A key to developing your academic literacy - and ensuring success in your studies - is expanding your knowledge of words. This will happen as a matter of course in your degree, as you read about and communicate ideas in your subjects. The following however, are some strategies you can use to actively develop your word power.
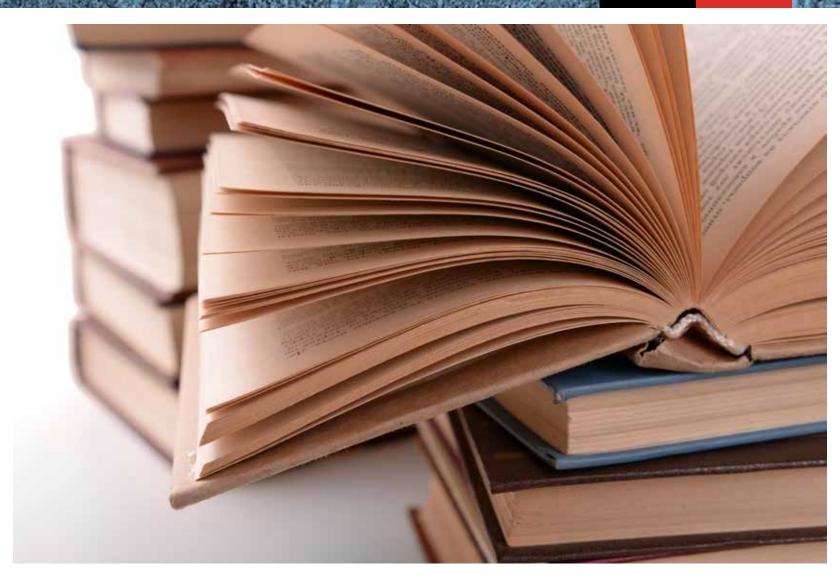
1. Use the Academic Word List to prioritise your learning of words

The **Academic Word List (AWL)**, developed at Victoria University in New Zealand, is a list of the most frequently used content words in general academic texts. The idea behind the list is that if you have a good knowledge of these words the task of understanding your academic texts will be a lot easier. Knowing these words will also help you to express your ideas more powerfully in your academic writing.

A total of 570 word families are included in the AWL, organized into 10 sub-lists. The following words are from sub-list 1, the top 60 items. Many of these words will probably be familiar to you; less familiar words are found in later sub-lists, located at:

http://www.victoria.ac.nz/lals/resources/academicwordlist/most-frequent

SUBLIST 1: Most frequently occurring words in academic texts			
1. analysis	16. definition	31. indicate	46. procedure
2. approach	17. derived	32. individual	47. process
3. area	18. distribution	33. interpretation	48. required
4. assessment	19. economic	34. involved	49. research
5. assume	20. environment	35. issues	50. response
6. authority	21. established	36. labour	51. role
7. available	22. estimate	37. legal	52. section
8. benefit	23. evidence	38. legislation	53. sector
9. concept	24. export	39. major	54. significant
10. consistent	25. factors	40. method	55. similar
11. constitutional	26. financial	41. occur	56. source
12. context	27. formula	42. percent	57. specific
13. contract	28. function	43. period	58. structure
14. create	29. identified	44. policy	59. theory
15. data	30. income	45. principle	60. variables

ACTIVITY 1: Vocabulary knowledge scale

A good strategy is to systematically go through the AWL, making a note of how well you know each word. Use the following scale for this purpose:

Vocabulary knowledge scale

1 = I am familiar with this word, but don't know what it means

2 = I know this word, and I think it means _____ (say synonym or translation)

3 = I know this word. It means _____ (say synonym or translation)

4 = I can use this word in sentence. _____ (say sentence)

Use your ratings for each item to organise your learning of key academic words. You should give priority to items you marked 1 or 2.

For more information about AWL, see Coxhead, Averil (2000) A New Academic Word List. TESOL Quarterly, 34(2): 213-238.

2. Be aware of specialist uses of words in the university

In your academic study, you will find that some words have meanings that are different from the way they are used in everyday life. The following are some examples.

