

## A linguistic toolkit for supervisors

Building  
cohesion  
"old before new"  
"back to front"

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In this chapter we introduce a linguistic toolkit for supervisors. We argue that grammar is a useful tool for helping doctoral researchers make their writing more coherent, engaging and clear. But to do this work as supervisors, we need a meta-language, a language for talking about language. We need a set of tools for doing archaeological work – for digging into doctoral writing, to see how it works and how it may be remade to work more effectively.

Supervisors know when doctoral writing is unsatisfactory. It is more difficult to pinpoint the difficulty or propose a strategy for making changes. Written comments such as 'this passage needs more focus' or 'try to be sharper in your argument' are imprecise. They provide little information about what action writers might take to improve their writing. It is in the spirit of helping supervisors provide more specific guidance for revision that we write this chapter.

Complaints about student writing are often couched in terms of 'poor grammar' or a failure to control the conventions of standard English dialect. Issues of appropriateness are often confused with issues of correctness. So we want to clarify at the start what we mean by grammar and how our approach differs from more traditional grammars which focus on etiquette and rules.

### A functional approach to grammar

Grammars are never neutral. They always presuppose a view about how to represent and shape experience based on a set of ways of categorizing the world. Terry Threadgold (1997) argues that there is nothing scientific or absolute about a grammar; it is just a set of categories which we use to impose structure and meaning on language. Grammar is not 'in people's heads', it is not a psychological reality and people do not actually produce language by following rules. Grammar is an attempt to describe, after the fact, some of the regularities that can be observed in the language which people produce. But the way grammars do this is always inexact and a matter of compromise, loaded with the preconceptions of the linguists who construct the grammar.

Our approach is based on the systemic functional grammar developed by the social semiotic linguist Michael Halliday (1985). A systemic approach to language

def's!

differs from the traditional, prescriptive grammars many of us learned at school and those populist 'new' grammars on the bestseller lists. It asks functional questions about how people use language and how language is organized to make meanings (Eggins, 2004). A functional grammar does *not* emphasize correct usage or formal rules. Rather, it adopts a view of language as social practice (introduced in Chapter 2), where language use is seen to accomplish social action.

Language, and writing in particular, makes things happen; they are inseparable from other activities and practices. In the university setting, these practices are based on complex sets of disciplinary discourses, values and identities (Lea and Street, 1998) and they take time to learn. A functional grammar can help supervisors make some of these practices more explicit and therefore more accessible to doctoral researchers.

Doctoral writers are often given generic advice which could be given to anybody about any piece of writing. Paré, Starke-Meyerring and McAlpine (2009) argue that too often supervisors offer generic advice or unexplained directives. 'Students are told to add to, reduce, move, and delete sections without clear reference to readers or to rhetorical justification (Paré *et al.*, 2009: 185).

The following prescription for writing the 'mature scholarly sentence' is a good example of an 'unexplained directive.' It is not linked to any disciplinary knowledge or to a reader who needs prose written in this way.

1. Combine shorter sentences . . .
2. Put the main idea in the main clause . . .
3. Reduce the numbers of ands . . .
4. Achieve an effect of clarity and directness by expressing the main action of the sentence in the verb and the main doer of the action (the agent) in the subject . . .
5. Avoid inserting long modifiers between the subject and the verb . . .
6. Avoid using subordinate clauses that modify other subordinate clauses . . .
7. Place modifiers so that they clearly modify what you intend them to modify . . .
8. Avoid excessive use of the passive voice . . .
9. Be consistent in matters of verb tense . . .

(Glatthorn, 1998: 117–19)

This list of rules treats writing as a mechanical skill and grammar as a set of techniques for achieving correctness. This is *not* the approach we take to grammar. We advocate that the final copy of the dissertation must be free of grammatical and spelling errors. But this does not mean we reduce writing to matters of surface features and grammatically correct sentences.

