

When it comes to Vocabulary- Get a Fresh Start with WORDSMART!

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After I learned how to read at the age of eight, I was constantly *pummeting* my parents with questions like "What's this word mean?", "How do you pronounce *this*?", and my personal favorite, "Why do the French spell so bad?!" Ever since I was a little girl, I've had trouble with vocabulary. Why? Perhaps it was because I found that most books that I read were boring. Perhaps I've struggled because it was too troublesome to look up every other word in a Shakespearean play (and not to mention it also more than triples the length of time it takes to finish the play). But the most likely reason I've never been a shining example of an individual with an extensive vocabulary is that I've never really cared-until now.

Starting as a bad habit when I was younger, when I came across a word I didn't understand, I would always ask my parents. When I reached the age of twelve, they became a bit annoyed with my antics. In desperation, my mother tried to get me to read more "enriching" books for the mind; but the truth being told, Shakespeare made me feel even stupider because I couldn't figure out what anyone was saying. I then began to avoid reading, because I really did start to hate it.

Of course, I never hated all books. In 8th grade I read through Dante Alighieri's *The Inferno*, and recently *The Lord of the Rings* series. By studying such literature, and also the Bible, I was able to partially extend my vocabulary. All seemed to be going well-my great dislike for using dictionaries caused me to develop the ability to determine the meaning of words by their context. This enabled me to survive school until my sophomore year in high school with decent scores on all my achievement tests.

But my mother was able to see what I did not wish to acknowledge-the fact that most high schoolers had a plethora ("a whole lot") of words at their disposal, while I was still trying to argue that my math scores would compensate for my lack of verbal skills on the SATs. But, as most homeschooled children would agree, trying to convince your parents to allow you to only do your "second best" is the greatest example of futility known to mankind.

After I took my PSATs and my SATs for the first time, my mother had had enough. That's when it happened - a friend of our family, Alison Wilkie, told my mother about a computer program developed by Scholastic called *WordSmart*. This so-called "miracle" program was said to be so sturdy that it boasted to users a guaranteed SAT verbal score increase of at least 100 points "or your money back!" My loving mother decided that we should at least see how well I would do on an online quiz hosted by Scholastic. The menace of more school caused me to *grimace* as I reluctantly agreed to try it. After assessing which level of the program would be best for me to start, the online test provided by Scholastic told me that on a scale of one to ten (ten being the greatest), my vocabulary skills ranked at about two. Mom ordered the program the next day.

When the program arrived at my home one afternoon I must admit I was almost excited. Upon installation in the computer, however, my attitude changed. Each time the program loads, the user is bombarded with a acoustic barrage of classical music. I *hate* classical music. Not only that, but after about five minutes of using the program, I had already been insulted numerous times by the automated recordings that recite the words and their meanings. Through numerous exercises-a multiple choice exercise that reminds me much of "Who Wants to be a Millionaire?" "flash cards," matching words with their synonyms, spelling tests, and a review game in the guise of a space ship blasting meteorites-*WordSmart* brought back to me years of spelling books and grammar studies which I had always passionately detested. Upon clicking numerous wrong answers, when I would finally stumble upon the synonym of a word, I was informed by a recording that the mistake I made is quite common for "15% of elementary school students, 5% of college seniors and 2% of adult readers." The program then described the origin of the word in great detail, teaching me the Latin, Greek, Scandinavian and/or French root words from which the modern term came.

Sitting in front of the computer one afternoon, I recall prompting my mother to laughter after stating, "perhaps death won't be that bad after all." Highly irritated with the program, and my ego more then slightly wounded by the emotionless cruelty inflicted upon me by the unseen Scholastic employees, I continued to work through the program, a level each day, adding roughly 15-20 words, not including the Greek and Latin roots, to my vocabulary.

Then one day, a horrible and yet highly comical realization struck me. It was not the fact that I had much better comprehension of what I was reading, nor was it the fact that I was explaining the origin of words and their meanings to family members, but rather that I was starting to find the classical tunes quite catchy. As I walked around my home, I would hum the ballads and even start up *WordSmart* just for the sake of listening to the classical music. Then after reflecting on my reading a bit, I realized I had improved my reading comprehension. Instead of guessing what the author was talking about, I knew in exact detail what they were trying to convey by their choice of words. Also taking myself by surprise was the fact that I had also grown somewhat fond of the insulting British voices who narrate the program. My vocabulary was growing and I was actually enjoying it!

During my SATs, I was able to identify at least ten words that I wouldn't have recognized before I used *WordSmart*. I was also able to complete all the questions before the time ran out. However, despite the 100 point guarantee, my verbal skills only improved 45 points, and my overall math/verbal score improved 95 points. Despite the fact that my scores didn't "soar" upwards, as stated in the guarantee, I did learn a lot from the *WordSmart* program. In fact, my mother ordered the entire series, all volumes and levels included, for our entire family to use. She even received it at a forty dollar discount because my SAT scores did not increase 100 points.

All-in-all, I would strongly suggest using this program-even if your verbal skills don't rank two out of ten! Even though my scores didn't jump up a hundred points, it is truly a possibility that they could have-had I started using *WordSmart* earlier in the school year. But the true heart of the matter is that I enjoy reading now-and that is priceless. So if you are struggling with the English language and how to use it, get a fresh start with *WordSmart*-I did!