



## **Beyond Flashcards: 3 Activities to Practice Academic Vocabulary**

by [A. C. Kemp](#)

We know that to succeed academically, multilingual learners (MLLs) need to both understand and accurately use a rich, varied lexicon, especially in writing. As Engber (1995) explains, the size and quality of vocabulary is the strongest correlation to ratings of papers (based on a study of texts written by intermediate second language writers).

Certainly, students can learn vocabulary passively with flash cards and quizzes on definitions. However, this decontextualized method is not enough to give students the confidence to produce these words. But beyond flash cards, how can students master difficult words found on academic vocabulary lists?

This article offers three focused activities to help students better understand and use academic vocabulary: The Associations Game, The Book of Records, and My Categories. Each offers a different way for students to make a personal connection to the words while offering room for the instructor to supervise and give feedback. I have chosen college-level words to illustrate that these activities can be used with less frequent terms, but they are flexible and will accommodate a wide range of word lists. All of these activities can be adjusted for time by increasing or decreasing the size of the word list or the number of examples required.

### **Activity 1: The Associations Game**

The Associations Game is a review that helps students engage with academic words through self- and peer-generated examples. It is especially useful for more abstract terms and less frequently used words that might not be encountered outside of the classroom.

*Time:* 40 minutes

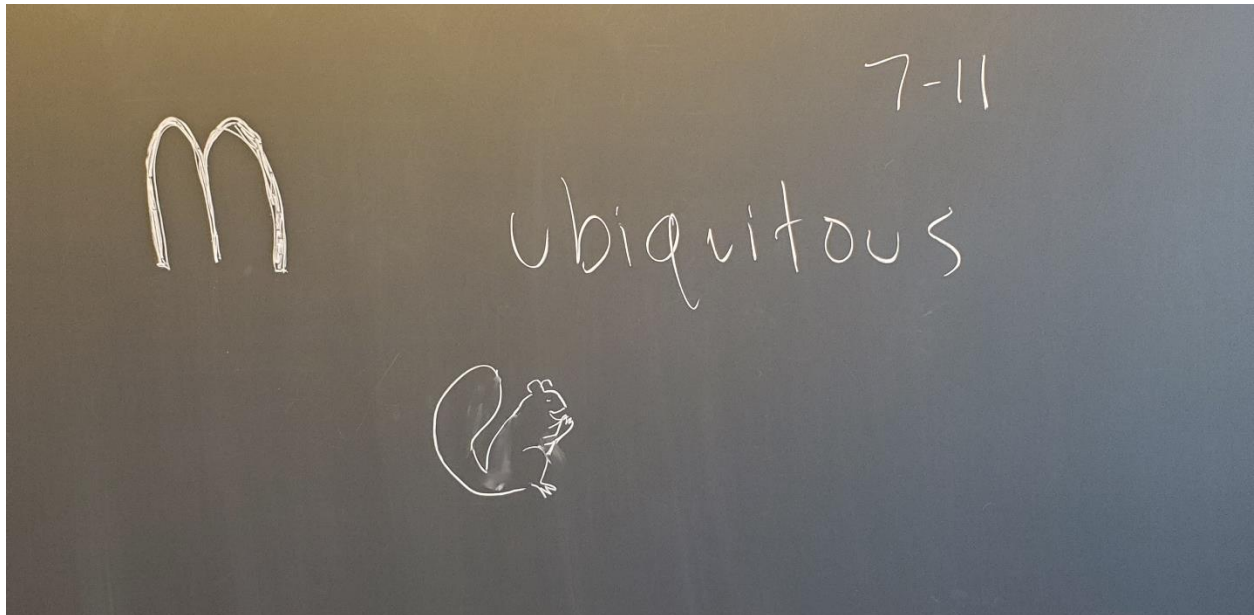
*Materials:* Paper cut into strips, scissors, and a different list of 10–15 words that students have encountered before for each group. (Try to avoid words that are very similar in meaning.)

## Warm Up

Before distributing the paper slips, write a familiar word on the board. Ask students what the word makes them think of. The example they give can be a person, place, thing, situation, experience, or feeling and can be expressed as an example: a word, phrase, sentence, or picture. To encourage students to make personal connections, stress that this should be an example, not a synonym or definition.

For instance, the simple word *hot* may conjure up pictures of the sun or fire for some students. Others may imagine a “hot” actor or fashion trend. The more academic word *ubiquitous* could elicit the example of Starbucks, event posters in the hallways, or the squirrels that are everywhere on campus.

