

OXFORD

Oxford Australian Children's Word of the Year

2020 Insights Report



Contents

About.....	3
Methodology and design.....	4
Language trends.....	5
Storyathon.....	9
Our education research experts.....	10
The language of Australian children in 2020.....	11
Oxford Australian Children's Word of the Year 2020.....	12
Writing samples.....	13
Shortlisted words.....	14
Themes (by year group and gender).....	17
How language is used in children's writing.....	18
Implications for educators.....	20
References.....	21

Oxford Australian Children's Word of the Year

Language is at the heart of education

Language is at the heart of education, and OUPANZ partners with the education community to develop and deliver learning resources underpinned by evidence-based research and pedagogy. One of our biggest research foci is language and literacy acquisition and development, and we have a reputation as being experts in the field through our research and thought leadership, along with the publishing we do to support Australian educators and learners.

The Oxford Australian Children's Word of the Year is an event that reveals trends in children's language; it is research that is relevant and contemporary and can inform what we teach and the way we teach our young students. The children's writing we collect and analyse also reveals through their eyes the current world we live in, so we have special insight into what and who are most important to them during a particular period of time.

About Oxford University Press

With origins dating back to 1478, Oxford University Press (OUP) is the world's largest university press with the widest global presence. At OUP, we believe in the power of the written word and the scholarship that stands behind it. Everything we publish relates directly to our mission: to support Oxford University's objective in research, scholarship, and education.

About Oxford University Press Australia & New Zealand

Since 1908, Oxford University Press Australia & New Zealand (OUPANZ) has operated as a microcosm of OUP's worldwide organisation, and we are the oldest continuous educational publisher in Australia. Our goal is to work with Australian educators to create the highest quality resources that help educators teach and students learn, and to deliver relevant, engaging and effective learning experiences in a constantly changing landscape that is influenced by new research and evolving technologies. We believe that education changes lives, and that the right learning resources can make a positive impact to student learning outcomes.



Oxford Australian Children's Word of the Year 2020

The Oxford Australian Children's Word of the Year is one of the ways OUPANZ engages with the ever-changing language of Australian children. Understanding the language that children use helps us to understand how their environment, age, gender and peers influence their language choices, and how we might apply the research to the resources we publish to support educators be the best teachers they can be.

Methodology and design

In partnership with Storyathon, OUPANZ has derived the Oxford Australian Children's Word of the Year 2020 from a full year's collection of Australian children's language. We have collected and analysed more than 50,000 writing submissions and more than 3,000,000 words from children in years 3–8. All the words have been added to our Oxford Australian Children's Language Corpus, we have analysed the data, and we have discovered some interesting trends within and across year levels.

Oxford Australian Children's Word of the Year

in proud partnership with



Language trends

Words by frequency ranked from numbers 1-50

Number	Word	Frequency
1	the	151681
2	I	140150
3	and	93582
4	to	87887
5	a	73757
6	was	65545
7	my	56889
8	it	54566
9	in	44054
10	of	42253
11	is	30619
12	we	26982
13	but	24729
14	he	24354
15	that	24287
16	on	23592
17	you	23587
18	me	22243
19	so	21489
20	for	18671
21	as	17745
22	they	17647
23	there	17310
24	at	16628
25	with	16578
26	out	16328
27	she	16002
28	then	15745
29	all	15283
30	have	14825
31	up	14634
32	do	14453
33	this	13997
34	had	13875
35	said	13419
36	go	13299
37	are	13283
38	what	12576
39	were	12551
40	one	11809
41	just	11782
42	get	11394
43	like	11305
44	no	11218
45	her	10829
46	when	10739
47	day	10592
48	be	10528
49	not	10485
50	mum	10204