We have been struck by the attention given to issues of correctness and presentation on university websites, even though a doctoral dissertation is presumably the highest level of scholarship in the academy. This may be a symptom of the increasing diversity of doctoral candidates (Pearson, 1999) and the rich array of language and cultural formations on which candidates draw (see Paltridge, 2004 for an extended review of approaches to academic writing with second language students). As universities in the US, UK, Australia and New Zealand require students to write in standard English, there is growing anxiety about how to help

students achieve this goal. And ‘grammar’ is often presented as a solution to a far more complex problem, as Paltridge (2003) argues:

Dissertation writing is a difficult process for native and non-native speaker students alike. Students may have the language proficiency required for their course of study, but not yet the necessary textual knowledge, genre knowledge and social knowledge (Bhatia, 1999) required of them in their particular setting.


(Paltridge, 2003: 92)

A disproportionate attention is paid to surface features (such as spelling, subject–verb agreement, verb tense consistency) and stylistic matters (such as margin width, spacing, title page, word length) because these are the most visible and accessible parts of language to address. Most supervisors have not been formally trained in writing-focused supervision pedagogy.

In this chapter we offer some linguistic tools which supervisors can incorporate into their existing practice and disciplinary knowledge. We focus, in particular, on nominalization, active/passive voice and modality. We balance technical explanation with examples of writing, illustrating both the linguistic resource and how it works in scholarly writing.

In such a discussion it is always difficult to decide how technical to be. Our compromise is to provide less information than would satisfy a linguist, but more than might be of immediate use to supervisors. This is because we want to build a flexible resource that can be used for a wide array of purposes. Our metaphor is the toolkit, not a set of rules.

It is well known that academic writing is often dense, packed with abstractions, and sometimes difficult to read. The term used to describe this tendency is nominalization. To understand nominalization – how and why it is used – we first explore the differences between speech and writing.

*nominalization* 

## The differences between speech and writing

A key linguistic difference between speech and writing is that writing tends to be more nominalized than speaking. By ‘nominalized’ we mean that much of the content of writing occurs as ‘things’ or nouns. In speaking, by contrast, the tendency is for much of the content to be coded as action and occur as verbs. We can illustrate with the following example.

Imagine we’re late for class because we’ve had an accident on the way to work. We run into the tutorial room, worried about being late. We are somewhat flustered about keeping students waiting for over fifteen minutes and say to them:

Look, I’m sorry for being late, but it was unbelievable, I can’t believe this happened. I was on the bridge and the sun was glaring into my eyes so I could hardly see and the traffic was really worse than usual and I had a

horrible headache already because I stayed up too late watching a video with my son last night and then I crashed. The car in front of me stopped suddenly and I went right into him and the car behind me crashed into the back of my car and it was a mess, it was just a disaster.

But what would students think if we rushed into class and instead, said:

I apologise for my unavoidable tardiness. There are three possible reasons for this regrettable event, which was caused by a three car accident on the bridge: first, the glare of the morning sun; second, the unusual intensity of morning traffic; and third, my possible inattention due to a headache from fulfilling parental obligations last night.

We would probably be accused of being uptight or 'talking like a book'. And rightly so, because such language use is highly inappropriate in this context. The grammar and syntax are correct, it is not faulty language, but it sounds 'wrong' because it is patterned more like writing than speech.

What we mean by this is that the language is organized differently in each example. In the first example, the structure of spoken language is more dynamic. Clauses are joined with a series of 'ands' and one sentence leads to another and another in a kind of complex piling up of ideas. In the second example, the syntax is more tightly structured and three succinct reasons ('first', 'second', 'third') are given for why the accident happened. All the words that convey the speaker's emotion are removed ('unbelievable', 'mess', 'disaster') and replaced with a pithy phrase ('regrettable event'). More importantly, the actions have become things, for example, 'being late' becomes 'unavoidable tardiness'.

Figure 6.1 shows how verbs (or actions) have been changed into nouns (or things) in these two examples.

These differences are neither accidental nor haphazard. They are a consequence of the functional differences between speaking and writing. Typically, we use speech in interactive situations to achieve some social action. Our language is usually spontaneous and unrehearsed. When we write, by contrast, we don't have the visual or aural dimension of face-to-face contact. We typically use language to reflect or anal-

Example A	Example B
I'm sorry for <b>being</b> late	my unavoidable tardiness.
the sun <b>was glaring</b> into my eyes	the glare of the morning sun
the traffic <b>was</b> really worse than usual	the unusual intensity of morning traffic
I <b>had</b> a horrible headache already because I <b>stayed up</b> too late <b>watching</b> a video with my son for his exam	my possible inattention due to a headache from fulfilling parental obligations last night.

