



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

4. The influence of Greek and Latin on academic vocabulary

Why is academic language difficult?

In each of the previous sections of this unit on academic English we have asked the question “Why is academic language difficult?” So far, we have argued that academic language is difficult because of the subject matter of the writing; because of the complex nominal groups typically found in academic writing; and because of *nominalisation*.¹ Another important contributing factor to the complex nature of academic language is that many of the words used are **technical** ones. Consider this example from a medical physics reference book:

For the treatment of deep-seated tumors, high-energy x-rays with penetrating characteristics are required. The medical *linear accelerator* (linac) is currently the most popular device for this application. To ensure a full understanding of linac beam properties it is important to review first the mechanism of x-ray beam production by these types of devices. (Metcalf et al, 1997, p.1)²

Technical words include *tumor*, *x-ray*, and *linear accelerator*. If we look at the etymology, or origins, of some of the words, we can see that their origins are in the Greek and Latin languages:³

tumors	Latin <i>tumor</i> , <i>tumere</i> to swell
linear	Latin <i>linea</i>
accelerator	Latin <i>acceleratio</i>
ray	Latin <i>radius</i>

However, it is not only the obvious technical words which have their origins in the Greek and Latin languages. This paragraph also includes a number of words which are more likely to be used in written language than in spoken language. For example:

written language	spoken language equivalent
<i>treatment</i>	helping someone get better
<i>penetrating</i>	gets through, strong
<i>characteristics</i>	things about it, features
<i>device</i>	thing
<i>mechanism</i>	workings of

We will refer to such words as semi-technical. In the excerpt from physics writing many of the semi-technical terms likewise have their origins in the Greek and Latin languages. For example:

treatment	Latin <i>tractatus</i>
penetrating	Latin <i>penetrare</i>
characteristics	Greek <i>kharakteristikos</i>
mechanism	Latin <i>mechanismus</i>

Why is academic vocabulary influenced by Greek and Latin?

Academic discourse is rich in words of Latin and Greek origin for several reasons. A major reason is an **historical** one: after about 1500 English began to be used by scholars in the English speaking world where Latin had been used before. Scholars borrowed words from Latin and Greek, and as a result, many Latin and Greek words were introduced into English. Fromkin *et al*, suggest that the Renaissance and the introduction of the printing press in England by William Caxton in 1476 were important factors in introducing learned words from Latin and Greek (Fromkin et al, 1990). Examples of words from Greek which are typically used in an academic or learned context are: drama, comedy, tragedy, scene, botany, physics, zoology, and atomic (p. 297).

Another reason for the influence of Latin and Greek is a **language** one. Fromkin writes that the Greek language is well suited to supply disciplines such as science with precise, technical terms. This is because it is possible to form many compound words, and to use suffixes to form precise meanings. Greek roots have also provided English with a means of coining new words, particularly technical terms such as thermometer from thermos 'hot', plus metron 'measure' (p. 297). Other examples of new words of Greek origin include: anaesthesia, photography, lithography, ophthalmoscope, telephone. Such terms coined in this way are mostly of international currency; that is to say, if a useful term of this kind is introduced in one country, it is quickly adopted into the languages of the rest (Bradley, 1968, p. 67).

Latin, like Greek, has also provided prefixes and suffixes that are used with native and non-native words. For example, the Latin prefix *ex* in *ex-husband*, *ex-wife*; while the Latin suffix *-able/ible*, borrowed via French, can be attached to most English verbs, as in: writable, readable, answerable, movable. (Fromkin et al, 1990, p. 297).

Here is a list of Latin prefixes which are commonly used in English:

Prefix	Meaning	Word	Other forms
ab-	from, away	abstract	a-, abs-
com-	with, together	complicated, confuse, contain	co-, col-, con-, cor-
de-	down	degrade	
de-	away	deduct	
dis-	not	dislike	
dis-	apart, away	distance	di-, dif-
in-	not	inconsistent	ig-, il-, im-, ir-
in-	in (to)	instruct	il-, im-, ir-
inter-	between, among	intermittent	
non-	not	nonviolent	
ob-	against	oppose	o-, oc-, of-, op-
pre-	before	predict	
pro-	forward	prospect	pur-
re-	back	reduce	
re-	again	reorganize	
trans-	across, beyond	transfer	tra-, tran-
un-	not	unable	

(adapted from Nation I, 1990, p.170)

Finally, in Latin and Greek, like English, it is possible to transform verbs and adjectives into nouns, and in doing so to create abstract things from initial observable processes (for example, *move* to *motion*). Also, it is possible to expand the nominal group with prepositional phrases to specify exactly what is meant. For example:

the square on the hypotenuse of a right-angled triangle

Word groups	Common element ⁶	Common meaning	common meaning (on completion of unit)
1. clarinet, clarify, declarative, declare	'clar'		
2. cordial, concordance, cardiac, cardiologist			
3. corpulent, corporation, chromosome, corpus, incorporate			
4. cubicle, cubit, incubus, incumbent, succumb			
5. culprit, culpable, exculpate, culpability			
6. decapod, decathlon, dime, Decapolis, dean			