ARGUMENT	
COMMON USE:	*The problem is that he comes home each night and just wants to have an **argument** (i.e. a verbal fight, quarrel).*
ACADEMIC USE:	*The problem is that he tends to write essays that just don't have an **argument** (i.e. a proposition supported by reasons).*
MATERIALIST	
COMMON USE:	*In her lifestyle, she's such a **materialist** (i.e. a person who seeks to have many possessions; a consumer).*
ACADEMIC USE:	*In her philosophical outlook, she's such a **materialist**. (i.e. a person who believes in the theory that physical matter is the only reality).*
CULTURAL CAPITAL	
COMMON USE:	*Many say that the **cultural capital** of Australia is Melbourne. (i.e. a place with a strong reputation for arts, music etc.).*
ACADEMIC USE:	*Many say that the possession of **cultural capital** underlies the academic success of many students. (i.e. extensive knowledge about history, culture etc.)*

ACTIVITY 2: Academic meanings of terms

The following are some other examples. Are you aware of the more specifically 'academic' meanings of these terms?

an assignment **a journal** **validity** **significance**

quote **discipline** **(being) critical**

Click here for answers

It's important to be aware of some of these potential differences. Can you think of any other examples like those above that you have encountered in your studies?

3. Actively learn new terms related to your subjects (disciplines)

The Academic Word List shown above includes words of a general nature; that is words that you may encounter broadly in your academic reading. A different type of vocabulary to learn are those words associated with study specific subjects (or 'disciplines'). Sometimes these words are referred to negatively as **jargon**. A better way to think of them however, is as **technical** terms that in fact are indispensable to the processes of knowledge-building in a discipline.

ACTIVITY 3: Identifying technical terms in specific subjects

Look at the following words which are taken from textbooks in three different subject areas – **Sociology**, **Accounting**, and **Mechanical Engineering**. Drawing on your general knowledge, try to decide which subject each word is from. Mark either **S, A** or **ME**.

Alienation	Ethnocentric	Damping capacity
Isotropic	Ledger	Moral panic
Particle displacement	A tappet	Revenue
Amortize	Feminisation	Breakeven point

Click here for answers

► Now make a list of four key terms (words or phrases) you have learned recently in one of your subjects.

You are likely to be more successful in your subjects if you can use these terms accurately. Note: in many exams, students are tested on their knowledge of key terms in the subject. In essay and assignments, your lecturers will want to see that you can use such terms appropriately.

How to identify key terms in your subjects

i) In lectures, your teachers will draw special attention to certain words e.g. by highlighting them on their power point slides, providing definitions of them etc.

ii) In textbooks and articles, certain terms will be bolded (e.g. **alienation**), or sometimes shown in inverted comma (e.g. "alienation"). Many textbooks also provide a glossary of terms, usually found at the back of the book.

iii) Comprehensive lists of these terms are also compiled in subject-specific dictionaries e.g.

Oxford Dictionary of Sociology
**http://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780199533008.001.0001/
acref-9780199533008**

Oxford Dictionary of Accounting
**http://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780199563050.001.0001/
acref-9780199563050**

Oxford Dictionary of Mechanical Engineering
**http://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780199587438.001.0001/
acref-9780199587438**

Keep your own personal list of key terms for each of your subjects – with their definitions, and an example of their use. Also include any other relevant information: e.g. any contrasting terms; the particular writer or theorist with whom the term is associated etc.)

Your list might look like this – the term 'Alienation' (mentioned above) has been used as an example:

Term	Definition (sociology)	Other information	Sample sentence
Alienation	*Feeling of powerlessness, and separation from things*	*Term used by Karl Marx to refer to workers losing control over their work, and lives*	*"In the age of automation, it is easy for workers to have a sense of alienation in their workplaces".*

ACTIVITY 4: Getting started with your own subject-specific glossaries

For the four words you listed above, prepare your own version of the table. Use a similar table for all your subjects.

Term	Definition (sociology)	Other information	Sample sentence

Look at your lists regularly. Cover up definitions, and try to say aloud all you know about the term.

4. Develop your knowledge of prefixes and suffixes in English

In English, many words are formed through the use of:

prefixes = elements that come at the beginnings of words
(e.g. **pro**-democracy; **extra**-terrestrial).

suffixes = elements that come at the ends of words
(e.g. happi**ness**, free**dom**).

You can improve your knowledge of words by developing a good understanding of the way that prefixes and suffixes operate in the language - known in linguistics as **affixation**.

The function of affixation is evident in the following word, listed in some sources as the longest, non-scientific word in English.

antidisestablishmentarianism

What does this word mean?

