Clarity and Coherence in Academic Writing

Using Language as a Resource

David Nunan and Julie Choi

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This book presents a lively, rich, and concise introduction to the key concepts and tools for developing clarity and coherence in academic writing. Well-known authors and linguists David Nunan and Julie Choi argue that becoming an accomplished writer is a career-long endeavor. They describe and provide examples of the linguistic procedures that writers can draw on to enhance clarity and coherence for the reader. Although the focus is on academic writing, these procedures are relevant for all writing. This resource makes complex concepts accessible to the emergent writer and illustrates how these concepts can be applied to their own writing. The authors share examples from a wide range of academic and non-academic sources, from their own work, and from the writing of their students. In-text projects and tasks invite you, the reader, to experiment with principles and ideas in developing your identity and voice as a writer.

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**To our students
past, present and future**

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Acknowledgments

Foreword

At its heart, this book is about understanding academic writing and understanding yourself as a writer. What it is not is an instruction manual on academic writing. And this is its strength. The authors invite you as readers to engage with how academic texts are crafted, to consider how you tackle the process of writing, and to reflect on your own writing. The book is about being a writer, as much as it is about academic writing.

For me, as an academic writer myself, as a journal editor, and as a supervisor of doctoral students, there are two fundamental messages underpinning the book which resonate powerfully with my own experiences. The first concerns the role of grammar and knowledge about language. The authors recognize the inseparability of form and content and emphasize a Hallidayan functional view of language, where grammatical choices shape meaning and effective communication. Writers need to understand how texts work and how different grammatical forms function to establish meaning. The authors stress that this is not about *knowledge* which is learned then routinely applied, but about *understanding* which supports and informs authorial decision-making and writer agency. The second fundamental message relates to the writing process, shifting the gaze from the academic text to the academic writer. This foregrounds the key processes of planning, drafting, and revising but, crucially, disrupts the rigid notion of first, you plan, then you draft, then you revise. Instead, the recursive and messy nature of writing is described, and particularly that writing and thinking co-occur. The process of writing itself generates new ideas or new problems not anticipated in initial planning, and equally the process of writing is one of constant rewriting and 'shuttling' between phrases, sentences, and paragraphs.

In developing their argument about understanding language and understanding the writing process, the authors do not avoid difficult concepts or challenging issues, but address them head-on, without adopting dogmatic

stances. For example, Halliday's metalanguage is explained clearly, using examples (in contrast to the conceptual density of some of Halliday's own explanations!). The problematic concept of 'voice' is considered from multiple perspectives and with rich complexity and not simply reduced to superficial discussion of first and third-person pronouns. There is recognition that 'academic writing' is not a genre, as implied in so many resources for academic writing support, but is a term which groups together a range of written genres, including, for example, theses, journal articles, reports, and applications, and which varies across academic disciplines.

The title of the book is enacted in the way it is written. The writing is a model of clarity and coherence, with chapter topics providing both a clear structure and supporting the development of a clear argument. Throughout, the voices of the authors are strongly present, sharing their own experiences and understandings of being an academic writer, and offering direct invitations to readers to think, reflect, and act. This book will not tell you the top ten steps to writing success: instead, and much more importantly, it will open up how you think about the academic texts you write and about yourself as a writer. Confidence and success as an academic writer is not about *knowing* what you should do, but about *understanding* the infinitely creative possibilities of language as a resource.

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Introduction and overview

This book is a collaborative effort between two experienced writers. There were times in the course of writing the book that we wanted our individual voices to be heard. We have made these occasions evident within the text. We also wanted to engage you, the reader, in the ideas presented in the text. We have done this by inserting 'Making Connections' boxes into the text. These consist of tasks and questions to help you relate what we have to say to your own context and experience as a creator of academic texts. As we worked on the book, we also sought feedback from emergent writers. We were fortunate in being able to enlist a group of young graduate students who read earlier drafts of the manuscripts, and posed many questions, challenging us on points that were not clearly or adequately articulated. We have added a selection of these, along with our responses, at the end of each chapter. Their enthusiasm for the project sustained us during difficult periods in the writing process.

David's voice: how the book was born

This guide was born out of a conversation I had one evening with Julie who is a Senior Lecturer in Education (Additional Languages) at the Melbourne Graduate School of Education where I have given many face-to-face and online seminars. The conversation had turned to the topic of academic writing, and Julie urged me to produce a guide to good, clear academic writing. Flattered, but also puzzled, I asked why.

"My students like your books. I'm constantly told many of the standard texts in the field are extremely challenging, but yours are clear. What's his secret?" they want to know. "Most of them struggle to express their own ideas. This is true, not only of the second language speakers, but

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the first language speakers of English as well. If you could share your insights, I'm sure the students would find it helpful".

She challenged me when I commented that learning to write by reading a book or article was akin to learning to drive by watching a video.

"Of course, you can't spare them the blood, sweat and tears, but if you can share with them your insights, it will give them concrete ideas they can try out to improve their own writing skills. Telling them 'this isn't clear', or 'this is garbled', or 'I haven't got a clue what you're talking about here', isn't helpful. It might indicate where the problem lies but tells them nothing about how to fix the problem".

Julie's suggestion reminded me of an incident that occurred about ten years into my academic career. At the time, I wasn't desperate to scramble up the academic ladder. However, one day a colleague forwarded to me an advertisement from a well-regarded university for a position a grade or two above the one I currently occupied. From the criteria for appointment, it seemed my experience, qualifications, research record, and publications were a good match for job. I applied, was shortlisted, acquitted myself well at the interview, and waited for a phone call from the Dean to inform me that the position was mine. The phone call never came. Eventually, I received a proforma letter thanking me for my interest in the position and expressing regret that the university was unable to offer me a post at that time. Resisting the urge to write back saying that any time would do, I consigned the letter to the dustbin.