Reading: clar-

The Latin element *clarus* means **bright**, **clear**. This gives us words such as *declare*, *declarative*, *clarinet*, *clarify*. Here are their meanings:

- declare: with the prefix *de-*, **to clear down** or **away**. Synonyms include *announce*, *assert*, *aver*, *proclaim*
- declarative: describing that which *clarifies* or *asserts*, as a *declarative* sentence; the other functional types of sentences being *interrogative*, *imperative*, and *exclamatory*.
- clarinet: from *clarion*, a trumpet, or musical instrument with a **clear** tone
- clarify: to make clear (difficult subject, obscure statement)⁷

cord-

Words with the common element *cord* include *discord*, *cordial*, *accordance*, *concordance*. Here the common element base is the Latin *cord*, which means **heart**. The Greek cognate, that is, of the same linguistic family, is *kardia*, but it refers to the physical heart, whereas the Latin is more figurative. Some medical terms including the Greek root are *cardiac*, *cardiologist*, *electrocardiogram*. Below are examples with the Latin common element and their meaning.

- cordial: that which warms the **heart**, eg. a friendship
- concord: with *con-*, a variation of *com-*, **same**, **mutually**, thus, of the same mind (or **heart**); from *concord* are derived *concordant*, **harmonious**, **agreeing**; *concordance*, a state of agreement. A *concordance* is also an alphabetical index of all the words in a text or corpus of texts, showing every contextual occurrence of a word, for example, a concordance of the bible.
- cri de couer*: The correct French expression is *cri du couer*; **cry from the heart**, an outrage, or a passionate appeal or protest.

Learning development

dec- Latin and Greek meaning ten, tenth . Words containing this root are <i>December, decurion, decade, decimate, decibel</i> .	
December:	the tenth month before January and February were added.
decimate:	from <i>decimus, tenth</i> ; originally, to kill a tenth of the people; now usually the obliteration of almost everyone.
decibel:	abbreviated to db; a unit that expresses the relative difference in power between two different acoustic or electric signal levels; usually equal to ten times the common logarithm of the ration of the two levels.
dean:	from <i>decanus</i> , a person who was head of a group of ten men—probably first soldiers; then, monks; and later, university students

Now go back to Task 4.2 and try to complete the final column! Note there is no key for this task.

Key The influence of Greek and Latin on academic vocabulary

Key 4.1 identifying words with Latin prefixes ⁸

Suggested answers only.

Prefix	Meaning	Word
ab-	from, away	abstract, <i>absent</i> , <i>abstain</i> , <i>abdicate</i> , <i>absolve</i>
com-	with, together	complicated, confuse, contain, <i>communicate</i>
de-	down	describe, <i>descend</i>
de-	away	deduct, <i>depart</i> , <i>deport</i> , <i>departure</i>
dis-	not	dislike, <i>disappear</i> , <i>disagree</i> , <i>disallow</i> , <i>disinherit</i>
dis-	apart, away	distance, <i>dissolve</i> , <i>dismiss</i>
in-	not	inconsistent, <i>incoherent</i> , <i>inadequate</i> , <i>insincere</i>
in-	in (to)	instruct, <i>investigate</i> , <i>initiate</i>
inter-	between, among	intermittent, <i>interview</i> , <i>intermittent</i> , <i>internal</i>
mis-	wrong(ly)	misinform, <i>mistake</i> , <i>misnomer</i> , <i>misadventure</i>
non-	not	nonviolent, <i>nonracist</i> , <i>nonsexist</i> ,
ob-	against	oppose, <i>opposition</i> , <i>opposite</i> , <i>opponent</i> , <i>obstruct</i> , <i>object</i>
pre-	before	predict, <i>prenatal</i> , <i>preempt</i> , <i>premature</i> , <i>premonition</i>
pro-	forward	prospect, <i>promote</i> , <i>progress</i>
re-	back	reduce, <i>reverse</i> , <i>reply</i>
re-	again	reorganize, <i>resubmit</i> , <i>review</i> , <i>redo</i> , <i>remake</i>
trans-	across, beyond	transfer, <i>transmit</i>
un-	not	unable, <i>unimaginable</i> , <i>unmanageable</i> , <i>unlikable</i> , <i>unhealthy</i> , <i>unwell</i> , <i>unusable</i> , <i>unanswered</i>

(adapted from Nation I, 1990, p.170)

Endnotes

1. For an explanation of nominal groups and nominalisation see section 2. **Nominal groups: nouns and their structure**, and section 3. **Abstract concepts and abstract writing**.
2. This example is from lecture notes for the subject *Texture and Lexis in Academic Discourse* in the English Language Studies major, Department of Modern Languages, University of Wollongong. The explanation for the influence of Greek and Latin on academic language is adapted from the lecture notes.
3. Needless to say many Latin words have their origins in Greek words. These explanations are not intended as a precise etymological account rather as an indication of the extent of the influence of Greek and Latin on academic vocabulary.
4. These tasks are from lecture notes for the subject *Texture and Lexis in Academic Discourse*, Department of Modern Languages, University of Wollongong.

