

Building your vocabulary summary

Introduction

Successful students need to develop a wide range of vocabulary, including general English words. At university, you need to develop your knowledge of

- general academic words
- discipline-specific words
- sub-technical words

General academic vocabulary

These academic words appear across a wide range of disciplines. They are important for you to know because they appear very frequently, but they are not specific to your discipline, so your lecturer is unlikely to teach them. This class of words has been extensively studied, so there are lots of resources you can use, such as the Academic Word List (Coxhead, 2000). *Analyse* is an example of this type of word.

Discipline-specific vocabulary

These academic words are frequently used in, or even unique to, a specific field. It is important for you to learn them in order to communicate effectively in your community of practice. This area of vocabulary has been studied in recent years and the number of resources is growing. An example of this type of word is *osmosis* in Botany.

Sub-technical vocabulary

A potentially confusing aspect of academic vocabulary relates to words that have multiple meanings. These words may have a common meaning in general English and one or more different meanings according to the discipline of study. The word *argue* means to have disagreement in general English, but it means to put forward one's opinion in an academic context.

Strategies for building vocabulary

Improving your academic vocabulary means you will be able to communicate your ideas in a precise and appropriate way. If you actively engage with your vocabulary learning, you will soon see the benefits. Learning is an active process – your goal is to store new words in your long-term memory and be able to retrieve them for active production. You could try some of the following strategies:

1. Record new vocabulary in a notebook so that you control how much and what type of information is important to you.
2. Space out your revision of new vocabulary by revising it every few days rather than once only.
3. Be creative about how you learn/practice new words such as using them in mind map or writing them in sentences.
4. Use your knowledge of grammar by identifying and learning common roots of words as well as prefixes and suffixes.
5. Try to classify groups of words to help your brain make connections between words.

6. Use visual approaches to organising vocabulary.
7. Take an active role in your own reading by identifying key words and how the author uses them.
8. Write your own flash cards for vocabulary revision.
9. Purchase a phone app which aids vocabulary learning.
10. Ensure you have access to a quality dictionary.

Vocabulary challenges

Spelling

English spelling can be tricky because letters do not correspond to a single sound, although some common spelling patterns exist. When writing an assignment, it is advisable to use a spell checker, but be aware of the differences between British and American spelling, as your lecturer may have a preference.

Collocations

Collocations are words that sound natural in combination. They do not always match a student's expectations and your awareness of them will develop over time with exposure to English. Using a dictionary regularly is a good strategy because modern dictionaries not only give definitions but also contain lots of other useful information, including collocations.

Confusing words

When you communicate in the academic world, it is important to use words correctly and precisely. However, there are many words that look the same but have a different meaning. For example, *varying* means *changing* and *various* means *many different kinds*. Again, using a good quality dictionary is essential.

Unknown vocabulary in texts

In addition to actively learning new vocabulary, it is important to have some strategies you can use when dealing with unknown words in your academic reading texts. You will need to balance your reading fluency (the speed and confidence which you can process a reading text) with reading comprehension. If you continually stop to check new words, this will slow you down but also make it difficult to understand the overall meaning of the text.

Understanding the commonly used structures that writers use is a good starting point. You already know how a typical introduction or body paragraph is structured. You may not realise, however, that good writers often provide a definition or examples of key terms in the next sentence or another part of the paragraph. In recent times, authors are often using **bold** or *italics* to indicate an important word or concept. There may also be clues in how the writer uses punctuation (e.g. a definition or example may be found in parentheses). As previously mentioned, you may be able to guess a word because of its root or prefix/suffix. Looking at the information before and immediately after the word (i.e. its context) will also help you.