At a conference some months later, I bumped into a member of the interviewing committee. I accepted his invitation to have a drink. After a second drink, I asked him what had been lacking in my application.

"Well, I supported you", he began. (*Yes, they all say that*, I thought.)

"Unfortunately, a majority of the committee didn't. The burden of their objection was that your books and articles were clear and accessible to their students. One of the members said that even some of his undergraduates understood your work".

Even some of his undergraduates? Goodness! That's the nicest thing anyone has ever said about my work. I couldn't help smiling.

He was surprised at my reaction. I told him that I saw clarity as a virtue. I have never subscribed to the notion that if academic writing is

comprehensible it must be superficial. While there are profound works that should carry a health warning, there are others that are only profound in their incomprehensible triviality. So, significance and clarity are not to be confused. You owe it to yourself, but more importantly, you owe it to your reader to strive for clarity while at the same time presenting often complex ideas in a non-trivial fashion. It's called showing respect.

Although flattered by what Julie's students had to say about my books, I hesitated about taking up her suggestion. To offer advice on how to write is to invite criticism. Fashions, practices, and standards of acceptability change over time. Take the case of *The Elements of Style*. The first edition was written and privately published in 1918 by William Strunk before being commercially published in 1920 (Strunk, 2018). The book was a best-seller. A second, expanded edition was produced by E. B. White (Strunk & White, 1959) after Strunk's death. In 2011, *Time* magazine named this edition one of the 100 best and most influential books of the previous century. Now in its fourth edition, the book continues to sell well. It has been highly praised by celebrated authors such as Dorothy Parker and Stephen King, the latter arguing that it should be read by every aspiring author. It has also been trenchantly criticized. Pullum's (2009) main criticism is that while Strunk and White dish out a great deal of advice on grammar (avoid the passive voice), their own knowledge of English grammar is either misguided or just plain wrong.

> Some of the recommendations are vapid, like "Be clear" (how could one disagree?). Some are tautologous, like "Do not explain too much." (Explaining too much means explaining more than you should, so of course you shouldn't.) Many are useless, like "Omit needless words." (The students who know which words are needless don't need the instruction.) Even so, it doesn't hurt to lay such well-meant maxims before novice writers.
>
> (Pullum, 2009, p. 32)

After thinking about Julie's suggestion for a week, I decided to accept her challenge. However, I'd do so on only one condition. We met for a lunch, and she was delighted with my decision. "But what's the condition?" she asked.

"That you co-author the book with me", I replied.

Defining academic writing

Academic writing has been defined as any formal written work produced in an academic setting. While academic writing comes in many forms, the following are some of the most common: literary analysis, research paper, and dissertation (or thesis) (Valdes, 2019). The serious business of producing pieces of written work that can be characterized as 'academic' usually begins in junior high school and, for many students, continues all the way through senior high to undergraduate study at university and, for some, on to graduate school. In the book, we deal with a range of academic writing genres, although our focus will be those of concern to our primary audience (see below), most particularly academic assignments and dissertations.

At this point, we won't elaborate on the definition provided above. The characteristics, conventions, and controversies over the nature of academic writing will emerge as your read the book and complete some of the application activities along the way. You may be surprised at the notion that academic writing stirs controversy. It does. This is particularly the case in those disciplines concerned with qualitative inquiry such as the social sciences, education, and the humanities. In our final chapter, we devote the first section to revisiting and elaborating on the controversies touched on in the body of the book.

Audience

The primary audience for this book is graduate students. As our own fields are applied linguistics, education, and the teaching of English as an additional language, it should come as no surprise to find that many of our examples are drawn from these fields and directed to readers who plan to become teachers. However, we hope the book is also useful for those from allied disciplines as well as undergraduates and even those who are in senior high school.

In developing the materials, we followed our usual practice of trying them out with our students as well as getting feedback from those who had recently graduated. From them we learned that the material should appeal to a wider audience, including undergraduates. It should help teachers in a range of disciplines developed their own writing skills as well as giving them insights into how they might improve the writing skills of their own students. The notion that every teacher is a language/literacy teacher has been around for many years. In the United Kingdom the Bullock Report, officially called *A Language for Life*, recommended that every school should develop a language policy for language across the curriculum in which there is a dual focus on language skills and

subject knowledge. The prevailing notion that developing academic language skills was the sole responsibility of language/literacy teachers was challenged. In secondary school, memorizing content and mastering procedures in subject areas such as science, history, or geography was only part of the learning process. Students also needed to master the language of history and learn to think as an historian. The same was held for other subjects. Teachers of these subjects had a major responsibility for teaching the language of their subject. Unfortunately, most were ill-equipped to do so. The point is that language and subject content are inseparable. You can't think and communicate without language, and you have to think and communicate about *something*, be it content related to everyday life or specialized subject matter. This is not always appreciated by subject specialists. We often encounter lecturers from other disciplines who argue that our job is to teach students language so that they can get on with the (more important) task of teaching science, law, or mathematics.

In the rest of this introduction, we provide a synopsis of the chapters to come along with brief overview of the concepts and principles you will encounter in the rest of the book. The book falls naturally into two parts. Chapters 1–3 address questions that underpin the rest of the book:

- What fundamentals of language should writers, teachers, and students should know about?
- What linguistic tools are available to writers to enhance the clarity and coherence of their writing?
- What are the intended outcomes of the writing journey and what processes do writers deploy along the way?

