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 August 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

The concordancer landscape changes constantly. Writefull, a previously mentioned concordancer, is still available (https://writefull.com/) but the latest version has not been checked as it has become heavily Microsoft dependent.

Simply searching the Web for a particular word/phrase, e.g., by using 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.

Ludwig guru, Google ngrams and Sketch Engine are three such concordancers.

Ludwig: (https://ludwig.guru)

Ludwig has simple instructions but the free version is restrictive in how often you can use it per day. The website says little about the databases it uses https://lexicoblog.blogspot.com/2020/06 gives a good review.

Google ngrams: (https://books.google.com/ngrams)
This website performs searches in the books scanned by Google. For simple questions about writing correct English, it is a reliable source.

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DFG Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft

Something here you don't understand? Contact Anne Wegner: anne@write-english.de

Sketchengine: (https://www.sketchengine.eu/)

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/)

The COCA database is smaller but more powerful than other concordancers 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. You need to register to use it, but it currently charges no fees.

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.

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

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.

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