



THE FLASHCARDS ADVENTURE

How to learn vocabulary
systematically and make it fun



Hi there! My name is Lýdia Machová. I'm a professional interpreter and language mentor and my mission is to help people learn languages by themselves. I myself take up a new foreign language more or less every two years and at the moment, I can fluently communicate in seven of them: English, German, Spanish, Polish, French, Russian, and Esperanto. I'm convinced that everyone can learn languages regardless of talent or possibilities of traveling abroad!

In this e-book, I offer a complete manual on how to learn new vocabulary in a fun and relaxed way, while storing it in your long-term memory. Enjoy! :)

Lýdia Machová, PhD.

www.language mentoring.com

What will you learn in this e-book?

- Why you should use flashcards to learn vocabulary
- How to make or get flashcards
- How to find a system of learning vocabulary with flashcards
- A practical example of studying with flashcards
- How to make flashcard learning more diverse
- The essentials of learning vocabulary

Why should I start using flashcards for learning vocabulary?

Learning vocabulary in any language will never be efficient if we stick to the typical school method of just writing down words and reading them repeatedly. It is extremely important for the new words to make their way into our long-term memory, so that we can use them anytime, not just on the test the following day :)

Flashcards allow us to mix the individual expressions in a way which prevents us from remembering a given word as "the one written in red in the top right corner". On the contrary, thanks to flashcards, we'll actually be able to recall and use the word. (And that's our aim in learning languages, right?) The words we find easy will come back less often than the ones we can't remember at all – these will keep showing up until we remember them.

For flashcard learning to work, it is important to have a system of repetition, so read the following pages carefully :)

Isn't it easier to just buy a set of ready-made flashcards for English/German/French, etc. from a shop than to make your own ones?

It is easier, but it's also less efficient. You can find many flashcard sets for different languages in bookshops, but I strongly recommend making your own ones and writing down expressions which you yourself have identified and chosen from books, articles, magazines, or TV series. Have a go with someone else's flashcards if you want, but 99% of you will prove me right when you find out that your own cards are much easier to remember :-)

FLASHCARDS MANUAL

1) How to make / get flashcards?



A) **If you have the time and you fancy making your own flashcards**, start by cutting an A4 sheet (standard printer paper) into eight equally sized pieces. (Cut it in half three times.)

Quick tip: I recommend using thicker paper if you plan on carrying the cards with you ;)) The color doesn't matter, you can use thick white paper and colored pens, it's up to you.

B) **If you don't feel like cutting but do feel like saving time**, you can also buy pre-cut blank cards. They are available in most bigger stationary shops and you can also get them online, for example on [Amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com) or [Aliexpress.com](https://www.aliexpress.com) if you search for "flashcards". The variety is huge – you can buy different-colored cards of various shapes in bulk packages.

2) How to write words on the flashcards?

Once you have enough blank flashcards, do the following: on one side of the card, write the word, expression, phrase, or even an entire sentence which you want to learn and write its translation in your mother tongue (or a different foreign language which you can speak well and want to refresh) on the other side.

Single-word cards are sufficient if you're a total beginner, but for higher level learners, longer expressions and phrases are more useful.

*Quick tip: If you don't want to fill out new cards every day, **you can always make more in advance**, for example at the weekend or whenever you have free time, but only start studying them later.*

*Quick tip No. 2: Flashcards are also great for **studying grammar**. For instance, you can write the infinitive of a verb on one side of a card with a little note saying "past tense" and write the past tense form on the other side. Or you can put similar structures on one card to learn the difference between them, for example, if you were learning English, one side could read "a lot of books – a lot of water" (this would be written in your mother tongue, not English) and the other side "many books – much water". Thus you would learn the difference between countable and uncountable nouns. You can put anything on flashcards, so just make one for everything you want to keep in your memory and repeat it until it's properly stored in it.*

3) How to find a system for studying?

(Or more accurately, a system of spaced repetition which is much better than the traditional rote learning.)

You'll need a box (any box you find at home or the box which came with your flashcards will do) and some "dividers" which will help you find the cards you should revise. They are simple cards made of any thicker paper, but they are slightly larger than the flashcards themselves, so that the dividers stick out from the box.

