An Introduction to the Academic Word List

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What is the Academic Word List?

The Academic Word List (AWL) is a list of 570 word families that are commonly found in academic texts. This list was selected by examining a large corpus (or collection) of written academic texts and selecting the words that occurred:

1. In texts from all four academic faculty sections: Arts, Commerce, Law and Science.
2. Over 100 times in the corpus overall.
3. At least 10 times in each academic faculty section.
4. Outside the 2000 most frequent words on Michael West’s General Service List (GSL). The GSL includes everyday words such as I, house and do.

These principles ensured that only words that occurred reasonably frequently in a variety of study areas were selected.

The AWL targets vocabulary that occurs most often in written academic texts. These words also occur in newspapers but not as often as they do in textbooks. The AWL words appear even less in fiction. If your focus is learning academic vocabulary, you need to make sure you read academic textbooks so that you encounter these words in context.

How is the AWL organized?

The AWL is organized into Word Families. Word families are made up of the ‘parent word’ and ‘family members’. Take for example the word maximise. Its family members include inflections of the verb such as maximised, maximises and maximising as well as the noun maximum. The word family also includes the British spelling of the noun maximisation, as well as maximization, the US spelling.

If you learn the verb maximise, you will be able to recognise other family members such as maximised when you encounter them in your reading. These words are closely related and the meaning is likely to be the same or similar. When you are looking for words in this dictionary, think about other word family members too.

Finally, there are some academic words that do not have a word family. These words occur on their own and do not have any inflections. Examples include nonetheless, so-called and behalf.

Why is the AWL important?

The AWL is intended as a reference for students who are studying or preparing to study at a tertiary level in English. As a university lecturer, I was aware of the difficulties that students had in mastering the vocabulary necessary for written assignments. The AWL does not include ‘content’ vocabulary for particular subjects which students obviously need to learn as well. The AWL focuses instead on the non-subject-specific vocabulary that students of any discipline will need to master in order to produce coherently-structured written assignments.

The AWL covers up to 10% of the vocabulary covered in written academic texts. This means that, on average, one word in 10 in an academic textbook is in the AWL. Look at the following extract from an academic text:

EUROPEAN ENVIRONMENTAL POLICY

Environmental issues are truly global. Many of the problems, like the releasing of CFCs into the atmosphere, have global effects and require global action. Some problems link to the exploitation of global commons – the resources shared by the international community such as ocean beds and the atmosphere. Sometimes small local problems, such as poisonous gases leaking from landfills and water pollution, are multiplied so many times in any local contexts that they become major world hazards. The environment is a global concern requiring global policies.
The highlighted words are all on the AWL. This sample illustrates clearly that the AWL can help with decisions about which words are important for you to learn if you are studying in an English-speaking country.

How can the AWL help me with my academic studies?

Knowledge of academic vocabulary is vital for students studying at an English-speaking university, particularly for reading and writing. If you compare estimates of how many words a native English speaker might know by the age of 18 (approximately 18,000 to 20,000 words) and how many a learner who has had two or three hours of schooling in English over several years (roughly 2000 to 3000 words depending on the language background of the student), this gap is enormous. In order to read and write successfully you need to be able to recognize as many words as possible in your textbooks and use as many as possible in your essays. The bigger your vocabulary, the more you will be able to cope with the high reading and writing demands of your studies.

Academic writing tends to be quite formal in style. The vocabulary items that you use in your writing can affect the level of formality. Writers need to know whether a word can be used in a particular situation. Take for example consequent. This is marked as formal. You would probably not choose to use this word when speaking with friends but you should use it in written English to take your language to a higher level of formality. The AWL will help you to focus on issues of formality. Look out for the formal label in this dictionary.

Remember that the AWL covers approximately 10% of all vocabulary in a piece of academic writing. You should aim to have roughly the same percentage in your own academic writing too. If you go to the AWL highlighter website by Sandra Haywood (http://www.nottingham.ac.uk/~alzsh3/acvocab/awlhighlighter.html) you can copy and paste your text into it and it will highlight the AWL words for you. This will enable you to see how many AWL words you are using overall and whether you repeat the same words many times in your writing.

When looking up words from the AWL in this dictionary you should also focus on the bold phrases that are highlighted. These show you the key grammatical patterns and collocations for that word. Collocations are words that commonly occur together or near each other in a text, for example ‘effect on’. Collocations and phrases are important because they help with fluency in writing and indicate that you are working at a higher level with academic vocabulary than just using a word from your own language and its translation. The collocations in the following text have been highlighted in blue.

DECLINING BIODIVERSITY

Whatever the effects on this planet’s climate, rain-forest clearance has another undeniable impact. The disappearance of rain forests is a major factor eroding the earth’s biodiversity, or, more simply causing many thousands of species of plant and animal life to disappear forever. While rain forests account for just seven percent of the earth’s surface, they are home to almost half of this planet’s living species. Estimates of the total number of species of animals and plants range from 1.5 million to as high as 30 million. Researchers, in fact, have identified more than 1,000 species of ants alone (Wilson, 1991).

