[JALT PRAXIS] WRITERS' WORKSHOP



Jerry Talandis Jr.

The Writers' Workshop is a collaborative endeavour of the JALT Writers' Peer Support Group (PSG). Articles in the column provide advice and support for novice writers, experienced writers, or nearly anyone who is looking to write for academic purposes. If you would like to submit a paper for consideration, please contact us. Email: jaltpubs.tlt.writers.ws@jalt.org • Web: https://jalt-publications.org/psg

Key Points About Keywords Jerry Talandis Jr.

S ometimes when submitting a paper for publication, the journal will require you to include a few descriptive keywords in order to facilitate its discovery on web searches. Here is an example of such a request, taken verbatim from the *JALT Journal submission guidelines* (Notes on editing & formatting, n.d.):

Following the Japanese translation of the abstract, include between two and five keywords, in alphabetical order, separated by a semi-colon. The use of keywords is a new addition to JALT Journal, so articles in past issues may not contain them. Keywords: abstract; American Psychological Association; reference list; style guide

Choosing keywords is no big deal, right? Just pull a few terms off the top of your head and be done with it. Well, even though such a casual approach will technically fulfill a submission requirement, bringing a bit more awareness and attention to optimizing keywords is worth the effort. In short, effective keywords can put your paper on the first or second page of a search result, thus making it more convenient for other researchers to cite. The more citations the better, as this is a measure of your paper's effectiveness and a reflection of your credibility and expertise as an academic (Miranda, 2016). Fortunately, choosing effective keywords does not require in-depth knowledge of sophisticated SEO (search engine optimization) techniques. In this column, I will cover a few key points about keywords to help get you started quickly and easily. I will also introduce a few free online tools that automate this task and help you test out and fine-tune your ideas.

The Goldilocks Approach: Not Too Short or Too Long

Ideally, a keyword should actually be a short phrase consisting of two to four words (How to choose the best keywords, n.d.). Single words tend to generate overly broad results, but long sentence-length phrases can lead search engines to filter results to such an extent that your paper is not included (Miranda, 2016). Let's call this the *Goldilocks approach* to choosing keywords, to make it easy to remember. Naturally, on occasion, single words may be unavoidable, but as a general rule of thumb, short phrases highly relevant to your study will lead to the best outcomes.

Avoid Using Words From Your Title

When you begin choosing the keywords, start with your title. Search engines scan article titles first and place great weight on these words (How to find keywords effectively, n.d.). Your title should already contain the most important concepts and ideas, so grab a thesaurus and find a good synonym or two. You want terms that rephrase, complement, and supplement your paper's title.

Highlight the Main Topic and Methodology

For better results, focus on the key concepts in your paper. Usually, you cover these points in the abstract and introduction, so look there for ideal keywords that capture the essence of what you are trying to do. For example, if you wrote up a report on a classroom action research project, mention the main intervention and how you went about collecting data. For example, how can you express the key aims of your study in a single phrase or two? What sort of methodology did you use? Did you analyze recordings? Examine samples of student writing? Evaluate various classroom activities? Tuning in to what you did, how, and why can spur some effective keyword creativity.

Follow Any Journal Guidelines

This point supersedes all others! Even if single word keywords are best avoided, but the journal guidelines call for them, you need to follow the rules. Familiarity with submission guidelines is an essential task in any case, so while you are at it, make note of any guidance on keyword choice. In the example from *JALT Journal* cited above, note how the only stated requirements are total number of items (two to five) and a bit of formatting advice (alphabetical order, separated by semicolon). Otherwise, you have free reign. Note the sentence on the newness of this requirement, which I suppose was included to clear up any confusion on this point. These sample keywords imply what the editors are looking for. However, if the journal you target does not mention keywords, peruse some past issues to see what other authors have done. If you are unclear as to what a journal may want, contact an editor and clarify this point. I would bet that many editors would appreciate your conscientiousness.

Research and Test Out Your Ideas

To make the job of choosing keywords easier, a number of free online tools can automate the process and help you fine-tune possible choices. A quick search of *word cloud generators* will bring up many options. To get you started, I recommend the *Jason Davies Word Cloud Generator*, which can be accessed at https://www.jasondavies.com/wordcloud. Simply paste in a bit of text from your paper, such as the abstract and/or introduction, and see what comes out. This web app is simple to use, and you can configure the resulting graphics to your liking. As a demonstration, I have taken the abstract and introduction from a past paper (Talandis Jr & Stout, 2015) and pasted it into the generator. The resulting word cloud is shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1

Jason Davies Word Cloud Generator sample image



From this image, I can instantly see which words are the most prominent. This information kickstarts me into thinking about which keywords I could use.

Once you have come up with a preliminary list of keyword ideas, the next step is to actually try them out. Miranda (2016) suggests pasting prospective ideas into a search engine of your choice and seeing what comes up. Do you see other papers on topics similar to yours? If so, then you are on the right track. If not, then refine and try again. A few online tools can help with this vetting process. One excellent place to start is Keyword Tool, an online service (https://keywordtool.io) with a free option that generates keyword suggestions based on Google search trends (How to find keywords effectively, n.d.). While primarily geared for business, using this service at the free level can provide a variety of useful options for academic research purposes. For example, typing action research brings up a list of 321 options (Figure 2).