You will need several dividers: NEW, NEXT DAY, and then one divider for every day of the week (i.e. MONDAY, TUESDAY, WEDNESDAY etc.) and MEMORIZED. That means you should prepare 10 dividers right away, although you won't need all of them at the beginning. Let's have a look at how it works:

- A) Let's begin with the easiest divider, called "NEW", which will be right at the front of the box and every day, you'll add a few new flashcards, e.g. 5 or 10, to this pile (definitely not more than 10 and if you're a total beginner and every card is completely new for you, it's better to stick to 3-5 new cards a day).

The basic system works like this: go over the new flashcards once, slowly, and get acquainted with the new expressions. **See the phrases in your mother tongue first and only then flip into the foreign language.** It is possible that you'll be able to translate some words, but most of them will probably be new. If you're absolutely confident about the translation of certain cards, you can put them into the "next week" pile (e.g. before the WEDNESDAY divider if today is a Wednesday) – this does not happen very often so don't feel bad if you have nothing for WEDNESDAY right away. Go over the remaining cards which were new for you once more, say the expressions out loud and, if possible, put all of them in the NEXT DAY category.



B) Continue the following day. Go over the flashcards in the NEXT DAY category. These are the cards you that put in there yesterday. They were completely new, but you've now seen them twice. Once again, try translating them from your mother tongue into the foreign language and if you succeed, place them behind the THURSDAY divider (if today is a Thursday, which means that you'll see them in one week). If you didn't manage to remember the words, keep them in the NEXT DAY category – they'll stay there until you learn them and only then will you move them to the next week pile (under the respective day of the week). They're new expressions and you need to see them more often to remember them better, so it's absolutely fine if they remain in the NEXT DAY category for a few days.

C) Apart from studying new cards and revising the ones that were new yesterday, you should also **revise older cards** which are scheduled for today.

Go over all the cards due for today: if today is Thursday, these are the ones behind the THURSDAY divider. These are the cards you could not quite confidently remember last Thursday. If you now remember them well, put them away in the MEMORIZED category. If you struggle with the translation (whether it takes you too long to recall the expression or you remember it incorrectly), keep them in the THURSDAY pile for one more week.



Once you're done with the revision, put the cards back in the box.



4) What to do with the words next?

- If you can recall the words with confidence, you can "remove" them from your study plan for a while. But feel free to keep them in the box in an "archive" pile and get back to them after a few weeks or months to make sure you still know them.
- If you're still not confident, you can keep the card in the current pile and revise it on the same day next week again.
- If you still struggle with remembering the words you want to learn, you can learn them in a different way – for example, write them down in the form of a list using the [Goldlist method](#) or come up with a sentence for each word while revising it. It is also useful to consciously try to use the word in conversation.
- If you still can't remember a word but you don't even want to anymore and it's not vital – remove it from the box or throw it away completely. Sometimes, it's impossible to force our brain to do something and unless you need to learn the word for some reason, you can simply forget about it. Maybe you'll miraculously recall it in the future, maybe not. It's

important not to keep the cards in the NEXT DAY pile forever – if a card is getting annoying, get rid of it :)

5. A practical example of studying with flashcards

Today is Wednesday. My studying will consist of three parts:

- 1) *Revising older cards scheduled for today, i.e. for WEDNESDAY.
I go over all of the cards in the WEDNESDAY category. These are the ones I put in there last week when I wasn't totally confident about them. If I can still recall them, I move them to the MEMORIZED category. If I struggle with recalling them fast or correctly, I keep them in the WEDNESDAY pile.*
- 2) *I go over the cards in the NEXT DAY pile. These are new cards from yesterday which I've seen twice at this point. I translate them from Slovak (my mother tongue) to the foreign language I'm learning and, if I succeed, I move them to the WEDNESDAY pile. If not, they remain in the NEXT DAY pile. They're new expressions and I need to see them more often to remember them better.*
- 3) *I'm also adding a few new cards today, so as not to just revise old ones. I add 3-10 cards into the NEW pile. In an ideal case, I don't have to look for new expressions to add every day, because I prepared them beforehand (as I mentioned earlier). I go over the cards once, slowly, and get acquainted with the new expressions. I'm still going from Slovak into the foreign language. I might know some of the words already, but most of them will be new for me. If I can confidently translate some of the words, I put the respective cards into the WEDNESDAY category to revise them in a week. I go over the remaining new cards one more time, say the expressions out loud and, if possible, put them all into the NEXT DAY category.*

I'm done and it only took me about 10 or 15 minutes.