Words by frequency ranked from numbers 51-100

Number	Word	Frequency
51	got	10156
52	his	9600
53	went	9533
54	down	9154
55	from	9152
56	could	8868
57	going	8509
58	home	8152
59	see	7941
60	can	7905
61	did	7882
62	time	7666
63	back	7665
64	now	7497
65	school*	7454
66	into	7437
67	because	7254
68	people*	7054
69	lockdown*	6425
70	Australia*	6156
71	over	6082
72	your	6066
73	about	5997
74	will	5811
75	would	5793
76	house	5649
77	some*	5560
78	has*	5400
79	around	5370
80	if	5333
81	our*	5271
82	friends*	5265
83	new*	5201
84	saw	5188
85	know	5180
86	am*	5149
87	them	5145
88	him	5127
89	started	5095
90	door	5081
91	been*	5071
92	an	4823
93	came	4822
94	or*	4725
95	Dad	4624
96	by*	4563
97	world*	4547
98	here*	4401
99	only	4386
100	fun	4284

*These words did not appear in the 2019 top words by frequency

2020 top trending words ranked from numbers 1-50

Number	Word	Frequency	Change from 2019*
1	we	26982	95.9%
2	go	13299	79.1%
3	are	13283	79.0%
4	school	7454	137.2%
5	people	7054	217.8%
6	lockdown	6425	48619.4%
7	our	5271	73.5%
8	friends	5265	204.8%
9	new	5201	129.7%
10	or	4725	71.7%
11	world	4547	245.9%
12	fun	4284	576.8%
13	more	4112	91.7%
14	family	3375	162.9%
15	shocked	3288	612.3%
16	work	3253	147.5%
17	good	3127	70.2%
18	play	3105	143.6%
19	nothing	3062	87.2%
20	virus	2696	15232.4%
21	stay	2492	429.8%
22	things	2214	76.7%
23	long	2178	79.5%
24	also	2005	85.4%
25	place	1867	107.2%
26	great	1828	120.0%
27	hard	1812	71.0%
28	hi	1806	129.5%
29	many	1800	171.2%
30	paper	1613	342.1%
31	happy	1609	110.4%
32	toilet	1592	133.6%
33	news	1544	262.1%
34	live	1489	130.4%
35	year	1454	74.1%
36	living	1434	94.2%
37	stuck	1412	227.8%
38	game	1388	80.4%
39	different	1383	160.0%
40	hours	1322	86.8%
41	same	1287	75.3%
42	better	1265	98.5%
43	covid-19	1232	-
44	watch	1230	125.6%
45	lot	1215	111.0%
46	lock	1205	509.1%
47	hot	1205	87.8%
48	coronavirus	1200	-
49	lots	1083	176.8%
50	weeks	1058	138.3%

*(change in use over time)

2020 top trending words ranked from numbers 51-100

Number	Word	Frequency	Change from 2019*
51	since	1055	81.8%
52	land	1053	252.3%
53	shock	1039	151.4%
54	safe	1038	168.3%
55	online	1037	5797.5%
56	Coff*	1024	-
57	covid	1012	-
58	games	1007	316.5%
59	sky	994	86.9%
60	kangaroo	977	393.9%
61	sun	974	126.1%
62	beautiful	953	90.2%
63	zoom	942	1430.6%
64	amazing	942	91.3%
65	beach	939	167.0%
66	corona	937	-
67	shops	925	153.5%
68	hope	916	78.1%
69	earth	881	106.6%
70	lived	866	111.8%
71	closed	865	89.2%
72	sad	861	71.8%
73	cant*	856	152.9%
74	sick	853	152.0%
75	able	766	255.6%
76	war	748	183.6%
77	played	740	137.1%
78	trees	739	91.0%
79	kangaroos	734	1987.2%
80	plane	710	223.0%
81	months	703	122.1%
82	scary	693	113.0%
83	bye	688	70.1%
84	wish	686	108.1%
85	computer	679	191.4%
86	learning	673	2451.6%
87	rain	658	149.5%
88	least	631	111.1%
89	clock	626	196.7%
90	changed	623	121.4%
91	staying	620	642.3%
92	pretty	610	80.2%
93	upon	609	92.4%
94	during	606	206.3%
95	lightning	605	96.6%
96	seeing	603	96.0%
97	ride	600	259.2%
98	working	584	141.5%
99	yay	582	140.7%
100	bush	581	154.2%

*(change in use over time)

STORYATHON

Storyathon is a free online event conducted each school term for children in years 3–8. Children are challenged to write a microstory that is exactly 100 words. Writing tiny narratives challenges children to concentrate on the language they choose and to experiment with words.

