives you the complete scoop).

The important thing to know is that building your vocabulary can be a lot easier and a lot more fun that you may have thought.