

Developing Academic Language and Style

Questions:

- What types of vocabulary will I find in academic texts?
- How can I analyze unfamiliar words in assigned readings?
- How can I develop my own vocabulary knowledge for future reading and writing tasks?

Example: Highlight every word that is completely new to you or is used in a way you have never seen before.

Effective and targeted conservation action requires detailed information about species, their distribution, systematics, and ecology as well as the distribution of threat processes which affect them. Knowledge of reptilian diversity remains surprisingly disparate, and innovative means of gaining rapid insight into the status of reptiles are needed in order to highlight urgent conservation cases and inform environmental policy with appropriate biodiversity information in a timely manner. We present the first ever global analysis of extinction risk in reptiles, based on a random representative sample of 1500 species (16% of all currently known species). Source: Monika Böhm et al., “*The Conservation Status of the World’s Reptiles.*”

Consider different types of vocabulary:

Do new words always make a text difficult to read? Are some types of vocabulary more challenging than others? If so, why? Are there reading situations in which you do not need to understand unfamiliar words? When and why? Academic texts will include at least three distinct types of vocabulary: *everyday words*, *general academic vocabulary*, and *discipline- or topic- specific vocabulary*. These three types of vocabulary often appear together within a single text, and any of them can make comprehension difficult. Recognizing them can help you understand why some texts may be difficult to read and help you develop better strategies for analyzing different kinds of new and unfamiliar words.

1. **Think about the additional meanings of everyday words.** For example: *brief* = short; *briefs* = underwear; *to brief a case* = to summarize a legal opinion.
2. **Become familiar with general academic vocabulary.** For example: *theory*, *investigate*, *abstract*. Warning: some of these terms can vary from one discipline to another. For example: a business case study usually describes an organization or a problem, whereas one in education or psychology typically focuses on a person (a student or a patient). There are several books and online lists of academic vocabulary such as *English Vocabulary for Academic Success* by Bill Walker, and the Academic Word List: <http://www.uefap.com/vocab/select/awl.htm>
3. **Be aware of discipline- or topic-specific vocabulary.** For example: law students will learn *probable cause*, *due process*, *judicial review*, *misdemeanor*, etc. Engineering students will learn *conveyance*, *schematics*, *buried-channel charge-coupled device*, *polymer*, *fiber distributed data interface*, *torque*, etc. Linguistic students will learn *generative-transformational grammar*, *morpheme*, *semantics*, etc.

Analyze vocabulary within a text:

1. **Identify vocabulary that is new or unfamiliar to you:** First, skim the text to get a sense of the main ideas or the overall purpose and message. Then, read through it more slowly and carefully. Highlight words that are completely new to you, words that you have seen before but cannot define, and words that are familiar but seem to be used in a new or unusual way.

2. **Analyze the meanings of the words you marked:** Your first impulse might be to look up unfamiliar words in a dictionary. In academic texts, however, it's important to analyze each new word within its context. When trying to understand the meaning of a word, look for information elsewhere in the text. For instance, an important topic-specific term might be defined early in the text. This is particularly true in textbooks. Also, important terms may be set in boldface or italics, and definitions may be included in a glossary at the end of the book or chapter, in the margin, in a footnote, or in a sidebar. Use such textual aids so that you can build your vocabulary and understand what you are reading.
3. **Research words that you don't know and can't analyze in context:** After you have identified unfamiliar words and tried to figure them out in context, you may still be unsure about what they mean.
 - a. **Prioritize:** Decide if the word is important enough within the text to pursue its meaning further. Some words aren't problematic for text comprehension; it may not be worth your time to look them up. If you can restate the main idea in the sentence without using the unfamiliar word, then you probably understand well enough without further investigation. However, be careful— skipping words you don't know may lead to poor comprehension of the text as a whole. There is a difference between being efficient with your analysis and simply not taking the time to look up an important word.
 - b. **Investigate:** If you're unable to restate the main idea of a sentence without understanding an unfamiliar word, it's time to investigate the word. Use more than one dictionary if you have alternatives available in print or online. This will give you a broader range of variations of the word's meaning. **Verify** the meaning of these words in an English-only dictionary! Having looked the word up, you will then have to use your analysis strategies to select the definition that most closely resembles how the word is used in the specific text you are reading. Most dictionary definitions of words have a list of options, and you will need to pick the best one. You might also use a Web search engine, such as *Google*, to find other texts in which the word appears. Seeing the word in other contexts may give you a broader sense of its meaning. Again, though, be careful that the meanings you find match the word's usage in the specific text you are reading.
4. **Record the vocabulary you have analyzed for further use and review.** You will not have time to go through all of these steps with every reading assignment. It is, however, useful to go through this process a few times — especially in a reading-intensive course — so that you focus on being aware of and analyzing the different types of vocabulary you will encounter. Your awareness and analysis skills will become more automatic as you practice them and apply them to each new reading task.

Practice: Use the following text excerpt to practice the four-step vocabulary process just described. These two paragraphs are from an anthropology journal article published in 2009. The researchers focused on how children in different cultures learn responsibility.

Yanira stood waiting with a small pot and a bundle with two dresses and a change of underwear in hand. A member of the Matsigenka people of the Peruvian Amazon, she asked to accompany anthropologist Carolina Izquierdo and a local family on a fishing and leaf-gathering expedition down river. Over five days away from the village, Yanira was self-sufficient and attuned to the needs of the group. She helped to stack and carry leaves to bring back to the village for roofing. Mornings and late afternoons she swept sand off the sleeping mats, fished for slippery black crustaceans, cleaned and boiled them in her pot along with manioc, then served them to the group. At night her cloth bundle served as blanket and her dresses as her pillow. Calm and self-possessed, she asked for nothing.