Storyathon microstories force writers to focus attention on important writing features, including:

- The impact of just one word
- Great expression
- Effective punctuation
- Crafting paragraphs
- The discipline of writing precisely



Our education research experts

We partner with education experts to review and comment on the language data we collect. This year we have worked with:

- Anne Bayetto, Flinders University, South Australia
- Shane Hill, Creator and CEO of Storyathon and Writing Legends
- Lee Walker, Director of Publishing, Editorial and Design at OUPANZ.

Anne Bayetto

Anne teaches special education at Flinders University, with a focus on how to teach students with literacy and numeracy difficulties. She has taught in both mainstream and special needs classes, and has been a disability support coordinator, a founding member of the Learning Difficulties Support Team (SA), and a literacy policy and project officer. Anne offers professional learning sessions for The Specific Learning Difficulties Association (SPELD) and provides consultancy and professional learning for educators. She was also the reading expert for the Principals as Literacy Leaders (PALL) project, initiated by the Australian Primary Principals Association.



Shane Hill

Shane is founder and creator of Mathletics, Spellodrome, World Math Day, Skoolbo, da Vinci Declathlon, Storyathon and Writing Legends. Collectively, these learning communities have been used by tens of millions of students. Prior to entering eLearning, Shane was a secondary school teacher in Australia, Canada and the United Kingdom.



Lee Walker

Lee is Director of Publishing, Editorial and Design at OUPANZ and is also President of the Australian Publishers Association. She has almost 30 years' experience in Australian educational publishing, a career that first focussed on primary literacy and mathematics research and resource development, and then expanded to secondary and higher education publishing, including a significant focus on digital innovation.



What the language tells us about Australian children in 2020

Moore (2008, p. ix) commented that “of all the markers of identity, language is by far the most significant... [and] in important ways, we are what we speak, and we are how we speak.”

He went on to observe that through the years some words would cease to be used while new words would be conceived, and it could be suggested that in 2020 some words have taken on quite different and emotional meanings that reflect personal and societal experiences, for example, *isolation* and *mask*.



The *School of Essential Ingredients* (Bauermeister, 2009) is a story about people and food, and the author wove a story around those who went to cooking classes at Lillian's restaurant. This wasn't a cookbook, but instead there were vignettes about people's backgrounds and experiences: stories about the chef and her aspiring cooks that brought them together at that point in time. It is this 'food' intersection that offers an analogy that may be used to think about students and the words they wrote in 2020. Imagine for a moment that the chef, Lillian, is an educator. She responds to students' knowledge, skills, and understandings through her programming, planning, and instructional approaches. She knows that no matter what the learning area, there are some ingredients (approaches) that are always needed to be used: they are essential.

From the early 1970s, researchers have studied educators' work looking to identify those essential and effective approaches that positively influence students' learning, and they have discussed at length the impact on students of experiences offered, lessons taught, feedback provided, and the contexts and environments in which this has happened. However, while hours spent at school are significant, students are not just the sum of educators' work.

Students bring diverse experiences (ingredients) from their lives into classrooms; experiences and involvement with immediate and extended family, broader social networks, and leisure activities. Like those who came to learn to cook, students bring their lived experiences to school, and it is these webs of lateral connections that infuse into students' writing. In discussing the significance of choice, Watt (1995, p. iv) observed, “The way you think about yourself, the way you describe yourself, the way you describe your increasingly complex world – these are shaped by the words you have at your command. Physical appearance, emotions and feelings only have meaning when we put a word to them”. So what words did students draw upon when writing in 2020? What were their lived realities as well as their imagined worlds where they transported characters (and perhaps themselves) into other spheres?

