



Scholarly Reading Guide: Reading for Academic Jargon

What Is Academic Jargon?

One factor that affects reading comprehension is “jargon”: discipline-specific vocabulary in research. Academic jargon is specific words or phrases used to define concepts, methods, and ideas within specific disciplines. Academic jargon is difficult because the words found in articles do not always match the dictionary definition of those words.

Attempting to define words out of context can slow readers down. Word-by-word reading often causes readers to misunderstand how an author is using a specific word.

Example of Academic Jargon

First, in the following passage, the author uses the word “laminated”:

With all the methodological choices available in studying academic writing, there is a commonality: to make visible the act of writing. We study people while they write. We study writing itself. We study language. However, in the beginning of my teaching career, it seemed easier to assess the outcome of a writing activity completed in class than it was to study the complex and laminated history of the academic writers within my classroom.¹

If we looked up the word “laminated” in a dictionary, this is the definition listed: “overlay (a flat surface, especially paper) with a layer of plastic or some other protective material”.

This dictionary definition does not make sense given the author is talking about academic writing and ways to study writing. Academic writers sometimes use certain words differently, as compared to the dictionary. This is because disciplines have different ways they use language to prove a point.

Now, look at the passage again. Skim over the words that do not make sense and avoid defining each word separately. Ask yourself, what information can I gather from the passage based on the words I understand? Read the passage above again. This time, scan the passage for what you can understand. It seems the author is talking about how we ‘study writing’. The author also discusses different ways to study writing. While we may not know the context of “laminated”, we can gather from the rest of the passage that the author is talking about studying the lives and history of writers.

Strategies for Reading Academic Jargon

Part of increasing critical thinking in scholarly reading is improving your ability to acknowledge when certain words are being used in ways that are different than the dictionary.

- Avoid reading word for word (and defining words as you go). This causes slow reading and misunderstandings of certain words.
- Skim over the words that do not make sense and avoid defining each word separately. Ask yourself: What information can I gather from the passage based on the words I understand?
- Instead of reading the passage word for word, scan the passage for what you can understand.

¹ “*laminated, adj.*”, Lexico.com, 2019, Dictionary.com & Oxford University Press
[The Vanderbilt University English Language Center](#)

Disciplinary Context

Academic arguments often rely on specific language and phrases that disciplines use over and over in research. These words have a long history behind why they are used, so it is important to understand the context.

Example

Consider the phrase “critical pedagogy”. You may understand the term “criticize” in the sense of *to say something negative about a person*. If you look up the word “pedagogy”, you may find a definition similar to *a method or practice of teaching*. However, when we put “critical” together with “pedagogy”, it creates a disciplinary-specific phrase. Education, applied linguistics, and other disciplines use the phrase “critical pedagogy” as a teaching approach inspired by critical theory.

Jargon can be used so often you that may need to learn the history behind terms and phrases in your discipline.

Summary

Our Scholarly Reading Guide resource series was developed as a way to provide English as an Additional Language (EAL) learners the opportunity to better read and comprehend scholarly texts.

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

Find this guide and more online at: <https://www.vanderbilt.edu/elc/resources/scholarly-reading-guide/>