



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

## 2. Nominal groups: nouns and their structure

### What are nouns?

This unit on nouns, and the next two units: **Abstract concepts and abstract writing**, and **The influence of Greek and Latin on academic vocabulary**, focus on the types of words which are used in academic writing. However, before we can begin our discussion, you will need to have a clear understanding of what a noun is. Nouns are the people, places, or things in a text such as *John, the corner store, fruit*. The 'things' can be concrete, tangible objects, or they can be abstract ones such as *the decision, the increase*. Our example *the corner store* shows us that a noun can include more information than just the 'thing' itself: *corner* describes the kind of store. We will be referring to nouns and noun phrases such as *the corner store* as nominal groups.

Nominal groups are important because they typically provide the content in a text (what something is about), and in academic writing this content can be very sophisticated and complex. What's more, the nominal groups in academic writing are often nominalisations: this means they have been formed by turning a verb such as *decide* into a thing/noun *decision*. Adverbs and adjectives can also become nouns. Here are some examples of nominal groups from academic writing:

*people*

*the major policy priority*

*the establishment of the Union Club in Sydney*

*the rate of economic growth*

*the practice of responsible government in Britain*

and a very long one:

*The conventional wisdom which interpreted Australian social history as the working out of the egalitarian radicalism of the nineteenth century* came under sustained attack from a number of writers in the 1950's and 60's.

As you can see from our long example, the nominal group can expand to include a wide range of information. Let's now take a closer look at the structure of the nominal group.

### What type of information can go around the main noun? <sup>1</sup>

The term nominal group refers to a noun and other words around the noun which further describe and classify it: for example,

*the difficult university entrance examination*

The head noun is **examination**: it tells us what the nominal group is about. The other information describes and classifies the examination: **university entrance** classifies the type of examination, while **difficult** describes the examination. The **the** tells us 'which examination'. It is also

possible to include information telling us 'how many': *the **two** difficult university entrance examinations*. We refer to the information which precedes the head noun as the **Pre-Modifier** (*pre* because it is front of the Head noun, and *modifier* because the new information modifies or changes the Head noun). In other words:

<i>the</i>	<i>difficult</i>	<i>university</i>	<i>entrance</i>	<i>examination</i>
which examination?	describes the examination	tells us what kind of examination	what kind of examination	Head noun

Consider these other examples of nominal groups with pre-modifying information. You will notice that in many cases the pre-modifying information is an adjective which serves to describe or classify the head noun. The nominal groups are in italics and the head noun is underlined.

*Standard deliveries subject **the baby** to *spine-jerking dangling*.*

*Content analysis is designed to produce **an objective, measurable, verifiable account of the manifest content of the messages.***

As you can see from our last example, the nominal group can also include information which comes after the head. We refer to this information as the Post-Modifier. The information which follows the head noun can be a prepositional phrase.<sup>2</sup> For example (head nouns are in bold, Post-Modifiers are underlined):

*the **provision** of goods and services*

*the difficult university entrance **examination** for this course*

or a clause such as

*the difficult university entrance **examination** held in September*

You may have noticed that the last two examples contain further nominal groups in the Post-Modifier: *this course*, and *September*. Needless to say, nominal groups can be long and complex.

### Task 2.1 Identifying the head of a nominal group

The Head noun in a nominal group tells us what the nominal group is about.

Underline the Head noun in each nominal group.

#### Example:

*communication industry shares*

- 1 modern technology
- 2 many good jobs
- 3 many good jobs for society
- 4 the social benefits
- 5 the social benefits of modern technology

- 6 many negative side effects on the environment.
- 7 environmental destruction caused by new technology (N.B. *caused by new technology* is a clause acting as Post-Modifier in the nominal group).

## Nominal groups and academic writing

In academic texts, the nominal groups are often necessarily complex containing Pre-Modifying elements as well as Post-Modifying. The nominal group structure is very useful because it is **elastic**: it can expand to specify and qualify information around the Head noun. It allows the writer to build up technicality, and its elasticity means information can be condensed into the nominal group rather than put into a separate clause. Complex nominal groups are a significant feature of academic writing, and the ability to construct complex nominal groups is intrinsic to becoming a sophisticated writer at university. However, if you find your meaning is not clear, it is best to ‘unpack’ some of the information from your nominal group and put it into a separate clause.

### Task 2.2 Expanding the nominal group:

adding information in front of the Head noun <sup>3</sup>

Expand the nominal groups in the left column of the table by including the information in italics in the right column. You may need to make minor changes. For example:

*The Japanese Government has a responsibility*

This sentence can be condensed into a nominal group:

*The responsibility of the Japanese Government.*

Note: by including the information in the right column into the nominal group you will no longer have a sentence. However, when writing you can see that by expanding the nominal group to include more information, you are then able to link the expanded nominal group to another idea. Always make sure that your meaning remains clear, and if it isn’t, it is best to ‘unpack’ some of the information in the nominal group and include another clause.

