

ACADEMIC VOCABULARY

Most native-speakers of English come into university with a vocabulary of about 20,000 words. Without thinking about it, we usually pick up about a thousand new words a year. Starting university puts additional pressure on this natural development of your vocabulary as you extend your vocab to include professional terminology and academic language.

What is academic vocabulary?

One of the first things you'll notice at university is that there are a lot of new words to learn. A large number of these will fall into two major categories.

1. Subject specific or technical language

These are the kinds of words that describe the theories and processes in your own field (discipline). Psychology, for example, will use different words (or words differently) from commerce, nursing or law.

2. General academic words

These are words (and their various forms) that research has shown to appear frequently in academic texts across a wide range of subject areas. These words have been collated into *The Academic Word List*, which is easily accessed on the internet. Many of the words on the list you will know or be familiar with. Others you may not know or not be sure how to use independently. Test yourself on some academic vocabulary at the end of this section.

Why is vocabulary important?

Increasing your vocabulary can benefit your academic studies in a number of ways. It can help you:

- get through the reading you have to do much more quickly
- express yourself more effectively in both written and spoken English
- improve your marks in exams and assignments
- give you confidence that you're actively engaging with your subject
- connect you to the community surrounding your subject area.

How can I increase my vocabulary?

Most learning has several phases. With vocabulary the process is often like this:

- identifying a new word
- becoming familiar with the new word (knowing you've seen or heard it before)
- being able to understand the word in an appropriate context
- being able to give a rough definition of it
- truly 'knowing' the word, using it naturally in speaking or writing.

This process takes time but you can speed it up by taking an active interest in new words and increasing your contact with the words. One way of doing this is to develop your own card system (see below). Not surprisingly, you'll also need the help of dictionaries.

approximately
beneficial
commentaries
diversity
enormity
financial
implementation
persistence...

Dictionaries

Subject specific dictionary

If you know you're going to focus on a particular subject (e.g. psychology) throughout your course, it's worth buying a subject specific dictionary e.g. a *Dictionary of Psychology*. Why? Because:

- You won't find some of the terms you'll need to know in a standard average sized dictionary. They are too specific. e.g. *operant conditioning*
- You may find some terms in a standard dictionary, but the academic meaning required by your subject area may be slightly different. e.g. *discourse*

Standard English dictionary

It's useful to have a standard dictionary at home. You can't borrow dictionaries from the library and owning one gives you control over your learning of new words. Buy a good quality and decent-sized one (not a pocket dictionary – it simply doesn't have enough words in them). RMIT refers to the *Macquarie Dictionary*. A good dictionary is an investment for life; you will never stop coming across new words.

English learner's dictionary

If English is not your first language it is worth investing in a specialised learner's dictionary. A couple of good and relatively cheap ones are:

Collins Cobuild English Language Dictionary, and *Oxford Advanced Dictionary of Current English*.

NB. If you are not a native English speaker you should try to use only an English/English dictionary. Why?

- to help develop your conceptual understanding of English: that is, being able to associate an English definition with an English word
- building on your existing English language knowledge is a more effective method of remembering new words than translation
- bi-lingual dictionaries can often be out-dated in their usage of English and provide inadequate academic definitions
- many words are too specific for standard bi-lingual dictionaries

On-line dictionaries

The quality of on-line dictionaries is improving all the time. Many are also free. Use those that have been developed by reputable publishers.

The card system for vocabulary building

When you come across a word you really don't know or don't feel confident about, you can underline, highlight or jot it down and keep reading. When you've finished, you can go back to the word. Ask if it important to the meaning of the article. If so, look the word up in a dictionary and check that definition with the context you first found the word in (i.e. go back to the article it was in). Now you've read the definition does it make sense in the article? If you're still unclear on the meaning (this often happens - don't worry) you may need to use a subject-specific dictionary to cross-check the meaning. Glossaries in the back of introductory textbooks are also helpful for understanding the meaning of discipline-specific terminology.

Now make yourself a small card (or buy file cards).

Write the word on one side of the card like this:

hypothesis

Write a definition of the word on the other side:

An idea that is suggested as a possible explanation for a condition – but has not been proved

You might also include examples on your card to help you. You could include the word in a sentence, perhaps from where you first found it. Another possibility in this case could be an example of a hypothesis.

File the cards in alphabetical order and make some time to work with them. Take out five words at a time and test yourself on their meanings. This is something you can do on the tram, in 'spare' time between classes, etc. Gradually, you'll become more and more familiar with the word. Once you've made contact with new terms – you'll be surprised how you notice these words in your reading and lectures and become confident that you know what they mean!