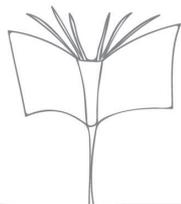# MACMILLAN DICTIONARY

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Making use of red words and black words in MD

Teacher's Notes   www.macmillandictionary.com

Introduction

As students use the *Macmillan Dictionary*, they'll notice that some of the headwords are shown in red, while most of them are shown in black. The red ones are the 7,500 most frequently-used words in English. These red words make up an average of approximately 90% of all written and spoken text. This feature of the *Macmillan Dictionary* is an important study aid for students.

Aim of worksheet

To help students understand and use the red word/black word distinction in order to make decisions about the relative importance of different words to them, and how much attention to give to learning different words.

Time and materials

Allow 10–15 minutes for each of the three activities.
For the activities students need access to the *Macmillan Dictionary*.

Procedures

▶ **Activity 1**

1 Ask students to access the *Macmillan Dictionary* entries for the following words and to observe which words are red and which are black: *cobble* (noun), *double* (verb), *halt* (verb), *mouth* (noun), *risk* (verb), *unsettle* (verb).

2 Hand out a copy of the worksheet to each student and ask them to read questions **a** and **b**.

3 Ask them to call out their observations while you write them on the board. These may include observations such as:
   a they recognise more of the red words; red words have stars after them.
   b red headword entries are often longer; there are generally fewer alternative meanings in black headword entries. While collecting the suggestions and writing them on the board there is no need to explain or to attempt to correct the observations.

4 Explain that:
   • those shown in red are the 7,500 most frequently-used words in English.
   • these are the words speakers use every day to express themselves in speaking and writing, and so are also the words most frequently heard and read.
   • therefore the red words are more likely to be needed for active use by learners when they are speaking and writing, than the black ones.
   • the black words are more likely to be needed by the student when reading.

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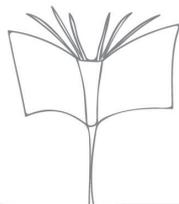
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▶ **Activity 2**

1 Ask students to study the paragraph on their worksheet. Tell them that all the words are red words in the dictionary, except for four. Ask them to guess which are the four black words.

2 Ask them to give their reasons.

3 Ask students to check their answers in the dictionary.

> **Answer**
>
> The four black words in the passage are *lapse*, *etiquette*, *pen* and *missive*.

▶ **Activity 3**

1 Ask students to look at several specific red words, e.g. *fine, finger, finish, finished, fire, fire alarm, firm, first, first class, fiscal, fishing.*

2 Ask them to guess why red words have one, two or three stars. And if they know this already, ask them to say whether they are more familiar with one-star words or with three-star words.

3 Explain that the most frequent 2,500 words have three stars. The next most frequent 2,500 words (i.e. 2501–5000) have two stars, and the next most frequent 2,500 (i.e. 5001–7500) have one star.

4 Now ask them to notice the length of entries for red words compared with those of black words, e.g. *fine art, finger bowl, finishing line, firearm, firewood, first aid, first-time, fish farming.* They may notice that entries for red words are generally longer, because these frequent words often have more meanings and uses. Red word entries also contain more information for students on how to use these words.

Follow up

1 Invite students to choose five words from their last piece of writing in English, to guess whether they will be shown as red or black words in the dictionary, and then to check in the dictionary.

2 Discuss with students what they have noticed and what they have learnt from these activities, and ask them what difficulties or concerns they have about using the dictionary.