

This presentation is on *Expanding your Academic Vocabulary*. It has been designed by the Robert Gillespie Academic Skills Centre and is targeted at undergraduate students currently studying at the University of Toronto Mississauga.

In this video, you will be exposed to the difficulties many students face when making the transition from conversational language to academic language. There are a few key things to remember when thinking about expanding your academic vocabulary. First, it doesn't happen overnight. Building up an academic word bank takes time and you must be willing to accept the learning curve and be willing to put in the effort. Second, academic vocabulary isn't universal. It is often very discipline specific and there are countless technical terms that go along with each subject. For example, science students are going to need words like equilibrium, homeostasis and phylogenetic but humanities students are not likely to come across this vocabulary, instead, they may focus on words like pedagogy, assemblage, and ethnicity. Knowing these differences is important, but it's just one step in the process.

As a student, you will be expected to adopt an academic tone when you write and speak. This tone is more than just knowing the discipline specific terms. It's about making the transition from conversational language, which is the language we use everyday, to an academic language. You are, essentially learning another language, or at the very least, learning more about language. If English isn't your first language, this can be an even bigger challenge. This is because English Language Learners have usually spent their lives learning conversational English, so using academic jargon means additional translation work, which means more time, and more effort.

In developing your academic vocabulary you may need to think of things in a more abstract way. Conversational vocabulary might include concrete words like money, fighting and police. In an academic

setting these might become capitalism, violence and law enforcement. It might seem like a small difference, but it can be significant in an academic paper.

But!

Don't despair just yet, as there are ways that you can improve your academic vocabulary.

First...READ. This should be fairly obvious and something you are doing already, but by reading academic journals, or essays, or reports in your discipline, you will start to get an idea of how the academic vocabulary works in your field. The more exposure you get to academic vocabulary, the more likely you are to remember it. It's important to think about the format and structure as well as about the words. As you read, highlight or circle any words that you don't understand...But, circling these words is not enough, you also have to be able to understand them and to remember them...which is sometimes the hard part. So, in addition to circling those difficult terms, you also might want to keep a word journal.

A word journal is like your personal dictionary. A helpful tip might be to write down your own definition of a word rather than using the dictionary one. Using your own words helps reinforce the information, as dictionary definitions can sometimes be difficult to understand. If English isn't your first language, you may also want to include the translation in your word journal to your first language, as that may make it easier to remember. You can organize your word journal any way you want. Some students have a page for each letter of the alphabet, some students write down the words as they go, it doesn't matter how you structure a word journal, just that you keep it, and not just keep it, but review it. You will never be able to remember a word unless you see it more than once... If you don't like the idea of a word journal, maybe consider keeping flash cards with academic terms on them. Again, the key is reviewing them regularly. This will help to reinforce what you have learned.

Another helpful hint to improving your academic vocabulary is to think of a word as the sum of its parts. Academic vocabulary often contains a root word with prefixes and suffixes. Some words are made by adding different parts. Take the word unemployment as an example. This word has 3 parts. The root of the word is employ. To 'Employ' means to give work to someone and pay them for it. By adding a prefix of un- and a suffix of -ment, we change its meaning. Unemployment means people who are without work. So, we are keeping the root word and that keeps the general meaning as work, but the word has changed.

So, as a student, it is important that you know about the morphology...or the different forms of a word. By adding different prefixes and suffixes to the word employ, we can make new words like employs, employee, employer, employed, and employable. Knowing how to modify a root word allows you to expand your vocabulary in a fairly easy way.

Another option you can use to expand your academic vocabulary is to set up a discussion group. A discussion group with peers who are studying the same subject can be particularly useful to practice academic vocabulary in a low stakes environment. Using new vocabulary in discussions is a great way to practice and a useful way to learn. One suggestion, however, is to pick a discussion group that has a wide range of cultures within it. This way, if English is not your first language, you are forced to speak in English and to practice your academic vocabulary because there is simply no other alternative.

In addition to reading, knowing about word roots and discussion groups, there are many additional resources available to you as a student here at UTM. First there is the AWL or Academic Word List. This list, which can be found online, provides the most common words found across multi-disciplinary

academic writing. The AWL is subdivided into 10 word lists. The first has the 10 most common words, the second has the second 10 most common words, and so on. Even better, there are multiple online practice exercises that you can use to help you remember the vocabulary you have learned. These are the links.

Another resource is Google Scholar. Now, some of your professors may have told you to avoid Google Scholar when you are searching for references because some of the stuff that comes up, isn't particularly academic. If you are using google scholar for academic vocabulary, it's easy to simply type in the phrase you want to use, and see how common it is. If you get 15,000 hits, its probably okay to use that phrase in your writing, if you don't get any, maybe you should reconsider your sentence.

The Corpus of Contemporary American English is another useful resource. Just like Google Scholar, it allows you to search words and phrases to see how common they are within academic writing. This type of resource can be useful if you want to ensure that your word choice fits within the most common usage in academic writing.

And of course, the RGASC right here at the University of Toronto Mississauga Campus is here to help. The Centre specializes in study skills and expanding your academic vocabulary is one of those areas where we can provide assistance. There are ongoing workshops throughout the year, so check our web page for updates, but if you want some more immediate help or a more personal approach to learning vocabulary, you can make individual appointments with a learning strategist. These 30 minute consultations may help you find the tools you need to excel at vocabulary acquisition. Details are on our website and you'll need your student number to book the appointment.

Ultimately, whatever you choose to do, practice is the key to success. Plan your schedule carefully so that you can incorporate time into your schedule for a weekly review of essential vocabulary. Hopefully, if you take the steps now to improve your vocabulary, it will be easier next year...and the year after that.

So, let's review. Expanding your academic vocabulary isn't easy, it takes time and it's discipline specific. We struggle with it because it's different from the conversational vocabulary we use everyday and it often makes us think of things in a more abstract way, which is difficult to do. This becomes even more problematic for English Language Learners.

Academic vocabulary can be improved by reading more...the more you read, the more you know about the vocabulary in your discipline....keeping a word journal or using flash cards (and then reviewing them)....learning the morphology of words, so the prefixes and suffixes in addition to the root word...participating in group discussions, preferably with a mix of cultures...using resources like the AWL, Google Scholar, or of course, the RGASC.... And by practicing. Practice makes perfect right?

Should you have questions we are here to help. Here are some additional references that might be useful in your quest to improve your academic vocabulary.

And here's our contact info at the RGASC. We're open during term time 9-4 and we're located on the 3<sup>rd</sup> floor of the Library. Stop by and see us. Thanks for watching.

