



1. Spoken and written languages: some important differences



2. Nominal groups: nouns and their structure



3. Abstract concepts and abstract writings



4. The influence of Greek and Latin on academic vocabulary



5. Formal writing



6. Expressing opinion and attitude in academic writing

Learning objectives

This module will help you to:

- understand some differences between spoken and written language, and the importance of these differences for academic writing
- gain insights into why academic writing is typically abstract and complex. In other words, learn about:
 - the influence of Greek and Latin on academic vocabulary
 - the predominance of complex noun phrases
 - the concept of abstraction and how this is realised grammatically
- understand formal academic style
- learn how opinions and evaluations are expressed in academic writing



Academic Writing

1. Spoken and written language: some important differences

Introduction: what is academic English?

The way we use language depends on factors such as the situation we are in (e.g. *at a friend's house, in a job interview, in a tutorial*); who we are talking to (e.g. *friends, potential employer, tutor*); and our means of communication (e.g. *conversation face to face, telephone, letter, email, report*). These factors influence:

- the amount of everyday language we use: e.g. compare *I reckon* to *it was decided*, or *the decision*
- how and to what degree we express our attitude and opinion: e.g. compare *the new treatment is excellent* to *the benefits of the treatment are...*
- how informal or formal our language is: e.g. compare *Are you selling that great little house?* to *the property will be sold*
- to what degree we include abstract and technical language: e.g. compare *we treat patients* to *the treatment of patients with deep-seated tumors*.

Our decisions about the way we use language are to a great extent unconscious ones: we instinctively know how to adapt our language to the situation. This is also the case when you write your assignments at university. For example, you will know it is best not to write something like this:

My mum's an accountant and she reckons you should buy shares in the communication industries.

Instead, you would say something like this:

Some financial advisors recommend purchasing communication industry shares.

While you may be aware of some requirements and features of academic English, others may cause confusion. How, for example, do you respond to assignment questions which ask "*What do you think*" when you know from your reading that academic language seems to contain little expression of opinion and attitude? This unit on academic English aims to dispel this confusion by explaining the features of academic English. It will focus on aspects of language which are significant for writing at university. It will also help you to apply this knowledge to your own writing.

The first module in the unit discusses in detail features of **spoken and written language** and the significance of these for academic writing. The next three modules, **Abstract concepts and abstract writing**, and **The influence of Greek and Latin on academic vocabulary**, focus on the types of words we use in academic English. They look in detail at nouns¹ and their structure, as well as the concept of abstract nouns, and nominalisation. The module on Academic Writing concludes with a discussion of formal and informal language, and the related topic of how we express opinion and attitude in academic writing.

Spoken and written language: some important differences

What are the differences? ²

There are a number of differences between spoken and written language. For example, we can characterise spoken language as quite informal, colloquial and presumably unstructured (since it is often spontaneous). Furthermore, spoken language mostly takes place in the form of a dialogue with another speaker. Written language, on the other hand, is generally more structured, formal, impersonal and wordy. What's more, it typically forms a monologue rather than a dialogue. However these distinctions aren't necessarily so clear cut. Consider these lines below from a letter to a friend.

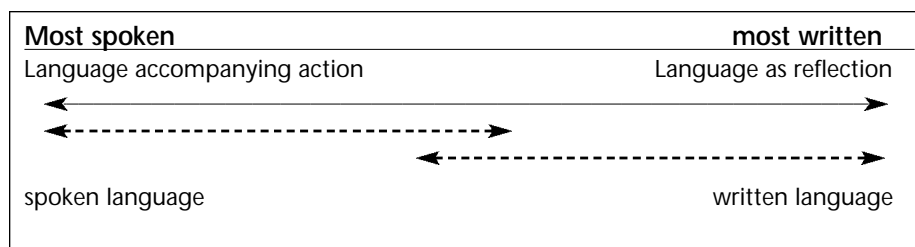
Dear Sarah

*Remember that adorable house I showed you when you were last here?
Well guess what, it's for sale!*

Although it is in the written mode, the letter starts off more like a dialogue (a question is asked of the reader). It is also quite informal (first name **Sarah**), and shows the writer's attitude (*that adorable house*). In other words, this example of writing seems more like spoken language. Similarly, here is an example of spoken language (at a house auction) which is more like written language:

Prospective bidders are required to register with the agent before the commencement of the auction.

