Lecture Three
Academic Writing for Postgraduates:
School of Informatics

English Language Education

2019-2020

By the end of this lecture, you will have begun to

- recognise the main features of academic writing.

- recognise how to establish clarity in your writing.

- develop an awareness of how to write coherent text.

With a partner discuss

What makes academic writing 'academic'?

Academic writing is …

- concise
- precise
- clear
- coherent

Being Concise

Good writing is simple and direct.

How to avoid wordiness

- Omit needless words (ineffectual phrases, excessive hedging)

E.G.

- *It is necessary to remember…*
- *This might possibly be because…*

- Opt for simple words. Bigger words don't make your writing more academic.

For example, what could you write instead of…?

a large majority of

has the capacity to

whether or not

are in agreement

prior to

subsequent to

at this point in time

due to the fact that

in the event that

a new initiative

The simple version!

most

can

whether

agree

before

after

now

because

if

an initiative

Do NOT inflate your sentence length and complexity to sound academic!

Example:

Epigenetic events contribute to the etiology of diabetes; however, the lack of epigenomic analysis has limited the elucidation of the mechanistic basis for this link.

Can you simplify this?

How about?

- ***How do epigenetic problems cause diabetes?***

- *You can find many more example of overly complex sentences on the excellent Duke University site:*

  https://cgi.duke.edu/web/sciwriting/index.php?action=lesson3#examples.

Academic writing is precise

- Which of the following terms can you use in your academic writing?

- *People*

- *Scientists*

- *Researchers*

- *The literature*

Academic writing is clear

- *Tutors often complain that writing is 'unclear'*

- International students often worry about their grammar and vocabulary, but this is usually not the main issue in making sure your message can be understood.

- Writing styles are culturally variable. This means there is a possible mismatch between your own expectations of academic writing and those of academic readers in the UK.

British and Chinese Academic Writing

Jin and Cortazzi (1996) – a study of academic culture in Britain and China

The research data reveal that many Chinese students use Chinese discourse patterns when they write in English. This causes some difficulty for British tutors who sometimes cannot identify the student's writing problems. At the same time, these students see their writing as unacceptable to their tutors but do not understand the reasons. Unfortunately they often blame their language skills for what may be a problem of **discourse** and **academic culture**. Furthermore, those who are aware of such differences may not be willing to change, since they cannot see anything wrong with their own discourse patterns.

Jin and Cortazzi (1996: 210-211)

In order to make your writing clear, you need to focus on..

- Explicitness

- Logical flow

- Cohesion

- Text structure

Being clear 1: Explicitness

One aspect of reader-responsible writing that may cause difficulties for British readers is what they may perceive as a <u>lack of explicitness</u>. Here are two more comments by British lecturers on Chinese students' writing:

T: [Chinese students] have difficulty in expressing the point, <u>they only give half of it, they don't fully explain things</u>, that's the most common thing....

        [...]

T: They've got to be precise and technical .... And the problem is, it's not only the technical things that must be precise, the equations and things like that, but it's also the fact that <u>there must not be inferences</u>....

Jin and Cortazzi 1996: 211-212 (emphases added)

Example: where to put the **main point**

(Interview data)

T: … the style we encourage: [the] main point at the beginning, then try to build up a paragraph, later to prove the main point or hypothesis, then give a summary or conclusion at the end.

CS: … The Chinese style of writing is constructed with reasons and feelings. The conclusion comes from step-by-step reasoning. From Confucius' time, we have been told we must present a source and origin, otherwise the reasoning must be made clearly. There is no present without the past. Therefore we should report from the root.[…]

T: Chinese students tend to give the main point at the end of the paragraph, while British students tend to give it at the beginning, the first sentence of the paragraph.

Jin and Cortazzi (1996: 211)

- Explain all links between ideas clearly. Be specific about **reasons**. Make careful use of appropriate linking words and phrases.

- Write down each stage in your **reasoning** as clearly as possible. Don't rely on implication or suggestion – these may not be understood.

- Use concrete, practical **examples** to illustrate general or abstract points. If you don't, your ideas may seem too vague.

- Remember that it is more important to be **clear** than to use impressive language. In academic writing your task is to present clear arguments and report information accurately; your work will not be assessed on its artistic merit!

