

Exploring Thesauruses

A. Introduction

The word Thesaurus comes from the Greek language (Θησαυρός) and means *treasure*. This is exactly what a Thesaurus is – a treasure chest of possible words, related to a particular meaning, which you can use in your academic writing to make it more precise, show subtle nuances, and add sophistication, or variety, of language.



English is recognized as having the most words of any language in the world – the *Oxford English Dictionary*, for example, defines around 616,500 words! The richness that exists in modern English is due to the historical influence of different language groups – Germanic (Anglo-Saxon and old Norse), Romance languages (Latin, French) and Greek – and many ‘triplet synonyms’ exist which come from these different groups, e.g. *foretell* (Anglo-Saxon roots), *predict* (Latin roots), *prophesize* (Greek roots).

The large number of synonyms and near-synonyms allows English to draw shades of distinction unavailable in other languages and good writers will use a wide variety of vocabulary. For example, the table below gives some different ways of looking in English – does your own language have an exact translation for these words?

English word	Definition	Your language?
<i>Glare</i>	- to look at somebody/something in an angry way	Answers will vary – we could, I guess, input answers for the most common languages?
<i>Gaze</i>	- to look steadily at somebody/something for a long time, either because you are very interested or surprised	
<i>Glance</i>	- to look quickly at something/somebody	
<i>Peep</i>	- to look quickly and secretly at something, especially through a small opening	
<i>Observe</i>	- (formal) to watch somebody/something carefully, especially to learn more about them	
<i>Scrutinize</i>	- to look at or examine somebody/something carefully	
<i>Peer</i>	- to look closely or carefully at something, especially when you cannot see it clearly	
<i>Ogle</i>	- to look hard at somebody in an offensive way, usually showing sexual interest	

Table 1: Some different ways of looking in English

A wide variety of Thesauruses are available online, including:

1. MacMillan Thesaurus: <https://www.macmillanthesaurus.com/>
2. Merriam-Webster Thesaurus: <https://www.merriam-webster.com/thesaurus>
3. Thesaurus.com: <https://www.thesaurus.com/>
4. Collins Thesaurus: <https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english-thesaurus/>

B. Familiarization tasks

1. Compare the 4 Thesauruses above by searching for different synonyms of the word *plant*.
 N.B. take care, there are many different meanings for *plant* – look for ‘a living thing that grows in earth, with stems, leaves and roots’ (noun). It is a good idea to do a confirmation check for the meaning of listed synonyms in a monolingual/bilingual dictionary

- How many synonyms are given?
- How are the synonyms organized (alphabetically, by relevance, etc.)?
- Is it easy to find the difference in meaning between the synonyms listed?
- Which Thesaurus do you prefer and why?

Answers will vary

2. Use the online Thesaurus you prefer to find an appropriate synonym for the word *plant* in the following sentences:

- a. We have a *plant* growing outside our house.

= bush or shrub



- b. My garden lawn is being ruined by *plants* growing over it.

= weeds



- c. We like to use fresh *plants* in our cooking.

= herbs



- d. It's nice to have some *plants* in living spaces.

= houseplants or pot plants



- e. The *plants* that we planted in the winter have just appeared in the pots.

= seedlings or shoots



3. Find a synonym to replace the different meanings of *plant* in the following sentences:

- a. The Swaggerty Sausage Company has a meat *plant* in Kodak, Tennessee.

Factory

- b. He claimed the drugs were *planted* on him by the police.

Hidden or secreted

- c. The bouncer *planted* himself in front of the nightclub entrance.

Stood or positioned

- d. The company has been investing in new *plant* and equipment for its factory.

Machines

4. Repetition is sometimes used for rhetorical effect (e.g. “Ask not what your country can do for you – ask what you can do for your country” – John F. Kennedy, inaugural address). However, we generally try to avoid repetition in academic writing by using synonyms (similar meaning) or antonyms (opposite meaning).

Try to improve the following text by finding appropriate replacement words in a Thesaurus:

The **island** of Santorini in Greece is one of the **nicest islands** in Greece. It is famous for its **nice** beaches and **nice** food. The islanders are very **nice** too so if you want a **nice** holiday, visit Santorini.