Here the language is formal, wordy (*commencement of the auction*), and impersonal (*prospective bidders*). This overlap between spoken and written language can best be understood when spoken and written language are viewed in terms of a continuum. In other words, there isn't a clear distinction between spoken and written forms, rather a gradual progression from the one form to the other. This continuum between spoken and written language can be shown diagrammatically.



Spoken and Written Continuum (Hammond, 1992, p. 5)

At one end of the continuum we have the 'most spoken' language. This is language which accompanies an action. 'Most written' refers to language texts in which there is maximum distance between writer and reader, and the language no longer accompanies the action rather it reflects on it (Hammond, 1992). The overlapping dotted lines in the diagram represent types of spoken language which are more written and types of written language which are more like spoken language. To understand the concepts of language accompanying action, and language reflecting on actions, study these examples below from Gerot and Wignell (1994). The examples move from the most spoken forms of language (active), to the most written forms (reflective). The numbers of the examples correspond to the numbers on the continuum.

Where does academic writing fit on the spoken and written language continuum?

Academic writing is most like our examples six and seven:

Student rebellion against the Government's policy to increase students fees has its origins in Australia's social welfare history.

and

While the socialist ideology values the concept of free education, contemporary western society appears to reject this ideology.

In other words, academic writing is placed toward the 'most written' end of the continuum. However, some student writers use too many of the features of spoken language. Understanding what the features of spoken language are should help you to identify them if they occur in your own writing, and edit them appropriately, so that your writing is more consistently 'academic' in tone.

Task 1.1 Identifying features of spoken and written language

Read the following two paragraphs carefully, then answer the questions below:

Text A

People benefit from modern technology because it has improved our standard of living. Modern technology provides many good jobs and services for society, but it also damages the environment and causes environmental pollution. We know that modern technology damages the environment and causes pollution, so why do we still use it? Because we just can't live without it. Scientists are trying to reduce pollution and control the problems it causes, and if they don't, our environment will be destroyed. Modern technology is surely necessary and important, but how can we use it without causing negative effects?

Text B

The social benefits of modern technology include the increased provision of goods, services and employment. While this technology has many negative side-effects on the environment, particularly in terms of pollution, modern society is dependent on the benefits that this technology provides. In recent years, increasing public awareness of the extent of environmental destruction as a result of this technology has spurred scientific investigation into technologies which provide a more sustainable outcome for the environment. In this sense, modern society may continue to sustain itself and the environment through more sophisticated technology.

1. Which of the texts is more 'written' according to the concept of the spoken and written continuum? Text A or Text B?
2. Can you identify examples of the following language features in texts A and B? Write your responses in the space provided over the page. (Note: you won't always be able to find examples for both texts).

SPOKEN		WRITTEN	
1	2	3	4
<p>(b) It might be said that in-vitro fertilisation, at any age, is a matter of free choice, especially if the patient pays. If a woman wants the procedure, age should be irrelevant. But age can never be totally irrelevant. The line is unclear. but in the case of older mothers, questions of the “best interest of the child” press more insistently. And even when the patient pays something towards the cost of these procedures, there is some cost to the public. The issue of resource allocation remains.</p> <p>Ranking _____ Briefly give your reasons:</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p>			
<p>(c) In many radiotherapy centres where planning for external beam treatments is performed by radiation therapists, the treatment sheet and its calculations are independently checked by staff from a different educational background, typically a radiotherapy physicist. The benefits of this practice were evaluated in a radiotherapy department with two linear accelerators, one combined superficial-orthovoltage unit and one telecaesium unit.</p> <p>Ranking _____ Briefly give your reasons:</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p>			
<p>(d) What on earth does this have to do with your topic?</p> <p>Ranking _____ Briefly give your reasons:</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p>			
<p>Check the KEY at the end of this unit for suggested answers.</p>			

