

Vocabulary

(The power of words)

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. 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 - "jargon". 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 families) that research has shown to appear frequently in academic texts across a wide range of subject areas. Many of them you will know or be familiar with. Others you may not know or not be able 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 often goes something 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.

Dictionaries

Subject specific dictionary

If you know you're going to focus on a particular subject (eg. psychology) throughout your course, it's worth buying a subject specific dictionary eg. 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. eg. *operant conditioning*
- you may find some terms in a standard dictionary but the academic meaning required by your subject area may be slightly different. eg. *discourse*

Standard English dictionary

It's useful to have a standard dictionary at home. You can't borrow them 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 one!** - they simply don't have enough words in them) A good dictionary is an investment for life. None of us ever stops coming across new words.

English learner's dictionary

If English isn't your first language it's worth investing in a specialised learner's dictionary. The definitions in these dictionaries are more clearly organised and less "dictionary-speak". A couple of good and relatively cheap ones are:

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

Other language dictionaries

One of these is essential if you're studying another language and useful if your first language is not English. Again, buy a good quality and reasonably large one. By university level the pocket ones won't do the trick.

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.
- because other language dictionaries are often out-dated in their usage of current English and rarely provide adequate academic definitions
- many words are too specific for standard other language dictionaries

The Card System

When you come across a word you really don't know or don't feel confident about underline, highlight or jot it down and keep reading. When you've finished you can go back to the word. At some suitable time look the word up in a dictionary and check that definition with the context you first found the word in. (eg. 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.

Now make yourself a small card (You can also buy card file systems relatively cheaply)

Write the word on one side of the card.

hypothesis

Write a definition on the other side.

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

You may also include examples on your card to help you. One form of example might be to 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.

What do you do with the cards? File them 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 a doctor's waiting room etc. Gradually you become more and more familiar with the word. Once you've made contact with it – you'll be surprised how you notice the word come up in your reading and lectures and confident that you know what it means!

Test Yourself

Match the letter of the most appropriate definition with the following ten words from the Academic Word List.

1. __ predominant a. the most common
 b. the earliest variety
 c. the weakest

2. __ phenomenon a. a spectacular event
 b. something which occurs at a precise time
 c. something that is observed to happen or exist

3. __ whereas a. in contrast
 b. similarly
 c. in another place

4. __ dynamic a. fuel-powered
 b. constantly changing and progressing
 c. rigid, fixed to a spot

5. __ paradigm a. a rectangular shape
 b. contrasting theories of the same event
 c. a model which explains an event

6. __ hierarchical a. passing information from generation to generation
 b. multi-layered
 c. a system of ranking by importance

7. __ arbitrary a. without principles or plans
 b. judged by merit
 c. following pre-determined procedures

8. __ parameter a. a system of measurement
 b. defined limit
 c. variability

9. __ commodity a. a feature shared by two or more people
 b. something sold for money
 c. weakness

10. __ infrastructure a. animal skeleton
 b. public transport system
 c. the basic facilities of an organisation, society

For more information about the list, you can refer to: Coxhead, A. 1998. *An Academic Word List*. School of Linguistics and Applied Language Studies: Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand.

The *Collins Cobuild English Dictionary* was used in the creation of these definitions.