<p><b>Example:</b></p> <p>1. These practices  <b>Suggested answer:</b>  <i>These coded practices</i></p>	<p>are <i>coded</i></p>
<p>2. The language  <b>Suggested answer:</b></p>	<p>has <i>historical divisions</i></p>
<p>3. A democracy  <b>Suggested answer:</b></p>	<p>has as <i>part of its central theme</i> the rights of the individual.</p>
<p>4. The culture  <b>Suggested answer:</b></p>	<p>is <i>feudal</i></p>
<p>5. Audiences  <b>Suggested answer:</b></p>	<p>are <i>older</i></p>



**Defining relative clauses** are a useful way of condensing information and avoiding unnecessary repetition in your writing. For example, the repetition in the following sentences could be avoided by creating a defining relative clause.

*Some of the waterfront workers were on strike. Some of the waterfront workers blocked the entrance to the dock.*

*The waterfront workers **who were on strike** blocked the entrance to the dock.*

### Task 2.3 Expanding the nominal group using relative clauses

Expand the nominal groups in the following sentences by introducing a defining relative clause. You will need to introduce a relative pronoun (*who, which, that* etc) in order to join the sentences.

**For example:**

*The earthquake hit Newcastle in 1989*

*It caused widespread destruction*

*The earthquake **which hit Newcastle in 1989** caused widespread destruction.*

1. Emergency workers rushed to the city. They did not realise the extent of the damage.

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2. Many inner city buildings were extensively damaged. These buildings have been rebuilt.

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3. A fund was established. It helped to pay for building works.

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To check your answers, see the KEY at the end of this unit.

Underline the nominal groups in Texts A and B. Keep in mind that the post modifying information in a nominal group (what comes after the head noun) can contain prepositional phrases as well as clauses, which in turn can contain further nominal groups.

<p><b>Text A</b>                  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?</p>	<p><b>Text B</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 regards to 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.</p>
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## Key: Nouns and their structure

### 2.1 Identifying the Head of a nominal group

- 1 modern **technology**
- 2 many good **jobs**
- 3 many good **jobs** for society
- 4 the social **benefits**
- 5 the social **benefits** of modern technology
- 6 many negative side **effects** on the environment
- 7 environment **destruction** caused by new technology.

### 2.2 Expanding the nominal group: adding information in front of the head noun

#### suggested answers:

- 1 These *coded* practices
- 2 The *historical divisions* of the language
- 3 *Part of the central theme* of democracy
- 4 The *feudal* culture
- 5 *Older* audiences
- 6 The *administrative leader of* a revolution
- 7 *Lenin's organisation* of the October Revolution
- 8 *Lenin's role in* the later consolidating period
- 9 *The administration's new policies*
- 10 *The provision of realistic solutions to the people's problems.*

### 2.3 Expanding the nominal group using relative clauses

- 1 Emergency workers **who rushed to the city** did not realise the extent of the damage.
- 2 Many inner city buildings **which were extensively damages** have been rebuilt.
- 3 A fund **which helped to pay for building works** was established.

## 2.4 Nominal groups: where do they start and where do they finish?

Text A	Text B
<p>People benefit from <u>modern technology</u> because <u>it</u> has improved <u>our standard of living</u>. <u>Modern technology</u> provides <u>many good jobs and services for society</u>, but <u>it</u> also damages <u>the environment</u> and causes <u>environmental pollution</u>. <u>We</u> know that <u>modern technology</u> damages <u>the environment</u> and causes <u>pollution</u>, so why do <u>we</u> still use <u>it</u>? Because <u>we</u> just can't live without <u>it</u>. Scientists are trying to reduce <u>pollution</u> and control <u>the problems it causes</u>, and <u>if</u> they don't, <u>our environment</u> will be destroyed. <u>Modern technology</u> is surely necessary and important, but how can <u>we</u> use <u>it</u> without causing <u>negative effects</u>?</p>	<p><u>The social benefits of modern technology</u> include <u>the increased provision of goods, services and employment</u>. While <u>this technology</u> has <u>many negative side-effects on the environment</u>, particularly in regards to <u>pollution</u>, <u>modern society</u> is dependent on <u>the benefits that this technology provides</u>. In <u>recent years</u>, <u>increasing public awareness of the extent of environmental destruction as a result of this technology</u> has spurred <u>scientific investigation into technologies which provide a more sustainable outcome for the environment</u>. In <u>this sense</u>, <u>modern society</u> may continue to sustain <u>itself</u> and <u>the environment</u> through <u>more sophisticated technology</u>.</p>

### Endnotes

1. This explanation is adapted in part from 'The nominal group' in *Academic Writing: a language based guide*, CD-ROM, (2000).
2. Which would start with a preposition such as *in, at, of, for*?
3. This exercise is from 'The nominal group' in *Academic Writing: a language based guide*, CD-ROM, (2000).
4. If you have trouble working out where a nominal group starts and ends, try shifting it around in the sentence: for example, ***The social benefits of modern technology include the increased provision of goods, services and employment*** . Is ***services and employment*** part of the nominal group ***the increased provision of goods***? Yes, because we can change the sentence to read: ***The increased provision of goods, services and employment is one of the social benefits of modern technology***.

### References

- Oshima A, & Hogue A (1991) *Writing Academic English*, 2nd Edition, Addison Wesley, Mento Park, California.
- Woodward-Kron R, Thomson E, & Meek, J (2000). *Academic Writing: a language based guide* (CD-ROM), University of Wollongong.