



CAMBRIDGE

# Quick guide for teachers



Why do our assessments test vocabulary?





## Why is vocabulary so important?

Having a good vocabulary or 'word knowledge' is important for reading, listening, writing, and speaking. All four of these activities are critical to academic success. Our many years of data from hundreds of thousands of students shows that their English vocabulary predicts their success in all school subjects at GCSE, IGCSE, A level and International Baccalaureate. Research and practice show that a focus on learning vocabulary is an important part of content learning right across the curriculum, as well as a significant part of any literacy programme<sup>i</sup>.

## Receptive vocabulary

**Receptive vocabulary is the collection of words that a student understands. It is important for reading and listening.**

### Reading

Students need to understand what they read in textbooks, on screen, and in other written materials. To ensure comprehension, the reader must know 95% of words in a text. This percentage is as high as 98% in many texts for older students.

Good reading skills are also needed for success in examinations. Students need to understand the words in the instructions and questions that they encounter. Additionally, exams in subjects such as English language, history, geography and business studies may contain unfamiliar texts. Students with a weak receptive vocabulary will struggle to make sense of them and to work quickly with them in an exam setting.

### Listening

Students need to understand what they hear. They must comprehend what their teachers are explaining to them, and what they are being asked to do during lessons and for homework. Understanding what other students are saying is also important for pair-work and small group activities. In whole classroom learning activities, students need to understand other students' responses to teachers' questions.

Having a good receptive vocabulary is important for developing students' vocabulary further, and a 'virtuous circle' can occur. When students encounter a new word, they draw upon their existing knowledge of the words that surround it. The more words the students know, the easier it is for them to work out a meaning for the new word that fits with the overall meaning of the text or speech<sup>ii</sup>.



# Expressive vocabulary

**Expressive vocabulary is the body of words that a student can express or produce. Expressive vocabulary is important for speaking, writing and wellbeing.**

## Speaking

The richer a student's expressive vocabulary is, the clearer their oral responses to questions will be. This is important for formative assessment and the resulting lesson planning and development. Teachers need to understand what students have understood in their lessons, in order to know what to teach next and which of their teaching methods are most successful. When students do not understand something, they need to express this to their teachers, to get clarification and help.

## Writing

A good expressive vocabulary is also important for doing well in written classwork and exams. Questions in GCSE, IGCSE, and A level subjects such as English language, biology, and the humanities can require students to produce extended responses explaining complex ideas. In creative subjects such as English literature and drama, the use of appropriate vocabulary is rewarded when views and opinions are needed.

## Wellbeing

Social interactions are a key component of wellbeing in schools. Students need to feel understood by their classmates and teachers. At times, they will need to explain what is wrong, so that teachers and other students can help to make a situation better.

Levels of receptive and expressive vocabulary are closely associated with one another, and receptive vocabulary is generally better than expressive vocabulary<sup>iii</sup>. That is, there are often some words that students understand when they hear and read them, but they may not know them well enough to use them in their own speech and writing.

# What kind of words do students need to know?

Leading researchers in vocabulary distinguish three tiers of words. All three tiers are important for doing well in education<sup>iv</sup>:

## Tier 1:

### Basic everyday words

*Examples: about, who, because, time, most*

- Important for good communication with all teachers and fellow students.
- Needed to understand the background contexts used in questions in subjects such as geography, history, economics, English language, and drama. Even in mathematics, problem-solving questions contextualise mathematical content, to check that students can apply their mathematical understanding in the 'real world'.
- Important in creative subjects such as English literature and drama, where the student must communicate everyday situations to a reader or an audience. A good vocabulary helps with the accuracy of communication and helps to bring an essay or a performance to life.

## Tier 2:

### Words that appear across the school curriculum but are not typical in everyday conversation

*Examples: assess, contrast, method, analyse, examine, conclude, theory, percent*

- Around 570 words occur frequently in academic texts and discussions<sup>v</sup>.
- They are very general academic words - they are not specifically connected with a single school subject.
- Although these words may not be used very often outside of school, they are very useful for all students during lessons and in exams.
- A common reason for underperformance is not answering the question asked. Understanding 'command' words within questions such as analyse, evaluate and review is critical to avoiding this pitfall.
- Cambridge publishes a list of command words on their website [cambridgeinternational.org](https://www.cambridgeinternational.org). The definitions will help students to understand what the words are asking them to do. The list does not include simple instruction words like write, circle or find. This list, as well as subject-specific command words, will also appear in new and revised syllabuses published from 2019 onwards. In addition, these command words will be in exam and assessment materials from 2022 onwards.

## Tier 3:

### Subject-specific words

*Examples: polygon, metabolism, symbiosis, electron, genre, tectonic*

- Some academic vocabulary is specific to a single subject or a group of closely related subjects.
- Words such as calibration have a specific meaning in science, but a more general meaning in everyday conversations.
- The stronger a student's subject-specific vocabulary, the better they can engage in lessons and follow what is being taught.
- Good subject-specific vocabulary helps students to demonstrate their understanding in examinations.

## References

<sup>i</sup> Blachowicz, C. & Fisher, P. J. (2015). *Teaching vocabulary in all classrooms* (5th ed.). Pearson.

<sup>ii</sup> Quigley, A. (2018). *Closing the vocabulary gap*. London and New York: Routledge.

<sup>iii</sup> Owens, R. E. (2001). *Language development: An introduction* (5th ed.). Needham Heights, MA: Allyn and Bacon.

<sup>iv</sup> Beck, I. L., McKeown, M. G., & Kucan, L. (2013). *Bringing words to life: Robust vocabulary instruction*. (2nd ed.). New York: Guildford Press.

<sup>v</sup> Coxhead, A. (2021) The academic word list. <https://www.wgtn.ac.nz/lals/resources/academicwordlist> – academic word list.

University of Plymouth (2021) What is the academic word list? <https://www.plymouth.ac.uk/students-and-family/academic-word-list/what-is-the-academic-word-list>