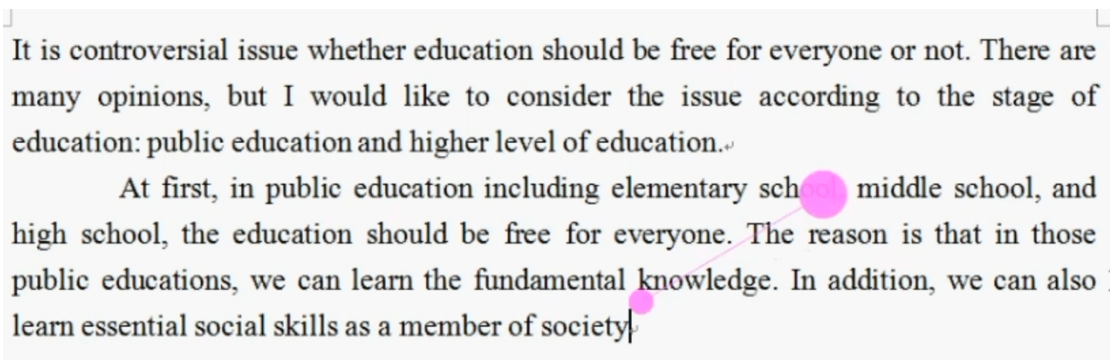
(Sample answer) The island of Santorini in Greece belongs to one of the most stunning archipelagos in the Mediterranean. It is famous for its picturesque beaches and delicious food. The islanders are very friendly too so if you want a perfect holiday, visit Santorini.

5. Use a Thesaurus to write 5 versions of the following sentence, which have roughly the same meaning:

Hannah considered¹ accepting² an accountancy job³ with Deloitte, but finally⁴ decided⁵ to become a doctor⁶ instead.

e.g. Hannah *contemplated* accepting an accountancy job with Deloitte, but finally decided to become a doctor instead.

1. Contemplated; thought about
 2. Taking; agreeing to
 3. Position; career
 4. Ultimately; in the end;
 5. Chose; resolved; elected
 6. Medic; medical professional
6. We are going to watch a short screen recording of a student writing an essay about whether education should be free or not. Her final text is shown below:



It is controversial issue whether education should be free for everyone or not. There are many opinions, but I would like to consider the issue according to the stage of education: public education and higher level of education.

At first, in public education including elementary school, middle school, and high school, the education should be free for everyone. The reason is that in those public educations, we can learn the fundamental knowledge. In addition, we can also learn essential social skills as a member of society.

Figure 1: Final text produced by a student

She uses a Thesaurus to find synonyms for the word *fundamental* and to avoid repetition in her essay. Watch the video two or three times, concentrating on the changes this writer makes to her text (the pink spots on the screen show where her eyes are focused during the writing task). Then answer these questions:

- a. Why does she copy-paste ‘social skills as a member of society’?
She decides to use this argument later in her essay and talk about learning ‘fundamental knowledge’ first.
- b. Why do you think she changes ‘basic knowledge for living’ to ‘fundamental knowledge’?

The writer explained that she thought the word *‘fundamental’* sounded more academic or sophisticated than *‘basic’*. This is true: although in the COCA corpus both words are seen predominantly in academic texts (basic = 26.7% of total hits; fundamental = 33.4% of total hits), *basic* is over

twice as frequent, in the corpus as a whole, as *fundamental* (basic = 74,781 hits; fundamental = 32,338 hits):

A. *Fundamental* search results in COCA

The screenshot shows the COCA interface for a search of 'FUNDAMENTAL'. The search results table is as follows:

HELP		ALL	BLOG	WEB-GENL	TV/MOVIES	SPOKEN	FICTION	MAGAZINE	NEWSPAPER	ACADEMIC	
1	<input type="checkbox"/>	FUNDAMENTAL	32338	4574	5697	466	3542	529	4247	2485	10798

B. *Basic* search results in COCA

The screenshot shows the COCA interface for a search of 'BASIC'. The search results table is as follows:

HELP		ALL	BLOG	WEB-GENL	TV/MOVIES	SPOKEN	FICTION	MAGAZINE	NEWSPAPER	ACADEMIC	
1	<input type="checkbox"/>	BASIC	74781	11649	12668	2112	6098	2287	12441	7535	19991

In addition, in Nation's BNC/COCA headword list, *basic* also appears in the first 1000 most frequent words, compared to the third 1000 most frequent words for *fundamental*. You can find this list here: https://www.dropbox.com/s/44nlxeiqtabdnc7/Nation_%2010000Headwords.pdf?dl=0

- c. How are the synonyms ordered in the Merriam-Webster Thesaurus?