The 2020 Oxford Australian Children's Word of the Year

For the first time, the Oxford Australian Children's Word of the Year has been voted by students from a shortlist of high-frequency and trending words for 2020. The students who voted also participate in Storyathon events.

In 2020, Australian children voted '**virus**' as the Oxford Australian Children's Word of the Year.

Virus

What may have led students to nominate this year's winning word ahead of the others that were shortlisted? In *The Dictionary of Lost Words*, Esme made the observation that, "Some words are more important than others" (Williams, 2020, p. 3), and in 2020 the most important word for students was 'virus'.

Would students have even thought to write this word in previous years? Perhaps the occasional writer may have used it in a science-fiction or dystopian text, but in 2020 it has been heavily featured. Many students were clearly concerned about the immediate and long-term effect of the virus, and perhaps being able to write about it may have been therapeutic as they 'voiced' their worries (*Then Coronavirus. The whole world was in lockdown and on alert* – Year 7 female). The feeling of having little control over circumstances was evident (*We were like prisoners locked up in our houses, not being able to do anything besides watch innocent people die from the virus* – Year 7 female). Others were feeling gloomy about ways forward (*The Coronavirus has taken over our lives! How are we going to get back to normal? Oh, that's right, we have to 'Social Distance'. I mean, how long can we 'Social Distance' for? Now I have another online call!* – Year 8 female).

Our parents never meant for this to happen. It's been months since our last hug. Our parents' simple trip to China for work tore our family apart. Borders closed, countries divided. The Great Lockdown of 2020 meant Rubi and I were left to the clutches of wicked Aunt Lucy. We wait to be reunited while the world battles on. I crave the things my parents do for me, the day-to-day of raising my sister and I'm yearning for my old life. But that life no longer exists. Now a virus runs the world. Never the same.

Year 3, female

OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS
AUSTRALIA & NEW ZEALAND



Virus: writing samples

Note that children's spelling and grammar has not been corrected in the samples presented.

Our parents never meant for this to happen. It's been months since our last hug. Our parents' simple trip to China for work tore our family apart. Borders closed, countries divided. The Great Lockdown of 2020 meant Rubi and I were left to the clutches of wicked Aunt Lucy. We wait to be reunited while the world battles on. I crave the things my parents do for me, the day-to-day of raising my sister and I'm yearning for my old life. But that life no longer exists. Now a virus runs the world. Never the same. (Year 3, female)

A great prophecy once said 'being together may bring the bad things together.' That was, what this was, the start of the worst. All the viruses had come TOGETHER. Absolutely NOTHING like this had happend before, an epidemic spreading over 5 GALAXIES was unheard of. How was it possible? This was undescrivable, it was impossible to describe. The virus was overpowerd. Protesting was back again, this happend, 'PM! PM! the people are revolting!' 'I know I think they are blue with Cholera. (Year 4, male)

One morning I woke up so excited to go to the zoo but then I got a vision. How shocking! 'Let's go, Mum. No, wait I had a vision.' 'You did?' yes ``Me too'' ``what shocking yes let's go wait then suddenly the tv turned on breaking news anyone who was about to go to the zoo has to stay home at home lock anything that can open. Quickly there are zombies with the silky virus. The zombie sounded creepy when they were in our house. I was shocked. Then I hid behind the door and traveled into my vision. (Year 5, female)

The virus is spreading people are rushing to the supermarket for their stuff. A lady was looking for hand sanitiser but once she realised that she could not find any anywhere she Went online once again they were gone she decided she may as well give up and go home on her way home there were people heading towards her house they were mostly strangers The lady was getting worried as she arrived at her apartment where she found thousands of people approaching her home. Everyone had hand sanitiser and yelled "it's corona time "and threw Hand sanitiser at her. (Year 6, female)

