Academic Vocabulary Guide: Word Cards

Paper and digital word cards are acknowledged by both students and researchers as an efficient way to quickly learn vocabulary.[1] Word cards are easy to create and customize, help you learn and remember words, and can be adapted to many study methods and games you can play alone or in a group with friends.

> Word cards can be index cards, slips of paper, sticky notes, or digital cards.

When to Use Word Cards

Use word cards to study when you need to learn words for short term retrieval, long term retrieval, or quick improvement of academic reading comprehension[2] or fluency.[3] Your goal will determine how you use the cards.

> Start by using Quizlet word cards or the Frayer Model[4] template at the end of this document.

Paper Word Cards

Write the target word on one side and add a definition in your own words, facts such as pronunciation or translation, examples, and non-examples. On the back of the card, write everything but the word. Each time you encounter the card you can add more information such as a drawing or image, a sentence with the word in a context you will use, or some fill-in-the blank sentences. Each encounter with the card strengthens your memory of the word and your ability to use it.

Advantages

Research suggests studying with word cards is more effective than word lists.[5] Paper cards are inexpensive and easy to shuffle, group, and store. Customizing paper cards to add words from academic texts that you read or from your field of study is easy. Paper cards can be used regardless of internet availability and they do not require data or electricity while you practice. You can also play games with paper cards alone or in groups with friends.

Disadvantages

You cannot always find pre-made word cards. They have no audio for learning pronunciation, no automatic quizzes, and it can be difficult to play remote or online games in groups with friends.

Digital Word Cards

Digital cards are electronic forms of paper cards and effective for learning vocabulary.[6] Many websites are available to make cards including Quizlet, Kahoot, and Vocabulary.com.

Advantages

Using a website such as Quizlet for digital cards will provide you with free and premium options. You can make your own cards or access pre-made sets created by others. The Quizlet website is flexible enough that you can add audio and visual information on the front and back. You can also learn through multiple choice, writing answers, matching, and playing games. Depending on the information you enter, you can quiz yourself on meanings, pronunciation, and spelling. The process of making your own cards deepens your engagement with the words you are learning. Repeating this process

also gives you more chances to elaborate and create mental links as you interact with each word, helping you learn and retain vocabulary information.[7] Digital cards also make it easy to play remote games in groups with friends.

Disadvantages

Digital cards require a device such as a smartphone or computer and access the internet. You also lose the kinesthetic learning advantage provided by writing or drawing word cards.

Summary

Our Academic Vocabulary Guide resource series was developed as a way to provide English as an Additional Language (EAL) learners the opportunity to better learn and retain academic vocabulary. For readers interested in more information about academic vocabulary development, please view our Academic Vocabulary Guide resource.

We hope this guide will provide you with strategies for more productive academic vocabulary development. If you have questions, please contact elc@vanderbilt.edu.

Find this guide and more online at: https://www.vanderbilt.edu/elc/resources/academic-vocabulary-guide/

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[1] *Quizlet in the EFL Classroom: Enhancing Academic Vocabulary Acquisition of Japanese University Students* by Dizon, 2016, Teaching English with Technology, 16(2), pp. 40–56; *EFL Vocabulary Acquisition through Word Cards: Student Perceptions and Strategies* by Wilkinson, 2017, TESL-EJ, 21(3)

[2] *Strategies for Improving Reading Skills among ELL College Students by Lei*, Berger, Allen, Rosenberg, & Plummer, 2010, Reading Improvement, 47(2), pp. 92–105

[3] *Applying the Four Strands to Language Learning* by Nation & Yamamoto, 2012, International Journal of Innovation in English Language Teaching and Research, 1(2), pp. 173–187

[4] *A Schema for Testing the Level of Cognitive Mastery* by Frayer, Frederick, & Klausmeier, 1969, Madison, WI: Wisconsin Center for Education Research

[5] *English Vocabulary Learning with Word Lists, Word Cards and Computers: Implications from Cognitive Psychology Research for Optimal Spaced Learning* by Nakata, 2008, ReCALL, 20(1), 3–20

[6] *Quizlet in the EFL Classroom: Enhancing Academic Vocabulary Acquisition of Japanese University Students* by Dizon, 2016, Teaching English with Technology, 16(2), pp. 40–56; *The Effect of Quizlet on Vocabulary Acquisition* by Sanosi, 2018, Asian Journal of Education and e-Learning 6(4)

[7] *Vocabulary Notebooks: Theoretical Underpinnings and Practical Suggestions* by Schmitt & Schmitt, 1995, ELT Journal, 49(2), pp. 133–143; *Instructed Second Language Vocabulary Learning* by Schmitt, 2008, Language Teaching Research 12(3), pp. 329–363; *Intentional and Incidental Second Language Vocabulary Learning: A Reappraisal of Elaboration, Rehearsal and Automaticity* by Hulstijn, 2001, pp. 258–286
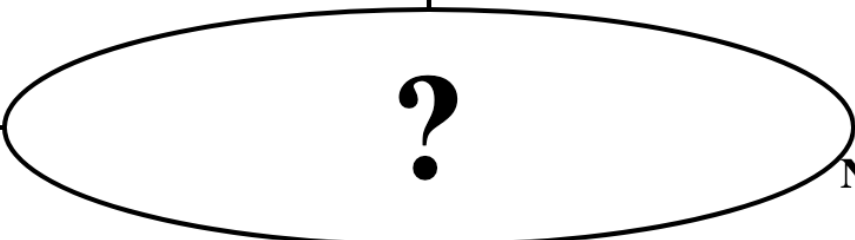
Frayer Model Word Cards: Front

Definition	Facts / Pronunciation / Translation
Examples	**Non-Examples**

Word

Definition	Facts / Pronunciation / Translation
Examples	**Non-Examples**

Word

Frayer Model Word Cards: Back

Definition	Facts

?

Examples	Non-Examples

Definition	Facts

?

Examples	Non-Examples