

The Oxford Learner's Dictionary of Academic English

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The *Oxford Learner's Dictionary of Academic English (OLDAE)* is a brand new learner's dictionary aimed at students of academic subjects on English-medium courses at university or college; or for students currently on foundation or pre-sessional courses and preparing to enter a degree course. It gives in-depth treatment to the academic English that is used across the disciplines, with a particular focus on academic writing.

Why publish a learner's dictionary of academic English?

In the first place, quite simply, because there wasn't one. Until now, the only learners' dictionaries available to EAP students, whether in print or online, have been dictionaries of general English, such as the *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary*. The *OALD* and its rivals are mostly very fine dictionaries with wide coverage, but they do not address the specific needs of EAP students. Teachers of EAP told us there was a need for a dictionary that not only included words that had been identified as 'academic' but that described them from an academic perspective and presented them in genuinely academic contexts of use. Comparison of general and academic language corpora shows quite convincingly that academic language is *different*.

What does an EAP student need from a dictionary?

We put this question to EAP teachers from a diverse range of countries and institutions and there was remarkable consistency in their assessment of the most fundamental needs. The number one challenge for almost all students is academic writing in English. Therefore, this dictionary needed to be more than just a reference work. It needed to give active help not just with understanding words and phrases but with *using* them appropriately. To use a word correctly and effectively in writing, a student needs to know how it behaves in context and how it combines with other words. This includes knowing its grammar, its complementation patterns and collocations, any phrases it frequently appears in and the language functions it can fulfil. Entries in *OLDAE* present information about all these aspects as clearly as possible for over 22,000 words, phrases and meanings. It is able to give this level of detailed help because it focuses only on academic vocabulary; and the information given is reliable because it is based on a genuine academic corpus, the 85-million word Oxford Corpus of Academic English.

cycle **AWL** /'saɪkl/ *noun* **1** the fact of a series of events being repeated many times, always in the same order: *Large birds have longer production cycles, and might therefore be more susceptible to poultry diseases.* ◊ ~ **of sth** *The seasonal cycle of work began in the autumn with the planting of new sugar cane.* **HELP** In biology, a **cycle** is a series of events or processes in the life of a plant or animal: *The chromosomes of a cell undergo a variety of changes in the course of the cell cycle.* ➔ *see also* BUSINESS CYCLE, CARBON CYCLE, LIFE CYCLE **2** a complete set or series of movements in a machine or part of the body: *The amount of fuel burned per cycle is lowered by reducing the engine pressure.* ◊ ~ **of sth** *We allowed another 90 minutes for another complete cycle of rotation.*

▶ **ADJECTIVE + CYCLE** complete ♦ natural ♦ seasonal ♦ annual ♦ long-term ♦ regular ♦ economic *Expenditure and income have to balance out over the economic cycle.*

▶ **VERB + CYCLE** enter ♦ go through ♦ complete ♦ repeat ♦ break ♦ halt, arrest ♦ control ♦ drive *The Grameen Bank aimed to break the cycle of poverty by providing the poor with micro-credit.*

▶ **PHRASES** a stage/phase/part of the cycle ♦ a point in the cycle *Each phase of the cycle must be completed before the next phase is initiated.*

Entry for **cycle** *noun* from the *Oxford Learner's Dictionary of Academic English*

The entry for **cycle** only includes the meanings that are important in academic writing. This enables the academic meanings to be treated in more detail.

A more precise meaning that is particular to biology is identified in a 'HELP' note.

Cross-references indicate entries for compound words with their own precise definitions.

The example sentences show genuine academic usage, based on the texts in the Oxford Corpus of Academic English.

Complementation patterns with prepositions or other words are clearly signposted before the examples that illustrate them.

Collocations and common phrases are shown and exemplified in a special section of the entry.

What is academic vocabulary?