The world's in lockdown. Everyone is stuck inside their home as the government has said to do so. It is very scary. You never know what can happen if you go outside with the whole virus going around. The world is a disaster right now and no body is doing good, this needs to stop. A couple months go by and the virus is slowing down. Everyone is back to work and school and people are enjoying themsleves after so long! We are out of lock down but still need to be careful. The world is now a better place! (Year 7, male)

My different world living in lockdown is not being able to see your friends and teachers also not being able to play with your friends and the fact that you use confrence call and it takes a while to get used of it and im glade that there are people there to help us but im getting used of it now (Year 8, female)

Other Shortlisted words

It is particularly interesting how many of the shortlisted words were used in relation to COVID-19, and that some of the 2020 shortlisted words appear to be what Moore (2008) referred to as, "...a bearer of history" (p. 205).

It is not surprising that, second to 'virus', students from Victoria voted for 'lockdown', although younger writers preferred 'friends'. Curiously, writers from Queensland had 'zombies' on their mind and voted for this word more than any other state (but still second to 'virus').

Note that children's spelling and grammar has not been corrected in the samples presented.

Friends

This word selection is particularly significant because the importance of wanting to spend time with friends was reiterated by many writers and, repeatedly, it was in relation to COVID-19 (*It was a Thursday afternoon. online school had finished for the day they all had enough of their devices. then a phone call came through from their friends* – Year 4 male; *I wish I could have sleepovers with my friends then I wouldn't be so bored* – Year 5 female). But one writer was surprised and happy when his family made him feel special for his birthday even though they were in lockdown (*Ugh, this is going to be the worse birthday ever! I cried. No friends allowed, No shops open, I can't even leave the house. I hate Covid-19! But the day had finally come, I woke up and my family had ordered a delicious golden mousse chocolate cake, decorated the house, balloons everywhere, song, dance* – Year 8 male).

Lockdown

It was predictable that this word would feature in students' writing given that there was daily, extensive coverage about COVID-19 and no-one in Australia was untouched by its impact. No matter the state or territory, all students were variously impacted through the need for school closures, home schooling, travel restrictions, and constrained contact with extended family and friends (*Yet another day of lockdown and online learning* – Year 3 female). However, while difficult and frustrating for many students, others reflected on positives that arose from it (*Lockdown is not to be seen as negative as it has opened eyes for our generation, made us be aware of our blessings* – Year 8 male). Then there was the blending of resignation with humour (*When the zoom meeting started, Annie started to talk to everyone about lockdown, as Ella and Mike crept in and went under Anne's bed and tricked Annie. "Noooooooooooo!"* – Year 4 female).

School

Texts written indicated a mixed response to students' educational circumstances, with some students relishing being able to stay at home (*They all jumped into the freezing water and were laughing, splashing, and playing. Normally, they would not be able to do this on a school day!* – Year 4 male) while others clearly missed the routines and social connections with educators and their friends (*I was excited to home school at first but if you knew you could stay home from school for two months, that's every kids dream. Like I said that was at first* – Year 4 female). However, it was concern for their friends' welfare that was front of mind for some writers (*When we go to school, will I only know whether my friends are ok. but now because of covid 19 I don't know if they even ok. I can't wait to go back to school* – Year 5 male).

Shocked

Very few students related this word to COVID-19, but instead it was one that was almost exclusively used when students wrote imaginative texts (*I was shocked to see the slimy creature slide under and creep closer and closer* – Year 3, female; *We ran in shock we were all shocked, in the sand we saw a pirate ship we hop in the crew saying ARR and MATEY, it sound ridicouless. Then i realised i was playing roblox *gasp** – Year 5 male; *"Good golly, Miss Molly!" her mother was shocked. Molly was on her princess throne, as usual, but something wrong was on her head* – Year 6 female; *I was shocked to see a rare bird it's never been in our neighbourhood* – Year 7, male). Those that did relate it to Covid-19 had negative thoughts (*Then I looked up how many cases there were in my city. 58?! Yesterday there were 9!!!! I was shocked* – Year 4 female).