The remainder of the book deals with practical issues and techniques, including the use of figurative and academic language, knowing one's audience, finding one's voice, dealing with feedback, and revising/redrafting initial efforts. As you embark on this challenging, but hopefully rewarding journey with us, you would do well to keep in mind what the author and broadcaster Clive James had to say about the art and craft of writing: that expressing yourself clearly is the most complicated thing there is.

Chapter 1: What every writer should know about language

The proposition we put to you in this chapter is that a basic knowledge of the English language will help you become a better writer. The proposition probably raises several questions in your mind: What counts as 'basic'? What aspects of

the language should I know about? and how can this knowledge help me become a better writer? In this chapter, we introduce you to the elements of grammar, vocabulary, and spelling that you should be familiar with. We also introduce you to functional grammar, describing what it is, how it different from other models of grammar, and why we favor this model over its competitors. Succeeding chapters will look at other key aspects of language that you should know about such as language relating to discourse, figurative language, and voice. We also give you an example of how explicit knowledge can help you make informed decisions about revising your written work rather than relying on intuition.

Chapter 2: Only connect

In Chapter 2, we move beyond sentence-level aspects of language to longer stretches of text. At the paragraph level, we examine resources of thematization, given/new structuring, and cohesive devices for improving coherence between and across sentences within the paragraph. In the course of the discussion, we discuss the concepts of cohesion and coherence: the differences between the two concepts and the relationship between them. We also look at signposting, informing the reader at the beginning of a chapter of the section of terrain to be covered and reminding them at the end of where we have come. We elaborate further on functional grammar and give examples of how we can use functional grammar to make connections between grammatical form and communicative meaning.

One of the biggest challenges in creating a clear and coherent text is representing real and imagined worlds in print. These worlds are populated by ideas, entities, events, actions, states of affairs, and so on. In the experiential world these phenomena are interrelated in intricate, multidimensional ways. Texts on the other hand are linear. The line of print marches on, one word at a time. The challenge for you is to capture in sequential lines of print, the complexity of the multidimensional world where phenomena interrelate and overlap. The resources we describe and illustrate will help you represent a non-linear world in a linear form that makes sense to the reader.

Chapter 3: Product and process approaches to writing

Writing can be seen as both a process and a product. Writing as a process involves initial drafting of ideas, revising and redrafting, incorporating new content that arise during the writing process, inserting new ideas as a result

of feedback from a teacher or critical friend, dividing a complicated sentence into two or more sentences, combining two or more sentences into a single sentence by turning them into clauses and phrases, shifting sentences and even whole paragraphs around, and so on. In this chapter, we'll describe and give examples of these different processes. The end result is a product: a report on the state of the economy, a set of instructions on how to conduct a science experiment, a short story, a discussion on how to improve an academic essay. Beginning writers are often advised not to put a finger on the keyboard until their ideas have been thought through and formulated. This advice is misguided. Thinking and writing go hand in hand. It is through writing, and rewriting, that we discover what we think. In this chapter, we introduce two important concepts: register and genre. These are part of systemic-functional linguistics, the approach to language we have drawn on throughout this book.

Chapter 4: Audience and purpose

Audience and purpose are fundamental to the writing process. They will have a powerful influence on the linguistic choices you make when you write. The two questions you should keep firmly in mind throughout the writing process, from planning, through draft and revising are: Why am I writing this? And who am I writing for? In the beginning, your purpose may be vague, or you may have several competing purposes in mind. The process writing approach we discussed in the last chapter may help to bring the main purpose into focus. Similarly, the audience may not be clear to you. If you are a student, your audience will probably be restricted to your teachers or perhaps an examiner. This doesn't mean that the audience will be unproblematic. Some teachers, you'll know well, and you'll be able to tailor your piece to their interests and perspectives. Others, you may not know well. In this chapter, you will read an academic conversation between David and a recent graduate. In it the graduate discusses the complexities and problems she encountered with audience and purpose in writing up her thesis and then turning it into an article for publication. We then present a view of writing as problem-solving when tailoring a piece to a particular audience and purpose and give an example from our own writing in relation to the construction of a single paragraph. We discuss the importance of the register variables of field, tenor, and mode in relation to purpose and audience. We also reintroduce the 'linearity problem' when making choices about selecting and structuring content for particular purposes and audiences.

Chapter 5: Toward active voice

Traditional approaches to academic writing insist on objectivity. This insistence betrays their roots in the positivist research paradigm. By objectivity in writing, they mean that the author's hand must remain invisible. We challenge this perspective. We are not the first or the only ones to do so. Times are changing. Even many in the hard sciences admit that their research does not proceed according to the procedural tenets of the scientific method, and that storytellers should have a presence, albeit a modest one, in the narratives they spin. The two pivotal concepts in this chapter, voice, and identity are complex ones, and we warn you this at the outset. To help you grasp them, we present definitions and examples from scholars who have written extensively on the subject. Linguistic devices enabling you to 'add voice' to your writing are many and varied. These include person choice, sentence length, active voice, and vocabulary choice. A particularly powerful tool is storytelling. Even small vignettes can make your writing memorable. They will help the reader form a view of who you are as a writer. However, they should not be inserted gratuitously, but be relevant to the subject at hand. By the end of the chapter, you should have clarified your understanding of voice and identity and be prepared to experiment with some of the techniques presented in it.

