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

University of Wollongong

Academic Writing

6. Expressing opinion and attitude in academic writing[1]

In the previous section on formal language we noted that formal writing typically does not contain features such as:

• the use of the personal pronoun
• expressions of attitudes (*thinking and feeling verbs, attitudinal adjectives* such as <u>*spectacular*</u> *results* etc)
• strong arguments and emotive language

These elements contribute to a text sounding informal, and they also result in the text sounding personal and subjective. This is because these elements make the reader aware of the writer's presence in the text, and the writer's opinions and attitudes. Academic language typically does not contain these elements, and as a result it is characterised as impersonal and objective. However, you have no doubt heard your lecturers and tutors say that they want to know what *you* think about a particular issue, event, or theory. In other words, your lectures want to know your opinion. This is evident in essay questions such as:

> *What do you think?*
> *Do you agree?*
> *Evaluate*
> *Argue in favour of or against*

Furthermore, in academic writing it is not only students who are required to form a considered opinion and present this is in a logically developed argument. The published work of academics can contain opinions in the form of:

> interpretations of results
> evaluations
> hypotheses

Needless to say, this type of writing will contain opinions and attitudes.

How are opinions and attitudes expressed in academic writing?

With regard to expressing opinions and attitudes in academic writing, it would appear that there is a contradiction. On the one hand, the writing is typically objective, while on the other hand it needs to contain a considered opinion based on research, analysis and critical thinking. In other words, we can say that in academic writing opinion needs to be presented so that it appears to be objective. Let's look at how an evaluation is expressed in a scientific article:

> *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.*

At first glance it would appear that there is no evaluative language in this paragraph: however, the word **benefits** implies that the writer considered the results of the experiment to be *beneficial*, or *good*. In spoken language this would be typically expressed as follows:

> *It's **good** to get an independent person to check the treatment sheet.*
> OR
> *Patients **benefit** when the treatment sheets are independently checked.*

Benefits is the nominalised form of **to benefit**. Here the science writer has used an abstract noun formed through *nominalisation*[2] (process of turning a verb into a noun) with the result that the writing sounds more objective.

Another important aspect of expressing opinion and attitude is the language feature of **modality**. This refers to the intermediate choices between *yes* and *no* (Halliday, 1985, p.86). In other words, statements can be not only positive or negative (*patients benefit, patients do not benefit*), they can also be tentative or near certain. For example:

> *Patients **might** benefit* (low certainty)

> *Patients **must** benefit* (high certainty)

High modality is found in persuasive texts which appeal to people's emotions such as speeches at rallies and letters from charities requesting money. Texts such as these attempt to persuade the reader or listener that something must be done. Low modality, on the other hand, appears in texts which are less emotionally charged such as reports and essays. Low modality can be used to open up a discussion, or present a reasoned argument. We could say that high modality appears to the emotions while low modality appeals to reason. It is for this reason that low modality is more prevalent in academic writing.

Where do we find evaluation and opinion in academic writing?

Where evaluation and opinion occur in academic writing depends to a large extent on the genre, or type of writing. For example, in essay writing expression of opinion and attitude is more predominant in essay introductions (where the essay's thesis is outlined), and conclusions (where reflections and recommendations are sometimes made). For example:

Conclusion to a Sociology essay	Evaluative language
Accordingly, it *seems* that while the theories of Marx and Weber on the notion of class may have some **common** aspects, they also contain some **fundamental** differences, which centre around the idea proposed by Marx that class is determined **solely** by economic factors, whereas Weber would argue that class is only **one form** of social stratification. It is an **impossible** task to decide which theory provides the most **accurate** description of class, thus not **surprisingly** the issue continues to be a topic of **contentious** debate. Weber's theory **certainly** encompasses aspects which Marx *seems* to have left out, yet the **importance** of Marx's theories cannot be undermined.	• *adjectives as part of the nominal groups to evaluate elements of the theories,* • *adverbs of degree (e.g. **certainly**, **solely**),* • *tentative evaluation: seems* • *nominalisation **importance***

Another example of evaluative language:

