

By David Park

Using newspapers to improve your vocab

Knowledge of academic vocabulary is vital if you're taking the academic version of IELTS (International English Language Testing System). The larger your academic vocabulary, the more you'll be able to read and write successfully in the exam.

Building your academic vocabulary takes time, but there are resources to help you. One such resource is the Academic Word List (AWL), a list of the 3,000 words that are most often used in English-language academic writing.

The list was made by Averil Coxhead, Victoria University, New Zealand, for students preparing to study, or studying, in an English-speaking university. She researched a large collection of writing from the Arts, Law, Commerce and the Sciences, and found the academic words that occurred most often. However, the AWL does not include any technical words that are used only in a particular subject, and it doesn't have everyday words.

The 3,000 words in the AWL are grouped into 570 "word families," which are made up of a "parent word" and "family members." Take, for example, the parent word "concept," which means "idea." Its family members include all of its verb, noun, adjective and adverb word forms: conception, concepts, conceptual, conceptualise, conceptualisation, conceptualised, conceptualises, conceptualising and conceptually. The complete AWL can be seen if you visit the website in the box on this page.

To ensure that you get satisfactory reading and writing scores in the academic IELTS exam, you should learn the meaning and correct use of at least the 570 parent words in the AWL. If you learn the noun "concept," for instance, you'll be able to recognise other family members (e.g. "conceptual") in the reading test. As family member words are closely related, their meaning is usually similar.

Learning AWL words

The AWL covers about 10% of the vocabulary used in written academic texts. This means that, on average, one word in 10 in an academic textbook is in the AWL. However, because AWL's words are so common, you'll see them often in newspapers, magazines and novels, and hear them on television, movies or in conversations. This is good news for you because it means you have many opportunities to see and hear how the 3,000 most common academic words are used.

AWL websites

Academic Word List:

<http://tinyurl.com/6qwg9p>

AWL Highlighter:

<http://tinyurl.com/2b8um>

Research has shown that, after a language learner has a certain level of English, trying to learn long lists of words is inefficient and ineffective. Instead, the best way to learn words is by thinking about the meaning of the words used while reading or listening to the language.

Reading English language newspapers, then, is a particularly valuable way of learning the AWL. Newspapers have many articles on issues relating to IELTS, and they're written in a range of styles, from humorous to serious. A major benefit of reading newspapers is that you get to see English being used to describe current events which interest you or which relate to your life. You also get to see which words are used in combination with a given word, which is very important for building your academic vocabulary.

Let's look at part of a newspaper story, "It's genes, not diet," by Gina Kolata. It tells how scientists have found that the people most likely to become obese (extremely fat) are those who've inherited certain genes from their parents. The story and vocabulary are similar to what you find in the IELTS academic reading module. The highlighted words are in the AWL.

*Stunkard also pointed out the **implications**: "Current efforts to prevent obesity are directed toward all children and their parents almost indiscriminately. Yet if family **environment** alone has no **role** in obesity, efforts now directed toward persons with little genetic risk of the disorder could be **refocused** on the smaller number who are more vulnerable. Such people can already be **identified** with some **assurance**: 80% of the offspring of two obese parents become obese as compared with no more than 14% of the offspring of two parents of **normal** weight."*

*The findings also provided **evidence** for a **phenomenon** that scientists like Hirsch and Leibel were certain was true - each person has a comfortable weight **range** to which the body gravitates. The range*

*might span 4.5kg or 9kg: someone might be able to weigh 54kg to 64kg without too much effort. Going much above or much below the natural weight range is difficult, however; the body resists by increasing or decreasing the appetite and changing the metabolism to push the weight back to the **range** it seeks.*

Newspaper articles don't have to be "serious" to contain academic words. Here's part of another newspaper story by Andrew Bond, "The truth is, web sites don't always save time and money." It's an amusing story about Andrew planning a trip to the Pyrenees Mountain range in France to see the "Tour de France," a three-week long bicycle race. The highlighted words are in the AWL.

*For today's traveller, the Internet is an indispensable tool for planning trips and making bookings, and has been a driving force of e-commerce in the post dotcom bubble era. From rooms to car hire and cheap flights, the Internet certainly has **revolutionised** how we arrange holidays. But just how practical and efficient is it?*

*In Britain, where a typical high street travel agent is staffed by costly human beings, it makes perfect sense to move everything onto the web, and Britons have **benefited enormously** from a competitive push to make travel planning completely cyber. A quick, general search in Google **reveals** a*

***domination** among results of UK-based web companies offering all sorts of package deals that are aimed **primarily** at people travelling outbound from the United Kingdom. But, if you thought the Internet was a universal tool, you'll find yourself frustrated by a worldwide web that is clearly Anglo or US-centric, as frustrating as all those web **sites** and software registrations that always ask for your state and zip **code**.*

*To prove my point, I took on the **task** of arranging a holiday for myself with a simple **goal**: to get from Chiang Mai to the foot of Pyrenees to witness the Tour de France. Everything was to be arranged without leaving my desk. I discovered it would be a **process** taking hours, even days, simply to watch a 30-second parade of the peloton [the main group of bicycle riders] flying by. By the time everything was arranged, an entire tour could have taken place.*

These samples show just how many academic words are in English language newspapers.

Checking AWL use

If you copy and paste a newspaper story into the "AWL Highlighter" website (the address is in the box), it'll show the AWL words. You can also see how many AWL words are in your own essays; about 10% of the words in an IELTS essay should be from the AWL.

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