Chapter 6: Using figurative language

Figurative language, or figures of speech (we use both terms synonymously in this chapter), is the use of terms or phrases whose meaning differs from the literal meaning as defined by the dictionary. We've chosen to deal with this aspect of language because it's ubiquitous in both speech and writing. This is as true of academic writing as any other genre. While there's a wide range of figurative language, we've chosen to deal with six of these: similes, metaphors including personification, idioms, colloquialisms, clichés, and slang. A thoughtfully chosen simile, metaphor, or idiom can add color and drama to your prose. Commonly used idioms, colloquialisms, and clichés should be treated with caution, while slang expressions should be avoided. These expressions often indicate confusion, laziness, or imprecise thinking, revealing to the reader that you're unsure of what you want to say. If you're in any doubt about a particular expression, then leave it out!

Chapter 7: Seeking and providing meaningful feedback

The phrase 'meaningful feedback' may seem oxymoronic, but we've seen in the course of the book that it's anything but. Like beauty, 'meaningful' is in the eye of the beholder. In Chapter 4, a graduate student, Kailin Liu, reports on her M.A. thesis in which she looks at the concept from the perspective of her informants – graduate students like herself. In the same chapter, Julie tells of spending an inordinate amount of time providing meaningful feedback to students on their assignments. She notes that many students have low expectations when it comes to meaningful feedback. In this chapter, we interrogate the question of meaningful feedback from the perspective of both students and teachers. Meaningful feedback is crucial to producing quality writing. This is as true for professional authors as it is for students. Regardless of one's experience and expertise, we are writing from the 'inside out' and are usually too close to our own work to have an independent perspective on it. We suggest that meaningful feedback will contain both critical but also positive comments but will also offer advice to the writer on how they might improve problematic aspects of their text. From interviews we learn that meaningful feedback has an important affective dimension for students: it tells them that their work is taken seriously and valued.

Chapter 8: The power of revising

Writing is hard work. We don't say this to discourage you, but to remind you of a fundamental fact. Regardless of what you do, you'll be constantly challenged by the demands of everyday life. If you're a student, in addition to these demands, you'll have classes to attend, extensive reading lists to work through, and assignment deadlines to meet. Most likely, as the end of semester approaches, more than one assignment deadline will compete for your attention. You'll be distracted by the easy affordances of the Internet: Facebook, Twitter, emails, and Google searches. Unless you can resist these temptations, the evening you've set aside to complete a writing assignment will have evaporated. Submitting a hastily assembled first draft is unwise. In this chapter, we describe the journey we take from first to final draft. We point out that producing a first draft is qualitatively different from producing subsequent ones. The first draft provides an opportunity to be as creative as you like, to write without self-censoring. In subsequent drafts, you progressively refine your project. In our own work, we enjoy the creativity afforded by the first draft and then the opportunity to craft tighter and more

parsimonious drafts. We know there's no such thing as a perfect final draft, but at a certain point, often dictated by a looming deadline, we are forced to admit that enough is enough.

Chapter 9: In a nutshell: ten thoughts to take away

The book introduces what we consider to be the fundamentals of academic writing. In this final chapter, we pull together the themes that have emerged into the course of the book and summarize the suggestions that have been made by us and others on improving the clarity and coherence of your writing. While interrelated, they provide different perspectives on the theme of language as a resource for writing. They are not presented in any hierarchical order of importance, although the first point, that a detailed and explicit knowledge of language is fundamental to good writing, underpins the others. The second focuses on the relationship between language and thought. A great deal of confused and confusing prose reflects confused and confusing thinking. The writer has published prematurely rather than using the writing and rewriting process as a method of discovery. This process can also help you clarify and refine your purpose and audience.

A fundamental problem is representing the non-linear experiential world in linear form. Resources such as cohesive devices and thematization can help us solve this problem. As we say, solving problems is at the heart of the writing problem. Also important is receiving meaningful feedback and using this in the rewriting process. Through this work, and with the judicious use of other resources such as figurative language, you will find your own voice and your identity as a writer will emerge.

Two other themes we highlight in the final chapter are the fact that academic writing is no one's native tongue. This leads to the issue of standards, and who gets to adjudicate on which standards should apply.

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What every writer should know about language

In this chapter, we will tell you what you need to know about the English language to improve the clarity and precision of your writing. We focus on those aspects of language that are relevant to the writing process, in particular, the sub-systems of grammar (technically referred to as morphosyntax) and vocabulary (technically known as lexis) (Nunan, 2013). In addition, we will have something to say about punctuation, which is also important, particularly in its association with grammar. If you are aiming to enter a profession where advanced proficiency in English language and literacy are essential (which are, or should be, most) the basics of English grammar and vocabulary we describe in this chapter are an absolute minimum requirement. You'll certainly need them to understand the more complex aspects of language we deal with in the subsequent chapters.

For students planning on a career as a language teacher, it's possible to register for graduate programs in TESOL with little or no knowledge of the basics of language. This is not the case for programs preparing students to teach science or mathematics where prerequisites will usually include having majored in the subject in your bachelor's degree. The lecturers will assume that students have the requisite content knowledge and will focus on *how* to teach the subject. In the case of English, the assumption is that if you can speak the language you can teach it. If there are prerequisites, they are menial, such as having done a semester of a foreign language as an undergraduate. A semester of German or Japanese will not equip you to write or teach academic English writing (or any other aspect of the language, for that matter). While the audience for this book is broader than aspiring language teachers, we know that many readers will plan on entering the profession. It's for this reason that we make this point.

Many years ago, in the preface to his play *Pygmalion*, the Irish author George Bernard Shaw famously wrote *It is impossible for an Englishman to open his*

mouth without making some other Englishman hate or despise him. These days, 'hated' or 'despised' for the way you speak may be too strong, but people will make judgements about you. They may not voice their opinion to your face, but they will have formed one just the same. When you speak, certain people will make judgements about your nationality or social class based on your dialect and accent. If you mispronounce a word, they will make judgements about your level of education and possibly even your intelligence.