Key: spoken and written language

1.1 Identifying features of spoken and written language (suggested answers)

1. Text B

SPOKEN	WRITTEN
<p>Dialogue features such as questions: Text A: <i>..., so why do we still use it? ..., but how can we still use it without causing negative effects?</i> incomplete sentence: <i>because we just can't live without it</i> (more like speech)</p>	<p>Long noun phrases (nominal groups) 4 Text A: <i>modern technology</i> (occurs 4 times); <i>our standard of living; many, good jobs services for society; environmental pollution, negative effects</i></p>
<p>Text B: -</p>	<p>Text B: <i>the social benefits of modern technology; increased provision of goods, services and employment; many negative side-effects on the environment; the benefits that this technology provides; increasing public awareness of environmental destruction as a result of this technology; scientific investigation into technologies which provide a more sustainable outcome for the environment; more sophisticated technology</i></p>

source: lecturer's comment on student's assignment

Ranked 2

Why write essays?

In the modern world our thinking is largely transmitted by speech and through radio and television. At the university, however, you are required to do much of your thinking through writing. In the Humanities and Social Sciences you are inevitably required to produce a considerable number of essays.

some formal language; however, some features of spoken language such as the direct address to the reader (you).

source: Clanchy and Ballard (1981) *Essay Writing for Students*, Longman Cheshire, Melbourne.

Ranked 3

It might be said that in-vitro fertilisation, at any age, is a matter of free choice, especially if the patient pays. If a woman wants the procedure, age should be irrelevant. But age can never be totally irrelevant. The line is unclear. but in the case of older mothers, questions of the "best interest of the child" press more insistently. And even when the patient pays something towards the cost of these procedures, there is some cost to the public. The issue of resource allocation remains.

features of formal language such as lack of personal pronouns and everyday language; specialist language such as in-vitro fertilisation; long noun phrases, some abstract nouns (allocation); however one feature of spoken language is the amount of conjunctions (if, but, and)

source: editorial from *The Sydney Morning Herald*

Ranked 4

In many radiotherapy centres where planning for external beam treatments is performed by radiation therapists, the treatment sheet and its calculations are independently checked by staff from a different educational background, typically a radiotherapy physicist. The benefits of this practice were evaluated in a radiotherapy department with two linear accelerators, one combined superficial-orthovoltage unit and one telecaesium unit.

formal vocabulary (abstractions such as benefits); technical language; objective; long noun phrases

source: abstract from physics journal

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Endnotes

1. Nouns are the people, places, or things in a text. The thing can either be a concrete one such as **a book**, or it can be an abstract concept such as **the decision**.
2. This explanation is adapted from 'Spoken and written language' in *Academic Writing: a language based guide*, CD-ROM, (2000) R. Woodward-Kron, E. Thomson & J. Meek.
3. Conjunctions are joining words such as *and, but, if, so, when*.
4. Text B has considerably more long noun phrases, or nominal groups than text A. These nominal groups can make a text more difficult to understand (as the information is so condensed) and should be used with caution; however, they are a feature of academic writing. See modules 2 and 3 of this unit on academic English for more information on complex nouns and their structure.
5. For more information on objective sounding expressions of opinion and attitude see module 6 of this unit, **Expressing opinion and attitude in academic writing**.
6. For more information on nouns created from verbs, see unit 3 of this module, **Abstract concepts and abstract writing**.

References

- Gerot, L. & P. Wignell (1994) *Making Sense of Functional Grammar*, Tanya Stabler, Sydney
- Hammond, J. (1992) *English for Social Purposes*, NCELTR, Macquarie University, Australia.