



# Using Concordancers to Improve Written Academic English

Here you can learn about

- **tools to increase your academic vocabulary and improve your written English.**

Much of this information sheet is based on working with concordancers (websites last accessed Jan 2021). An associated worksheet is also available.

## Concordancers

Here we can only provide a glimpse of what is possible with concordancers. The websites have good manuals/ instructions that provide further details.

Concordancers are tools that can search for a word and/or phrase in a database. Many concordancers are general and thus *discipline-independent*. If the database contains texts from your field of research, it is *discipline-dependent*, and you can use it to look for words/phrases commonly written in texts from your research field.

## Discipline-independent Concordancers

Simply searching the Web for a particular word/phrase, e.g., by using [linguee.com](http://linguee.com), is not always accurate enough when searching for words in context because so many of the Web's English texts have been written by non-native speakers. Concordancers using more reliable databases tend to be commercial and only have limited free access. On the plus side, they generally also have good manuals/user info on the website. Writefull ([www.writefull.com](http://www.writefull.com)), Ludwig ([ludwig.guru](http://ludwig.guru)) and Sketch Engine ([www.sketchengine.eu](http://www.sketchengine.eu)) are three such concordancers.

**Writefull:** (<https://writefull.com/>)

Writefull allows you to search Google Books, Google Scholar, Google News or the Web. This differentiation is sometimes useful: Google Books tends to be a more reliable source than Google Scholar because of the number of non-native speakers writing scholarly articles.

**Ludwig:** (<https://ludwig.guru>)

Ludwig can do the same things as Writefull, but it also has a translation assistant. The website provides less information about what databases are being used for the word searches (it simply states that they are "reliable"), so it is difficult to know how accurate the results are.

At [www.writefullapp.com](http://www.writefullapp.com), you will find an older version of Writefull. If you scroll down on that website, you will find a free app (for Macs and Windows) that will allow you to use Writefull for free on your computer.



**Sketchengine:** (<https://www.sketchengine.eu/> - Several databases)

Sketch Engine is a powerful concordancer but using all its facilities can be complicated. Free access to the British Academic Written English Corpus with nearly 7 million words is available to everyone. Costs are incurred when using other databases. Many EU universities are entitled to free use until 2022. Sketch Engine also allows you to investigate words/phrases in a database you have constructed yourself (discipline-dependent concordancer), similar to AntConc below. SkELL (<https://skell.sketchengine.co.uk>) is a simplified free version.

**COCA:** <https://www.english-corpora.org/coca/> (One billion words)

Corpus of Contemporary American English

SEARCH FREQUENCY CONTEXT OVERVIEW

ON CLICK: [CONTEXT](#) [CHART](#) [TRANSLATE \(??\)](#) [GOOGLE](#) [IMAGE](#) [PRON/VIDEO](#) [BOOK](#) (HELP) WORD PROFILES: [FIGURE](#)

	CONTEXT	FREQ	TOTAL 1,406   UNIQUE 140 *
1	<input type="checkbox"/> FIGURE 1 SHOWS	497	
2	<input type="checkbox"/> FIGURE 1 ILLUSTRATES	124	
3	<input type="checkbox"/> FIGURE 1 IS	110	
4	<input type="checkbox"/> FIGURE 1 PRESENTS	79	
5	<input type="checkbox"/> FIGURE 1 PROVIDES	65	
6	<input type="checkbox"/> FIGURE 1 DEPICTS	65	
7	<input type="checkbox"/> FIGURE 1 DISPLAYS	43	
8	<input type="checkbox"/> FIGURE 1 INDICATES	26	
9	<input type="checkbox"/> FIGURE 1 ARE	24	
10	<input type="checkbox"/> FIGURE 1 DEMONSTRATES	21	
11	<input type="checkbox"/> FIGURE 1 SUGGESTS	20	
12	<input type="checkbox"/> FIGURE 1 REPRESENTS	19	
13	<input type="checkbox"/> FIGURE 1 SUMMARIZES	16	
14	<input type="checkbox"/> FIGURE 1 WAS	14	
15	<input type="checkbox"/> FIGURE 1 CONTAINS	12	
16	<input type="checkbox"/> FIGURE 1 CAN	11	
17	<input type="checkbox"/> FIGURE 1 WERE	11	
18	<input type="checkbox"/> FIGURE 1 GIVES	9	
19	<input type="checkbox"/> FIGURE 1 HAS	9	
20	<input type="checkbox"/> FIGURE 1 REVEALS	9	
21	<input type="checkbox"/> FIGURE 1 COMPARES	8	
22	<input type="checkbox"/> FIGURE 1 INCLUDES	8	
23	<input type="checkbox"/> FIGURE 1 REFLECTS	7	
24	<input type="checkbox"/> FIGURE 1 OFFERS	7	

The COCA database is smaller but more powerful than Writefull or Ludwig as it allows you to search for specific types of words (POS menu on Search page). For example, to know which verbs can be used to describe the figures in your paper, type *Figure 1 \_v\** in the search box and the information to the left is supplied.

## A Discipline-dependent Concordancer

To really understand how language is used in your research area, you need to develop your own database of texts from your field. A useful open-access concordancer software for doing this and investigating language is

**AntConc** (<https://www.laurenceanthony.net/software.html>)

This software is fairly simple to use and has a good manual. It is currently freeware. It also lets you compare language in two databases. Thus, you can, e.g., discover words that are common in your field but you are not using.

Tip:  
If possible, use texts where at least one author is a native speaker.