Another interesting tool is *Google Trends* (https:// trends.google.com), which enables comparison of keyword choices to see which are more popular, thus clarifying your decision-making process. For example, say you are wondering which is better, *EFL* or *English as a Foreign Language*. Personally, I would lean towards the latter, as it is more descriptive, but let's compare them in Google Trends and see (Figure 3).

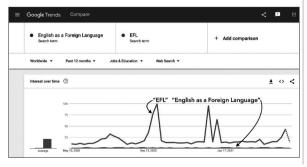
Figure 2

Sample Search Result From Keyword Tool

Keyword Tool Find	Keywords	Analyze Competitors Check Search Volume	Keyword Tool Pro API Access - Contact Log
Google YouTube Bing Ar	mazon eBa	y Play Store Instagram Twitter	
All v action research		Global / English	~ Q
Filter Results	^ B	Keyword Suggestions Questions Prepositions	Sort by Keywords - ascending
Negative Keywords	∽ S∈	earch for "action research" found 321 unique k	keywords
		Want to get up to 2x more keywords instead? Sub	sscribe to Keyword Tool Pro now!
		▼ Keywords ⊖	Search Volume 🛛 Trend 🕤 CPC 🕤 Competition
	0	Keywords D action research in education	Search Volume Θ $$ Trend Θ $$ CPC Θ $$ Competition
		•	Search Volume D Trend D CPC D Competition
		action research in education	Search Volume 0 Trend 0 CPC 0 Competition Do You Need This Information?
		action research in education action research model action research definition	Do You Need This Information? Keyword Tool Pro Provides Search
		action research in education action research model action research definition action research definition	Do You Need This Information?
		action research in education action research model action research definition action research arm test	Do You Need This Information? Ksyword Tool Pro Provides Search Volume Data For Canjish Ksywords. Try
		action research in education action research model action research model action research definition action research arm test action research examples	Do You Need This Information? Ksyword Tool Pro Provides Search Volume Data For Canjish Ksywords. Try

Figure 3

Sample Search Result From Google Trends



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"Hm! Interesting," you may think. "According to this data, the term *EFL* seems much more prominent. Okay, let's use that." In this way, Google Trends can help you test out and refine prospective keywords.

Final Thoughts

To recap, the topic of keywords may seem minor, but it is one of those academic writing details which can add a lot of value to your career. After all, it is not just about getting published—it is about doing everything possible to make sure your work gets noticed and cited. You have built your work on the shoulders of others, so it behooves you to do what you can to help others build upon yours. Of course, good research and writing is most important, but wouldn't it be a shame if all your hard work went for naught if your paper was difficult to find? Choosing effective keywords need not be a tiresome chore. In fact, paying some attention to this detail can help you reflect on your work in productive ways. Good keywords, along with your title and abstract, are your manuscript's public face. Taking some time to research the best options is a healthy use of your time and energy and a small but positive step you can take to improve your career.

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[JALT FOCUS] SIG FOCUS



Robert Morel & Satchie Haga

JALT currently has 30 Special Interest Groups (SIGs) available for members to join. This column publishes an in-depth view of one SIG each issue, providing readers with a more complete picture of the different SIGs within JALT. For information about SIG events, publications, and calls for papers, please visit https://jalt.org main/groups.

Email: jaltpubs.tlt.sig.focus@jalt.org • Web: https://jalt-publications.org/tlt/departments/sig-news

Collaboration is a cornerstone of JALT activities and the same goes for SIGs. Even though many people often think of collaboration occurring only within a SIG, there is an ever-growing amount of collaboration between SIGs as well as among SIGs, local JALT chapters, or other groups. This year, the SIG Focus column would like to highlight SIG collaboration in all its forms. Please feel free to contribute or suggest ideas by emailing us at jaltsigfocus@gmail.com.

The Performance in Education SIG

Ashley Ford, Nagoya City University, PIE SIG Publicity Chair

David Kluge, Nanzan University, PIE SIG Co-Coordinator

"Collaboration is fundamental to our approach"

The Performance in Education (PIE) SIG (founded in 2011 as the Speech, Drama, & Debate SIG) is involved with a myriad of teaching activities (still including drama and debate but now much more!) that require students to cooperate and collaborate together, so it is natural that our SIG also participates in many collaborative activities with JALT chapters and SIGs. In the beginning, we created events by ourselves, which established our SIG as a vibrant entity. We started collaborative ventures by providing speakers to chapters upon request (Tokyo, Fukui, Fukuoka, Gifu, Nagoya, Okayama, Hiroshima, etc.). These came from SIG members who were also officers of local JALT chapters or local chapter officers we met at conferences who invited us to come and present. Also, we received some cold-call emails from chapters who realized that presentations on roleplay would be interesting and useful to their members.