Mystery Word + Story = Definition

Learning vocabulary words can be a difficult process without the right strategy. Here’s a review of the mystery words process you learned at SuperCamp to refresh your memory.

First of all, our brains make meaning of new information by connecting it to existing knowledge and experience. The mystery words technique helps us learn vocab definitions by connecting them to ideas that are fun and memorable.

In case you’ve forgotten the process, here’s a typical mystery words story:

I found an old lamp yesterday and when I tried to clean it off a bit, guess what? A genie popped out. He called himself Genie Al and he told me I could have three wishes. My first wish was to be a world-class swimmer. Amazingly, it turned out that Genie Al also wanted to be a world-class swimmer. We realized that we were similar in tastes and habits. My second wish was to get a new skateboard and Genie Al also wanted to get a new skateboard! We really were similar in tastes and habits. I was having so much fun with Genie Al that for my third wish I decided to wish for 100 more wishes! He didn’t like that. He said, “Are you trying to con Genie Al? Just because we’re similar in tastes and habits doesn’t mean you can con Genie Al. I can’t believe you’re trying to con Genie Al.” I just thought it was fun that we were so similar in tastes and habits and I wanted more wishes to see where else we were similar.

As you can imagine, once you’ve come up with the mystery word—con Genie Al—and made up the story that includes the definition—similar in tastes and habits—you’ll easily remember the definition (and the silly story!) whenever you come across the word congenial.

Now let’s go through the process step by step. The first step in creating a great mystery word is to create a sounds-like word or short phrase. Let’s try this process for a new word: morose. What are some possible sounds-like words or phrases for morose? We could go with more rose(s), or maybe more rows.

The next step in creating a great mystery word is to include the sounds-like word or phrase and the definition in a story or situation, something that’s familiar to you that you can picture in your mind. The definition of morose is sad and gloomy. That gives us a great idea for an association with one of the mystery words we came up with—I gave Pam more rose(s) because she was sad and gloomy.

It helps to repeat the definition and the sounds-like word or phrase a lot, as in the Genie Al story. Have you ever remembered something just by repeating it to yourself over and over again, say a person’s name or state capitals? When this repetition strategy is combined with the association we create, it’s a powerful memory aid to vocabulary learning.

Whenever we have a tough vocabulary word to learn, we can simply create a sounds-like word or phrase. Then we make up a short story or situation that includes the sounds-like word and the definition. Next we can draw a picture to form a clear visual image of the association, and we’ve got a great strategy for remembering all our vocabulary words.

This is a powerful and proven technique. A student named Grant had a PSAT verbal score in the 66th percentile. When he learned this technique at SuperCamp he decided to test it with a list of vocabulary words likely to appear on the SAT. When he took the SAT, his score jumped to the 99th percentile. You can do this, too!