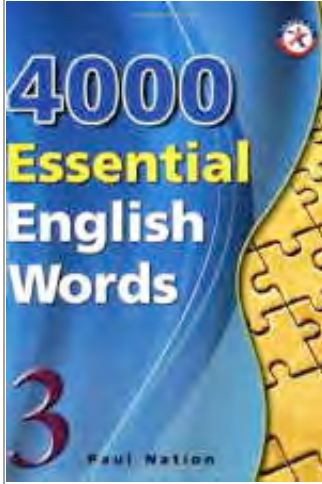


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4000 Essential English Words		
<b>Author:</b>	Paul Nation (2009)	
<b>Publisher:</b>	Seoul: Compass Publishing	
<b>Pages</b>	<b>ISBN</b>	<b>Price</b>
Pp. x + 196	978-1-59966-404-0	\$20.00 U.S.



Paul Nation, one of the most foremost and prolific authorities on vocabulary learning research, has designed a six-level self-study textbook series for high-beginner to advanced students with the aim of acquiring the most useful American English vocabulary words. Each book in *4000 Essential English Words* contains and highlights 600 words, with additional words appearing in the appendix of the first three texts.

However, with the title *4000 Essential English Words* emblazoned on the cover of each book, consumers might be forgiven for thinking that each book will cover 4000 words, when, in fact, only 600 words are featured. However, nothing on the book jacket directly dispels this potential misunderstanding.

Overall, the layout throughout the series is bright, clear and engaging, and employs an attractive blend of color photos and illustrations. The series roughly follows the same format. Each book is divided into 30 units, with each 6-page unit targeting 20 thematically unrelated words. This is clearly deliberate and in line with earlier research findings by Nation himself, which argue that studying semantically-related words together makes learning more difficult and inefficient (Nation, 2000). Each of the 30 units opens with an alphabetical set of 20 words, ten to a page, along with its phonetic transcription, part of speech, a simple English definition, and an example sentence. Small

color illustrations help to depict each target word's meaning. This word-image pairings seem particularly effective at helping learners visualize concrete words, such as *flashlight* and *wizard*; yet, many illustrations struggle to adequately represent more abstract items such as *arduous* and *presume*.

The word list is immediately followed by two pages of useful and enjoyable vocabulary exercises which first check the learner's receptive then productive knowledge of the target words. Oddly though, no answer key is included, and users will need to visit the publisher's website to locate one (<http://www.compasspub.com/english/>).

Each unit concludes with an original short story, which meaningfully contextualizes, with surprising naturalness, the 20 target words presented earlier in the unit. Original stories of this kind are a rare find in standard self-study vocabulary texts, making them a pleasant and pedagogically welcome addition here. However, with titles such as 'Why Monkey Has No Home' and 'The Ice Cream Cone Explosion', the stories cautiously steer clear of controversy and, at times, seem written with children in mind. As a result, some readers, particularly adults, may find the stories to be somewhat bland and innocuous. Each story is followed by reading comprehension exercises with target vocabulary embedded directly into the exercises themselves for further reinforcement.

An appendix of additional words grouped lexically (e.g., animals, plants, food) appear at the end of books 1, 2, and 3. An alphabetical word index also appears at the end of every book. Unfortunately, one feature not included is a periodic review section or end-of-the-book test.

The biggest selling point of this series is that the 4000 words that permeate the six texts are *essential* for learners. How does Nation defend this core assertion? The introduction notes that each target word is highly frequent and useful since the items appear with frequency across a range of English language course books of varying levels. This is a chilling admission, since words which appear frequently in course books may not actually occur with equal frequency in reality. Course book writers have long taken a pragmatic approach to vocabulary specification by relying on intuition, experience and common sense (Cunningsworth, 1995). But without some form of empirical substantiation, namely reference to corpus data or a general service list of high frequency words, what ultimately goes into course books may be arbitrary. Considering Nation's approach to specifying target vocabulary, the claim of essentiality, on the face of it, seems spurious.

As Nation and Waring (1997) have urged learners to focus on the most frequent 3,000 words of the language, it is worth determining how many of the words in *4000 Essential English Words* actually satisfy this recommended benchmark. With 4000 words described and heavily marketed as *essential*, we should expect to find that many of the words meet minimum standards of frequency. A random selection of target words (900 words out of 4000; 150 words from each book) was checked against a list of the most frequent 3000 words in the English language (Davies & Gardner, 2010). The frequency list, based on the 385-million-word Corpus of Contemporary American English, is the largest of its kind for American English, and offers an even balance between the five

genres of spoken, fiction, popular magazines, newspapers and academic journals. Of the 900 target words sampled from across the six-book series, just 32% fell within the top 3000 most frequent words. (Incidentally, only 55% of the sampled words were among the top 5,000 frequent words.) Of the six levels, only book 1 came close to satisfying the claim of essentiality: 83% of the sampled words appeared on the list. However, beyond book 1, the rate of frequency plummets. In books 2 to 6, only 22% of the sampled items were among the top 3000 words. What is pedagogically alarming is that many relatively rare words, such as *blacksmith*, *saliva*, and *celestial*, all made it for inclusion at the clear expense of more useful and frequent vocabulary.

All in all, despite an undeniably attractive layout, amusing and original stories, and useful vocabulary exercises, sadly, with the exception of book 1, *4000 Essential English Words* ultimately fails to deliver on its sensational claim.

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