What strategies can I use to help learn the AWL words?

Remember that building your vocabulary takes time. You are not likely to learn everything you need to know about a word the very first time you see it. And don’t expect to remember everything about a word after looking it up in a dictionary once. Try some of these ideas to help you with vocabulary building:

- Make the most of the information given in this dictionary to build up your knowledge of a word. Look at the bold phrases highlighted in the entry. These show important grammatical patterns and collocations. Learn these rather than the word in isolation.
- Even if you think you already ‘know’ a word, look it up in the dictionary to see if there is any additional information that you don’t know.
- Research has shown that repetition helps people to remember things. Make sure you build repetition into your learning. You could do this through using word cards to test yourself or by keeping a vocabulary notebook.
Studying words ‘actively’ will help your learning. People do learn words through reading but the chances of remembering vocabulary is higher when you focus on the words and make a conscious effort to learn them.

Look out for common collocations, phrases and grammatical patterns of words when you are reading academic texts.

Work with the AWL alongside you when you are writing. Try to use words from the list that are relevant to your writing.

How is the AWL shown in this dictionary?

The words on the AWL are marked with **Ac** in this dictionary.

The AWL does not include the 2000 most frequent words used in general everyday English. In this dictionary, however, the 3000 most frequent words in written English are also marked with **W1** **W2** and **W3** and the 3000 most frequent words in spoken English are marked with **S1** **S2** and **S3**. In some cases, these overlap with the AWL.

Averil Coxhead is a lecturer in English for Academic Purposes at Massey University, Palmerston North, New Zealand. She compiled the AWL in 2000. For further information on the AWL go to Averil’s website at http://language.massey.ac.nz/staff/awl/index.shtml.

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beneficial adj
beneficiary n
benefit
benefit v
bias
bias v
biased adj
bond
bond v
brevity n
brief adj
brief n
briefing n
briefly adv
bulk
bulky adj
capability n
capable adj
capacity n
category n
case v
challenge
challenge v
challenging adj
channel
channel v
chapter n
chart
chart v
chemical
chemical adj
circumstance n
citation n
cite v
civil adj
clarification n
clarify v
clarity n
classic adj
classic n
classical adj
clause n
code
code v
coded adj
coding n
coherence n
coherent adj
coincide v
coincidence n
coincident adj
coincidentally adj
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collapse v
collapse n
colleague n
commence v
commencement n
comment
comment v
commentary n
commentator n
commission
commission v
commission n
commit v
commitment n
committed adj
commodity n
communicable adj
communicate v
communication n
communicative adj
community n
compatibility n
compatible adj
compensate v
compensation n
compensatory adj
compilation n
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complement
complement v
complementary adj
complex
complex adj
complexity n
component
component n
component adj
compound n
compound v
compound adj
comprehensive adj
comprise v
computation n
compute v
computer n
computing n
conceivable adj
conceive v
concentrate
concentrate v
concentration n
concept n
conception n
conceptual adj
conclude v
concluding adj
conclusion n
conclusive adj
concurrent adj
conduct
conduct v
conduct n
conduct adj
confer v
conference n
confine v
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confirm v
confirmation n
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conflict n
confom v
conformation n
conformist adj
conformity n
consensus n
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consent v
consent n
consent adj
consequence n
consequent adj
consequently adv
considerable adj
considerably adv
consist v
consistency n
consistent adj
constancy n
constant adj
constant n
constantly adv
constituency n
constituent n
constituent adj
constituent v
constitute v
constitution n
constitutional adj
constrain v
constrained adj
constraint n
construct v
construction n
constructive adj
consult v
consultancy n
consultant n
consultation n
consultative adj
consume v
consumer n
consumption n
contact
contact v
contact n
contact adj
contemporary adj
contemporary n
context n
contextual adj
contextualize v
contract
contract v
contract n
contract adj
contradict v
contradiction n
contradictory adj
contrary adj
contrary n
contrast
contrast v
contrasting adj
contribute v
contribution n
contributor n
controversial adj
controversy n
convener v
convener n
conversion n
convert v
convertible adj
convince v
convinced adj
convinced v
cooperate v
cooperation n
cooperative adj
coordinate v
coordinate n
coordinator n
core n
core adj
core v
corporate adj
corporate n
correspond v
correspondence n
corresponding adj
couple
couple v
couple n
create v
creation n
creative adj
creativity n
creator n
credit
credit n
credit v
creditor n
criterion n
crucial adj
cultural adj
culturally adv
culture n
currency n
cycle
cycle n
cyclic adj
data n
debatable adj
debate n
debate v
decade n
decide n
decision n
decide v
deduce v
furthermore adv
gender n
generate v
generation n
globalization n
globe n
goal n
grade1 n
grade2 v
graded adj
grant1 v
grant2 n
guarantee1 v
guarantee2 n
guideline n
hence adv
hierarchical adj
hierarchy n
highlight1 v
hypothesis n
hypothesize v
hypothenetical adj
identical adj
identifiable adj
identification n
identify v
identity n
ideological adj
ideology n
ignorance n
ignorant adj
ignore v
illegal1 adj
illogical adj
illustrate v
illustation n
illustrative adj
image n
imagery n
immature adj
immigrant n
immigrate v
immigration n
impact1 n
impact2 v
implement1 v
implement2 n
implicate v
implication n
implicit adj
imply v
impose v
imposition n
imprecise adj
inaccessible adj
inaccuracy n
inaccurate adj
inadequacy n
inadequate adj
inappropriate adj
incompatible adj
incapacitate v
incentive n
incidence n
incident n
incidentally adv
inclination n
incline1 v
incline2 n
incoherent adj
income n
incompatible adj
inconceivable adj
inconclusive adj
inconsistency n
inconsistent adj
incorporate v
incorporated adj
indefinite adv
index1 n
index2 v
indicate v
indication n
indicative1 n
indicative2 adj
indicator n
indiscretion n
indistinct adj
individual1 adj
individual2 n
individualism n
individualist n
individuality n
individually adv
induce v
induction n
inevitability n
inevitable adj
inevitably adv
infer v
inference n
infinite adj
infinitely adv
inflexible adj
infrastructure n
inherent adj
inhibit v
inhibition n
initial1 adj
initially adv
initiate1 v
initiation n
initiative n
initiator n
injure v
injured adj
injury n
innovate v
innovation n
innovative adj
innovator n
input1 n
input2 v
insecure adj
insert1 v
insertion n
insight n
insightful adj
insignificant adj
inspect v
inspection n
inspector n
instability n
instance1 n
instance2 v
institute1 n
institute2 v
institution n
institutional adj
institutionalized adj
instruct v
instruction n
instructor n
insufficient adj
integral adj
integrate v
integrated adj
integration n
integration n
integrity n
intelligence n
intelligent adj
intense adj
intensify v
intensity n
intensive adj
interact v
interaction n
interactive adj
intermediate1 adj
internal adj
internalize v
interpret v
interpretation n
interpretative adj
interpretive adj
interval n
intervene v
intervening adj
intervention n
intrinsic adj
invalidate v
invalidity n
invariable adj
invariably adv
invest v
investigate v
investigation n
investigative adj
investigator n
investment n
investor n
invisible adj
invoke v
involve v
involvement n
irrational adj
irrelevance n
irrelevant adj
irreversible adj
isolate v
isolated adj
isolation n
isolationism n
issue1 n
issue2 v
job n
journal n
justifiable adj
justification n
justified adj
justify v
label1 n
label2 v
labor n
labored adj
labour1 n
labour2 v
laboured adj
layer1 n
layer2 v
lecture1 n
lecture2 v
lecturer n
legal adj
legality n
legally adv
legislate v
legislation n
legislative adj
legislator n
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symbolic adj
symbolism n
symbolize v