They are ordered alphabetically:

Synonyms for *fundamental*

abecedarian, basal, basic, beginning, elemental, elementary, essential, introductory, meat-and-potatoes, rudimental, rudimentary, underlying

- d. Which synonym does she choose from the Thesaurus to avoid repeating the word *fundamental*?

She uses the word *essential*.

- e. The choices of synonyms listed in the Thesaurus are: *abecedarian*, *basal*, *basic*, *beginning*, *elemental*, *essential*, *introductory*, *meat-and-potatoes*, *rudimental*, *rudimentary*, *underlying*. Did the writer select the best option

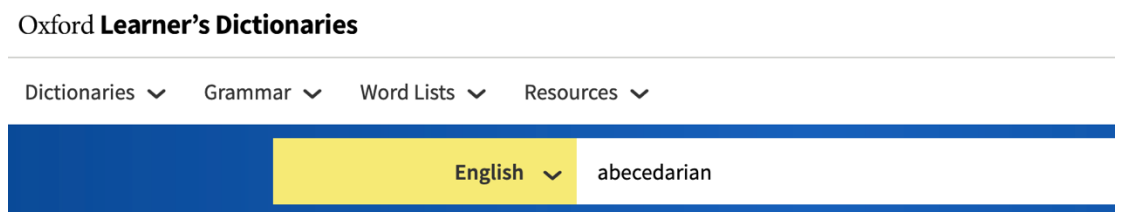
in your opinion? Use a monolingual dictionary, Google, the Academic Word List (AWL), or Nation's list of the 10,000 most common headwords in English to further investigate these possible choices.

Yes, 'essential social skills' is quite natural: the phrase '*essential skills*' has 157 hits in COCA, with half of these being from the academic section (81 hits):

The screenshot shows the COCA interface with the search term 'ESSENTIAL SKILLS' entered. The results table is as follows:

HELP		ALL	BLOG	WEB-GENL	TV/MOVIES	SPOKEN	FICTION	MAGAZINE	NEWSPAPER	ACADEMIC
1	<input type="checkbox"/>	ESSENTIAL SKILLS	157	20	26		2	2	16	81

Some of the suggested synonyms are very unusual words: for example, *abecedarian* doesn't appear at all in the Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary:



No exact match found for "abecedarian" in English

Did you mean:

- cesarian
- sectarian
- vegetarian
- Cancerian
- Iberian

Other suggestions are inappropriate because they are too informal for an academic essay, for example '*meat-and-potatoes*' is a less academic American expression, used more in newspapers:

A. 'Meat and potatoes' search in the Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary:

meat and potatoes *noun*

 /,mi:t ən pə'teɪtəʊz/

 /,mi:t ən pə'teɪtəʊz/

[uncountable] (*North American English*)

★ the most basic and important aspects or parts of something

- *Issues like this are the newspaper's meat and potatoes.*
- *Acoustic guitar and vocals are the meat and potatoes of this band.*

B. 'Meat and potatoes' search in COCA:

Corpus of Contemporary American English

SEARCH FREQUENCY CONTEXT

ON CLICK: [CONTEXT](#) [TRANSLATE \(JA\)](#) [GOOGLE](#) [IMAGE](#) [PRON/VIDEO](#) [BOOK](#) (HELP)

HELP		ALL	BLOG	WEB-GENL	TV/MOVIES	SPOKEN	FICTION	MAGAZINE	NEWSPAPER	ACADEMIC	
1	<input type="checkbox"/>	MEAT AND POTATOES	234	36	25	20	37	21	31	53	11