The same holds for writing. Grammatical errors, poor vocabulary choices, as well as punctuation and spelling mistakes will be held against you. It's for this reason that some people are unwilling to show others their writing. What you write and how you write reflects your voice and identity as a writer.

This chapter introduces linguistic terms that might be unfamiliar to you. If you do encounter a term that is unfamiliar, you'll find a glossary with explanations and examples at the back of the book. Although we have treated grammar, vocabulary, and punctuation separately, in reality, they are not so easily segmented. In fact, many linguists integrate the description and analysis of grammar and vocabulary under the single label of lexicogrammar.

Grammar

Answering the question, what is grammar?, in a paragraph or two is an audacious undertaking, when entire volumes have been devoted to the task. Here, we provide a basic definition which we'll elaborate on in the rest of the book. Most definitions see grammar as sets of rules for forming words, phrases, and clauses and specifications for arranging these to form meaningful sentences (see Harmer 1987; Richards, Platt & Weber, 1985). We follow a linguistic model known as functional grammar. This model describes the systematic relationship between grammatical form and communicative function. Fundamental to the model is the notion of choice. Debra Myhill (2011) draws an analogy between the tools of a mechanic and the grammatical tools of the writer.

> Both have to create products from the materials available, be that physical materials or linguistic resources; both have to test things out to see how they work, both have to make choices and decisions about the purpose of their work.
>
> (p. 81)

In the course of the book, we show how you can use linguistic resources to make informed choices and solve problems in creating clear and coherent text.

David's account of what writers should know about grammar

At a recent seminar, I made the point that all teachers should have a 'reasonably comprehensive' knowledge of grammar regardless of the subject they teach. A member of the audience raised his hand and asked, "What do you mean by 'reasonably comprehensive'?" When I wanted to bone up on my knowledge of grammar, I did an Amazon search for books on grammar. I didn't want anything too complicated and came across a book that had the ideal title *A Short Introduction to English Grammar*. Before ordering it, I looked inside and found that it ran to over 200 pages!

In a little book on teaching grammar (which runs to only 178 pages!), I argued that at the very least, teachers should be familiar with the word classes in English, the grammatical roles they play, and the clause types they are used to form. In English, we have the common word classes of nouns, verbs, adjectives and adverbs, and less common (closed classes) such as articles and prepositions. Within the sentence, these word types have five grammatical roles: subject, verb, object, complement, and adverbial (Nunan, 2005).

Traditional grammar recognizes seven different clause types made up of these basic building blocks.

Table 1.1 Seven basic English clause types (Nunan, 2005, p. 4)

Clause type	Example
Type 1: Subject + Verb	Maria sang.
Type 2: Subject + Verb + Object	William saw a UFO.
Type 3: Subject + Verb + Complement	I became wary.
Type 4: Subject + Verb + Adverbial	I've been in the office.
Type 5: Subject + Verb + Object + Object	Malcolm bought his wife a diamond.
Type 6: Subject + Verb + Object + Complement	We think traditional grammatical analysis rather pointless.
Type 7: Subject + Verb + Object + Adverbial	We had to take our children home.

This knowledge can be helpful when it comes to making choices as you produce successive drafts of your writing in order to achieve greater coherence and clarity. Revising and refining can be done intuitively, of course. But we find it useful to be explicit not only in terms of our own writing but also when giving feedback to students on their own writing. It enables us to go beyond vague generalities such as "this isn't clear", or "this is garbled", or "I haven't got a clue what you're talking about here".

We advocate a functional approach to grammar which accounts for grammatical structures in terms of the communicative acts they enable us to perform through speaking and writing. Functional grammar demonstrates the choices available to us when we are constructing our sentences. By thinking in terms of 'meaningful chunks' (word groups that form around a head word), we can see "how these words work together to make meaning or how different shades of meanings could be made through author choices" (Derewianka, 2011, p. 11). Writers can change the order of the groups depending on their purpose or intentions. Consider, for example, the sentence 'A golden ray of sunlight was shining through the leaves'. In this sentence, the writer may be drawing attention to the 'who' or the 'what' by starting the clause with a noun group. If the author wrote, 'Through the leaves, a golden ray of sunlight was shining', she/he is drawing our attention to the physical environment by starting the clause with an adverbial of place. Drawing our attention to a sentence element (word or group) by placing it at the beginning of the sentence is called thematization. We'll elaborate on this process in the next chapter. In the following table you can see how the simple sentence 'Sunlight shone through', can, in Derewianka's words, be given greater elaboration or shades of meaning by inserting additional elements to the head word (see Table 1.2).

Table 1.2 From word class to word groups (Derewianka, 2011)

Word	Sunlight (Noun)	Shone (Verb)	Through (Preposition)
Group	A golden ray of sunlight (Noun Group)	Was shining (Verb Group)	Through the leaves (Adverbial Group)
Function	Naming 'who' or 'what'	Naming 'action'	Naming 'where'

Grammar offers us tools for thinking, creating, and crafting meaning in ways *we* want them to be communicated. It can help us to create dramatic effect in telling a story which enables us to become more compelling and expressive storytellers. Writers can also take greater control of their writing – they can influence the reader to read for particular messages or details depending on their purpose and we begin to develop a sense of the writer's 'voice'. Julie recalls how learning about functional grammar well after her formal education allowed her to develop much more appreciation of texts and allowed her to read and write more critically. Later in the chapter, we elaborate on the benefits of studying grammar. (For a detailed discussion of functional grammar in relation to academic writing, see Caplan, 2023.)

