Word Clouds

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Levels	Intermediate +
Aims	Previewing a text and its vocabulary
Class Time	5–15 minutes
Preparation Time	5–10 minutes
Resources	Wordle (http://www.wordle.net), a free online tool for creating word clouds

A word cloud is a visual representation of a text and is easily created using free websites. In a word cloud, words that are used more frequently in a text appear larger; words that are used less frequently appear smaller. While a word cloud can be used in a wide variety of activities, it is especially useful in class discussions for previewing a text and its vocabulary. In the example in the Appendix below, a word cloud has been made of the course description in a syllabus to introduce students to an academic reading and grammar course.

PROCEDURE

1. Go to a word cloud website like Wordle (http://www.wordle.net).

    - Choose to *create your own* word cloud.

    - Select, copy, and paste your text into the box. In the Appendix below, the word cloud was created by copying and pasting a course description and objectives.

    - Insert a tilde (~) between two words to create a phrase.

    - When ready to make the cloud, click *Go*.

    - Set the number of words used in the word cloud. In the example provided, 50 words were used. Common words were excluded.

    - Choose the font and colors.

    - Select the orientation: horizontal, vertical, or a mixture.

    - Reload the layout until you like the appearance. For instance, you can choose to lay out the words in alphabetical order.

- Save as a PDF or make a screen shot to insert the word cloud into documents.

2. Give the students a copy of the word cloud on paper, or project it electronically for the class.

3. Use the word cloud to preview a text. The word cloud in the Appendix below clearly shows the students that the reading and grammar course focuses on skills, especially *developing skills for reading academic English.* In a class discussion, you can ask questions about the word cloud to see what students can guess about the focus of the text.

4. Use the word cloud to preview vocabulary. In this example, students can look for related words like *analysis* and *analyze* to discuss parts of speech. The students can also look for categories of words. For instance, for the term *critical thinking,* students can find related words like *synthesize, analysis,* and *analyze*. Students can ask questions about the words they do not know.

5. Use the word cloud as a graphic for the text. In this case, the word cloud of the course syllabus is used in the class website to be a continual reminder of the focus of the course.

CAVEATS AND OPTIONS

You can shorten or alter the activity for different situations:

1. Use a word cloud for vocabulary and sentence-writing activities.

2. Use a word cloud for discussion prompts.

3. Use a word cloud to review or sum up a text.

4. Use a word cloud for paraphrasing and summarizing activities. For instance, make a word cloud for a single paragraph or section. After reading the paragraph(s), students can write paraphrases or summaries using their own sentence structures by looking at only the key words appearing in the word cloud.

5. Compare two word clouds to compare two readings on the same topic. Make two word clouds: one for each article. Have students compare the authors' word choices and content.

6. Use a word cloud to show the results of class polls. Copy and paste students' answers to polls. The most frequent responses will appear larger in the word cloud.

7. Print a black-and-white copy of a word cloud (black background and white

text). Have students color in words to show themes, parts of speech, a character's traits, and so forth.

8. Try a website like Tagxedo (http://www.tagxedo.com/) to create word clouds in specific shapes.

REFERENCES

Wordle (http://www.wordle.net)

Tagxedo (http://www.tagxedo.com/)

APPENDIX: *Sample Word Cloud*