In Britain in the 1800s, there was a political movement that wanted to see the removal of the Anglican Church's (or Church of England) special status as the official church – or for it to be 'disestablished'. The people pushing this view were known as:

Disestablishment-arians   (-arian = type of person, e.g. librarian, authoritarian etc.)

And their political belief or position was known as:

Disestablishmentarian-ism   (-ism= school of thought, doctrine e.g. nationalism, liberalism etc.)

There was a rival position however, that was supportive of the church's status, and which opposed the activities of the *Disestablishmentarians*, hence:

Anti-disestablishmentarianism   (-anti= against, opposed to e.g. antisocial, antibiotic etc.)

It must be said that this word, '*antidisestablishmentarianism*' is one you are very unlikely to encounter in your studies. However, in the structure of this long and difficult word, you can see how affixation operates to build on simpler words in the creating of new meanings.

Some common prefixes and suffixes used in academic English, as listed in the *Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary* are shown below.

If you don't know them, learn them! They will often help you to decode new and unfamiliar words.

Common prefixes

ante =	before or in front of e.g. *antenatal (before birth), antecedent*	**mono =**	one or single e.g. *monolingual, monologue*	

ante = before or in front of
e.g. *antenatal (before birth), antecedent*

anti = opposed or against
e.g. *antiracist, anti-aircraft*

auto = operating without control of humans
e.g. *autopilot, autobiography*

co = with or together
e.g. *co-author, cooperate*

contra = against or opposite to
e.g. *contradiction, contraception*

counter = opposing or reaction against
e.g. *counter-attack, counterfactual*

cross = across
e.g. *cross-cultural, cross-disciplinary*

cyber = relating to computers
e.g. *cybercrime, cyberculture*

eco = relating to the environment
e.g. *eco-friendly, ecotourism*

geo = relating to the Earth
e.g. *geophysics, geothermal*

hyper = having a lot/too much of a quality
e.g. *hyperactive, hypersensitive*

ill = in a way that is bad or unsuitable
e.g. *ill-prepared, ill-judged*

inter = between or among
e.g. *internet, interstate*

intra = within
e.g. *intranet, intrastate*

macro = relating to the whole of something
e.g. *macroeconomics, macroscopic*

mega = extremely large (1,000 times)
e.g. *megastore, megabyte*

meta = beyond, at a different level
e.g. *metadata, meta-analysis*

micro = very small
e.g. *microscopic, microchip*

mono = one or single
e.g. *monolingual, monologue*

multi = many
e.g. *multi-millionaire, multi-tasking*

neo = new form of something, near to something
e.g. *neo-natal (newly born), neo-liberal*

omni = everywhere, or everything
e.g. *omnipresent; omnipotent (all powerful)*

para = beside, beyond
e.g. *paranormal, paramedic*

poly = many
e.g. *polygamy (more than one wife/ husband)*

post = after or later than
e.g. *postgraduate, post-modern*

pre = before or earlier than
e.g. *pre-school, prehistoric*

pseudo = false
e.g. *pseudonym (false name), pseudoscience*

psycho = of the mind, or mental processes
e.g. *psychology, psychotic*

quasi = partly, appearing to be similar to
e.g. *quasi particle*

retro = look back
e.g. *retrospective, retrofitting*

socio = relating to society
e.g. *sociocultural, sociopath*

sub = below, under
e.g. *sub-zero, sub-culture*

super = extremely or more than usual
e.g. *super-rich, super conductor*

trans = across
e.g. *trans-Atlantic, transgender*

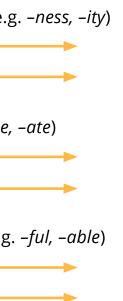**ultra =** extremely
e.g. *ultramodern, ultramarathon*

Common suffixes

Suffixes operate slightly differently from prefixes. Often their role is to change the **forms** of words, as in the following examples.

► To change an adjective to a noun (e.g. *–ness, –ity*)

good (adjective) ⟶ goodness (noun)

specific (adjective) ⟶ specificity (noun)

► To change a noun to a verb (e.g. *–ise, –ate*)

harmony (noun) ⟶ harmonise (verb)

vaccine (noun) ⟶ vaccinate (verb)

► To change a verb to an adjective (e.g. *–ful, –able*)

help (verb) ⟶ helpful (adjective)

read (verb) ⟶ readable (adjective)

Other suffixes however, like prefixes, function to create new **meanings**. Some of the more common are:

