

# Building your vocabulary

This video will introduce you to university vocabulary, or vocab for short. As a student, you will encounter a wide range of new vocab at university. To best manage your studies, you need to develop your knowledge of:

- general academic vocab
- discipline specific vocab and
- sub-technical vocab.

Some students feel a little overwhelmed by new vocab when they begin attending lectures and doing the readings for their units. However, you can learn to manage the load if you understand the types of vocab used in academic communication. Let's look at an example.

Imagine you are a new Speech Therapy student. Pause here and read this extract from a journal article from your new discipline.

Don't try to understand everything. Just answer this question: What is the topic of the paragraph?

As children with cleft palate acquire more complex speech, issues may become increasingly noticeable. Speech issues in children with cleft palate can be caused by a variety of factors. Velopharyngeal dysfunction, including both obligatory (i.e., velopharyngeal insufficiency) and learned (i.e., velopharyngeal mislearning) domains, can result in hypernasality, weak pressure consonants, and/or nasal air emission. ... It is estimated that up to 37% of children with a repaired cleft palate acquire velopharyngeal insufficiency after the initial palate repair, resulting in speech that is difficult to understand (Bicknell et al., 2002; Lithovius et al., 2014).

Kotlarek, K. J., & Krueger, B. I. (2023). Treatment of speech sound errors in cleft palate: A tutorial for speech-language pathology assistants. *Language, Speech, and Hearing Services in Schools*, 1-18. [https://doi.org/10.1044/2022\\_lshss-22-00071](https://doi.org/10.1044/2022_lshss-22-00071)

Now, you may not have understood *everything* in the extract, but you probably got the basics.

You probably understood that the general topic is children with cleft palate, even if you are not *entirely* sure what a cleft palate is. You may have understood that the focus is on speech issues caused by some factors connected to cleft palate, even if you didn't understand what those factors were. You may also have understood that repairs aren't always successful. So, even if a text has quite a few unknown words, you can probably get the general gist or main message.

Let's look at this extract again. Pause here. Decide which words seem to be **discipline specific**. That is, words specific to the field of speech therapy. Okay. You may have noticed these words:

cleft palate  
velopharyngeal  
or  
hypernasality

These are **discipline specific words**: that is, they are terms that have a specific meaning in an academic discipline and are not usually used by other disciplines. For instance, you are unlikely to see these words in a Marketing or Engineering textbook.

Other words you may have thought were discipline-specific could be:

dysfunction  
obligatory  
weak pressure consonant  
nasal air emission  
insufficiency

In fact, these words are not exclusive to Speech Therapy, even if the way they are used is different to other contexts. We can call these words: **sub-technical vocab**. That is, they are words that have a general meaning, **but** they also have a specific meaning in a discipline. In addition, they may be used in other disciplines, but have *another* meaning in that discipline.

You may notice that **Velopharyngeal** is used with **dysfunction**, **insufficiency** and **mislearning**. This tells you that there are different types of velopharyngeal issues. Maybe you can use your knowledge of the more common words to infer what these issues could be. The fact is: Each discipline not only has its **own vocabulary**, it may also use more **common** words in its **own** way.

Both discipline specific and sub technical vocabulary are important. They make communication easier and more precise for members of the discipline. You will continue to use these words in your profession after you graduate, so it is important that you know them and can use them appropriately. Now, let's look at the sample again.

Academic texts also include **general** academic vocab. When you start reading to prepare for classes or do your assignments, you will notice certain words are used often – *more often* than in general conversation. In this extract, the words:

complex  
issues  
factors  
domains  
estimated  
*and* acquired

...are all general academic words. General academic words are words that occur frequently in *all* academic disciplines.

One way you can check your knowledge of these words is to use the Academic Word List, or AWL. The AWL is a list of the 570 most common words in academic English, created by New Zealand researcher, Professor Averil Coxhead. You can explore this through her website. So, by analysing our speech pathology extract, we are able to build a picture of the type of vocab that the writer used.

Certain tools, like online Vocabulary Profilers exist that help researchers analyze academic texts. When we put this extract through a Vocabulary profiler, we get the information on this table. We can see that nearly 70% of the words in this extract are from general English. The rest are general academic words or 'off list', which means they are likely to be discipline specific. This is fairly typical of most academic texts, although some disciplines, such as Anatomy or Botany, may have much higher numbers of discipline-specific words

This video has provided a general overview of the type of vocabulary you will see in your readings. The materials on this page will look at university vocab in more detail. They will also help you develop strategies for learning new words and for managing vocab challenges.

Don't forget to speak to a Language and Learning Advisor if you need more help.