Academic vocabulary can be divided into three broad categories. First, there is ordinary general English vocabulary. This includes all the function words such as *the, and, because, for, about*, as well as common verbs and adjectives and nouns for everyday things. At the other extreme, there is specialist subject vocabulary. This differs between different academic disciplines and can be highly technical; typically, students will need to learn these words as part of their subject studies, whether or not they are also learners of English. In between these two extremes, there is so-called 'subtechnical' or 'general academic' vocabulary. These are words that tend to be used across most or all academic disciplines; most are also used in general English. However, the way they are used in academic writing is often rather different, which is why these words deserve special study by the student of academic English. It is these 'general academic' words that are the main focus of this dictionary.

How did we make the dictionary?

A core headword list for this dictionary was drawn up through analysis of the Oxford Corpus of Academic English (OCAE), an 85-million word corpus designed specifically for this project and composed of undergraduate textbooks, academic journals, and scholarly monographs and handbooks, drawn from a range of disciplines across the four main subject areas of physical sciences, life sciences, social sciences, and humanities. We also paid due attention to the work of other researchers on academic vocabulary, especially the Academic Word List (AWL) (Coxhead, 2000) and Academic Keyword List (Paquot, 2010). Detailed lexicographic analysis of these core words followed, identifying their meanings, usage patterns and collocations in different academic contexts, together with useful synonyms, antonyms and defining words. All words identified as collocations, synonyms or antonyms, or used in common academic phrases or idioms, were then

added to the headword list, along with the words needed for explaining them. The definitions are mostly written using a controlled defining vocabulary of 2,300 words.

What did the corpus reveal about academic language?

Using the corpus enabled us to build up a detailed picture of key academic words, their meanings and usage patterns. It also revealed uses of particular words that other dictionaries overlook. Look at this list of noun-object collocations of **introduce** (*verb*):

introduce

V* obj N	9912	8.1
concept	345	8.11
idea	185	6.99
system	168	5.06
change	159	5.44
bias	133	7.56
measure	109	6.03
periodicity	108	8.2
policy	98	5.0
element	96	5.98
reform	95	6.9
term	92	5.09
notion	89	6.97
legislation	87	6.97
product	76	5.17
model	74	4.6
innovation	72	6.64
error	68	6.27

Though omission of these studies may **introduce** a *bias*, as studies which report ' () . To make sure this method did not **introduce** a *bias*, whenever we investigate However, this type of evaluation may **introduce** a *bias* against less attractive song contexts of language use, which might **introduce** a *bias* against any group of candidates degree to which non-tradable goods **introduce** a *bias* in PPP deviations, are the words low-intensity reflections, thereby **introducing** a *bias* in the process. Often, the on in which the crystallization process **introduces** a *bias* in the results, since less for DAS-ELISA and could consequently **introduce** a *bias* in our estimation of the relation subjective information, which may **introduce** a *bias* into the rankings. The bias This is a non-linear operation that may **introduce** a *bias* proportional to the variance ts. However, pre-selection inevitably **introduces** a *bias* towards prior knowledge, lower than total population growth this **introduces** a *bias* towards decreasing GDP per borough or Scottish burgh), thereby **introducing** a *bias* towards those places where that misclassification of alcohol intake **introduced** a major *bias*. However, we did scored sperm complements, but also **introduced** a potential *bias* linked to the success in the literature sample might have **introduced** a publication *bias* that (e.g. for relative country-specific bundles, which **introduces** a quality *bias*, whereby lower quality the use of pre-defined TFBSs patterns **introduces** a strong *bias*. </p><p> Current knowledge spillovers has the potential to **introduce** a substantial *bias* towards R & am

From the 'Word Sketch' and concordance for **introduce**, using the Oxford Corpus of Academic English and Lexical Computing's Sketch Engine program (Kilgarriff et al, 2004)

Bias and *error* are circled here because they do not easily fit into any meaning of **introduce** that is included in the *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* or other general learners' dictionaries. However, these are significant collocations in academic English and deserve an explanation of their own:

7 to cause sth to contain mistakes

- ◆ **introduce sth** *Measurement error could have been introduced by respondents' recall errors.*
- ◆ **introduce sth into sth** *The analyst's rankings rely on subjective information, which may introduce a bias into the rankings.*

From the entry for **introduce** from the *Oxford Learner's Dictionary of Academic English* on CD-ROM

What were the main challenges in making the dictionary?

