

Los Angeles Times

September 14, 2010

Show Tracker

WHAT YOU'RE WATCHING

A vocabulary-enhancing guide for your TV viewing

By Maria Elena Fernandez

Who says that just because you love television you can't beef up your lexicon? The folks at Dictionary.com have found a few TV shows they say might actually improve your vocabulary.

Here's the list:

1. "Glee": Musicals may take center stage, but Jane Lynch's ego-maniac Cheerio's coach Sue Sylvester uses some advanced vocabulary to insult her enemies. The next time you run into trouble, you may want to try: "I realize my cultural ascendance only serves to illuminate your own banality." Or perhaps, "Even your breath stinks of mediocrity." Burn!

2. "The Daily Show With Jon Stewart": It may be about truthiness and laughs, but "The Daily Show," not unlike "The Colbert Report," holds a lexical secret: its guests. Colbert and Stewart give air time to academics who address provocative and complex topics using some of the most advanced language on TV ... before they're lampooned, that is.

3. "Fringe": Known for its quality research, this sci-fi series uses actual science terminology in entertaining and far-fetched ways. Crack open those textbooks and prepare to expand your vocabulary on fringe science topics such as mutants, rare diseases, chimeras and teleportation.

4. "Top Chef": The Emmy-winning reality TV competition is a delectable way to develop your taste buds and vocabulary. Its user-friendly cooking terminology may help you decipher a few challenging cookbook terms of your own. TV never sounded this tasty.

5. "Sesame Street": Ask any parent whose kids watch Elmo and Big Bird and you'll learn how much viewers of any age glean from the show, with its references aimed at both grown-ups and children. "Sesame Street" is arguably the great refresher course.

6. "Yo Gabba Gabba": Brad Pitt played one of its characters this past Halloween, confirming this fun, kitschy, live-action show is special. Infectious songs and great lessons make this show entertaining and educational.

7. "True Blood": For such a guilty pleasure, this vampire drama offers a remarkably sophisticated vocabulary. Mythological references are rampant, but medical, historical and political references sneak in like steamed vegetables blended into mashed potatoes. Sit back, relax and let the mythical adventures take your ears for a ride.

8. "Mad Men": Alas, we have another reason, besides Don Draper's painfully good looks and Betty Draper's perfect execution of 1960s fashion, to watch this Emmy-winning drama. Proper grammar, ad agency lingo and subtle historical references make this show a vocabulary-expanding experience.

Now, here's the list of shows for which Dictionary.com says you definitely won't need its help:

1. "Jersey Shore": Its cast may have taught us a useful acronym in GTL (gym, tan, laundry), but the show's educational reach stops there. Amid fist-pumping, hair-gelling, late-night antics and the occasional arrest, Snooki and the gang have nothing to offer us but what not to do.

2. "Gossip Girl": With such complicated plot twists, you may think you're actually learning something from this teen drama, but in reality it is just a soap opera dressed in the year's hottest fashion trends. With the Upper East Siders moving on to college, the show never addresses the biggest question of all: How the heck did they get accepted to the top-tier universities they attend?

3. "Keeping Up With the Kardashians": Unless you're interested in discovering how many ways you can use the letter K, don't look to Kris, Kim, Kourtney, Khloe, Kendall or Kylie for vocabulary lessons. While the sisters prove their skill at texting and bickering, their vocabulary is nowhere near as elaborate as their makeup and hair extensions.

4. "It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia": This hilarious comedy's four main characters, all incompetent and uneducated bar owners, will be the first to point out, in their typical witty banter, that they're all foam and no beer. The endearing part is that they're not trying to be, and what results are wild antics that lead to raunchy humor, serious injuries, or wacky inventions like "kitten mittens." You wouldn't expect this show to utilize elevated vocabulary, and it doesn't.

5. "Real Housewives of Washington D.C.": The latest from the "Real Housewives" brand shows us that money can't buy happiness -- or a decent vocabulary. Notorious for gossip, catfights and flat-out bad behavior, these housewives have been involved in more than one newsworthy scandal and have emerged none the more articulate.

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