What Is a Glossary?

A glossary is an alphabetized list of words, accompanied by definitions. The aim is to help readers understand specialized terminology they might not understand.

Usually, this will be part of a larger work. For instance, an academic book might contain a glossary at the end to define technical terms. However, you can also prepare a glossary for terms in a specific industry or field of study.

This makes a glossary a bit like a dictionary that only contains terms or phrases related to a single topic. Texts that might require a glossary include:

* **Academic or technical works** that contain a lot of technical language, abbreviations, [neologisms](https://literaryterms.net/neologism/), or other terms that might be unfamiliar.
* **Style guides** for businesses that want to ensure consistent use of language and clear communication across their organization.
* **Educational materials**about the language used in a specific field, or that give a list of relevant words and their translations (i.e., bilingual glossaries).
* **Works of fiction** that contain invented words or languages (e.g., sci-fi and fantasy novels, which may feature unfamiliar words, names, and places).

By adding a glossary, then, you can make your work more accessible to readers.

Selecting Terms to Include

The first step in writing a glossary is choosing what to include in it. The aim here is to select words that your intended readers may not know otherwise.

If you are adding a glossary to a larger work like a book or dissertation, you will thus need to go back through your writing to note down potential inclusions.

Keep your readers in mind here: there’s no point adding entries if the people reading them will know the words already. For instance, you might want to include definitions of basic terms like “respiration,” “digestion,” and similar in a biology book aimed at schoolchildren. But it would be unusual to define these terms in a work aimed at academic biologists, who should know them already!

It can also help to get outside input at this point. Ask a friend or colleague (or your editor if you have one) to review your work and highlight unfamiliar terms. You can then add these to your own list before narrowing it down to the final entries.