Figure 6.1 From verb forms to noun forms.

yse, so it is more formal. We draft, revise and edit our writing for an absent audience who will engage with our words when we are no longer present.

These different dimensions of the situation have a strong effect on the language we use. Speech is typically organized as a dialogue, where the participants take turns speaking and build up meaning together. Written language is typically produced as a monologue, where one person (the writer) holds forth on a topic. It's more accurate, however, to think of these differences as a continuum. When we write emails, for example, we are physically alone but have a specific reader in mind, so our writing is more dialogic. It is more like speech in being interactive. When we give a conference keynote, we speak in the presence of many people. But our language is more like writing, an uninterrupted monologue of ideas and information directed to an unknown audience.

Spoken language is also typically more context-dependent, because speakers are in the same place at the same time. We can say to students in our class 'pass *that* to me' or 'put *it* over here', because students can interpret 'that' and 'it' from the shared context. Writing, however, needs to stand alone and be more context-independent. If students write 'I disagree with *that*' or 'It makes that point convincingly', they must make explicit what 'it' and 'that' refer to in the text itself.

Anyone who has ever recorded speech will know that it contains false starts, repetitions, incomplete clauses, interruptions, slang and non-standard grammatical constructions. In written language, we can remove all our false starts and meanderings from the text so that it *seems* more focused and directed.

For the most part we are unaware of the differences between speech and writing. In teaching doctoral writing it is useful to make these differences more conscious. For example, when students' writing sounds immature, we can often trace the problem back to the fact that in their writing they use patterns which usually occur in speech rather than on the page. Or when academic writing gets too dense and impenetrable, we can model how to unpack difficult prose by explaining the process of nominalization.

## Nominalization

Nominalization is the process by which verbs in a text are changed to nouns (things) and information is packed more densely into noun groups. Writing tends to be more nominalized than speaking and much of the content occurs as 'things' or nouns, whereas in speaking, much of the content occurs as 'action' or verbs. To illustrate, we can represent the same content differently, as speech (action) and as writing (a thing). Consider this typical directive to doctoral researchers.

*Supervisor speech:* If you revise each chapter carefully before you submit the thesis, then you're likely to get a good result.

*University website, Writing:* Careful revision of each chapter prior to thesis submission will increase the likelihood of a good result.

The supervisor's speech consists of one sentence made up of three clauses. Each clause is marked with a slash /; it roughly comprises a stretch of language with a verb.

If you *revise* each chapter carefully/before you *submit* the thesis/then you' *re likely to get* a good result/

The three clauses are linked with the conjunctions 'if', 'before' and 'then'. Each clause uses a verb to describe a concrete action ('revise', 'submit', 'get'), which need to be performed by the doctoral researcher ('you').

In the website text, by contrast, the message is condensed to one clause with only one verb ('will increase'). The actions of 'revise', 'submit' and 'get' have been turned into nouns: *revise* has become *revision*; *submit* has become *submission*; *likely to get* has become *likelihood*. As a consequence of reducing three verbs to one, more information can be packed into the noun groups (the noun and its accompanying words) on either side of the verb.

*Careful revision of each chapter prior to thesis submission will increase the likelihood of a successful examination.*

An enthusiastic website administrator could take this process further and continue to elaborate the noun groups (which are very elastic) to make them even more dense.

*Careful revision of each chapter with supervisory assistance prior to thesis submission will increase the likelihood of a crafted text and a successful examination.*

The process of nominalization changes what starts as friendly advice into something officious and bureaucratic. This example shows why written and spoken language are so different. Spoken language is concerned with human actors, carrying out action processes, in dynamically linked sequences of clauses. Written language is concerned with abstract ideas and reasons, linked by relational processes in condensed sentences with denser nominal group structures (Eggins, 2004: 94).

Nominalizations are useful in academic writing. The capacity to pack more information into noun groups increases the possible content of a text. Nominalizations condense meanings, make information more concise and foreground abstract ideas and concepts, rather than people and actions (Hammond, 1990). To illustrate, consider this extract from a discussion of the doctoral research experience.

