

Six easy online tools for finding just the right word

It's called the 'tip-of-the-tongue' phenomenon, that feeling that there must be a better word if only you could think of it. You know it's out there; you can feel it right there on the tip of your tongue. The technical term is *lethologica*. Here is how it works.

No matter what language we are using, we have an active and a passive vocabulary. Our active vocabulary is made up of the words we use when speaking or writing. Our passive vocabulary is made up of all the words we recognize and understand (more or less) when we see them, but generally don't use in speech or writing. For example, I read:

"According to lexicographer and dictionary expert Susie Dent, the average active vocabulary of an adult English speaker is around 20,000 words, while his passive vocabulary is around 40,000 words."

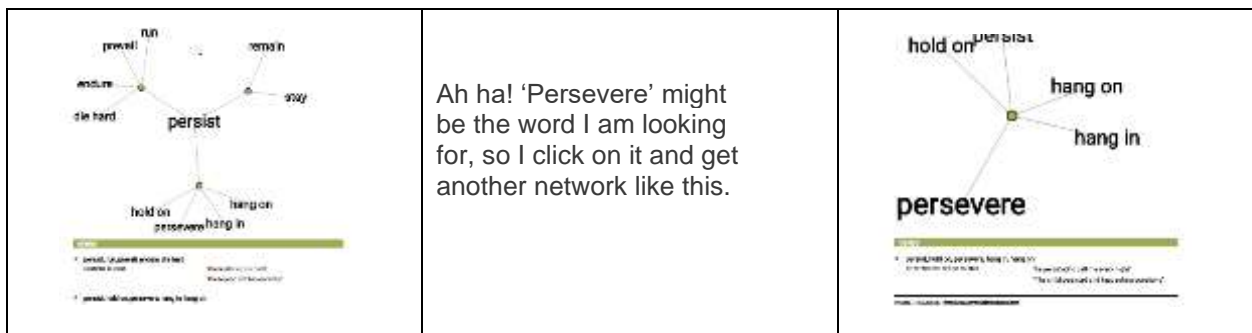
I never use the word 'lexicographer' and while I might not be able to give you the dictionary definition, I recognize it and know that it means 'someone who studies words'. Psychologists have been doing recognition versus recall studies for a hundred years and people consistently perform better on recognition tasks.

What this means is if you see the word you are hunting for you will know it is the word you have been looking for. Here are some powerful and super easy tools to help.

Visual thesaurus

<https://www.visualthesaurus.com/>

You know what a thesaurus is. You may have the ubiquitous Roget A to Z on your bookshelf. Good to have, but my first choice is Visual Thesaurus by Thinkmap. Suppose I am looking for an alternative for the word 'persist'. I enter 'persist' in the search box and this lovely semantic network pops into life on my screen.



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You can use the Visual Thesaurus for free but only for a limited number of searches. There is a 14-day free trial and several levels of subscription starting at USD 2.95 per month.

Visuwords

<https://visuwords.com>

Visuwords works much the same as Visual Thesaurus. I find the interface a bit 'busy', but it has some interesting features that make it worth trying, and it is free.

The OneLook reverse dictionary

<http://www.onelook.com/reverse-dictionary.shtml>

I have written, "The committee is made up of..." but I want a better word for 'made up of', something that sounds a bit more formal. Sound familiar? A reverse dictionary gives you the word for a definition. I type in 'made up of' and get this:

The screenshot shows the OneLook reverse dictionary interface. At the top, a search bar contains the text "made up of". Below the search bar, there is a definition: "consist be composed of; be consisted in; form; or character; be composed; have its essential structure; be comprised or contained; be entailed by; integrate etc." To the right of the search bar is the OneLook logo. Below the definition, it says "Showing words related to 'made up of' ranked by relevance". There are two tabs: "Show filters" and "Alphabetical". The main area displays a grid of words, with "consist" highlighted in yellow at the top left of the list. Other words include "constituted", "structured", "matine", "multifarious", "includes", "contributing", "shuffled", "number", "multifaceted", "component", "containing", "isologan", "Bible", "epitaph", "composition", "delivered", "taken", "Bible", "affected", "formed", "dis", "trained", "drawbridge", "agreed", "inward", "doing", "compounded", "eclectic", "heterogeneous", "apprise", "inverted", "done", "comprising", "include", "mortgage", "arch", "account", "Edison", "dated", "Tchys", "mortgage", "antilocality", "composed", "educated", "exclusive", "pock", "steer", "complete", "established", "formal", "initial", "compositional", "polymer", "chosen", "checked", "formal", "initial", "compositional", "polymer", "collage", "improvised", "tampered", "initial", "compositional", "polymer", "concurrent", "roughed", "incorporated", "complex", "compositing", "sectional", "constituent", "congress", "kidding", "budget", "completable", "staff", "terr", "later", "offet", "make", "accrete", "appointed", "overlaid", "make", "accrete", "assembled", "recorded", "compound", "crisis", "crib", "called", "recovered", "modify", "diatomic", "cribbed", "compiled", "recovered", "modify", "diatomic", "Ducat", "compiled", "recovered", "modify", "diatomic", "kud", "decide"

And there is the word I want right at the top of the list: consist. Don't know why I couldn't think of it until now (hint: recognition is easier than recall).

OneLook is free. You can add it to your browser search bar, and there is a Google Docs Add-On. It also works for Spanish.

Online dictionaries

Sometimes looking up the word in a dictionary will jog your memory or you will see the word, plus there are usually examples of the word in use.

Wiki list of online dictionaries is your best one-stop shop for the authoritative dictionaries like Cambridge, Oxford and Meriam-Webster. It also has lists of advanced learner's, multilingual, English language, and foreign language dictionaries.

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https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_online_dictionaries

The alphaDictionary site has an extensive list of dictionaries of technical terms organized by field or profession. These are useful when you need to know what a word or phrase means in the context of a discipline or profession you may not be familiar with.

<https://www.alphadictionary.com/specialty.html>

RefSeek offers a list of 30 online dictionaries, thesauri, and definition aggregators with listings ranked by authority, coverage, usability, and utility. It includes an acronym finder, something I use on almost every paper I edit.

<https://www.refseek.com/directory/dictionaries.html>

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