Thesis writing

Persuasion

BUILDING A CASE

A research proposal, paper or thesis needs to establish a gap in current knowledge that the proposed investigation will address. Its problem statement and literature review must ***convince*** readers that there is a gap in existing knowledge about the topic, and that the proposed research is valid and significant. To be persuasive, while also being objective and impersonal, research writing draws on various language features, that are briefly overviewed below.

USING EVIDENCE

The most obvious way you will be able to persuade your audience is through the presentation and organisation of evidence that supports the position or case you are arguing. In a long document like a thesis, a logical progression from one piece of evidence to another and proper sign-posting of that progression is particularly important if your reader is not to get lost. Part of the sign-posting comes from such things as chapter and section titles that indicate movement to a new topic and the presentation of a new piece of evidence; other sign-posting is necessary to identify movement of ideas within sections or between paragraphs to ensure that evidence being presented is foregrounded and not accidentally backgrounded.

Example: thesis introductory literature review (excerpt)

A number of studies during the 70s seemed to suggest that younger students obtained better degree results than older students. Studies in a number of countries (Warren, 1975; Barlow, 1978; Smith, 1979) all seemed to confirm original findings by Brown et al (1970). All of these studies, however, were based on only small samples of students who were aged between seventeen and twenty-one and the correlation techniques employed in the studies meant that the relationship between age and performance really only concerned this narrow age band. A closer look at the findings from Brown's original study actually suggests that the relationship between age and performance disappears when controlled for intelligence.

arguments presented and refuted, before writer presents alternative

'seemed' indicates lack of credibility

A number of studies during the 80s reported evidence that supports an opposing view, ie that older students are just as successful, in terms of degree results, as younger students. Philips and Cullen (1985), for instance, found that those aged twenty-four and over tended to do better than the eighteen and nineteen-year-old age group. Other studies have found that older students, those who delayed entry to university for a year or two, are more successful than those who enter directly from school (Spicer & Owen 1986; Frome 1988; Reynolds 1988). Even more studies since then have reported evidence that suggests that neither of the above views can be accepted too readily. They suggest that the relationship between age and performance is not a linear one, in either direction. Sanders' study (1987) found that the university success rate actually fell until the age of twenty or twenty-one, at which point it rose again. Brown (1989) found that …

presents further evidence to refute earlier research topic sentences signpost new evidence and direction of argument

signals position that refutes previous arguments, and supports with evidence

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<table>
<tr><td colspan="2">Example: thesis introductory literature review (excerpt)</td></tr>
<tr><td>The conflicting data resulting from all of these studies suggest that it may be too simplistic to suggest that increasing age brings either more or less success: other factors can account for the apparent relationship between age and performance: To provide conclusive evidence, a study is needed of subjects across a broad age range, that gathers data about a range of factors and that carries out a multivariate analysis of factors on the results …</td><td>now author puts forward their own view</td></tr>
</table>

MAKING CLAIMS: DEGREES OF CERTAINTY

In academic writing, the strength of the claims researchers make is dependent on the amount of evidence there is to support the claim or the degree of certainty felt by the researcher. The words used to indicate these degrees of certainty are words such as the modal verbs *would, should, may, can*, the adverbs and adjectives *possibly, possible*; the verbs *believe, suggest, consider*; and nouns such as *belief, possibility, assumption,* and *claim*. These words allow you to signal a degree of uncertainty in the claims you put forward, or to signal higher degrees of certainty (for more on this, see Hyland (1994), Halliday & Matthiessen (2014)).

<table>
<tr><td colspan="2">Examples: words signaling certainty/uncertainty</td></tr>
<tr><td>The present results indicate that …
The present results are evidence that…</td><td>high degree of certainty</td></tr>
<tr><td>The present results suggest that …
The present results can also be used to address Piaget's (1959) claims.</td><td>medium certainty</td></tr>
<tr><td>The findings could indicate that…
The findings may suggest that …
The work is possibly indicative of…</td><td>low certainty</td></tr>
</table>

INDIRECT PERSUASION AND EVALUATION

Successful persuasion in an academic context also often occurs less obviously when writers are trying to put the best 'spin' on their results and when readers are not aware they have been persuaded. The language through which persuasion occurs may not be obvious to many readers. Consider the following example on the left; the annotations on the right highlight the persuasive features of the example text.

<table>
<tr><td colspan="2">Example: indirect expression of opinion</td></tr>
<tr><td>The present results can also be used to address Piaget's (1959) claims …</td><td>refers to Piaget's ideas as claims rather than results, indirectly demoting them</td></tr>
<tr><td>Piaget argued that children under the age of seven years, especially between the ages of three and five years, find it difficult to accommodate the perspectives of their listeners.</td><td>'argued' represents Piaget's ideas as claims rather than facts, and his observations as open to re-interpretation</td></tr>
<tr><td>The results of the present study, however, indicate that children between the ages of 3 and 4 years do adapt to differences in listener status and say 'thank you' more frequently to adults than to peers.</td><td>refers to own research as 'results' which 'indicate' rather than the more uncertain 'suggests'</td></tr>
<tr><td>These findings support the results of previous studies in which pre-schoolers recognised differences in listener status and adjusted their use of politeness routines accordingly [references].</td><td>refers to writers' research as 'findings' which support others' published results, to establish significance of own research</td></tr>
</table>

(Adapted from Hunston, S (1994), pp 193 –199.)

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Without explicitly saying so, the writers of those sentences imply Piaget was wrong in this particular area, and this subtlety is likely to influence readers to agree with the judgement. For more on reporting verbs, please see https://www.adelaide.edu.au/writingcentre/sites/default/files/docs/learningguide-verbsforreporting.pdf

STRATEGIC VAGUENESS

As well as persuading readers in this subtle, indirect manner, there are ways of leaving out or underplaying certain information that also makes an argument persuasive. Strategic vagueness results from the back-grounding of some points and the foregrounding of others. An example of such vagueness is the text below.

Example: vagueness	
The results of the present study indicate that children between the ages of 3 and 4 years do adapt to differences in listener status and say 'thank you' more frequently to adults than to peers. This finding supports the results of previous studies in which pre-schoolers recognised differences in listener status and adjusted their use of politeness routines accordingly [references].	*avoids detail and discussion to focus reader's attention on the point, not the numbers*
A number of studies during the 70s seemed to suggest that younger students obtained better degree results than older students. Studies in a number of countries (Warren, 1975; Barlow, 1978; Smith, 1979, etc) all seemed to confirm original findings by Brown et al (1970). All of these studies, however, were based on only small samples of students who were aged between seventeen and twenty-one and the correlation techniques employed in the studies meant that …	*no discussion of how works cited differ or agree – possibly hiding information that could undermine the argument*

While 'strategic vagueness' (Myers 1996) is a feature of academic discourse, it is unwise to let an examiner think you don't know the field thoroughly, or that you are trying to distort the facts to fit your argument, as this will detract from the success of your thesis.

CONCLUSION

These few examples show how word choices help persuade and evaluate, control the degree of certainty associated with a knowledge proposition, and create strategic vagueness. As a research student, part of the process of successfully participating in your chosen discourse community involves learning to negotiate through such persuasive resources, so you are able to use them in ways that are normal and acceptable within your discipline.

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