Of course, by the time you reach this level you will be very familiar with using a dictionary. However, students do not always know how to use their dictionaries in the most effective way. This handout will focus on how to obtain the most useful information from your dictionary.

Using a dictionary
If you want to buy a hard copy dictionary, it is important that you should obtain an English-English dictionary, rather than one that provides translations into other languages. There are many reliable dictionaries on the market, such as those published by Oxford, Cambridge and Collins. Electronic dictionaries are not usually as useful as hard copies. As you already know, there are also several online dictionaries that are very helpful.

Dictionaries provide a great deal of information including:
- Meanings of words
- Grammatical information (such as whether a noun is countable or uncountable)
- Information about style
- Information about pronunciation

Before looking at these four areas you need to make sure that you are familiar with the abbreviations that your dictionary uses. At the beginning of your dictionary there will be an explanation of the types of abbreviations that are used in your dictionary. They can vary between dictionaries. For example in one dictionary the abbreviation used for ‘adjective’ is ‘adj,’ while in another it is ‘a’.

Activity 1: Abbreviations. Have a look at the abbreviations below and decide what they stand for.
- n
- prep
- adj
- pron
- conj
- adv

Activity 2: Meanings. When looking up the meaning of a word in the dictionary, you must choose the meaning that fits the context. Consider the word ‘fair’ in the following sentence: ‘The girl had fair hair and blue eyes’. In the dictionary you will find a number of meanings for fair, such as ‘unbiased’, ‘blonde’ or ‘satisfactory’. In this case, it is clear that the meaning is ‘blonde’. In the following sentences, choose the meaning that best suits the meaning.

1. In this climate of uncertainty, few people are investing in shares. (weather, prevailing trend, zone)
2. He placed his case on the luggage rack. (example, container, situation)
3. We decided to extend the kitchen. (prolong, expand, offer)
4. The farmer decided to plant rice on his land. (country, ground, district)
5. This issue is peculiar to my own situation. (belonging exclusively, odd, privately owned).

Activity 3: Looking up verbs. The dictionary also provides very useful information on verbs. This includes:
- The prepositions to use with different verbs
- Whether the verb is transitive or intransitive, or both
- Whether the verb is irregular
In the following sentences, the prepositions used are not correct. If you do not know what the correct preposition is, check it in your dictionary. The answers are not provided so that you have to use your dictionary.

6. The student is very interested for chemistry.
7. Deforestation affects on the climate.
8. The country is divided to five regions.
9. Students should familiarise themselves to the library.
10. He is looking forward on the holidays.

Explanations about style
Some abbreviations after words tell you that they can only be used in certain situations. For example ‘sl’ after a word means that it is ‘slang’, and therefore not suitable for use in an academic context. ‘arch’ is sometimes used to denote ‘archaic’, which means that the word is outdated and rarely used in modern language. The abbreviation ‘obs’ meaning ‘obsolete’ has a similar use. Another useful stylistic abbreviation is ‘colloq’, which stands for ‘colloquial’. This informs you that the word is not normally used in formal or academic contexts.

Activity 4: Check the style. Look up the following words in the dictionary, and make a note of what you learn about the usage. See if you can find an alternative word with a similar meaning but that is used in a different context.

- Beget
- Tucker
- Hereto
- Screw up

Activity 5: Pronunciation and stress. At the beginning of the dictionary there is a table of phonetic symbols. If you are familiar with these symbols then the dictionary can help with pronunciation. It does this by writing the word in the phonetic symbols. It is important to note that not all dictionaries provide phonetic spellings. The dictionary also tells you where the stress falls in a word and this helps with pronunciation. The main stress is shown by a stress mark ‘ ‘, which comes after the stressed syllable. Look up the following words and note where the stress mark is written.

- Photograph
- Photography
- Indignant
- Indignation
- Indigo