Grammar in postgraduate academic writing

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Overview of the workshop

- Developing awareness of typical language patterns in academic English.
- Some useful online resources for building awareness and academic vocabulary.
- Making claims/generalising
- Tense use in literature reviews
- Typical information structure in paragraphs
• Academic English is ‘writer responsible’

• What are the implications?
Nouns & noun phrases in academic English

- language

- the language of scientific communication

- The international language of scientific communication

- English as the international language of scientific communication

- the emergence of English as the international language of scientific communication

- The emergence of English as the international language of scientific communication has been widely documented.
Compare

• The emergence of English as the international language of scientific communication has been widely documented.

• English has emerged as the international language of scientific communication. This phenomenon has been widely documented.
Verbs: phrasal & prepositional verbs vs single verbs

- In everyday spoken English verb + preposition often used
- Written academic style = tendency to use single verb where possible
- Does depend on field of study too

- Eg:
  - Given our fast-paced society, people must routinely put creative solutions to unexpected problems into practice. (more spoken)
  - Given our fast-paced society, people must routinely implement creative solutions to unexpected problems. (more written)
Scientists are looking into innovative drug delivery systems that can transport and deliver a drug precisely and safely to its site of action.

The use of touch screen voting systems could get rid of many problems associated with traditional paper-based ballots.

Many funding agencies worldwide are thinking about ways to give new researchers greater opportunities to receive grant money.

AIDS researchers have run into a variety of unexpected problems in their efforts to develop an effective vaccine.

In the past five years, many studies have looked at the effect of different grassland management practices.
Which sounds ‘more academic’ to you?

• Crash test dummies are really important for/an integral part of automotive crash texts.

• According to a recent study, just about/nearly 25% of all mobile phone users view text messaging as an important source of entertainment.

• There has been a lot of/considerable interest in how background sounds such as music affect an individual’s ability to concentrate.

• Consumer interest in electronic billing and payment is getting bigger and bigger/increasing.
• The competition faced by Australian growers from imports of fresh fruit has *got more intense*.

• Allergic reactions to local dental anaesthesia *do not happen very often*.

• The doors on these ferries *were made bigger to make it easier to load and unload* vehicles.

• Many urban areas *do not have enough* land to build new schools.
The writer’s diet

• Can be a helpful tool for checking the ‘flab’ content of your writing:

• http://www.writersdiet.com/WT.php
The move from a structuralist account in which capital is understood to structure social relations in relatively homologous ways to a view of hegemony in which power relations are subject to repetition, convergence, and rearticulation brought the question of temporality into the thinking of structure, and marked a shift from a form of Althusserian theory that takes structural totalities as theoretical objects to one in which the insights into the contingent possibility of structure inaugurate a renewed conception of hegemony as bound up with the contingent sites and strategies of the rearticulation of power. (94 word sentence)
The Result

The Writer’s Diet

The WritersDiet Test

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>verbs</th>
<th>nouns</th>
<th>prepositions</th>
<th>adjectives/adverbs</th>
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</table>

Your sample has 94 words (please note that the WritersDiet Test is not calibrated for samples of fewer than 100 words)

The move from a structuralist account in which capital is understood to structure social relations in relatively homologous ways to a view of hegemony in which power relations are subject to repetition, convergence, and rearticulation brought the question of temporality into the thinking of structure, and marked a shift from a form of Althusserian theory that takes structural totalities as theoretical objects to one in which the insights into the contingent possibility of structure inaugurate a renewed conception of hegemony as bound up with the contingent sites and strategies of the rearticulation of power.

