



Improving vocabulary

At university you will come across a lot of new words. Most of these words will fall into two categories:

- **General academic words:** These words are commonly found in most subject areas, and
- **Subject-specific words:** These words are also known as 'technical language' or 'jargon', and are common to your field of study (your discipline).

It is important to incorporate these new words into your vocabulary and to develop your vocabulary in general.

Increasing your vocabulary

Building your academic vocabulary will help you:

- cope with your reading load: by knowing more words, you will become a more efficient reader and won't get overwhelmed by all the readings you have to do for your subjects
- communicate effectively in speaking activities whether on campus or online (tutorials, oral presentations, general discussions with lecturers or peers) and in your written assignments, and
- achieve better grades in your assignments and/or exams

Strategies

A simple process for increasing your vocabulary involves the following steps:

- identify a new word when you first encounter it
- become familiar with the new word and consider how it is related to your life (e.g., University in general, a specific subject in your course, etc)
- understand the word in context: the meaning may change depending on the context in which it is used
- define the word: how would you describe its meaning to someone else?

You can keep a vocabulary book or create a card system to help you with this process. By keeping a record of new words, and going through the above steps, new words will become familiar over time.

Becoming familiar with new words

While reading an article, you will probably come across some new words. As you read:

- underline, highlight or write each new word in a vocab book
- keep reading and try to guess the meaning from the context (use the other words in the sentence, as well as the sentences before and after to help you predict the meaning)

After reading, check each word in a print or online dictionary. Do you understand the definition of the word?

- **If yes**, read the word in the article again. Does it make sense in the article? If not, try another dictionary or look up the word in a subject specific dictionary to cross-check the meaning.
- **If no**, look up the word in another dictionary. Once it makes sense, read the word in the article again to check your understanding of the word in that context. If the word doesn't make sense in the article, you might need to look it up in a subject specific dictionary.



Using dictionaries and thesauri

Subject-specific dictionaries

If you are going to focus on a specific subject throughout your course (e.g., Education, Law, Engineering, Medicine), it is a good idea to buy a subject specific dictionary, because:

- a standard dictionary might not have the discipline-specific terms you may find in your readings and/or need for your assignments
- a standard dictionary might have the terms you need, but the academic meaning within your study area might be slightly different

Standard English dictionaries

This type of dictionary is useful to own because you will probably come across new words not only in your readings, but also during lectures and tutorials. Invest in a good dictionary, because you'll never stop learning new words! There are also online versions of most quality print dictionaries, e.g., Oxford, Cambridge, Macquarie, Encarta.

English Learner dictionaries

If English is not your first language, it is recommended that you buy a good dictionary which is English language learner focussed. Definitions and explanations of words in these are often clearly organised and have examples and/or visuals as support. There are also online versions of most quality print dictionaries, e.g., Oxford, Cambridge, Collins COBUILD, Longman, Macmillan.

Thesauri

A thesaurus is a dictionary which gives you synonyms for words instead of definitions. It can help make your writing more varied and can reduce repetition of words. You can also search for synonyms online. However, be sure to check the definition of the synonym before using it in your writing, otherwise this can lead to errors in communication.