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# Using the Academic Word List

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I'm Nigel Caplan, ESL Specialist at the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill. This video presentation will introduce you to the Academic Word List, an important tool for learning academic vocabulary.

You will be able to follow this presentation better if you click the ZOOM icon – that's the PLUS key above the powerpoint slide in the top right corner.

## The vocabulary of academic texts

- Top 2,000 words = c. 75% of academic texts

A new generation of interdisciplinary research seeks to use common functional genetic polymorphisms to model emergent variability in brain chemistry that regulates behaviorally relevant brain structure and function.

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Academic texts cover a huge range of vocabulary. For example, the 2,000 most common words in English account for only about 75% of academic texts, on average. On the other hand, those same 2,000 words would cover about 90% of the average piece of English fiction.

That means a quarter of the words in most academic articles and books are not frequently used English words. For example, here is a sentence from a recent issue of *Science*. The words in blue are in the top 2,000.

## The vocabulary of academic texts

- Top 2,000 words = c. 75% of academic texts

A new [redacted] of [redacted]  
[redacted] to use [redacted]  
[redacted] to model [redacted]  
in brain [redacted] that [redacted]  
[redacted] brain [redacted] and [redacted].

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If I blank out all the other words outside the top 2000, clearly, you can't understand anything.

This means, there are a lot of specifically academic words that you need to learn both for reading and writing academic English. But it's impossible – at least, very difficult – to learn them all, so you have to prioritize.

## The Academic Word List (AWL)

- 570 most common word families in academic writing
- Excludes the 2,000 most frequent families
- Does not include technical vocabulary
- Based on texts from the 1990s and earlier
- Does not distinguish between general and academic uses of the same word

The Academic Word List (AWL) was developed by New Zealand linguist Averil Coxhead to help you do just that. Coxhead analyzed a large collection of journal articles from 28 different subject areas to find the words that were most common in several different fields. This produced a list of 570 word families that are common in most types of academic writing. A word family is a word with all its related forms, so e.g. analysis, analyze, analyst, analytic are all one word family.

This list excludes the 2,000 most frequent word families in general English, so the AWL can claim to be a list specific to academic writing. It also excludes technical vocabulary and jargon specific to one particular field, so you still need to learn the particular vocabulary for your discipline.

There are 2 weaknesses with the AWL: it is based on texts that are now at least 20 years old, so some important words are missing – you won't find computer or Internet anywhere in the top 2000 or the AWL. It also does not distinguish between general and academic uses of a word – so "model" is on the general list, not the academic list. Despite these reservations, the AWL is a great place to start your academic vocabulary study.

## Example

A new generation of interdisciplinary research seeks to use common functional genetic polymorphisms to model emergent variability in brain chemistry that regulates behaviorally relevant brain structure and function.

Now, I've highlighted the AWL words in red: Most of the remaining words are specific to the field of biochemistry, although you probably know words like *genetic* and *chemistry*. The lists are far from perfect!

## Example

A new generation of [redacted] research  
seeks to use [redacted] functional [redacted]  
[redacted] to model emergent variability  
in brain [redacted] that regulates [redacted]  
relevant brain structure and function.

you can see that if you know the red and blue words, you can understand a lot of the sentence.

## Structure of the list

- Divided in 10 sublists (sublist 1 = first 60 most frequent words, etc.)
- Available online at <http://www.victoria.ac.nz/lals/resources/academicwordlist/>
- Links to practice exercises at: <http://eslonthehill.wordpress.com>  
Click on Links and Resources → Vocabulary

The Academic Word List is divided into 10 sublists, with sublist 1 containing the 60 most frequent words, and so on. You can find the entire list and the sublists online at this website, or click the link under the video.

I'd recommend that you look through the list to find academic words that you don't know. These are good words to look for in your reading, try to use in your writing, and add to your vocabulary list.

I have links to useful practice sites on my blog – address on your screen, under the video, and at the end.

## Vocab Profile

- <http://www.lextutor.ca/vp/eng/>

Here's a useful exercise to see the profile of a piece of writing in your field. I'm going to demonstrate, and then you can do the same with a text from your discipline.

We're going to use a tool from Tom Cobb's Lexical Tutor website – use IE.

Click on SCREEN CAPTURE now ... use lib website to get an article from Language Learning. Show how to find "TYPES" list.





Website: [www.unc.edu/writingcenter/esl](http://www.unc.edu/writingcenter/esl)  
Blog: [eslonthehill.wordpress.com](http://eslonthehill.wordpress.com)

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Good luck with your continuing vocabulary development.  
I'm Nigel Caplan in the Writing Center at UNC-Chapel Hill.