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## Frequently used reporting verbs by discipline

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<th>Softer Sciences</th>
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<td>Find</td>
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<td>Electrical Engineering</td>
<td>Propose</td>
<td>Argue</td>
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<tr>
<td>Medicine</td>
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<td>Find</td>
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Hedges and boosters

Hedges
• suggest /may; seem; believe/could;
• appear to; might; hypothesise; assume/likely; speculate; possible; might

Boosters
• show that/always; clearly shows that
• demonstrate/substantially; clearly
• show/will; fact that; obviously/will; certainly; it is certainly the case; it is clear that; must

Pay attention when reading to hedges writers use

Academic writing uses hedges more than boosters.
• The ten most frequently used hedges in professional academic writing:

would may could might indicate

seem assume likely possible(ly) suggest
Making claims: Stronger and weaker

• Word-of-mouth advertising influences a consumer’s incentive to purchase a product.
• Word-of-mouth advertising can influence a consumer’s incentive to purchase a product.
• Word-of-mouth advertising could influence a consumer’s incentive to purchase a product.
• Word-of-mouth advertising may influence a consumer’s incentive to purchase a product.
• Word-of-mouth advertising might influence a consumer’s incentive to purchase a product.
Making claims less strong

- Health education **has** a positive impact on a patient’s quality of life.

- Health education **seems to have** a positive impact on a patient’s quality of life.

- **It seems that** health education has a positive impact on a patient’s quality of life.

- **It would appear** that health education has a positive impact on a patient’s quality of life.
Moderating generalisations

• Generalisations should be grounded in some reasonable evidence and stated cautiously so that they will be accepted by readers.

• 3 classic verbs for carefully stating a generalisation:
  – Children living in poverty appear to do poorly at school.
  – Children living in poverty seem to do poorly at school.
  – Children living in poverty tend to do poorly at school.

  Compare with:
  – Children living in poverty do poorly at school.
Other ways of generalising with caution

- Many children living in poverty appear to do poorly at school.
- A majority of children living in poverty appear to do poorly at school.
- Some children living in poverty appear to do poorly at school.
- In most parts of the world children living in poverty appear to do poorly at school.

- OR

- With the exception of those enrolled in specialised programs, children living in poverty appear to do poorly at school.
- Apart from those enrolled in specialised programs, children living in poverty appear to do poorly at school.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>weaker</th>
<th>stronger</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Might result in</td>
<td>May result in</td>
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<tr>
<td>It is possible that</td>
<td>It is very likely/probable that</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Would seem to have</td>
<td>Seem to have</td>
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<tr>
<td>May have contributed to</td>
<td>Contributed to</td>
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<tr>
<td>Suggests</td>
<td>Indicates</td>
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</table>
Other ways of generalising with caution

Stronger’ and ‘weaker’ verbs

- Many studies have concluded that excessive credit growth *caused* the global financial crisis.
- Many studies have concluded that excessive credit growth *contributed to* the global financial crisis.
- Many studies have concluded that excessive credit growth *may have contributed to* the global financial crisis.
- Many studies have concluded that excessive credit growth *was probably a major cause of* the global financial crisis.
- Many studies have concluded that excessive credit growth *was one of the causes of* the global financial crisis.
- Many studies have concluded that excessive credit growth *might have been* a factor in the global financial crisis.
Expressing claims cautiously

There are a number of explanations for why musicians have superior cognitive abilities to non-musicians. First, it is possible that only more intellectually rigorous people continue with music training once they have been exposed to it. Practising a musical instrument takes a tremendous amount of discipline. Individuals who are willing to work that hard may also work hard in academic settings, thus improving their cognitive abilities. Secondly, socio-economic class could be playing a role. In a study comparing scholastic aptitude among musicians and non-musicians, Phillips found a difference in the two groups, but once socio-economic class was taken into account the difference nearly disappeared (Phillips, 1976). It is possible that the differences between musicians and non-musicians is actually innate or caused by something not musically related.
Which verb makes the weaker claim?

- The results indicate/establish that there is a link between smoking and lung cancer.
- The survey results suggest/show that the reuse of sentences or sections from one’s previously published papers is a questionable practice.
- The latest series of studies question/challenge the value of including consumer expectations in the assessment of service quality.
- The results shown in Figure 4 validate/support the second conclusion that certain bacteria can reduce arsenic levels in groundwater.
- Baseline conditions have been assumed/shown to be accurate at the time of the surveys.
Can you make these claims more defensible?