World

Predominant use of this word was related to the effects of COVID-19 (*Last month the world changed when COVID 19 struck* – Year 3 male; *The world living in lockdown is fun lots of times and boring the other times everyday (monday - Friday) we have to go on a blog and the zoom link to meet with our teacher* – Year 4 male; *Then lockdown was over until they heard a enormous explosion. They looked through the window and !KABOOM! It was like World War 2* – Year 6 male; *You can't even see your friends face-to-face! What is this new world?* – Year 8 female). One student made a connection between major catastrophes (*What happened? I will tell you what happened. It all started with Australian bushfires. Everyone was helping with them. Then Coronavirus. The whole world was in lockdown and on alert* – Year 7 female).

Fun

The word fun was suggestive of predictable enjoyable experiences (*After that we had a staring competition. It was so fun!!* – Year 3 female; *After the beach we went home to have a nice soapy bath. Then we just watched some TV played some games together and had some fun outside* – Year 4 male). However, it was also used in relation to COVID-19 with comments about the yes/but situation in which students were positioned (*I'm so mad! Since the coronavirus started, I haven't been able to see almost anyone! It's not like I hate it because it's a really fun experience staying at home, but I just don't like it much* – Year 4 female; *The world living in lockdown is fun lots of times and boring the other times every day* – Year 4 male; *I relaxed for the most of quarintine. It is actually pretty fun!!!* – Year 6 female).



People

There was mixed use of this word with it being in some imaginative writing (*Now people are worried because the powers of the enchanted forrest had turned agansted them!* – Year 3 female; *1215: The Lightning Benders were the most powerful people in the world* – Year 6 male). Again, the word was more often used in relation to COVID-19. One student was excited to hear she could go back to school (*I've started watching the news, it's the same every time "Children will go back on June 9th" THAT'S JUNE 9TH PEOPLE!* – Year 4 female) while there were other considered references (*Some people live by themselves so if you have a family member in your house then your luckier then some other people. Stay safe, have fun!!!* – Year 3 male; *He sped towards the building, the people greeted him as if he were the most important person in the whole Australia* – Year 7 male).

Zombies

While 'zombies' doesn't appear in any top 100 lists, it was worth including in the shortlist because they were featured in stories from all year levels as 'zombie', 'zombies', 'corona-zombie', 'human-zombie', and there was also some 'zombie-busting'. The word was used by students when writing imaginative stories (*Jack pulled me against the wall in silence. We heard the sound of zombies blindly coming our way!* – Year 5 female; *I thought zombies are coming! I brought a sharp knife and I threw it. But I know the zombie is not dead!* – Year 5 male). Other writers linked it with COVID-19 (*I must stay inside because ¾ of people are Corona zombies* – Year 5 male), and one writer linked the video platform of Zoom and created a new word, 'zoom-bies' (*Life will go back to being stuck inside, and I will be trapped within the nightmare of zoom-bies and face-masks that's become my life* – Year 8 male).

One morning I woke up so excited to go to the zoo but then I got a vision. How shocking! 'Let's go, Mum. No, wait I had a vision.' 'You did?' yes ``Me too'' ``what shocking yes let's go wait then suddenly the tv turned on breaking news anyone who was about to go to the zoo has to stay home at home lock anything that can open. Quickly there are zombies with the silky virus. The zombie sounded creepy when they were in our house. I was shocked. Then I hid behind the door and traveled into my vision.