tape¹ n
tape² v
target¹ n
target² v
task¹ n
task² v
team¹ n
team² v
technical adj
technically adv
technique n
technological adj
technology n
temporary adj
tense¹ adj
tension n
terminal¹ adj
terminal² n
terminate v
termination n
text¹ n
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thematic adj
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theoretical adj
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theorist n
theory n
thereby adv
thesis n
topic n
topical adj
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trace² n
tracing n
tradition n
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traditionalist n
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transfer² n
transference n
transform v
transformation n
transit n
transition n
transitional adj
transitory adj
transmission n
transmit v
transport¹ n
transport² v
transportation n
transporter n
trend n
trigger¹ n
trigger² v

ultimate¹ adj
ultimately adv
unaccompanied adj
unaffected adj
unaided adj
unalterable adj
unambiguous adj
unanticipated adj
unapproachable adj
unattached adj
unattainable adj
unavailable adj
unaware adj
unbiased adj
uncharted adj
unconstitutional adj
unconventional adj
undeniable adj
underestimate¹ v
underestimate² n
undergo v
underlie v
underlying adj
undertake v
undertaking n
underwent v
undiminished adj
uneconomical adj
unethical adj
unfounded adj
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unified adj
uniform² adj
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unjustified adj
unobtainable adj
unlicensed adj
unobtainable adj
unparalleled adj
unprecedented adj
unpredictable adj
unprincipled adj
unpublished adj
unregulated adj
unreliable adj
unresolved adj
unresponsive adj
unrestrained adj
unrestricted adj
unscheduled adj
unspecified adj
unstable adj
unstressed adj
unstructured adj
unsustainable adj
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utilize v

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validate v
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variable² n
variance n
variant n
variation n
varied adj
vary v
vehicle n
version n
via prep
violate v
violation n
virtual adj
virtually adv
visibility n
visible adj
visibly adv
vision n
visual¹ adj
visualize v
visually adv
volume n
voluntarily adv
voluntary¹ adj
volunteer¹ n
volunteer² v

welfare n
whereas conj
whereby adv
widespread adj