- Tall people have higher incomes than short people.
- Economic sanctions are ineffective.
- Alcohol cause brain damage in teenagers.
- Passive smoking causes cancer.
- Recycling is the best solution to the waste disposal problem.
- Physical exercise prevents depression.
Wrong or missing prepositions

- Using the wrong preposition is a common error as most prepositions are not stressed or pronounced clearly in speech, they are also often left out accidentally in writing.

Incorrect: The study emphasised on the need of further research to ascertain the influence by television violence to young children.

Revised: The study emphasised the need for further research to ascertain the influence of television violence on young children.

Note: Prepositions need copious practice. Google searching may help but don’t waste too much time!
Identifying potentially useful words and phrases on Google Scholar

- [http://scholar.google.com/](http://scholar.google.com/)

- “in recent years there has been interest in”

- “in recent years there has been *interest in”

- “in recent years there has been considerable interest in”

- “in recent years there has been increasing interest in”

- “in recent years there has been interest in “electric vehicles”
Another searchable site

• http://www.wordandphrase.info/academic

• Eg: evidence

• Is noun or verb more common?

• In which disciplines is evidence more common?

• Which verb and adjectives collocate most strongly with the noun evidence?
Another very useful site

- http://www.phrasebank.manchester.ac.uk/
Academic word lists

- [http://www.victoria.ac.nz/lals/resources/academicwordlist/sublists](http://www.victoria.ac.nz/lals/resources/academicwordlist/sublists)

- The list contains 570 word families.
Skeletal sentences

- It is **clear** that ....
  - possible
  - (un)likely
  - true
  - important
  - estimated
  - imperative
  - evident
  - obvious
  - apparent

- It is **important** to ....
  - difficult to
  - necessary
  - hard
  - (im)possible
  - easy
  - interesting
  - reasonable
  - essential
  - likely


Skeletal sentences

- It is estimated that
  - assumed
  - expected
  - hoped
  - recommended
  - believed
  - suggested
  - argued
  - said
  - known

- It should be noted that
  - be emphasised
  - be remembered
  - be stressed

- It could be argued
  - be said

- It can be argued
  - be seen
  - be said

- It must be noted
Skeletal sentences

• Studies have shown that have found have found have indicated have demonstrated have suggested have reported have revealed

• Researchers have found that have suggested * have argued have shown * have noted have reported have demonstrated

*human subjects only
The Apostrophe

• Use to show possession or contraction:

• One of the *whale’s* characteristics is *its* ability to communicate with other whales using lyrical sounds.
• Whales’ neck vertebrae are fused.
• *It’s* (it is) clear that an apology should be made.

• Take the apostrophe challenge:
Tense in a literature review - 3 patterns

1. **Past tense** – researcher as active agent
   - Jones (2007) *investigated* the causes of airport delays.
   - The causes of airport delays *were investigated* by Jones.

2. **Present Perfect** – researcher not active agent
   - There *have been* several investigations into the causes of airport delays (Hyon 2004; Jones 2007).
   - Several researchers *have studied* the causes of airport delays (Hyon 2004; Jones 2007).
   - The causes of airport delay *have been widely investigated* (Hyon 2004; Jones 2007).

3. **Present** - no reference to researcher activity
   - The causes of airport delays are complex (Hyon 2004; Jones 2007).
   - Airport delays appear to have a complex set of causes (Hyon 2004; Jones 2007).
Using present tense when referring to the past

- When we refer to what previous researchers *thought* or *wrote*, we have options:

  - Rogers (2010) *concluded* that business failure may be related to ..
  - Rogers (2010) *has concluded* that …
  - Rogers (2010) *concludes* that …

- Our choice may be influenced by how close the research reported on is to our own research or opinion or close to the current state of knowledge
Present tense also used with

- Famous or important sources
- Aristotle argues that ... 
- Confucius says ... 
- The Bible states ... 
- Marx tells us that ...
Tenses in a literature review

The present tense is used to:

• state a generalization (in overviews, statements of main points, etc.) OR a generally accepted fact
• Example: This thesis investigates the second approach.

make a statement by you as a writer

• Example: Non-standard applications such as X and Y are now emerging.