Assessing your own knowledge of language

How detailed or sophisticated is your own knowledge of linguistic terminology? Presumably you know the different word classes of English (nouns, verbs, prepositions, determiners, etc.). Do you know the difference between an object and a complement or why we have a passive voice in English? We think it would be useful for you to take an inventory or 'snapshot' of what you know of the language you are currently studying, teaching, or proposing to teach. There is a range of online instruments which are designed to help you carry out such an inventory. One we would recommend is the Cambridge Teaching Knowledge Test (TKT).

The TKT is a comprehensive set of self-study modules through which you can assess and improve your knowledge of English vocabulary, grammar, language functions, and pronunciation. As it's aimed at aspiring language teachers, it also includes modules such as first and second-language acquisition and techniques for presenting new language items. If you have no plans to become a language teacher, you can ignore these modules. Both print and online versions of the test are available.

Here are two sample items from the online version of the TKT. This version contains free, downloadable practice tests. Having completed one of the tests, you can download the answer key and check their answers. The site also contains a glossary of terms, which the teacher can consult if he/she is unsure of any technical terms. On the site, it is also possible to purchase support materials which include coursebooks and practice tests. These also exist in both print and digital forms.

Making connections

Example 1: Knowledge of lexical/grammatical terms

Instructions

For questions 8–13, read the text. Match the underlined words or phrases in the text with the lexical terms listed A–G. Mark the correct letter (A–G) on your answer sheet. There is one extra option which you do not need to use.

Lexical (and grammatical) terms

A   phrasal verb
B   compound noun
C   word with negative affix
D   compound adjective
E   word family
F   verb and noun collocation
G   noun with affix

Text

During his career, Sean Connery made over 70 films and became very rich. However, as a child (8) growing up in Scotland during the Great Depression in the 1930s, he was poor. He and his family were not (9) unusual in living in a two-roomed flat with no (10) bathroom. Sean left school at 13 and did a variety of jobs to (11) make money including being a milkman and a (12) builder. Eventually he began acting and his role as the first James Bond made him (13) well-known all over the world.

Example 2: Knowledge of language functions

Instructions

For questions 20–25, match the underlined parts of the email with the functions listed A–G. Mark the correct letter (A–G) on your answer sheet. There is one extra option which you do not need to use.

Functions

A   expressing ability
B   making an offer
C   making a prediction
D   expressing intention

E   expressing possibility
F   making a request
G   expressing preference

Email

Dear Juan,

Thought I'd let you know (20) <u>I'm planning to come</u> to Chile next year and I'm hoping to visit you there! (21) <u>January is my first choice</u>, but I might stay with Mum then, so (22) <u>it could be</u> that I'll visit you in February instead.

Anyway, (23) <u>I'd be really grateful if you could share your knowledge</u>. What's the weather like in February? How much can I see in two weeks? (24) <u>I know how to check all this</u> on the internet, but it would be good to speak to someone who knows the country. By the way, (25) <u>would you like me to bring you anything special</u> from Britain?

Speak soon, I hope.

Frank

(Cambridge Teaching Knowledge Test, 2020)

We like this resource from Cambridge for a number of reasons. First, it is amenable to a range of instructional contexts, from instructor-guided classroom use to self-study. Second, the online version is easily accessible for students regardless of where they happen to be living and/or studying. Third, source texts, such as the ones in the samples we have provided, are either authentic or simulate authenticity. (What Brown and Menasche (1993) refer to as 'altered', i.e., adapted from authentic sources.) Finally, many of the test items make explicit the links between linguistic form and communicative function.

Making connections

Click on the following link to access the Cambridge TKT free online practice modules. Complete several of the modules.

- How useful was the activity?
- How good is your knowledge of English grammatical terminology?
- What areas of grammar do you need to improve on?

https://web.archive.org/web/20220717062756/https://www.cambridgeenglish.org/teaching-english/teaching-qualifications/tkt/prepare-for-tkt/

David's example of putting grammar to work

Here is an example of how knowledge of grammar can help us go beyond intuition when redrafting our initial writing efforts. It consists of the first draft of a paragraph from an anecdote I'd been writing up followed by a 'think aloud' piece in which I talked about my concerns with the draft. Finally, I present the second draft resulting from my critical self-evaluation.

Draft 1:

The genesis of this piece began one evening when a friend and colleague with whom I had just had supper suggested (in fact, urged) me to write something on writing clearly. Slightly flattered, but also puzzled, I asked her why. My friend is a lecturer at a prestigious graduate school of education.

"The final sentence doesn't follow coherently from the preceding sentences, but I want to get that information in. I'll demote it from the status of a sentence in its own right to a relative clause. Having supper is irrelevant – drop it. 'The genesis of this piece…' Hmmm, don't like this. By beginning the subject with the noun phrase 'the genesis', I'm thematizing its origin, but that's putting the cart before the horse. I'll re-thematize the subject giving 'the piece' the status it deserves. I'll also add the prepositional phrase 'in a conversation'. 'The conversation' will be instantiated as the subject of the second sentence. The indefinite article 'a' becomes a definite article because the reader knows which conversation I'm referring to. Creating this anaphoric link also improves the coherence of the paragraph. In the second sentence, I'll drop the 'slightly' because it's wishy-washy. 'Be hard on yourself when it comes to adverbs and adjectives!' I remind myself. (Advice I give my students, but don't always follow myself.) Oh, I'll also delete the possessive adjective 'her'. It's cohesive but redundant".