On the following day, Thursday, I repeat the process: first, I go over the cards in THURSDAY and put them into the MEMORIZED pile or keep them in THURSDAY. Then, I look at the NEXT DAY words and either move them to THURSDAY or keep them in NEXT DAY. (There might also be some words from Monday or Tuesday in this pile if I can't remember them well. The category is called NEXT DAY, but that doesn't necessarily mean one day only.) Finally, I take 10 new cards from the pile prepared in advance (or fewer if I feel that yesterday's new cards were too difficult), go over them once and take the ones I could translate immediately. I move them to THURSDAY. I go over the remaining new cards one more time (saying them out loud) and put them in NEXT DAY.

I do this every day and my vocabulary keeps getting better and better :-)

6) Possible variations



Feel free to adjust the system to match your preferences. You don't have to strictly follow the manual, although if this is your first time using flashcards, I recommend following the manual. For those who have been using flashcards for a while, I introduce the following variation, which I've been using for learning Swahili.

1. Right in the front, there are flashcards which I prepared in advance. Every day, I learn 3-5 of them and move them into one of the piles.
2. "Maneno mapya" means "new words" in Swahili, so this is my NEXT DAY pile. This is where I put all the cards after my first contact with them.
3. The thinking smiley is my divider for cards which are not completely new, but I still don't know them very well. It's basically an extension to the NEXT DAY pile. It's not necessary, but I like variety so I always adjust the system a little bit :)
4. The happy smiley is for... you've guessed it... the memorized words. This is similar to the day dividers (MONDAY, TUESDAY, etc.), but I don't revise the cards exactly one week after learning them. Instead, I always revise the ones that have been there longest, usually a couple of days. If I know them well, they move on, if not, they go back to the thinking smiley category.
5. The smiley with a question mark is for words which I will revise later to check if I still remember them. They usually stay there for longer than a week and once a week I go over some of them, checking if I can still translate them from Slovak to Swahili. If I succeed, I put them in the archive at the very end of the box. I look at the archived words after one or two months and either move them to the front of the box (if I struggle with them), or remove them from the box completely, because I now know them well.

As you can see, the system can be adjusted while its essence remains the same: you see problematic cards more often than easy ones. If you spend 5-15 minutes a day with your flashcards, you'll be astonished at how much your vocabulary will have expanded. And if the expressions on the flashcards come from books or articles you've read in the given foreign language, you'll also remember exactly how they were used, so you won't struggle with using them in the right context in the future.

Final remarks

When learning vocabulary, regardless of the method, it is important to realise that:

Revising old words/expressions is much more important than learning new ones.

Many autodidacts start by making the mistake of wanting to quickly learn a lot of vocabulary (often 50-100 words at once). There are methods for getting even such ridiculous quantities of words into the short-term memory and remembering them surprisingly well the following day, but it is our long-term memory that is key in learning languages. We need to be able to actually use the words in conversation, not just rote learn them. That's why you should always devote more time to revising old words than to learning new ones.

It is also **better to go from your mother tongue to the foreign language** (in other words, looking at the side of the flashcard with the expression in your mother tongue, translating it into English, German, Spanish... and only then looking at the other, foreign language side). After some time, it is suitable to try the opposite direction, but you should always spend more time translating into the foreign language. That way, you'll be able to actively use the words, not just understand them in a text.

And last but not least: no matter how you learn vocabulary and languages as such, **make sure you're having FUN**. If you don't think flashcards are for you, let them be and find a different way of learning. The methods are plentiful and everyone should choose their own one.

That's what the philosophy of Language mentoring is all about: we help people find their ideal method for learning any language they want. Because when they do, learning becomes a real adventure :-)

P.S.: If you're interested in my language learning style, make sure to like my page – Language mentoring – on [Facebook](#) where I regularly post tips for learning languages, or follow me on [Instagram](#). You can also share your experience with flashcards and your feedback on the e-book with me at lydia@languagementoring.com. I'll be very happy for every e-mail I receive and I will definitely reply to you :) Have a great day!