Year 5, female

Themes by year group and gender

By the early primary years, most students have usually moved away from writing factual recounts toward writing about decontextualised imaginative topics. They are using more literate language and they do this through writing complex sentences, making broader grammatical choices, and including wider descriptive vocabulary. However, perhaps because of the very nature of what has happened to Australian students in 2020, there were many factual recounts about COVID-19 at all year levels:

Every day we're staying home because of covid 19. We have to stay home & we can't see our friends at all- not even our grandparents. Every day we have to stay home twenty-four-seven. It means I can't go to play tennis or do my swimming classes. (Year 5 male)

To begin with everyone was excited to have the rest of the term off, until they realized we would have online schooling, from there everything went downhill. Online calls were every day and we were getting overloads of work. We missed out on doing things we loved most such as playing sports, going places and seeing our friends, it was hard, but we couldn't do anything about it. (Year 7 female)

Another day of living in lockdown. I wake up every morning and think "Ugh, I have to get up for another google meet." Most of the time, you spend all of your day at the computer. It's hard living in lockdown, especially without the teachers to help you. (Year 8 female)

Also, there were several examples that may be called 'faction'. That is, students wrote imaginative stories that had facts as part of them.

"I know lets make our own OLYMPICS!" Coral shouted wonderfully. The siblings worked hard on the OLYMPICS. After tones of work they finely finished.

"Start roling Coral!" shouted Karen. Today's a special day! its time for the olimpics! First is the wieghets which are made of valiable toilet paper. Coral droped the camra. Ce tried to lift it but the number of waght was too grate to lift and sliped into the pool.

"Theres no more toilet paper at the store!"

"sorry mum" cried the siblings. (Year 6 male)

Scott (in Catts & Kahmi, 2005, p. 262) wrote that there is "...an inherent clash between topics that interest boys and topics and attitudes valued by the educational culture. Researchers since the early seventies have documented differences in self-sponsored writing topics: wild animals (boys) versus domestic animals (girls); secondary territory of wars, presidents, space (boys) versus primary territory of home, school, parents, friends (girls); contests in which protagonists act alone (boys) versus joint action and staying connected to the community (girls)." However, in 2020, there was some, but not much, variation in word and topic selection by females and males. Highly occurring words written only by males were *robot, superhero, dinosaur, dragon, ghost, crash, commander* and by females it was *shopping, unicorn, rainbow, party, hair, shock, bestie, homework, couch, math*. There was no clear delineation in topic selection as both genders chose to write factual accounts related to COVID-19, faction, and imaginative texts that incorporated suspense and imagined worlds.

How is language used in children's writing?

Nouns

Nouns provide a name or a label and a large number of the words written by both genders, and across all year levels, could be placed into categories, for example, people (*mum, dad, friend, family, brother, sister*) animals (*dog, cat, bird, koala, kangaroo, snake*), places (*school, home, house, room, country, world*), time (*week, month, year, hour, minute, mealtimes*), and COVID-19 (*lockdown, coronavirus*, and in higher year levels, *quarantine, pandemic, isolation*).

Pronouns

Initially, writers use pronouns as a replacement for a noun and later for a noun phrase. Older students had the least variation of usage while students in middle primary wrote the wider range of pronouns. The most used pronouns across all year levels were *I, my, it*.

Adjectives

Adjectives add more information about a noun or a pronoun. Both genders, at all year levels, predominantly used simple one syllable words for their descriptions, with the most used words being *good, big, little, bad, next, happy, sad, more, new, last*. Interestingly, the words *boring* and *bored* appeared later in all of the data sets and seems to reflect the unusual circumstances in 2020 where students were somewhat confined in where they could go and what they could do.

Verbs

Students used verbs to indicate what was happening or what might be. The more popularly written verbs were single syllable and quite general in their description. For example, at all year levels, and for both genders, the most written words were *be, go, have, do, say, get, see, come*. Interestingly, the first two-syllable word written at all year levels was *happen*. Only one three syllable word (*remember*) featured in the first 100 words written by Year 4, 5, 7, and 8 females and males and Year 6 females. The other cohorts did not have any three syllable words in the first 100 words.



