

Research and Thesis writing

4. Thesis writing and persuasion



1. Research models and methods



2. Developing a research proposal



3. Thesis Structure guidelines



3a. Sample Abstract from Engineering & Biology



3b. Sample Introduction from Engineering, Biology & Education



3c. Sample Methods section from Biology, Engineering & Education



3d. Sample Results section from Biology & Education



3e. Sample Discussion section from Biology



3f. Sample Conclusion from Engineering & Education



4. Thesis writing and persuasion

In unit 2 of this module we suggested that the process of developing a research proposal is ultimately one of establishing a gap in current research which your thesis will aim to address. Consequently, the function of your research proposal and the literature review chapter of your thesis is to **convince** your audience that this research gap does exist, and that your research is valid and significant. At the macro level, the function of your thesis is to describe your research, identify its contribution to the field and to convince your reader of the validity of your argument or thesis.

The language of your thesis needs to be persuasive even though this seems to contradict our folk understandings of academic discourse as objective and impersonal. In this unit we investigate the ways in which persuasion occurs in academic writing. We can only generalise about the language features of persuasion across different disciplines, but we hope in the following discussion to give you enough ‘tools’ in your own language toolbox so that you can identify persuasive language in your own discipline and use it suitably in your own writing.

Building the case: Persuading your audience with 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 text

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.

In this excerpt from a literature review, you'll notice that the writer puts his or her own argument at the end of the section. A series of arguments or evidence is presented then refuted; this allows the writer to present an alternative. Notice how the use of 'seemed' in the first sentence indicates a lack of credibility in the results.

The writer presents argument that refutes earlier research. Notice the use of however to signpost the contrary view the writer is putting forward.

Learning objectives

This module will help you to:

- learn about various research models.
- prepare a research proposal.
- structure your thesis and its chapters.
- write convincingly of your research outcomes and implications



Covert persuasion and evaluation

Successful persuasion in the scientific and generally the 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 has to be implicit, and not obvious to the reader. Consider the following example on the left; the annotations on the right highlight the persuasive features of the example text.

The present results can also be used to address Piaget’s (1959) <i>claims</i> .	Notice that the things that Piaget has reported are referred to by the authors as <i>claims</i> rather than <i>results</i> . This effectively demotes Piaget’s results without saying so explicitly.
Piaget <i>argued</i> 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.	Here, the authors write that Piaget <i>argued</i> , suggesting that what he said was an interpretation which can be argued against, rather than a result which would have the status of a fact.
The <i>results</i> 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.	The authors here refer to their <i>own</i> research as <i>results</i> . They also use the reporting verb <i>indicates</i> rather than a verb with more uncertain status such as <i>suggests</i> .
<i>These findings</i> support the results of previous studies in which preschoolers recognized differences in listener status and adjusted their use of politeness routines accordingly [references].	In this sentence, the writers’ research is similarly referred to as <i>These findings</i> which are then interpreted as supporting similar findings. By linking the findings to other similar findings, the authors establish a greater level of significance for their own research (pp. 193-199).

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

You’ll notice, no doubt, that the writers of those sentences feel Piaget was probably *wrong* in this particular area, and that they are most probably *right*, even though they have said neither of these things explicitly. It has only been implied. What’s more, you might feel that you’ve been persuaded to share the authors’ views because of the way they’ve ‘implied’ certain things.

‘Strategic vagueness

As well as persuading readers covertly, as the last section showed, there are ways of leaving out or underplaying certain information that effectively allows your argument to be more persuasive. This is called strategic vagueness: it results from the backgrounding of some points and the foregrounding of others. An example of such vagueness is the text below.

Learning development

Learning Resource ♦ Learning Resource ♦ Learning Resource ♦ Learning Resource ♦ Learning Resource

Latour, B., & Woolgar, S. (1979). *Laboratory Life: the social construction of scientific facts*. Beverley Hills, CA: Sage.

Myers, G. (1996). Strategic vagueness in academic writing. In E. Ventola, & A. Mauranen (Editors), *Academic writing: intercultural and textual issues* (pp. 3-18). Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

Swales, J. (1990). *Genre analysis*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Thomson, E., Woodward-Kron, R., Humphrey, S., Droga, L., & Dreyfus, S. Learning disciplinary discourses, learning grammar: exploring academic discourses using SFL with undergraduates. *International Systemic Functional Conference 2000*.