



# Grammar in postgraduate academic writing

Never Stand Still

The Learning Centre

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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

Nouns are important building blocks in academic writing

- 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)

# Replace with more 'academic' verb

- 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>

# Test sentence for writer's diet

- 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 screenshot shows a web browser window with the URL [writersdiet.com/?page\\_id=4&analyse](http://writersdiet.com/?page_id=4&analyse). The page title is "The Writer's Diet" and the navigation menu includes "home", "test", "blog", and "about". The main heading is "The WritersDiet Test" with social media sharing options for Facebook (Like, Share 613) and Twitter (Tweet).

The diagnostic chart shows the following distribution of parts of speech:

Part of Speech	Category
verbs	lean
nouns	heart attack
prepositions	heart attack
adjectives/adverbs	flabby
it, this, that, there	flabby

Below the chart, a box displays the diagnosis: "your diagnosis HEART ATTACK" and a button labeled "test new sample".

The text analysis section states: "Your sample has 94 words (please note that the WritersDiet Test is not calibrated for samples of fewer than 100 words)".

The sample text is: "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".

At the bottom, there is a newsletter subscription form with fields for "full name" and "email", social media icons for Facebook, Twitter, and RSS, and a copyright notice for Helen Sword.

# Frequently used reporting verbs by discipline

Discipline	1	2	3	4
<b>Harder sciences</b>				
Biology	Describe	Find	Report	Show
Physics	Develop	Report	Study	Find
Electrical Engineering	Propose	Use	Describe	Show
Medicine	Show	Report	Demonstrate	Observe
<b>Softer Sciences</b>				
Marketing	Suggest	Argue	Find	Demonstrate
Psychology	Find	Show	Suggest	Report
Sociology	Argue	Suggest	Describe	Note
Education	Find	Suggest	Note	Report

# Hedges and boosters

Pay attention  
when reading  
to hedges  
writers use

## 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

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.

# Making claims

weaker



stronger

Might result  
in

May result in

Will result in

It is possible  
that

It is very likely/  
probable that

It is certain  
that

Would seem  
to have

Seem to have

Have

May have  
contributed to

Contributed to

Caused

Suggests

Indicates

Shows

# 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/>
- “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>
- 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 indicate  
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:
- <http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/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.

1 & 2 focus on what previous researchers did

## 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).

Refers to areas of inquiry

Focus on what has been found

## 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).

Refers to state of current knowledge

# 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.*

# Flow: Old to new information patterns

A common way  
of organising  
information

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 placed 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 or 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://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/>

# 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/>
- Collection of north American upper level student assignments. University of Michigan:
- <http://micusp.elicorpora.info/>

This workshop was based on these two helpful books

