**ACADEMIC VOCABULARY**

Academic Vocabulary is defined as words that are traditionally used in academic dialogue and text. Specifically, it refers to words that are not necessarily common or frequently encountered in informal conversation.

It begins by considering a definition of academic vocabulary, then looks at different types of vocabulary used in academic contexts, namely general words, non-general 'academic' words, and technical words. Another important feature of academic vocabulary, nominalisation, is also considered.

**What is academic vocabulary?**

Academic vocabulary can be difficult to define. One broad definition is the vocabulary which can be used in academic contexts. The problem here though is what do we mean by 'academic contexts'? Does this mean spoken contexts (e.g. lectures, seminars, presentations), written contexts (e.g. essays, articles, reports), or both? Writers on academic vocabulary tend to focus on the latter, and often overlook the former. It also depends on what subject we are talking about. The academic vocabulary necessary for writing a science laboratory report (e.g. apparatus, procedure, errors) has some differences from the academic vocabulary which might be used in social science research (e.g. survey, population, sample), though of course they would also have much in common.

In general, academic vocabulary can be considered to consist of three types of vocabulary:

general words which are acceptable for academic use;

non-general 'academic' words;

technical words specific to an individual subject area.

Each of these is described in more detail below.

**General words which are academic**

The General Service List (GSL) is a useful starting place to identify general English words. Many of the words in the GSL can be used in academic contexts. Consider these examples, all of which contain only words from the GSL, but all of which are acceptable in academic speech or writing:

The aim of this report is to... [see language for reports]

What I want to talk about today is... [see language for presentations]

There are several possible reasons for this, for example... [giving reasons, giving examples]

In comparison, the control group... [comparing]

There are, however, many words from the GSL which are not academic. Consider these examples:

Spoken English is more informal than academic English. It uses phrases like 'like' and things like that.

Acid rain is a bad thing for all of us.

These examples contain several words and phrases which would not be considered good academic style, for example like (to give examples), thing, and bad. These three words are also in the GSL. In this case, the important consideration is tone: words and phrases such as aim, report, reasons, for example, and in comparison are all academic in tone, while like, thing, and bad are not. For this reason, when studying words for academic use, it is important to know whether they are academic (formal) or not.

General vocabulary can also include general words which have special meaning in academic contexts. Examples include:

**discipline**

general meaning: training people to obey rules

academic meaning: a subject of study

**population**

general meaning: the number of people living in a country/region

academic meaning: all individuals who could possibly be included in a study/survey

**control**

general meaning: power over

academic meaning: a group used in a scientific experiment to check results

In this case, it is important to focus on both the meaning and usage of these general vocabulary items.

**Technical words**

The final type of words you need to study to improve your academic vocabulary is technical words, or words which are particular to your field of study. Examples are photosynthesis (for biology), inertia (for physics), externalities (for economics).

**Conclusion**

In sum, academic vocabulary is difficult to define, because it depends very much on what kind of context we are talking about. For example, spoken academic language differs from written academic language (though they also have much in common); the language for biology differs from the language for economics, especially in the technical language they use (though again, they have much in common). The main issue for EAP students is to raise your awareness of which general words are formal enough to use in academic writing, build your knowledge of common academic words, and study and learn the technical vocabulary which is used in the discipline you are studying (or plan to study).