• report another writer’s position and state your support or lack of support for this position
• Example: Therefore, this sequential approach is impractical in the real world where projects are typically large (Radice, 1988) and the activities from one stage may be carried out in parallel with the activities of another stage.
People have been pulling freshwater out of the oceans for centuries using technologies that involve evaporation, which leave the salts and other unwanted constituents behind. Salty source water is heated to speed evaporation and the evaporated water is then trapped and distilled. This process works well but requires large quantities of heat energy and costs have been far too high for nearly all but the wealthiest nations such as Kuwait and Saudi Arabia. To make the process more affordable, modern distillation plants recycle heat from the evaporation step.

A potentially cheaper technology called membrane desalination may expand the role of desalination worldwide, which today accounts for less than 0.2 per cent of the water withdrawn from natural sources. Membrane desalination relies on reverse osmosis – a process in which a thin, semipermeable membrane is place between a volume of saltwater and a volume of freshwater.
Old to new information flow –

• Research has shown that caffeine does indeed reduce sleepiness and can lead to better academic performance since students can spend more time studying. Despite its effectiveness in counteracting sleepiness, caffeine can have a negative impact on subsequent sleep, which for many students may already be compromised. Specifically, caffeinated beverages consumed near bedtime at night can prolong sleep onset and reduce sleep efficiency and depth, thus affecting both sleep quality and duration.

• Most of the research on how caffeine affects sleepiness/alertness has focused on coffee of no-doze pills. However, a new kind of caffeinated drink has become increasingly popular, namely functional energy drinks (FEDs). FEDs are marketed as products that can improve both mental and physical performance.
Using *this* and summary phrases

- **This/these** + a noun can be used to establish a good old-to-new flow of information.
- Writing instructors know that students need to understand the differences between formal and informal language. *This understanding* can help students make strategic choices in their writing.
- In recent years, the number of students applying to PhD programs has increased steadily, while the number of places available has remained fairly constant. *This situation* has resulted in intense competition for admission.
Complete the sentence

• According to a recent survey, 26% of all Australian adults, down from 38% 30 years ago, now smoke. This ______________ can be partly attributed to the mounting evidence linking smoking and fatal diseases such as cancer.

• Early in September each year, the population of Oxford suddenly increases by several thousand as students arrive for the new academic year. This ______________ changes the character of the town in a number of ways.

• Nowadays, laptop computers are lighter, more powerful and easier to use than they were five years ago. These _____________ have led to an increase in the sales of these machines.

• Traditional economic and consumer behaviour models assume a rational, thoughtful consumer who gathers information about a good and then carefully makes a purchase. This ___________ has recently been challenged, particularly because of the growing number of consumer choices.
Some commonly confused words (that can annoy your markers)

- Principal/principle
- Whose/who’s
- Your/you’re
- Stationary/stationery
- Complement/compliment
- Affect/effect
- Their/there
Useful websites

• For more info
  • https://student.unsw.edu.au/academic-skills-workshops-and-courses
  • http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/al/learning_english/leap/grammar/grammartalk/
  • http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/learningenglish/index.shtml
  • http://www.askoxford.com/betterwriting/classicerrors/confused/?view=uk
  • http://grammar.quickanddirtytips.com/
When in doubt - google

- [http://explorationsofstyle.com/](http://explorationsofstyle.com/)
Searchable databases of proficient student assignments

- Large collection of British undergraduate assignments across a range of disciplines. **British Academic Written English collection:**
  - [http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/al/research/collect/bawe/](http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/al/research/collect/bawe/)

- Collection of north American upper level student assignments. University of Michigan:
This workshop was based on these two helpful books:

1. *Academic Writing for Graduate Students: Essential Tasks and Skills* 3rd Edition
   - John M. Swales and Christine B. Feak

2. *Grammar Choices for Graduate and Professional Writers*
   - Nigel A. Caplan