Draft 2:

This piece had its genesis in a conversation I had one evening with a friend who is a lecturer at a prestigious graduate school of education. The conversation had turned to the topic of academic writing, and my friend suggested (in fact, urged) me to produce something on writing clearly. Flattered, but also puzzled, I asked why.

Of course, it's perfectly possible to revise drafts of your writing without possessing a detailed knowledge of grammar. The majority of writers probably don't possess such knowledge. They revise their text intuitively until it 'feels' right. However, knowledge of grammar provides you with a tool for knowing *why* the revised version feels better. It also provides you with vocabulary for talking about your text.

The status of grammar within the curriculum

For many years, in western educational contexts such as the United Kingdom and Australia, the teaching of grammar in schools has been controversial. The traditional way of teaching grammar was dry, decontextualized, and lacked creativity. Students spent hours parsing and analyzing sentences that had no obvious applications beyond the classroom. (The same could be said about many subjects in the curriculum.) As a result, the anti-grammar brigade won the battle.

In her investigation into the empirical evidence for the explicit teaching of grammar, Myhill (2016) makes the point that the debate over whether or not grammar should be explicitly taught in schools has been highly politicized for decades. Politicians, and policy-makers, conflate grammar with accuracy and correctness and tend "to equate mastery of grammar with standards, including moral standards" (p. 36). She gives the example of a London newspaper (the *Daily Standard*) which attributed street riots across England in 2011 to the fact that rioters couldn't speak correctly. The notion that forcing young protesters to use the "Queen's English" might quell civil unrest is clearly ludicrous, but not uncommon. Recently, a conservative Minister for Education in Australia pronounced that poor literacy in schools could be cured with explicit instruction and a good dose of phonics (Tudge, 2021). We have no argument with either explicit instruction or phonics. Phonics is one of a number of tools that can assist young learners to make the often painful transition from spoken to written English although it has major limitations. (For one thing, that 26 letters in the English language have to represent almost twice that number of sounds. For another, it will be of little assistance to the beginning reader when it comes to words such as 'through' and 'tough'.) In addition, use of the singular noun 'literacy' is problematic. The terms 'multiliteracies' and 'multimodalities' are prominent in the educational literature (see Vinogradova & Shin, 2021). This has been prompted by globalization and technology which have transformed

the ways in which we communicate and created new, hybrid, communication modes.

Educators opposed to the explicit teaching of the sub-systems of language including grammar, in particular, argue that such a focus cripples creativity and stifles freedom of expression. This may be true, if the focus is restricted to the decontextualized manipulation of grammatical forms isolated from the communicative functions they exist to serve.

Myhill's research demonstrated that the explicit teaching of grammar had a positive effect on learners' writing when it was taught from a functionally oriented perspective in which connections were made for the learners between "grammatical choices and meaning-making in their own writing" (p. 42). She concludes that "there is a clear emerging body of research signaling real benefits of explicit grammar teaching when the teaching is grounded in meaningful language learning contexts" (p. 44). In a recent call for putting grammar in its (rightful) place, David echoed this view:

> I'm not arguing for a return to transmission teaching accompanied by the dreary, decontextualized parsing and analysis exercises to which I was subjected as a schoolboy - although through such exercises, I did develop a thorough understanding of the structure of English, along with the metalanguage to talk about it. … A detailed, contextualized introduction to the fundamentals of language underpinned by a functional model of grammar, can be taught through the scaffolded, inductive procedures promoted by Bruner all those years ago.
>
> (Nunan, 2023, p. 18)

Although the status of language in general, and grammar in particular, is beginning to change under the influence of Myhill, Jones et al. (2013), and other proponents of functionally oriented perspectives, the influence is scant in some educational systems and non-existent in others. In this book, we try to show how knowledge of language in general, and grammar in particular, can assist you in your efforts to become a better writer.

Vocabulary

Making effective vocabulary choices also has a significant impact on the clarity of your writing. In this regard, lexical collocations are particularly important. Lexical collocations are pairs or groups of words that naturally

or commonly co-occur. The development of corpora (singular, corpus), massive, computerized databases of words, and the linguistic contexts in which they naturally occur, enable linguists to "identify patterns, principles, regularities and associations between words that would not be apparent from a casual inspection of language samples" (Nunan, 2013, p. 219). Corpora that researchers, publishers, textbook writers, and so on include the British National Corpus which consists of over 100-million word samples taken from a wide range of spoken and written sources. Unlike a dictionary, these corpora can answer questions such as *What are the 100 most common words in English?* and *What are the other words and phrases with which they collocate (co-occur)?* Dave Willis, an applied linguist and textbook author, was one of the first writers to use a corpus (COBUILD) to guide decision-making about which words to include in the course and when to include them. He points out that a number of important words such as *problem*, *solution*, *idea*, and *argument* are often omitted from most English language textbooks. He goes on to say:

> A particularly striking example is the word *way*, the third commonest noun in the English language after *time* and *people*. The word *way* in its commonest meaning has a complex grammar. It is associated with patterns like:
>
> …different *ways of* cooking fish.
>
> A pushchair is a common *way to take* a young child shopping.
>
> What emerges very strongly once one looks at natural language, is the way the commonest words in the language occur with the commonest patterns. In this case the word *way* occurs with *of* and the *-ing* form of the verb and also with the *to* infinitive.
>
> (Willis, 1990, p. vi)

For second-language writers, mastering lexical collocations is particularly challenging. The difficulty is that pairings are often metaphorical and can't always be deduced from context. In the following examples, the writer's intended meaning is clear, although readers who are familiar with the collocations may find them odd.