Methodology is defined by the *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* as the 'science of method or more historically as 'treatise on method.' My own interpretation of methodology is: the activity or business of choosing, reflecting

upon, evaluating and justifying the methods you use. Indeed, the latter is an essential feature of any written report or research thesis, i.e. justifying the decisions we have made on methods. The process of reflection and justification needs to happen before, during and after their research – and during their viva. No-one can assess or judge the value of research without knowing its methodology.

(Wellington, 2010: 129–30)

We can identify a number of nominalizations in this extract: methodology, reflection, justification. These abstract concepts are central to the research endeavour. It would be hard to teach doctoral researchers research method without these conceptual tools.

Nominalizations provide high levels of abstraction. Once introduced, these abstractions can be reinstated and used across a text to compress information and make it portable.

Scholarly writers need a concentrated expression they can reinstate to bind together parts of their discussion and to control extensive stretches of lower-level information. These expressions are like elevated platforms from which the extent of the argument can be captured at a glance. There is not much standing-room on these platforms, so, when the arguments are complex, the expression can be complex.

*Crucial!* (Giltrow, 1995: 238)

These viewing platforms or nominalizations, Giltrow suggests, are crucial because 'they compact a vast array of events and conditions, and hold them steady for scrutiny' (Giltrow, 1995: 242). They have rhetorical force and conceptual force. 'They engage readers' interests as Big Issues, matters of concern, and persuade them to pay attention' (p. 242).

It would therefore be an extreme oversimplification to suggest that doctoral researchers avoid nominalization, although they sometimes get this kind of advice from websites and how-to manuals, as in this example:

*Vague and wordy:* orientations and explanations are important methods used by teachers in teaching writing

*Better:* teachers teach writing by orienting and explaining

Words like orientations and explanations are called nominalizations. Nominalizations are nouns made from verbs: orientation from orient, explanations from explain.

(Glatthorn, 1998: 117)

Of course, an excess of nominalization is to be avoided, as it can make writing stodgy and impenetrable. But nominalization itself is not a good or bad thing; it has important purposes in dissertation writing. Put another way, the absence

of nominalization will make doctoral writing sound childish and immature, as it reduces the capacity to build up hierarchies of assumed knowledge in a text.

Sheridan's writing on interdisciplinary models of pedagogy illustrates the point. In this extract (DW 6.1) she describes a team teaching approach in the university setting, which we can describe as verb-centric (the verbs are in italics).

At the university, the courses *were staffed* by approximately nine faculty members who *came* from disparate discipline backgrounds (drama, dance, social studies, literacy and music). While this might at first *appear* as a logistic workload nightmare, in fact staff involved in the units *have noted* it was better sharing lesson preparation with other colleagues; that they *were* continually *learning* more about themselves and their own teaching by teaching with colleagues and that they *felt* continually *supported* and in times of high stress *knew* fellow colleagues would step in to help. While many colleagues *embraced* the notion of sharing teaching, others *found* it difficult and *have worried* about the loss of their own discipline-specific content. This is indeed a cultural shift in the ways in which university educators *work* and there is a constant need *to keep* ongoing dialogue amongst staff *to establish* clear boundaries and expectations. (146 words, 17 verb groups)

Doctoral writing 6.1 Sheridan's under-nominalized text.

Sheridan's use of 17 verb groups makes the writing more like speech, informal and verbose. It sounds more like an email than an analysis. In order to make it more concise and more acceptable within her field, she has to reduce the number of verbs (and clauses) and increase the level of conceptualization by nominalizing the text. This process also helps her move from a simple description to something more analytic, as in this fairly minor rewrite (DW 6.2):

At the university, courses *are staffed* by approximately nine faculty members who *come* from disparate discipline backgrounds (drama, dance, social studies, literacy and music). While potentially a logistic workload nightmare, faculty actually *noted* two significant benefits of shared lesson preparation; increased reflexivity about themselves and their teaching and on-tap collegial support in times of high stress. Not everyone, however, *embraced* the notion of shared teaching, and some *worried* about the loss of their own discipline-specific content. This *is* not surprising as the model *requires* a cultural shift in the ways university educators *work* and ongoing interdisciplinary dialogue *to establish* clear boundaries and expectations. (105 words, 9 verb groups)

Doctoral writing 6.2 Sheridan nominalizes.