Yanira is six years old. Yanira’s comportment exemplifies key elements of what constitutes well-being for the Matsigenka: working hard, sharing, and maintaining harmonious relationships (Izquierdo 2009). The Matsigenka are a small-scale, egalitarian, family-level society. As a social group, they have historically survived in isolated extended family compounds in the Amazonian rainforest and more recently have been brought together as small communities by Protestant missionaries, all the while continuing to subsist on fishing, hunting, and subsistence horticulture (mainly manioc, bananas, and sweet potatoes). Source: Elinor Ochs and Carolina Izquierdo, “*Responsibility in Childhood: Three Developmental Trajectories.*”

STEP 1: Read through the text excerpt. Highlight any words that seem unfamiliar to you — either completely new words or words that you may have seen before but that are being used in a new way.

STEP 2: Choose five of the words you marked in Step 1 and try to analyze their meaning within this particular text. Do not forget to include prepositions that might be needed, too. Do not use a dictionary for this activity. You can use the chart below to take notes. Under “Word type,” just provide your best guess. The point is to become more aware of the different categories and how they affect reading comprehension.

Word	Context	Guess about meaning	Word type (everyday, academic, topic-specific)	Formal meaning(s)
Attuned (to)	Yanira was attuned to the needs of the group	used to, familiar with	academic	In harmony with, responsive to

STEP 3: Now research the meanings of the five words you analyzed above, using dictionaries for definitions and *Google* for additional context. Use the following chart to take notes. **Verify** the meaning of these words in an English-English dictionary!

STEP 4: Choose at least two words from the previous steps and create a vocabulary notebook entry or vocabulary card for each word. Provide the following information: the word or phrase, and information that helps you understand and remember the word (general meaning, specific meaning in this text, grammatical information (part[s] of speech), other words that it might co-occur with, sample sentence(s), etc.).

Recognizing the value of lexical variety: Lexical variety isn’t about just plugging lots of vocabulary words into your texts. Rather, it is about carefully choosing words with the goal of improving your writing style.

1. Lexical variety can make a text more interesting.
2. Lexical variety can make a text (and its writer) sound more mature, thoughtful, and sophisticated.
3. Students with texts with greater lexical variety tend to receive higher grades.
4. Lexical variety can be taken too far and make the text (and its writer) sound pretentious.

Improving lexical varieties in writing:

1. **Use topic-specific vocabulary:** identify key terms that usually appear in discussions of your topic. For example, here is a sentence written by a law student: “Although *evidence resulting from an illegal search may not be used to discover other evidence*, this was not the case for this incident.” As you conduct research or complete reading assignments about a topic, try to identify the key content words and phrases. Look for topic-specific terms that are used repeatedly in your readings and that seem to be central to the overall content of the texts. Be sure you understand them in the context of the readings
2. **Use general academic vocabulary:** become familiar with academic vocabulary, which can help you communicate effectively in your academic community or discipline. These expressions and terms make you sound competent and encourage readers to take you seriously. For example, a law student should be familiar with phrases like “*confirmed their suspicions*,” “*the search incident to a lawful arrest*,” “*consented to a search of his person*,” etc. A linguistic student should be familiar with expressions such as “*a follow-up analysis*,” “*analyzed the transcript*,” “*the extent of the changes*,” etc.
3. **Consult a thesaurus and a dictionary:** a dictionary provides basic information about specific words (spelling, pronunciation, history, parts of speech, meanings); a thesaurus is a book of synonyms (words that have same or similar meanings). It’s important that you understand the meaning of the original word and of each synonym given in the thesaurus and **make accurate choices and substitutions!** Using a dictionary in tandem with the thesaurus will help you pick a synonym that makes the most sense in context.
4. **Use software tools to analyze your writing:** a number of software tools will allow you to input your own text and receive feedback about it:
 - a. The AWL Highlighter: this tool focuses specifically on words that appear in the Academic Word List. (Search “AWL Highlighter” in your browser to find this tool.)
 - b. The Compleat Lexical Tutor: Vocabulary Profiler. (Search “Compleat Lexical Tutor” in your Web browser to find this tool.)
 - c. Word processor tools: word processors usually have a built-in thesaurus and dictionary, and you can set the spelling and grammar checker options to look for misused words, clichés, etc.
5. **Use source material appropriately:** be careful, however, not to borrow specific language from your readings without proper citation. Using general academic structures such as *The researchers analyzed* or *The results showed* without quotation marks is not going to get you into trouble, nor will content terms such as *peer comments*, because those are not unique. However, you should never simply copy a specific phrase, sentence, or paragraph without properly acknowledging the source.
6. **Edit your own writing for lexical variety:** Editing is not simply about proofreading for typing errors or missing words or punctuation (although those issues are important). The editing stage is also a great place to assess whether your word choice is effective: use key words and related words for cohesion; use precise reporting verbs (*assert, claim, argue, suggest*, etc.); be careful with pronoun reference (especially with *it* and *this*); don’t overuse qualifiers (such as *very, always, rarely*).
7. **Read your text aloud:** This is a great strategy for finding errors. It is also a good strategy for assessing when a text is too repetitive. Hearing the text aloud may alert you to overuse of key words or pronouns in a short space of text.