

## IELTS Word Lists - full article

In this interview with Sheldon Smith from [EAPFoundation.com](https://www.eapfoundation.com), he explains the strengths and limitations of four well known vocabulary lists. Sheldon is an expert in all things related to vocabulary. Watch one of [Sheldon's YouTube videos](#) here and [subscribe to his channel](#).

Find a summary of this article on my website: [IELTS Vocabulary: the best IELTS word lists](#).

See my [IELTS Vocabulary Booster Workbook](#) for a summary of the words you need to learn for IELTS.

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### 1. The Academic Word List (AWL)

The **Academic Word List (AWL)** is the best known academic vocabulary list. It is a useful place to start, but it is not perfect. Here are some of its limitations:

- It was designed mainly to improve **reading**, not writing.
- It groups words into **word families**, but some members of each family are much more common than others. If you try to learn every word in a family, you may spend time on words that you don't need.

Many students make the mistake of studying **only** the AWL, as if it contains **all** the vocabulary they need for IELTS or academic English. It does not. Another problem is that the AWL, like most word lists, focuses on **single words**. However, for fluent English, you need to learn **common phrases** and **word combinations**.

#### **\*Levels of Frequency**

'Frequency' means how often something happens. High frequency words appear very often in spoken and written English. Low frequency words appear much less often.

#### **What is a 'word family'?**

A word family is a group of related words that share the same root but have different forms and meanings. For example these words all belong to the same 'word family':

- analyse (verb)
- analysis (noun)
- analyst (person)
- analytical (adjective)

## 2. The General Service List (GSL)

The AWL does not include words from the **General Service List (GSL)**. This is a problem because some of the words in the General Service List are **suitable for academic use**. Indeed, some GSL words are more common in academic contexts than in everyday language, for example 'thus', 'suggest' and 'likely'. For students learning Academic English, it is important to understand which words belong to general vocabulary and which are used more formally in academic writing. This awareness helps learners make the shift from general English to more academic language in a natural and accurate way.

## 3. Academic Vocabulary List (AVL)

The **Academic Vocabulary List (AVL)** is especially useful for IELTS students. This is a **more recent list**. Unlike the AWL, it covers words that might be considered 'general' words, but which are in fact more frequent in academic than non-academic writing. For example, the following words are in the top 50 of the **AVL** but not in the **AWL**: *control, develop, development, figure, however, human, provide, rate, relationship, report, suggest, practice*.

## 4. The Academic Collocation List

The **Academic Collocation List (ACL)** is another useful general academic list I think is very useful is the **(ACL)**. It is important to understand how words combine with other words, and this has a comprehensive list of collocations. The list is pretty huge, with 2469 collocations, but it includes adding frequency information, which is extremely useful.

## How to use word lists for IELTS

### Why is it important to use these 'official' word lists?

None of them are actually 'official'. Each list has its critics who tell you not to use it. Generally, however, they are a **good starting point**. If you don't use them, the words you choose to study come from one of two sources: either **you** select them, or a **teacher** chooses them. If **you** select them, you really have no basis, except that you don't know the meaning. Is it a common word? Is it worth studying? It is extremely difficult for you to know which words you should learn. This is why word lists are useful. If a **teacher** chooses the words you should learn, a similar problem

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arises. A teacher may have a better 'feel' for which words to study, though essentially they are relying on intuition, and their intuition may be wrong.

### What is the best way to learn from these word lists?

It is better to **study words from reading (or listening) texts you already have**, and identify useful words from some of the word lists. However, this approach has its limitations. Some courses might use lists such as the AWL as a basis, and test students on any of those words. Therefore being proactive and studying unknown words in those lists might be helpful. Also if you want to increase your vocabulary, and aren't sure where to start, the lists are useful for that.

### Are there different lists for Spoken and Written English?

Most academic word lists are for written English, but there are also word lists for spoken English. e.g. the **Hard Science Spoken Word List** (HSWL) or the **Academic Spoken Word List** (ASWL).

