WRITING SKILLS

Vocabulary

Handling new words

When you hear a new word, decide how important it is. In an article, is it used repeatedly? Is it a sentence's subject? Is it emphasised? In a lecture, is it both being spoken and on the Powerpoint slides?

	Spoken (e.g. in a lecture)	**Written** (e.g. in an article)
Not important	**Ignore** it. You want the complete idea, and shouldn't miss the whole point by worrying about one word.	**Ignore** it. If you want to, make a note to come back later.
Useful	**Guess**. The whole sentence will often give you a hint, and you can imagine what meaning makes most sense from other ideas around it.	**Guess**. The whole sentence often gives you a hint. At least, work out the type of word (e.g. words with "-tion" are usually nouns). Don't automatically go for the dictionary; doing that too often interrupts the whole text's meaning.
Important	**Ask**. Some lecturers are OK with being asked, and some prefer you leave it for the tutorial. Sometimes you can ask another student. This is also easy in conversation.	**Check**. Really important words only occasionally appear, and going to a dictionary won't interrupt too much.

Building new vocabulary

Like any natural language, English has different types of vocabulary. At uni, the three main types are jargon, academic vocabulary and everyday vocabulary. For example, this passage

> Given the intrinsically limited regenerative abilities of the CNS and the highly complex inhibitory environment of the damaged tissues, stem cell transplantation has great potential to regenerate a robust population of functional neural cells such as neurons and oligodendrocytes, thereby re-establishing disrupted neural circuits in the damaged CNS areas. However, several pertinent obstacles hinder advances in stem cell transplantation... MnO_2 nanosheets were synthesised based on a previous protocol with minor modifications (Letao et al., 2018).

is from health science. Some of its words are only used by people in that area – if you're not studying health science, you probably don't know words like "oligodendrocytes". Those discipline-specific words are called ***jargon***. Some words, like "protocol" and "synthesised", are used in all faculties but still only in ***academic*** work. And some words, like "intrinsically" or "disrupted", are useful anywhere and might be heard outside uni – that is, ***everyday*** vocabulary. Each type can be learnt in its own way.

Jargon

- Most course textbooks include a **glossary** (a jargon dictionary) at the end, with technical definitions. That's your first place to look.
- Many course textbooks include **definitions** (e.g. in the margin). Check the index to see where your textbook first mentions a piece of jargon, and look for the definition there.
- Jargon is often made of smaller **pieces** – e.g. "oligodendrocytes" = "oligo" (a few) + "dendro" (branches) + "cytes" (cells), and means "cells with a few long parts sticking out". Learning the pieces sometimes helps you understand the word (e.g. if you study health technology, then knowing that "cyte" = "cell" is also useful with jargon like "granulocyte" or "cytosis").
- Many areas of study also have **discipline-specific reference books** or dictionaries. Ordinary dictionaries sometimes don't include jargon.

Academic

- A lot of academic vocabulary appears repeatedly as you do research and discuss your work, so you'll often get used to it by **experience**.
- Ordinary **dictionaries** are more likely to help with this type of vocabulary.
- Be willing to **ask** others in your course. Usually they'll be happy to help.
- You're likely to **use** this type of vocabulary in your own work. Using a word is the best way to remember it.

Everyday

- **Read** and **talk** as much as possible – join a club, buy a newspaper, do volunteer work, watch TV – and take in as many types of writing/speaking as possible.
- Of course, that's in addition to your own **research**, **discussion** and **groupwork**.
- Remembering new words is often the most difficult part. Some people like to make **flashcards** or their own **dictionary**. Most vocabulary's easier to remember as part of a sentence than on its own – write a few examples. Also make a note of the pronunciation and part of speech (i.e. noun, verb, etc.). If your first language isn't English, be careful of translating it – moving between languages can often change the meaning slightly.