Being Clear 2: Paragraphing and Cohesion

Follow conventional paragraph patterns

- Must every paragraph have a 'topic sentence'?

- How should I structure my paragraphs?

- How can I link paragraphs?

Must every paragraph have a 'topic sentence'?

- Because you start a new paragraph when you move on to a new (sub)topic / point, you need to make the change of topic <u>clear</u> to your reader.

- An effective way to do this is to begin the new paragraph with a sentence announcing the new topic / point.

A typical topic sentence

Productive and receptive control of routine formulae is highly beneficial to L2 learners. First and foremost, it eases communication with other language users. Use of an expression like 'Do you have the time?' is immediately comprehensible to an interlocutor as a request for the current time, whereas 'Declare the hour and the minute, please' is not. Furthermore, knowing how to express meanings quickly and efficiently and knowing what other people will say in certain situations reduces processing load, which is an important advantage, particularly to learners at lower levels of proficiency for whom routine formulae can constitute 'islands of reliability' (House op.cit.). Finally, target-like use of routine formulae makes it easier for learners to 'fit in' (as Wong-Fillmore op.cit. showed) at least to the degree that they choose to do so.

(Roever, 2012, p.12)

Being Clear 2: Paragraph structure- cohesion

Which of these two texts is more cohesive?

Text A
Attracting customers to buy your products and services needs a great deal of research and planning to ensure the money you invest in gaining customers pays off. This is normally achieved through market research and involves finding more about the people you hope to sell to. Armed with this information you can then formulate an effective plan of action based on your evidence. Once you are aware of the needs of your potential customers you need to examine your product in detail, fix a suitable price which will help your product sell, ensure you choose the correct method of distribution and select an appropriate promotion to attract your audience. This is known as the marketing mix and can help your business to spend money wisely with the best results.

Text B
Attracting customers to buy your products and services needs a great deal of research and planning to ensure the money you invest in gaining customers pays off. Firstly, there is market research and involves finding more about the people you hope to sell to. Secondly, formulate an effective plan of action based on your fix a suitable price which will help your product sell, ensure you choose the correct method of distribution and select an appropriate promotion to attract your audience. So this is known as the marketing mix and in summary it can help your business to spend money wisely with the best results.

Adapted from http://www.dcielts.com/ielts-writing/cohesion-introduction/

Which of these two texts is more cohesive?

Text A

Attracting customers to buy your **products** and services needs a great deal of **research** and planning to ensure the money you invest in gaining customers pays off. This is normally achieved through **market research** and involves finding more about the people you hope to sell to. Armed with **this** information you can then formulate an effective plan of action based on your evidence. Once you are aware of the needs of your potential customers you need to examine your **product** in detail, fix a suitable price which will help your **product** sell, ensure you choose the correct method of distribution and select an appropriate promotion to attract your audience. **This** is known as the marketing mix and can help your business to spend money wisely with the best results.

Text B

Attracting customers to buy your products and services needs a great deal of research and planning to ensure the money you invest in gaining customers pays off. **Firstly**, there is market research and involves finding more about the people you hope to sell to. **Secondly**, formulate an effective plan of action based on your fix a suitable price which will help your product sell, ensure you choose the correct method of distribution and select an appropriate promotion to attract your audience. **So** this is known as the marketing mix and **in summary** it can help your business to spend money wisely with the best results.

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Establishing clarity: Information Flow

What is information flow?

Another important consideration for successful communication is flow – moving from one statement in a text to the next. Naturally, establishing a clear connection of ideas is important to help your reader follow the text.

Swales and Feak (2004)

Academic Writing for Graduate Students

- Paragraph units are most effective when they either

    1)   discuss a single topic; or

    2)   discuss a series of related topics that build on one another. You can fulfil reader expectations by maintaining a *logical flow* of grammatical subjects in a paragraph.

- There are two primary ways to accomplish this:

    1   Maintain a common subject throughout a one-topic paragraph

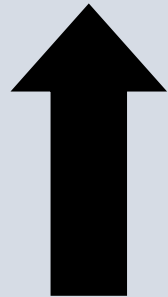   2   Shift the subject appropriately according to the story

Sentences

Most sentences in English have two parts:

- a topic (theme) – what the sentence is about

- a comment (rheme) – what the writer/speaker wants to tell you about the topic
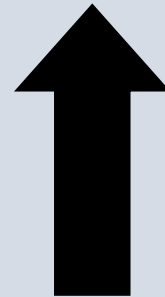
Sentences

Question: Where is Anton?