Generally, I don't see these as so interesting or useful, since the 'rules' for academic speaking are not as strict as for academic writing. Words you can use in writing can be used in speaking, but the reverse is not true. For example, when giving a presentation (academic speaking), you can (and probably should) use basic transitions such as 'So' and 'And' and 'But' since they are clear and simple. However, you should probably avoid these in your writing. Conversely, if you use 'As a result' and 'In addition' and 'However' in academic speaking, you will sound a bit formal, but there is nothing wrong with those words. No one will stop you and say, 'Hey, you can't use that word in your speaking.'

### Is it better to learn a few words and use them well, or to learn many words in order to read faster and understand the listening better (active vs. passive knowledge)?

Ideally, both. Study the more frequent words in depth for active use (speaking and writing), but study less frequent words at least for recognition (passive use – listening and reading). You can generally ignore the very low frequency words.

### How many words should I learn?

I've mentioned the **8000-9000 range** a few times, which comes from research\*. But **there are different levels of knowing a word**, and therefore different degrees of learning. Native speakers

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don't know all the words in English, and the number they do know, which is **impossible to measure** anyway, is not useful. So, forget about how many words you should learn, and **focus instead on choosing to study new words when you encounter them**, and slowly build up your vocabulary.

*\*See Schmitt and Schmitt: 'A reassessment of frequency and vocabulary size in L2 vocabulary teaching'.*

### How can I remember new words and collocations?

It's important to study many aspects of a word, and which aspects depend on how you plan to use it. **Many students just focus on meaning** (often by translation). This is generally how they started learning vocabulary in school. This is fine if all you want to do with a word is recognise it when you read it, and for many words, that may be enough.

But if you want to use it, then you need to know

- how to **pronounce** it (to use it in speaking, also essential for listening)
- **part of speech** (n, v, adj, adv)
- other members of the word **family**
- any special **spelling** rules, how it combines with other words (**collocation**)
- **usage** (e.g. followed by preposition 'of' or 'with' or 'doing' vs. 'to do')
- whether it is **academic or informal**.

It is not easy studying this kind of information (a good dictionary will be essential).

1. Recording words in a **vocabulary notebook** is a good idea, with some of the information above (pronunciation, part of speech, usage and so on).
2. Trying to **use words you've recently studied** is also helpful, and hopefully you can get feedback

Remembering and using vocabulary accurately **takes a lot of time**, and **a lot of effort**, and involves **going beyond just the meaning** of a word.

### How can I use the memorized words naturally and avoid mechanism\* (being mechanical)?

Yes, 'being mechanical' is the correct phrase – I think this is a good example of some of the points above, and also a good demonstration of what is called an '**achievement strategy**'. Good language learners try to use words they know to express the meaning they want, while less able learners try to avoid words or phrases (or grammar structures) they are unsure of, which is

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called a '**reduction strategy**'. By attempting to use phrases like '*mechanism*' and '*being mechanical*' you can get feedback and correct errors.

**Self noticing** is also important, as you find words or phrases you are unsure of and take the time to check or ask how to use them properly. **Reading more** is the best way to learn new vocabulary, as long as you are being active. This is great not just for identifying new words to study, but also for **reinforcing words** you have already learned, if you encounter them again. For example, you might forget whether '*mechanism*' or '*being mechanical*' is correct, but if you read a passage with either of these words in it you will pay attention and reinforce what you know about the words in a more natural way.

### How can I choose the right words and collocations? And how can I group them?

I've created a **series of videos** on different common IELTS topics using word lists, since it is easier to remember words if they are linked somehow, e.g. a common topic.

A different approach is how to choose words and collocations from a topic you are reading about. I would suggest using tools such as **word list highlighters**. It can be difficult to know which words to study, but if they are in a recognised word list, that should be a good start.

Going beyond those word lists can be important. Comfortable reading requires 8000-9000 words, while common word lists generally only take things to the 3000 word level. If you can group words according to topic, that might help you to remember them. But if you are studying, for example, different word forms of 'analyse' (e.g. '*analyst*', '*analytic*', '*analysis*') you are also grouping the words in a **meaningful way**. Alternatively, you might want to study **common adjective collocations** e.g. with '*analysis*': careful/ critical/ detailed/ final/ further/ statistical analysis and that is another way to group them.

Watch one of [Sheldon's YouTube videos](#) here and [subscribe to his channel](#).

See also: [How to improve your IELTS Vocabulary](#)