Great examples! →



We literally see the text become more concise and definitive in the rewrite. Overall, seven verb groups are reduced to one, and 65 words to 34 with dramatic effect. The most extensive changes occur in the second sentence, where three nominalizations are used to condense information. The introduction of the nominalization *reflexivity*, for example, makes her text more abstracted and generalized. Rhetorically, she makes herself part of a CoP by using terms which are grounded in a wider body of scholarly literatures. She moves from a purely personal account to one which is more scholarly.

Finding the right balance with nominalizations can be tricky. It is a matter of judgment. Over-nominalized texts give academic writing a bad name, as Helen Sword (2012) has pointed out.

Take an adjective (*implacable*) or a verb (*calibrate*) or even another noun (*crony*) and add a suffix like *ity*, *tion* or *ism*. You've created a new noun: *implacability*, *calibration*, *cronyism*. Sounds impressive, right?

Nouns formed from other parts of speech are called nominalizations. Academics love them; so do lawyers, bureaucrats and business writers. I call them 'zombie nouns' because they cannibalize active verbs, suck the life blood from adjectives and substitute abstract entities for human beings . . . At their best, nominalizations help us express complex ideas; *perception*, *intelligence*, *epistemology*. At their worst they impede clear communication.

(Sword, H. *Zombie nouns* *New York Times* 23 July 2012.  
<http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/07/23/zombie-nouns>. Accessed 11 May 2013)

Doctoral researchers need to learn the right textual balance of not too heavy—not too light nominalization. They are clearly dependent on their supervisor's advice for making these judgments. (We provide some activities that supervisors might use later in the chapter.)

Nominalization, however, is not just a neutral linguistic process. Nominalizing allows writers to condense a whole configuration of meanings, but it also has ideological effects, as the conversion of verbs into nouns removes agency from a statement. The following nominalizations, gleaned by Giltrow (1995: 239–40) from a variety of journal articles, highlight what gets obscured when human action is removed.

- Immediate economic deprivation (being poor)
- Long-term potential for income inadequacy (worry about not having enough money later)
- Voluntary employee turnover (people quitting their jobs)
- Job satisfaction (how happy people are with their work).

Some scholars (Halliday and Martin, 1993) call nominalization *thingifying* – creating an abstract concept from a verb and then proceeding as if it were a thing, a

material entity not a metaphor or something created by humans. Critics of thingifying suggest that it obscures agency, context, difference and actions. Michael Billig (2013), for example, argues that the use of abstract jargon and nominalization in the social sciences mystifies the interpretation and explanation of research results. It is not just a question of style, he suggests, but a practice that leads to sloppy knowledge production.

Critical management scholar Barbara Czarniawska (undated) also has problems with the nominalizers. She argues that administration and business scholars who have ‘thingified’ the organization have failed to put under sufficient scrutiny the different kinds of organizations that exist. They have largely ignored the actual process of *organizing*, namely, what actions are involved, what and who is involved and why things happen in the way that they do. Czarniawska goes so far as to say ‘The Organisation’ has become a Golem, something originally intended to act as a measure of defence of a field of scholarship, but which has now become a monster, doing the entire field an intellectual disservice.

Making agency and activity invisible has consequences not only for what it is possible to understand, but more importantly, to actually do. If leadership is thingified to refer, for argument’s sake, to the importance of a business vision, this does not say anything about whether some visions are better than others. Nor does it focus on what leaders do and say, to whom, where and when, in order to build a vision. It doesn’t address how their particular business, social economic and policy contexts and personal biographies shape the kind of vision that they might wish to construct.

## Working with doctoral researchers on nominalizing

There are multiple reasons why it is good for supervisor to work with doctoral researchers on nominalizing. It’s not simply about making the text easier to read. It is about making a text more analytic, connecting it with conversations in the CoP and addressing questions of agency. We suggest three activities which model these different purposes.

