

ADD A MILLION WORDS TO YOUR VOCABULARY

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Actually, I could have written "add a billion words to your vocabulary". Or more, even. If I had written the actual number of words this article can teach you, you would have turned the page. You would have had to, because the actual number doesn't fit on this page.

Consider the following: there has been considerable disagreement in recent years over the naming of recently-synthesized elements with atomic numbers greater than 103. In order to simplify the nomenclature, the International Union of Pure and Applied Chemistry has proposed that newly-discovered elements be named with a series of prefixes indicating atomic number, followed by the suffix -IUM. The prefixes are NIL-, UN-, B(I)-, TR(I)-, QUAD-, PENT-, HEX-, SEPT-, OCT-, ENN- (the parenthesized I is omitted before -IUM). The elements above Lawrencium (103) are UNNILQUADIUM (104), UNNILPENTIUM (105), UNNILHEXIUM (106), etc. The unusual mixing of Greek and Latin may upset linguists, but it insures that each prefix has a unique initial letter, so each element has a ready-made three-letter abbreviation (Unq, Unp, Unh, etc.).

Elements have been synthesized through UNNILENNIUM (109). It is unlikely that too many more elements will be successfully produced, however, because the structure of such atoms is highly unstable. Nevertheless, the names of these hypothetical elements are in use, and it is perfectly acceptable to write "the search for BIBINILIUM" or, perhaps in a science-fiction novel "the space-ship crash landed because of a malfunction in the UNBITRIUM-powered reactors." For that matter, there is no reason one couldn't write about UNNILNILNILNILNILIUM (Unnnnnn) with atomic number 1,000,000, either; the word exists even though the substance never will. That's a million names for hypothetical elements (less 103) right there.

But I've really taught you more than a million words, because these words are usable in any language (even Chinese). Since there are about 6,000 languages, I've taught you about 6,000,000,000 words. And of course we could go on beyond Unnnnnn...

I didn't say you would add a million useful words to your vocabulary if you read this page. Check the fine print. Nothing about useful anywhere.