Write or draw their examples next to the word. Clarify vague or ambiguous suggestions.

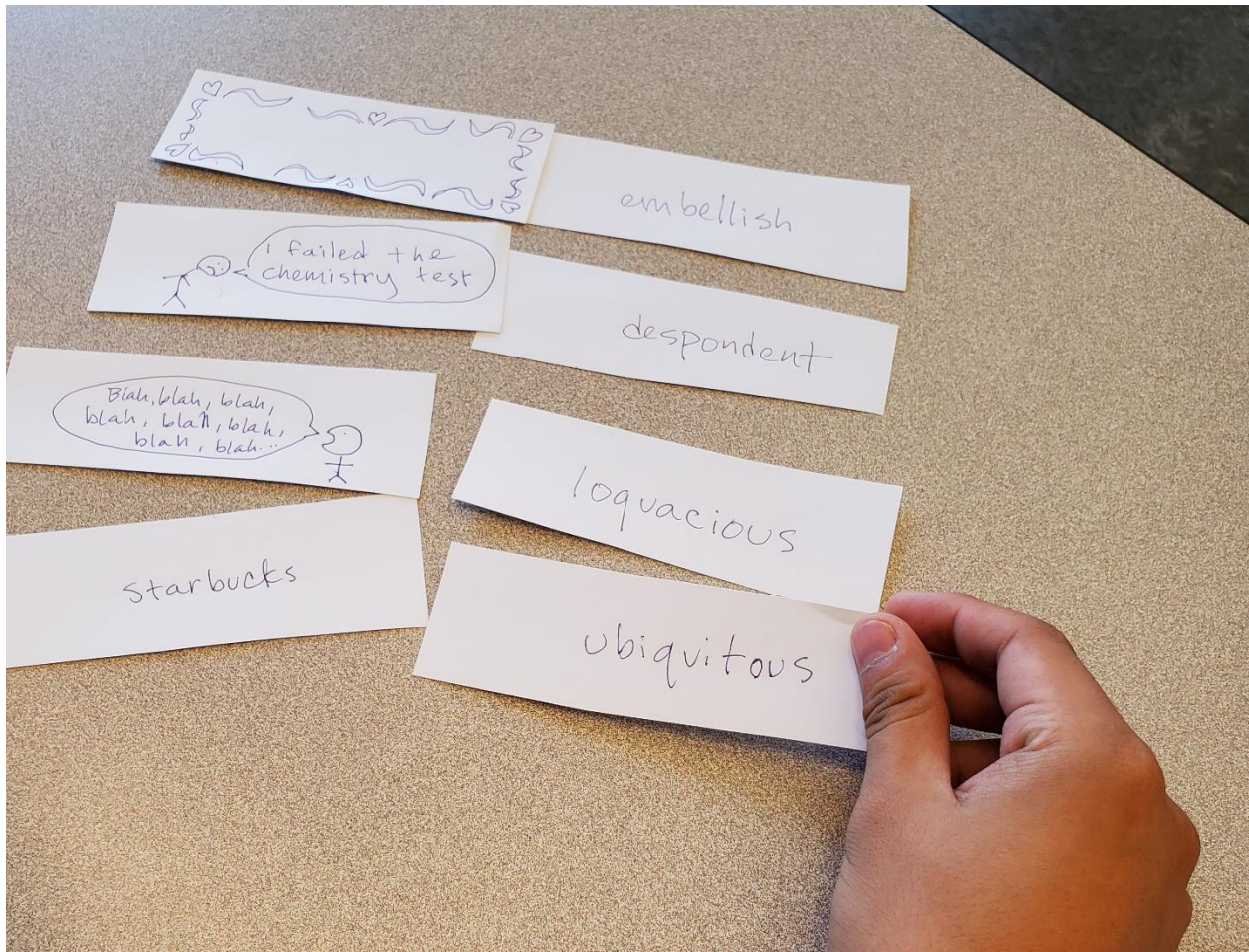


### Sample Wordlist

affluent	embellish	malicious	amorphous	expiration
collaborate	detriment	oblivious	reek	fritter
terse	surreptitious	ubiquitous	perplex	dwindle

## How to Play

First, divide the students into an even number of groups of with three to four students each and give each group a set of 10–15 blank strips of paper (one for each word). Students write the vocabulary words on the left side of blank strips. They then put one example for each word on the right side. Check student answers as they write them to ensure that their examples are appropriate.



