Challenges and Resources

- Challenges of language use: tone; clarity; correctness

- “Academic Phrasebank” created by Manchester University in the U.K: http://www.phrasebank.manchester.ac.uk

- Functions:
  - “Introducing Work
  - Referring to the Literature
  - Being Critical
  - Describing Methods
  - Reporting Results
  - Discussing Findings
  - Writing Conclusions
  - General Functions
  - Useful Links”

Academic Phrasebank: Introductions

“Writing Introductions” breaks down into things that academic writers often do such as:

- “establish the context, background and/or importance of the topic
- Indicate a problem, controversy or a gap in the field of study
- Define the topic or key terms
- State the purpose of the essay/writing
- Provide an overview of the coverage and/r structure of the writing”

More Resources


- “Cohesion”
  - “Metatext” under “Research Functions”
  - “Report Structure”
- “Grammar”
- “Punctuation”
- “Style”

### Tone

- Your tone communicates how you see yourself in relation to your readers, the sources you discuss, and your subject matter.
- It must be appropriate for the temporary status of a research student.
- We are critical of what other scholars have done, but we soften this by letting ideas speak to each other, rather than making scholars dispute.
- *The Craft of Research* (1995, p. 210) suggests that instead of seeing your thesis as “a contest between competing intellects”, it’s better to think of it as “a conversation with someone interested in what you have to say, but with a mind of her own”.
- Be confident, but also aware of limits to confidence (C of R, 210).
- For more on cautious language, also called “hedging”, see: [http://www.monash.edu.au/lls/hdr/build/3.5.6.html](http://www.monash.edu.au/lls/hdr/build/3.5.6.html)

### Clarity

- Temptation towards display – resist it! Communicate (rather than showcase) your ideas.
- Supervisors want students to write more simply, not more elaborately.
- Examiners may mistake ambitious writing for inability to make sense!
- Don’t write anything that you don’t understand.

### Write More Formally, OR More Readably

If you find it hard to write formally enough, you may like to consult
• And the pages on “vocabulary” – under “Style” – at Academic Writing in English (again, at http://kiepc10.cc.tut.fi/~english/kirjoittamo/awe/index.html)

On the other hand, if you find it hard to write readably enough, you’ll find good advice on that at the Monash site under “Readable Writing” http://www.monash.edu.au/lls/hdr/build/3.6.3.html.

Writing that is Too “Dense”

For humans, the dog both by its actual existence and in its rhetorical representation has and does serve as a key symbolic and metaphorical discursive site in which broader social and cultural meanings, anxieties and tensions are not only present but are being negotiated, clarified and described.

Pare it Down and Loosen it Up

For humans, the dog serves as a key symbolic site in which broader cultural meanings and anxieties are negotiated. This discourse revolves around real dogs and rhetorical representations of the dog alike.

Abstract Writing

• “Nominalisation” – making a noun out of a verb or adjective – is common in academic writing, to make it more abstract: e.g., industrialisation, urbanisation, degradation (note “-tion” endings).
• Such nouns name processes but make the people and activities disappear!
• This contradicts our experience that people do things, and requires readers to supply the people and activities in order to understand the idea.

For more on nominalization, visit the Monash site “Learning support for higher degree research students” at: http://www.monash.edu.au/lls/hdr/build/3.5.1.3.html
Keeping it Real!

Expression is more dense because there’s invisible information tightly packed into a single word. You can reduce the demands your writing makes on readers by putting the people and activities back in:

Desertification forced pastoralists south.

This abstract idea can be unpacked into a sentence that says who does what.

Cattle-keepers moved south because their traditional grazing lands had turned into desert.

A Noun Pile-Up

A lot of words are lined up together, ahead of a noun they describe:

- Incomprehensible: The Neo-Confucian ideological inferiority of merchants belief became inapplicable.

- Better: The Neo-Confucian belief that the merchants were inferior to all other classes was no longer applicable.

- Best (because most accessible: least abstract, most direct): People could no longer hold the Neo-Confucian belief that merchants were inferior to all other classes.

The Cure Using “of”

- Rephrase your pile-up using “of”. “Vegetation degradation is due to heavy grazing” becomes: “Degradation of vegetation is due to heavy grazing”.

- Better still, reframe the sentence into the most common English sentence structure, known as “subject – verb – object”. This tells us:

  SUBJECT VERB OBJECT
  Who/what does what to whom/what.

  Heavy grazing degrades vegetation.

  (Notice that the nominalisation “Degradation” has morphed back into the verb that it was made from!)
The Passive is Not an Error!

- Humanities has a strong cultural preference for active verbs, because they foreground the person doing the action ("We tried this method"). Sciences often prefer passive verbs, because they foreground the action, not the actor ("This method was tried").

- For more on this, see http://kiepc10.cc.tut.fi/~english/kirjoittamo/awe/grammar/passive/index.html

Grammar – the failing that dare not speak its name

- Can you conceal a problem with grammar from your supervisor? No, and your attempts to do so will only make it worse.
- Can you pay someone a lot of money (yes) to fix your thesis up reliably (no) before you submit?
- If you think you’re too bad, too good, too old or too stupid to attend to this now, get over it!
- Go and see your language and skills academic adviser and learn how to recognise your patterns of error, the reasons why you’re making those errors, the reasons why you shouldn’t make them, and how you can correct them.
- In the section on “Revision”, you’ll find advice on proofreading.