Adverbs

In Years 3–8, students mostly use adverbs to add more meaning to a verb. Three adverbs were extensively used by both genders and at all year levels: *not*, *so*, *then*. It was upper primary females and males who used the widest variation of adverbs, while Year 8 females and males used the least.

Conjunctions

Conjunctions are used to connect words, phrases or clauses and are increasingly used as students write more complex sentences. In these writing samples, very few conjunctions were used by females and males at any year level. Overwhelmingly, the most used conjunctions were *and*, *but*.

Prepositions

Prepositions show the link between a noun/pronoun with another word. It was Year 6 males who showed more extensive use of prepositions (96) while Year 8 females (65) and males (60) used the least. The most used words across all year levels and by both genders were *in*, *to*, *of*, *on*, *for*, *at*, *with*.

Aldous Huxley (n.d.) stated, "Words form the thread on which we string our experiences", so there was much to be learned from analysing students' topic and word choices. For educators, this information offers opportunities for reflection about ways forward to support their planning and programming decisions.

The world's in lockdown. Everyone is stuck inside their home as the government has said to do so. It is very scary. You never know what can happen if you go outside with the whole virus going around. The world is a disaster right now and no body is doing good, this needs to stop. A couple months go by and the virus is slowing down. Everyone is back to work and school and people are enjoying themselves after so long! We are out of lock down but still need to be careful. The world is now a better place!

Year 7, male

Implications for educators: continue to develop students' spoken vocabularies and grammar knowledge

Continue to develop students' spoken and written vocabularies because relatively few multisyllabic words were written by both genders at any year level. Students rarely learn new words by listening to or speaking with educators because educators simplify their vocabulary for students to understand what they are speaking about or asking them to do. Whatever the year level, all students need explicit vocabulary instruction to increase their repertoires because knowing more words makes students smarter.

1. Increase knowledge about the use of adjectives because, across all year levels, the most-used adjectives were simple one-syllable words.
2. Verb usage was generally unsurprising and for the most part the words used did not effectively and precisely describe the action. Students need to have a more comprehensive bank of words from which to choose.
3. Broaden students' understandings about how adverbs can enhance their writing by adding emphasis and clarity.
4. There are many pronouns that may be drawn upon to confirm identity and the writing samples indicated that it would be helpful for writers if educators expanded students' pronoun knowledge.
5. Anticipate that some words that were heavily used in 2020 may disappear from students' writing vocabularies as these were words relevant for this point in time.

The atypical 2020 context has notably influenced students' writing choices and accordingly, these words have provided a window into their worlds. Young (2016, p. 4) referred to Pamuk who, as a reader, was "putting his mind to work with words" and perhaps this parallel may also apply to students regarding their word choices. As part of educators' writing instruction, there needs to be continued development of both students' spoken vocabularies and grammar knowledge because educators aspire for students to want to write with interest, involvement, and intention, rather than just being students who can write.

References

Bauermeister, E. (2009). *The School of Essential Ingredients*. USA: Putnam.

Huxley, A. (n.d.). <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/search?utf8=%E2%9C%93&q=Words+form+the+thread+on+which+we+string+our+experiences>

Moore, B. (2008). *Speaking Our Language. The Story of Australian English*. South Melbourne, Victoria: Oxford University Press.

Watt, G. (1995). *How Words Work*. South Melbourne, Australia: Longman.

Williams, P. (2020). *The Dictionary of Lost Words*. South Melbourne, Victoria: Affirm Press.

Young, D. (2016). *The Art of Reading*. Victoria, Australia: Melbourne University Press.

To learn more about Oxford Australian
Children's Word of the Year visit

oup.com.au/cwoty

Keep in contact

-  oup.com.au
-  [@OxfordAustralia](https://twitter.com/OxfordAustralia)
-  facebook.com/oupanz
-  blog.oup.com.au
-  Oxford University Press ANZ

OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS
AUSTRALIA & NEW ZEALAND