After the students have filled out as many strips as they can within 20 minutes, they cut the completed ones in half with scissors and mix up the papers. Any uncompleted strips are discarded. Each team then exchanges their set with another group. The teams then try to re-create the original combinations. After they have finished, someone from the team that wrote the examples should check them.

*Note:* Set a timer for 20 minutes for the first part and call time for students to stop working, then exchange the mixed-up sets of strips. Make it clear to students that they do not need to finish all the words in the time allotted.

## Activity 2: The Book of Records

The Book of Records is a game I initially devised for students to practice comparative and superlative adjectives—and it is still useful for that! However, whether students are still mastering that skill or have gone beyond it, the Book of Records is a great way to practice using words in a fun way.

The name of the game should be based on the name of your school or program (e.g., “The Smith School Book of Records”). Because students will vie to be a “winner” in their class, be sure to include categories that a variety of students might win—whether that is a hobby or the amount of homework they get every week.

*Time:* 30–40 minutes, depending on the number and difficulty of questions

*Materials:* A list of questions about superlative qualities that use vocabulary students know passively.

## **Warm Up**

Start by writing a few superlative questions on the board. For instance, “Who is the most versatile actor?” or “Which Olympic sport is the most exciting?” As students suggest candidates, ask them to support their answers with reasons.

## **How to Play**

Break students up into groups of four or five. Each group receives the same list of six to eight questions—each containing a superlative. Students must give examples to support their claim to the record, and records are determined by consensus. The type and number of questions will determine the length of the exercise. For instance, “Who can tell the most terrifying story?” will take a long time. “Who is the most dexterous?” will take less time.

Once each group has determined its “record holders,” those students will go on to compete for the class record in front of the class. Final winners will be determined by the class.

### *Example Questions*

- Who can say the English alphabet the most rapidly?
- Who is the grouchiest when they wake up in the morning?
- Whose favorite animal is the fluffiest?
- Who was the most sedentary this week?
- Who can tell the most hilarious joke?
- Whose day was the most hectic?

## **Activity 3: My Categories**

Finally, My Categories is a great springboard to a writing activity as well as a way to practice vocabulary. It is possible to categorize words in many ways—groupings like “verbs,” “words from Latin,” or “words to describe a person” can be useful—however, for this exercise, the idea is for students to create categories that draw on their own experiences and interests.

*Time:* 30 minutes

*Materials:* Blackboard and a list of at least 25 words students know passively

## Warm Up

After giving students the word list, write a category of your own on the board. The category should be as specific as possible and should be based on *meanings*. Begin to add words and explain why each fits your category. Ask students for other words from the list they think would fit your category and write these on the board as well. Make sure that students understand there is no right answer.

### *Sample Wordlist*

scanty	sphere	boast	foible	exhibit	drizzle
habitat	clumsily	isolated	relaxed	debate	mammoth
summon	briskly	drooping	invisible	adoringly	bewildered
author	rage	benefit	shambles	livelihood	dominate
mimic	sweltering	gruesome	miniscule	woe	superficial

### *Examples of Model Categories*

“Words about my garden”

- Habitat—for insects
- Mammoth—the size of the sunflowers in August
- Benefit—the flowers benefit butterflies
- Drooping—the flowers if they don’t have enough water

“Words about my commute to school”

- Briskly—how I walk to the subway station
- Woe—if I miss the train, I’ll be late to work!
- Sweltering—the temperature on the subway in the summer

## How to Play

Students work in pairs to create three categories of three to five words each from the list and write them on a paper or the board. They should include their reasons for selecting each word. After they finish, groups read their favorite examples to the class. As mentioned earlier, this activity is a great lead-in to writing; students can expand on each list to create a complete paragraph.

## Conclusion

These are just a few of the ways you can give students opportunities to practice academic vocabulary. As they move through the semester, they build personal connections to items in their word lists, helping them to thrive in their content classes.

## Reference

Engber, C. A. (1995). The relationship of lexical proficiency to the quality of ESL compositions. *Journal of Second Language Writing*, 4(2), 139–155. [https://doi.org/10.1016/1060-3743\(95\)90004-7](https://doi.org/10.1016/1060-3743(95)90004-7)

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*A. C. Kemp has been a lecturer in English language studies at MIT since 2007. She has a master's degree in applied linguistics from the University of Massachusetts/Boston. A. C. has also presented extensively on teaching strategies for vocabulary acquisition. Since 2002, she has been the director of [Slang City](#), a website devoted to American slang and colloquial language.*