Conclusion to Accounting & Finance essay	Evaluative language
Under the appropriate social and economic conditions, Value Added Statements (VAS) **may** become important in presenting additional or recognised information about an entity to a wider audience. They are of *most* use when they can be compared with those of past years or with other companies. However, if the publication of the VAS is to become widespread throughout the United Kingdom, and in Australia for that matter, there is <u>the need</u> then for accounting standards on their form and content. This is due to the variety of methods which are currently employed in their preparation. From Woodward-Kron (1997) *Writing in Commerce,* Revised edition, CALT, The University of Newcastle, p. 17.	• *low modality* • *adjective used to express evaluation* • *nominalisation used to express obligation*

In this example strong obligation is expressed in the abstraction *the need*, so the obligation is less obvious than if it had been expressed in the verbal form as *we need to.* Needless to say, high modality can occur in essay writing: however, this depends to an extent on the essay topic and on the department. Here is an example from the creative arts:

> *The criteria used to judge artists' work **needs** to be assessed. Art history is dominated by male artists, and predominantly taught and written by men. This inherent male imagery defines art practice. The infrastructure **needs** to be reappraised.*

Task 6.1 identifying expressions of attitude and opinion in academic writing

Underline any expressions of opinion and attitude in the following sentences.

1 With the support of key people, Ms Costello could change the organisational culture into a more participative, less hostile workforce. (Source: Management synopsis)

2 This book gave a fairly objective view to the events surrounding the Rum Rebellion. (Source: History annotated bibliography)

3 Although the work that is being conducted in several areas regarding biological sensors shows significant progress, there is still quite a lot of work to do in order to understand how biological sensors in insects and other animals interact and what effect they have on animal behaviour. (Source: Computer Science essay)

4 All three types of leg sensors seem to be important for agile locomotion. (Computer Science essay)

5 Robotic labour will probably be needed for most of our industrial and commercial activities. (Source: Computer Science essay)

6 The results of the study suggest that there are considerable benefits to be gained from including writing checklists in the teaching/learning cycle. (Source: Education abstract)

7 The failure of information systems is rarely due to technological failure. Failure is much more likely to be caused by human and organisational problems. (Source: Business Systems essay)

8 The results show that, taken together, at least 17 of the 25 items can form a valid scale measuring graduate perceptions of their courses for each of the three data groups. Of the five sub-scales, Good Teaching and Generic Skills are only moderately valid and reliable for use and interpretation separately from the main scale.

(Source; abstract Waugh F (1998) 'The Course Experience Questionnaire' *Higher Education Research and Development*, Vol. 17, No. 1, pp. 45-63.)

For suggested answers see the KEY at the end of this section.

Key: expressing opinion and attitude in academic writing

6.1 Identifying expressions of opinion and attitude in academic writing

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4 All three types of leg sensors <u>seem to be</u> important for agile locomotion.

5 Robotic labour will <u>probably</u> be needed for most of our industrial and commercial activities.

6 The results of the study <u>suggest</u> that there are <u>considerable</u> <u>benefits</u> to be gained from including writing checklists in the teaching/learning cycle.

7 The <u>failure</u> of information systems is <u>rarely</u> due to technological failure. Failure is <u>much more likely</u> to be caused by human and organisational <u>problems</u>.

8 The results show that, taken together, <u>at least</u> 17 of the 25 items <u>can</u> form a <u>valid</u> scale measuring graduate perceptions of their courses for each of the three data groups. Of the five sub-scales, Good Teaching and Generic Skills are only <u>moderately valid</u> and <u>reliable</u> for use and interpretation separately from the main scale.

(Source; abstract Waugh F (1998) 'The Course Experience Questionnaire' *Higher Education Research and Development*, Vol. 17, No. 1, pp. 45-63.)

Endnotes

1. The explanation and task in this section is from Woodward-Kron R, Thomson E, & Meek, J (2000). *Academic Writing: a language based guide* (CD-ROM), University of Wollongong.

2. For a more detailed explanation of nominalisation see section 4 of this unit on academic English called **Abstract concepts and abstract writing.**

References

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