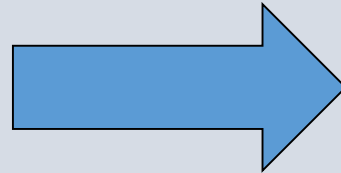Answer: Anton's   at the cinema.
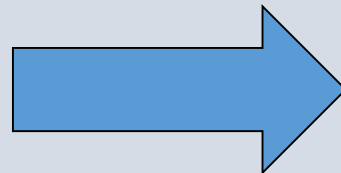
theme   rheme

Sentences

In English sentences, old (known) information usually comes before new (unknown) information.

topic ➡ **comment**

old/known
information ➡ new/unknown
information

Sentences

- The theme is what you are writing about - it is *old* or *known* or *given* information.

- The rheme is what you are saying about the theme - it is *new* information, what you want to tell your reader.

Task

Identify the theme (topic) and rheme (comment):

1. The M8 goes from Edinburgh to Glasgow.

2. The motorway from Edinburgh to Glasgow is called the M8.

Solution

Identify the theme (topic) and rheme (comment):

1. The M8 goes from Edinburgh to Glasgow.

2. The motorway from Edinburgh to Glasgow is called the M8.

Problem text?

To stop the outbreak of the unknown disease, two medical teams were sent immediately to the affected area in Sichuan to diagnose the disease. Ten doctors selected from the first-rate hospitals across the country formed each medical team. The expertise of all the doctors was well-known in China, and some was world-famous.

Choice 1

Epigenetics is the study of heritable changes in gene function that do not involve changes in the DNA sequence. The Greek prefix epi- in epigenetics implies features that are "on top of" or "in addition to" the traditional genetic basis for inheritance. Epigenetics most often denotes changes in a chromosome that affect gene activity and expression. It can also be used to describe any heritable phenotypic change that does not derive from a modification of the genome, such as prions.

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Choice 1

Epigenetics => is the study of...

The Greek prefix epi....

Epigenetics

It (epigenetics)

Mary Wollstonecraft

The early feminist movement was greatly influenced by works like "*On the Vindication of the Rights of Women*" (1792) by Mary Wollstonecraft. She proposed a feminist agenda whose aims were to expose the exclusion of women from traditionally "male" spheres like politics, economics, education and religion, to take apart these structures, which denied women their deserved rights and attempt to achieve these rights for them in the male dominated spheres. These aims became a main focus for religious women in particular, at the time, in the United States.

(McCabe, 2009)

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(McCabe, 2009)

Choice 2

Early feminist movement => Mary Wollstonecraft

She => feminist agenda (aims)

These aims => focus for religious women

Being clear: use explicit transition

- English is a

  writer- responsible language.

- This means it is $your$ job to make your meaning clear.

- This means you need to provide explicit transition

  - *between ideas within paragraphs* and
  - *between each paragraph*.

Be careful of...

- overusing the cohesive devices some of you learned for IELTS

(*nowadays*, *moreover*, *furthermore*, *firstly*, *secondly*)

- Instead, you can use the following devices to make your text more cohesive.

Repetition

Patients who repeatedly take overdoses pose considerable management difficulties. The problem-orientated approach is not usually effective with such **patients**. When a **patient** seems to be developing a pattern of chronic repeats, it is recommended that all staff engaged in his or her care meet to reconstruct each attempt in order to determine whether there appears to be a motive common to each act.

This / These + noun

account	criticism	fall	rejection
advice	description	finding	report
answer	difficulty	idea	rise
argument	discussion	improvement	situation
assertion	distinction	increase	suggestion
assumption	emphasis	observation	view
claim	estimate	proof	warning
comment	example	proposal	
conclusion	explanation	reference	

Cohesive Nouns

1) This d_____**between high- and low-contact systems** provides a basis for classifying service production systems that can enable the manager to develop a more effective service operation.

2) Economic theory **ascribes the primary role** in the provision of public goods **to government**. This e_____ on government overlooks the role of the not-for-profit sector in providing collective-type goods.

