What is the Academic Word List? Why does it matter? How Can It Help You Get a Higher TOEFL Score?

Let’s start with what almost everybody studying English in high school and college already knows. TOEFL scores count, and the focusing on the Academic Word List (AWL) helps students score higher on the TOEFL – across the curriculum.

English teachers naturally notice and appreciate a strong vocabulary, and academic writing requires a more formal register than causal oral speech. Standardized tests also reward a rich vocabulary and often explicitly test vocabulary skills. Nuance and precision can also be displayed by finding the appropriate word. Therefore, gaining and deploying a strong academic vocabulary will help you succeed as college and university students.

Yet what are the key words that a college student needs for academic success in English? Professor Averil Coxhead at the School of Linguistics and Applied Language Studies at Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand studied a wide range of academic texts across disciplines in the late 1990s. He culled 570 word families that he deemed vital for college preparation and created the Academic Word List. The list was further divided into 10 sub-lists. We alphabetized the sublists to make finding the definitions easier.

Because of Coxhead’s systematic approach and the clear need for this type of focused vocabulary list to help ambitious, college bound international students, the AWL quickly has established itself within academic high schools around the world. Many intensive English programs have also adopted the AWL for their college prep programs, creating a niche within the ESL/EFL world. Although an intense controversy has arisen over the extensive focus on this vocabulary list, motivated students (like you!) should become at least familiar with the AWL.

Let’s create better English conversations in our English classrooms. Adding more AWL words and teaching explicit vocabulary enrichment exercises – in your writing and speaking – is a simple, effective method. Please pay extra-attention to these words in your academic courses.

The Academic World List (AWL) in 10 subsections.

Sublist 1

analysis • approach • area • assessment • assume • authority • available • benefit • concept • consistent • constitutional • context • contract • create • data • definition • derived • distribution • economic • environment • established • estimate • evidence • expert • factors • financial • formula • function • identified • income • indicate • individual • interpretation • involved • issues • labour • legal • legislation • major • method • occur • percent • period • policy • principle • procedure • process • required • research • response • role • section • sector • significant • similar • source • specific • structure • theory • variables •
Sublist 10

adjacent • albeit • assembly • collapse • colleagues • compiled • conceived • convinced • depression • encountered • enormous • forthcoming • inclination • integrity • intrinsic • invoked • levy • likewise • nonetheless • notwithstanding • odd • ongoing • panel • persistent • posed • reluctant • so-called • straightforward • undergo • whereby •