-arian = type of person
e.g. vegetarian

-archy = rule, leadership
e.g. *oiligarchy, anarchy*

-cide = murder, killing agent
e.g. *suicide, fungicide*

-cracy = form of government
e.g. *democracy, theocracy*

-holic = love, addiction
e.g. *alcoholic, shopaholic*

-ism = school of thought, doctrine
e.g. *athiesm, catholicism*

-ist = type of person
e.g. *dentist, optimist*

-itis = disease, inflammation
e.g. *hepatitis, arthritis*

-mania = irrational tendency
e.g. *egomania, Beatlemania*

-ography = writing or field of study
e.g. *calligraphy, cinematography*

-ology = field of study
e.g. *biology, neurology*

-oid = resembling
e.g. *android, cuboid*

-phile = person attracted to specified thing/person
e.g. *Anglophile, paedophile*

-phobia = fear
e.g. *homophobia, microphobia*

-phone = related to sound
e.g. *microphone, megaphone*

-ship = state of being
e.g. *apprenticeship, citizenship*

8. Activity answers

ACTIVITY 5: Deducing the meaning of terms from their prefixes and suffixes

The following is a list of words that contain prefixes and /or suffixes. Can you work out what they mean?

biblio**phile**	**mega**fauna	**pseudo** intellectual	**meta**-analysis
techno**phobia**	**para**normal	**quasi**-religious	**macro**economics

5. Use internet resources (games, puzzles etc.) to build your word power. Have fun!

There is now a plethora* of sites and resources on the web to help you expand your vocabulary. Here are some examples to get your started:

a large amount

How Strong Is Your Vocabulary?

http://www.merriam-webster.com/word-games/vocabulary-quiz

Name that thing

http://www.merriam-webster.com/word-games/name-that-thing

ACTIVITY 2 - ANSWERS

an assignment	Common use:	allocation of someone or something as belonging to a particular group; generally, a task
	Academic use:	a piece of work set as part of the assessment requirements of a course
a journal	Common use:	a daily record of news and events of a personal nature; a diary
	Academic use:	a specialist publication dealing with a particular subject or professional activity. Also a particular type of written assignment – a reflective journal
validity	Common use:	the state of being legally or officially binding or acceptable e.g. a valid air ticket
	Academic use:	the quality of being logically sound; in philosophy, when a conclusion follows on logically from a set of premises e.g. a valid argument
significance	Common use:	the quality of being worthy of attention; importance
	Academic use:	In statistics, the likelihood that a result or relationship is caused by something other than mere random chance. e.g. statistical significance
a quote	Common use:	the estimated price of a job or service; the repeating of another's words
	Academic use:	repeating or copying out of words (from a text) to include in one's own work
discipline	Common use:	use of punishment to correct disobedience
	Academic use:	a branch of knowledge, typically one studied in higher education
being critical	Common use:	expressing adverse or disapproving comments, finding fault
	Academic use:	involving an analysis of the merits and faults of a work, idea, theory etc.

ACTIVITY 3: ANSWERS

Alienation (*Sociology*)

Ethnocentric (*Sociology*)

Damping capacity (*Mech Eng*)

Isotropic (*Mech Eng*)

Ledger (*Accounting*)

Moral panic (*Sociology*)

Particle displacement (*Mech Eng*)

A tappet (*Mech Eng*)

Revenue (*Accounting*)

Amortize (*Accounting*)

Feminisation (*Sociology*)

Breakeven point (*Accounting*)

Return to Activity 3.

ACTIVITY 5: ANSWERS

biblio**phile** =	biblio (book) + phile (person attracted to something) = lover of books
megafauna =	mega (extremely large) + fauna (animals) = large animals (usually) mammals of a particular region, period
pseudo intellectual =	pseudo (false) + intellectual (scholarly person) = a person attempting to appear intellectual, but with no basis in scholarship
meta analysis =	meta (beyond, at a different level) + analysis (study) = a study that involves the combined analysis of a number of previous studies
techno**phobia** =	techno (relating to technology) + phobia (fear) = the fear or dislike of advanced technology, especially computers
paranormal =	para (beyond) + normal (what is usual) = phenomena beyond the scope of normal scientific understanding e.g. mind reading
quasi-religious =	quasi (similar) + religious = resembling a religion, often used in relation to cults e.g. scientology
macroeconomics =	macro (relating to the whole of something) + economics = the study of economics on a large-scale, concerned with general economic factors, such as interest rates and national productivity

Return to Activity 5.