3) **Melanoma cell lines that carried at least one copy of MTS1 frequently carried nonsense, missense, or frameshift mutations in the gene**. These f_____ suggest that MTS1 mutations are involved in tumor formation in a wide range of tissues. **...**

4) Here we show that the annual flux of carbon from deforestation and abandonment of agricultural lands in the Brazilian Amazon was a source of **about 0.2 Pg C yr^{-1} over the period 1989–1998 (1 Pg is 10^{15} g).** This e_____ is based on annual rates of deforestation and spatially detailed estimates of deforestation, regrowing forests and biomass.

In the science reports written by Westerners, they normally give an introduction which reviews this research done by others, very wordy. When they discuss the new techniques or new methodology, they put in a lot of irrelevant quotations from others and their previous writing. In the end, they again give reviews and prospects and implications of this research. So their papers are quite long with a lot of work mentioned. But our Chinese writing is different. We don't have their introduction part. We just introduce this new method or technique, our thinking on this research, how it is to be used or processed … how it can solve the problem. This is because people who read this journal have already known about the history of the research and where the problem is. What they need to know is how to solve this problem.

Jin and Cortazzi (1996: 211-212)

Verbs and Nouns

- Do not be afraid of verbs!

- Nouns are useful when summarising the action in the previous sentence.

- ' The data was analysed using SPSS. *This analysis* highlighted that …

BUT

- Verbs carry meaning.

Avoid bamboo sentences

This advice is from J. Strunk's

An unskilful writer will sometimes construct a whole paragraph of sentences of this kind, using as connectives *and, but,* and less frequently, *who, which, when, where,* and *while,* these last in non-restrictive senses (i.e., non-defining).

The third concert of the subscription series was given last evening, and a large audience was in attendance. Mr. Edward Appleton was the soloist, and the Boston Symphony Orchestra furnished the instrumental music. The former showed himself to be an artist of the first rank, while the latter proved itself fully deserving of its high reputation. The interest aroused by the series has been very gratifying to the Committee, and it is planned to give a similar series annually hereafter. The fourth concert will be given on Tuesday, May 10, when an equally attractive programme will be presented.

https://www.bartleby.com/141/strunk5.html#13. Accessed 27/09/2018

- A similar problem happens with long lists. Authors provide a long list of stuff with no context, and the verb doesn't show up until the end of the sentence:

    Peanuts, shrimp, almonds, milk or anything else with lactose, and wheat or anything with gluten all represent things that people are commonly allergic to.

- You have no idea what you're reading until the end. When you find out, you must re-read the sentence to comprehend what these things have in common. To revise, just give the context before the list:

    People are commonly allergic to things like peanuts, shrimp....

- Now the list can be any length without reducing understandability.

If your tutor says…

1. '*You're not developing your points enough*'

   Look at your paragraph structure. Have you too many points in each paragraph. Think 'one paragraph = one point'

2. '*You need more evidence*'

   Make sure that you provide at least one source in each paragraph, or your writing could be too anecdotal.

Other issues that can impede clarity

- Get to the main verb quickly:
- Avoid long introductory phrases and clauses.
- Avoid long abstract subjects
- Avoid interrupting the subject-verb connection

Demeaning adverbs

"There is nothing more deceptive than an obvious fact."

Arthur Conan Doyle

Be careful of demeaning words like *obviously*, *clearly*, or *undoubtedly*. Something that is obvious to you may not be obvious to the reader.

Summary

- concise
- precise
- clear
- coherent

Further resources

- Fragments and Run-Ons
http://grammar.ccc.commnet.edu/grammar/cgi-shl/quiz.pl/fragments_quiz.htm

- Sentence Structure
https://owl.english.purdue.edu/exercises/5/

- Comma Splices, Run-On Sentences, & Fragments
http://www2.gsu.edu/~eslhpb/grammar/lecture_6/commas.html

Further resources

- Finding synonyms: (https://www.wordandphrase.info/frequencyList.asp)

- Sound advice on Scientific Academic writing with some useful examples:

  Duke Graduate School Scientific Writing Resource (https://cgi.duke.edu/web/sciwriting/)

- Interactive Unilearning (https://unilearning.uow.edu.au/first.html)