> "She likes to drink **powerful** coffee" (strong coffee)
>
> "John has been a **large** smoker all his life" (heavy smoker)
>
> "I need to go out and **achieve** money" (make money)

While effective writers select the best lexical option from two closely competing alternatives, the truly accomplished writer will make creative, and

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Making connections

Listen to the following webinar in which Professor Mike McCarthy talks about the use of corpora to inform the analysis and development of academic vocabulary and answer the following questions. Go to YouTube and enter the following: Using corpora to inform the teaching of academic vocabulary.

https://www.cambridge.org/elt/blog/2016/04/08/using-corpora-inform-teaching-academic-vocabulary/

- What types of analysis did he use to analyze the words in the corpus?
- What is a key word?
- Why don't we think of single words but word chunks?
- What's dispersion of academic language? Why is it important?
- What does he say about the most frequent words in academic English?
- Why are nouns and noun phrases significant in academic English?
- Do a search of one of your assignments for the existence of four-word chunks. How many of these chunks appear in your text? Which do you think you might like to include in your writing?

Making connections

Are the words in bold acceptable to you? Which (if any) would you change and why?

- The small sailing boat battled through the **hilly** waves.
- Technology **makes** a pivotal role in students' learning.
- Jane is **celebrating** a party for everyone on Tuesday.
- Don't **lose** time.

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sometimes surprising choices that express their own attitudes toward the subject at hand. The late author, poet, and broadcaster Clive James (2007) was a master at surprising the reader with choice of words and turn of phrase. In an essay on Auden, he refers to the English poet as "the achingly modern Auden". That single, inspired adverb says what it would have taken a less accomplished writer a paragraph to articulate his attitude to Auden. Similarly, in his critique of narrowly focused, experimental research, the American educational researcher, Terry Denny (1978) critiques academics

who come up with "nifty solutions" to problems that teachers never pose. Most dictionary definitions cast the adjective in a positive light: a 'nifty' person or an action as skillful or effective. It is also a colloquial word and used to describe the writing of one segment of the academy is a clever put-down on Denny's part. The alliterative collocation with 'shifty' is also no accident.

Punctuation

Punctuation has a number of important roles in written language. One role is to tell the reader when to take a breath and how long the breath should be. In advising young writers to learn punctuation, Dillard (2005) put it most eloquently – poetically, you could say.

> Learn punctuation: it is your little drum set, one of the few tools you have to signal the reader where the beat and the emphases go. (If you get it wrong, the editor will probably throw the manuscript out.) Punctuation is not like musical notation; it doesn't [only] indicate the length of pauses, but instead signifies logical relations.
>
> (p. 5)

The mention of logical relations brings us to the second important role played by punctuation. (We would have used 'grammatical relations' rather than 'logical relations', but we won't quibble about terminology here). In many respects, punctuation can be seen as a part of the grammatical sub-system of language. Let us give you an example. Consider the following sentences:

1. My sister who lives in Atlanta is visiting me in Melbourne.
2. My sister, who lives in Atlanta, is visiting me in Melbourne.

The only difference between the two sentences is the addition of a couple of commas. It may seem that an additional comma here or there is inconsequential. However, they signal an important difference in meaning. The implication in sentence 1 is that the writer has more than one sister, and the function of the relative clause 'who lives in Atlanta' is to specify or define which of the sisters she is referring to – the one who lives in Atlanta, not the one who lives in Toronto. It provides essential additional information and for this reason is known as a defining relative clause. In the second sentence, the information in the 'who' clause is incidental, and the commas mark the fact that this is so. For this reason, it is referred to as a non-defining relative clause. The implication is that the speaker only has one sister.

If you think that punctuation is a dry subject, albeit a necessary but mechanical aspect of the writing process, we urge you to read Lynne Truss on the subject. Here is the introduction to her marvelous little book on the subject. Interestingly, in light of our discussion above, she begins the book by recounting a personal anecdote about the misplaced apostrophe.

> Either this will ring bells for you, or it won't. A printed banner has appeared on the concourse of a petrol station near to where I live. "Come inside," it says, "for CD's, VIDEO's, DVD's, and Book's." If this satanic sprinkling of redundant apostrophes causes no little gasp of horror or quickening of the pulse, you should probably put down this book at once. … For the stickler, the sight of the plural word "Book's" with an apostrophe in it will trigger a ghastly private emotional process similar to the stages of bereavement, though greatly accelerated.
>
> (Truss, 2003, p. 1)

Questions from readers

Q: As a non-native speaker of English, it is really difficult to grasp collocations. Do you have any advice on how I can learn collocations?

A: Yes, collocations, idioms, phrasal verbs, and other forms of figurative language are particularly challenging for second-language learners because they have no 'logic' and have to be learned individually. Native speakers 'pick up' collocations as they acquire other aspects of their native language. Several resources can help you increase your knowledge of collocations. For example, dictionaries such as the *Oxford Collocational Dictionary for Students of English* is available in both print and online versions.

Q: Am I correct in thinking that a functional approach to grammar focuses on 'meaning' rather than prescriptive 'rules'? If the meaning comes through, does it mean we don't have to worry so much about correcting grammar?

A: The notion that functional approaches to grammar focus on meaning rather than form is not correct. In fact, grammar is fundamental. Functional grammarians seek to establish principled relationships between form and meaning. In 'traditional' approaches to grammar, learners are taught grammatical forms with little or no reference to meaning. For example, when the passive voice is taught, learners are shown how to transform active voice statements. (*"The boy broke the window"*.) into the passive voice (*"The window was broken by the boy"*.) They are then drilled until they are fluent in the new form. They might be able to make statements in passive voice, but have