Academic Vocabulary Guide: Selecting Words to Study

During your academic career, you must learn to independently select words to study.[1] At university, you may want to ensure you can understand and use the most frequent academic words. As your study progresses, you will need to select important words to learn from texts such as journal articles or textbooks you read. Finally, to help establish yourself as a member of your field, you will want to identify and develop a rich, discipline-specific vocabulary.

Benefits of Selecting Your Own Study Words

By actively selecting study-words, you can deepen your interest, engagement, and motivation to study vocabulary.[2] By extension, selecting your own words will help you increase your awareness of words, learn words more deeply, and remember them longer.[3] If you know and can use more words, this should also increase engagement in classes, academic discussions, and research. Additionally, if you learn to use tools to select high-priority words, you can maximize your study time for high-frequency academic words rather than words you will rarely encounter. Using this strategy can also help you quickly find important discipline-specific words while reading so you can add them to your vocabulary study.

How to Use This Strategy

Identify Words Using a General List

When you want to check or enhance your academic vocabulary, these carefully researched lists can help you make sure you are spending your time learning frequent, useful words that will help you manage the listening, speaking, and writing required in your university classes. Choose the list below that best meets your language level and goals.

The New General Service List (NGSL)

The NGSL comprises 2,800 of the most common words in English and can help improve your vocabulary. Even though you may be an advanced learner, reviewing this core list may bring unfamiliar words to your attention. Explore the list on the NGSL website or use tools like NGSL by Frequency where the words are divided into 50-word blocks for study.

The Oxford 3000 and 5000

The Oxford 3000 and 5000 contain 3,000 words you should know and 2,000 additional words for advanced learners.

Identify Words Using Academic Word Lists

New Academic Word List (NAWL)

The higher-level NAWL is a 963-word list with academic words taken from academic journals, textbooks, student papers, fiction, and spoken English. Tools for studying this list include NAWL Highlighter and Gapfill.

The Academic Word List (AWL)

The AWL is an excellent resource for higher-level study. It does not contain the General Service List (GSL) words, and you should know about 90% of academic words if you learn both lists.[4] The AWL is divided into 10 sub-lists ranked by frequency. List 1 contains the most frequent words in the AWL and List 10 contains the least frequent. You can study and quiz yourself with Flashcard Deluxe, multiple choice Vocabulary Exercises, and many Quizlet exercises and quizzes. You can also use the AWL Highlighter to highlight words from the AWL, as shown in this AWL Highlighters video.

Other commonly used lists include the Academic Vocabulary List and the Academic Keyword List.

Identify Words Using Subject-specific Lists

Discipline-specific lists are available in fields such as math, business, science and technology, and law.

> Get started with Selecting Vocabulary to Learn and Subject-specific Lists.

Identify Academic Words in a Text

It is helpful to use a text analyzer to identify academic words and phrases from a text and thus avoid wasting time on learning common words.

- To identify individual academic words in a text you are reading, put the text into the AWL Highlighter, NAWL Highlighter, or the GSL Highlighter.
- For more information about both academic words and phrases, analyze the text with the Word and Phrase Info website. This analyzer uses the Contemporary Corpus of American English (COCA) and its Academic Vocabulary List to identify words and provide their frequencies, presence in academic fields, collocations, and examples in context.
- For academic words and phrases in individual fields of study, use WordSift to compare your word's frequency to seven different lists: The AWL, GSL, NGSL, and Marzano and Pickering's Language Arts, Science, Math, or Social Studies Lists. This tool displays word clouds that emphasize the most frequent words. WordSift also generates webs of related words to help you visualize their relationships.

Summary

Our Academic Vocabulary Guide resource series was developed as a way to provide English as an Additional Language (EAL) learners the opportunity to better learn and retain academic vocabulary. For readers interested in more information about academic vocabulary development, please view our Academic Vocabulary Guide resource.

We hope this guide will provide you with strategies for more productive academic vocabulary development. If you have questions, please contact elc@vanderbilt.edu.

Find this guide and more online at: https://www.vanderbilt.edu/elc/resources/academic-vocabulary-guide/

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[1] *"Extraordinary," "Tremendous," "Exhilarating" "Magnificent": Middle School at-Risk Students Become Avid Word Learners with the Vocabulary Self-Collection Strategy (VSS)* by Ruddell & Shearer, 2002, Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy, 45(5), pp. 352–363; *Strategies for Effective Vocabulary Instruction* by Phillips, Foote, & Harper, 2008, Reading Improvement, 45(2), pp. 62–69; *The Impact of Choice on EFL Students' Motivation and Engagement with L2 Vocabulary Learning* by Wang, Huang, & Hsu, 2015, Taiwan Journal of TESOL, 12(2), pp. 1–40

[2] *Strategies for Effective Vocabulary Instruction* by Phillips, Foote, & Harper, 2008, Reading Improvement, 45(2), pp. 62–69; *The Impact of Choice on EFL Students' Motivation and Engagement with L2 Vocabulary Learning* by Wang, Huang, & Hsu, 2015, Taiwan Journal of TESOL, 12(2), pp. 1–40

[3] *"Extraordinary," "Tremendous," "Exhilarating" "Magnificent": Middle School at-Risk Students Become Avid Word Learners with the Vocabulary Self-Collection Strategy (VSS)* by Ruddell & Shearer, 2002, Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy, 45(5), pp. 352–363

[4] *Selecting Vocabulary to Learn* by Gillett, 2020, UEFAP.com