Always remember why each type is important:

Jargon is important because it conveniently labels the topics and ideas in your area of study.
Academic vocabulary is important because it shows you're thinking like a researcher (most academic jargon is about research values and processes), and makes you part of an academic community.
And ***everyday*** vocabulary is important because it's the clearest and easiest to understand – that is, it communicates best.

Don't get them mixed up. For instance, never use jargon to show off how much of a researcher you are. Jargon is the most difficult vocabulary type, especially for outsiders, and is worst at communicating (except with other people in the same area).

Dictionaries and thesauruses

Many types of ***dictionary*** are available; choose one based on how you want to use it (e.g. ordinary dictionaries and discipline-specific dictionaries include different types of vocabulary). You have to decide which type's most useful for you. Most dictionaries give you

regenerate /rəˈdʒɛnəreɪt/, *v.* **–rated**, **-rating**; – *v.t.* 2. to re-create, reconstitute, or make over, esp. in a better form. 3. to generate or produce anew...

spelling — pronunciation — part of speech — related words — definition

(Regenerate, 1981)

↳ one word often has several definitions

You can use a similar pattern if you want to start your own dictionary, such as

Word	Pronunciation	Part of speech	Definition	Example
regenerate	re-JENNA-rate (or rəˈdʒɛnəreɪt)	verb	repair by making new	The proteins regenerate the torn skin.

Working out a word for yourself often works better than going to a dictionary. English is full of metaphors, euphemisms and idioms – that is, words that are used with multiple meanings (sometimes even opposite meanings). For instance, in that earlier passage, "population" and "environment" have technical jargon meanings different to the ordinary everyday meaning you'll get from most dictionaries. A dictionary can tell you a word's possible meanings, but you must judge for yourself which works best in your own case. The whole text's sense is normally more important than the single word's sense.

Thesauruses can cause a lot of problems. English is very rich in synonyms, but they almost never have exactly the same meaning – they're usually different in subtle ways. Staying with the same example, if a student right-clicked on "regenerate" and looked at the Synonyms, they'd find

renew, restore, revive, redevelop, reinforce, stimulate, restart, rejuvenate

Many students would just choose the cleverest-sounding word from that list and use it, hoping it looked academic. DON'T – their different meanings make that a serious mistake. You can *renew* a borrowed library book, *restore* a faded painting, *revive* a person who's fainted, *redevelop* a street of empty buildings, *reinforce* concrete, *stimulate* a bored person, *restart* a computer or *rejuvenate* a tired person, but only two (maybe three) of those words can be used to talk about repairing damaged cells. If you can't guess which two, then you see why synonyms are dangerous – though if you know the words well enough to consciously use their differences, they can also be very powerful. That's why building your vocabulary is a good habit, even though it normally means making mistakes in the process.

One last point: **always use your vocabulary to communicate**. Never use it to show off. If your argument's good, your research sound, your comments thoughtful, your reasoning valid and your conclusions insightful, then help your reader see those things without struggling. That includes using words they understand. Too many students try to use difficult vocabulary to sound smart – but the best way to sound smart is to show the value of your ideas. Direct, ordinary vocabulary is often the best way to do that. In the above example,

> "neural circuits in the damaged CNS area"

is a bit jargonistic, but that's OK because it needs jargon – it's talking about things in its special area of study. By contrast,

> "several pertinent obstacles hinder advances"

isn't OK. The writers mean "several relevant problems make the work difficult", and should just say that. People know the word "relevant" more than the word "pertinent", and people understand "make something difficult" more than "hinder". Many good researchers are bad writers – a good vocabulary should be used to make your writing more exact and more flexible, NOT more impressive. Use direct, well-known words if they get your meaning. If your first language is English, think of the word you'd find easiest if you were reading it. If your first language isn't English, think of the first word you learnt. English learners normally learn "relevant" before "pertinent", and that helps you judge what your own readers will be most comfortable with.

The great secret: As you see new words, work out their meaning *then* attach the word to it. That includes seeing the type of word and how/where you use it. Dictionaries can help, but only use them occasionally, and always with your own judgement. Be careful of synonyms.

References

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