The main challenge, which ran across many different aspects of dictionary policy, was how to reconcile the academic and pedagogic requirements of the dictionary. For example, the definitions needed to be precise but also learner-friendly. Sometimes this meant a ‘belt and braces’ approach. Take this definition of **recession** (*noun*):

re·ces·sion /rɪˈseʃn/ *noun* **1** [C, U] a difficult time for the economy of a country, lasting months or years, during which trade and industrial activity are reduced, and more people are unemployed **HELP** The actual definition of a **recession** is a fall in GDP for two quarters of the year (i.e. over a period of six months): *If the economy moves into a*

The main definition that comes first is closely based on the definition of this word offered in the *Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary*. However, as our economics adviser pointed out, it is not, strictly speaking, a definition at all, but a description. On closer inspection, this will be found to be true of many ‘definitions’ offered in general learners’ dictionaries, and the dictionaries in general are all the better for it. They offer learners the degree of understanding they need in a form that is accessible to them. For the EAP student, however, the case is different. The student of economics (or of history or geography or a number of related subjects) is not well-served by a mere description of a recession, when it is in fact a very precisely defined economic term. Our solution is to offer the description first, followed by the ‘actual definition’, clearly signalled as such.

The tension between academic rigour and learner-friendliness was also apparent when it came to selecting example sentences. All the example sentences are ‘corpus-based’; consultation with academics and EAP tutors at the planning stage impressed on us the need for extreme caution when lifting and editing examples from the corpus. Some were uncomfortable with the idea of editing corpus text at all. However, when faced with the reality of raw corpus text, set against the practical needs of the intended users of the dictionary, it became clear that many of the selected corpus examples would need some degree of editing to render them useful and appropriate for learners. Potential difficulties with unedited corpus text were numerous: very high-level vocabulary, difficult constructions, extremely long sentences, obscure and distracting detail, general oddness. Editors also had to take into account the fact that the academic genres in the corpus – textbooks and journal articles – were not the genres that students themselves would be writing. Textbook examples were often tempting, as they were clear and accessible, but many textbooks employ a tone of ‘expert speaking to student’ that would not be appropriate in a student essay.

The most useful examples are the most typical, which often means the most general: examples that are not taken directly from any one text, but are a distillation of a number of different corpus lines, all of them very similar. Other examples – the majority – do contain context derived from a particular source text; and, where appropriate, may be taken from that text unedited. This helps them to feel more authentic; nonetheless, it is important that the context does not get in the way of understanding the linguistic point being presented in the example. The examples are intended to ‘feel authentic’ but they cannot actually be authentic – even if completely unedited, they are inauthentic the moment they are taken from their context and set in italic type in a learner’s

dictionary. Ultimately, though, the needs of the learner trump other considerations. Learners using this dictionary are not expected to immediately start writing fluent expert academic texts; what they need to acquire is a style that approaches an appropriate academic style more closely, whilst still being accessible from the level they are currently at.

What other support can *OLDAE* offer the EAP student?

Academic writing is obviously about more than just putting words and phrases together. Chief among the difficulties listed by teachers in our survey were planning and structuring academic texts, presenting a coherent argument and using sources correctly. *OLDAE* also offers support with these more structural aspects of academic writing. *OLDAE*'s writing supplement, the Oxford Academic Writing Tutor, offers guidance on many different genres of academic writing, from essays and case studies, through to all the components of a dissertation, with authentic model texts, analysed and annotated, and tips on grammar, language and presentation. The CD-ROM offers an interactive version of the Writing Tutor, the Oxford Academic iWriter, which both presents the model texts and offers frameworks for students to structure their own writing.

How is this dictionary really different from all other learners' dictionaries?

OLDAE is the first learner's dictionary to be based on a corpus of academic English and to attempt to meet the specific needs of tertiary level students writing assignments in English in a wide range of disciplines. It covers a generous 'core' academic vocabulary, showing not only the meanings of words, but how to use them in context, and, frequently, how meaning and use may differ according to context. We hope it will be a valuable new resource for students.

References

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