

Vocabulary



Definition

Many people think of vocabulary as the list of words that they studied in elementary school, but in the context of higher education, the word *vocabulary* typically refers to the language we use to talk about and within a given discipline. In biology, the word *cell* is fundamental to the field, for example, and in sociology, the word *population*. Likewise in composition: the vocabulary we use allows us to talk about writing and texts in specific ways. Some of the vocabulary writers use point to features within a text, like a thesis or claim; opening and closing paragraphs; and different sentence structures. Some of the vocabulary we use allows us to describe the processes we engage in when we write: to describe the process of composing a first version of a text and then second and third versions—it's helpful to have the words *draft* and *revise*. We have words for other processes we engage in when we write—

invention, *peer review*, and *publication*—and definitions for each. Moreover, as fields develop and we learn more, we may lose some words and add others. The word *genre* wasn't used in writing studies thirty years ago, for instance, but we understand today that experienced writers use *genre* as an idea and as a word to think about how to compose.

Importance to the Field

The members of a field or community are defined by a common language that allows them to refer to the same ideas and practices: the word *cell* means very different things in biology, the basis of life, than it does in criminology, a place where someone awaiting trial or convicted of a crime resides. In composition, we have a language as well, a set of vocabulary terms that can help us understand and practice writing well.

Resources

- Heilker, Paul, and Peter Vandenberg, eds. *Keywords in Composition Studies*. Portsmouth: Boynton/Cook, 1996. Print.
- Lindemann, Erika. "Early Bibliographic Work in Composition Studies." *Profession 2002*. New York: MLA, 2002. 151–58. Print.
- Stotsky, Sandra. "The Vocabulary of Essay Writing: Can It Be Taught?" *College Composition and Communication* 32.3 (1981): 317–26. Print.
- Wiley, Mark, Barbara Gleason, and Louise Wetherbee Phelps. *Composition in Four Keys*. Mountain View: Mayfield, 1996. Print.
- Williams, Raymond. *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*. New York: Oxford UP, 1984. Print.



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