### Nominalizing activity 1: making it more concise

Students who are unhappy with the maturity of their writing often consult the thesaurus and fill their texts with bigger words. A more useful strategy is to turn ‘speech-like’ text into nominalized prose.

One example comes from Barbara’s work with Joshua. Joshua was writing about professional standards in management. The first thing Barbara did was to select a brief segment from his text, identify the verbs and break the text into clauses, assigning one verb to each clause as follows:

- (1) That *is not to say*
- (2) that if you *are a* highly qualified person

- (3) then you *will be paid* a lot  
 (4) as there *has to be* demand for that profession

Having identified four clauses with four verbs, Barbara looked at each verb to see if it was possible to create a noun form (e.g. ‘will be paid’ into ‘payment’). She discussed this strategy with Joshua and he produced the first revision.

- (1) That *is not to say*  
 (2–3) that a highly qualified person *will be highly paid*  
 (4) as there *has to be* demand for that profession.

Here four verbs are reduced to three and a new nominal group, ‘a highly qualified person’ is created to replace the more colloquial ‘you’. Barbara then modelled how to take the process further. She reduced the number of clauses to two and produced three new nominalizations: ‘high qualifications’, ‘high remuneration’, ‘appropriate demand’.

- (1) That *is not to say*  
 (2–4) that high qualifications *yield* high remuneration without the appropriate demand.

Joshua was pleased with this rewrite as it seemed to him ‘more scholarly’ than his original speech-like text. It is important to note that he did not know how to nominalize. The exercise demonstrated a way of changing verb forms to nouns that he could build on in subsequent writing.

Supervisors can use this procedure on segments of doctoral researcher’s drafts. This is not correcting. The supervisor and doctoral writer work together to make the text more concise and authoritative. Like the side-by-side writing discussed in Chapter 4, this is collaborative textwork at a closer linguistic level. As the text shifts away from speech-like syntax, doctoral researchers see and hear their identity shift too.

### **Nominalizing activity 2: making it more accessible**

This second activity is the reverse of the first. Rather than condense meanings into fewer clauses with fewer verbs, the aim is to insert verbs and actors and create more clauses so it is clearer who is doing what to whom, when and why. We use Calvin’s work (DW 6.3) to illustrate how to unpack nominalized text and let it breathe.

This extract comes from a research methodology chapter where Calvin describes the method he devised to analyse websites designed by students. These are referred to as multimodal and multimedia documents. Here Calvin discusses analytic questions developed by a well-known theorist of visual and multimodal literacies, Jay Lemke (2003). Verbs are put in bold type and nominalizations in italics.

The above questions (Lemke 2003) were designed to focus my attention on *a variety of meaning types and functions during the analysis of multimodal semiotic artefacts*. The initial questions applied to nearly all media; some of the more advanced ones only in specialised cases. Not all meaning types were equally salient in all multimedia genres students designed. Most of these questions were relevant for my analytical purposes and research because they were specific and described some of the ways students' literacy practices shifted and/or remained unchanged through hypermedia design. They also offered insights into the relationship between shifting or unchanged literacy practices in relation to understandings of adolescence, literacy and pedagogy. But the questions above were also not entirely adequate for my research purposes. *Two additional tools for discourse analyses on multimodal documents were designed*: a Multimodal Semiotic Discourse Analysis (MSDA) and Hypermedia Traversal Analysis (HTA).

### Doctoral writing 6.3 Calvin obscures his method.

Calvin's supervisor examined some of the nominalizations he uses: 'a variety of meaning types and functions during the analysis of multimodal semiotic artefacts'; 'insights into the relationship between shifting or unchanged literacy practices in relation to understandings of adolescence, literacy and pedagogy'. These are long and difficult phrases which raise many questions. What exactly is Calvin doing as an analyst? How is he using Lemke's work?

Calvin's supervisor asked him to talk about what these nominalizations meant – to unpack them. She asked him to describe exactly how he had used the questions for his own purposes. Her aim was to help him make his method explicit and accessible for others in the CoP to replicate and interrogate. Calvin left the supervisory session eager to rewrite the text and make his analytic work more explicit. This revised extract (DW 6.4) gives a sense of the shift he made.

At first, Lemke's (2003) questions seemed relevant for my analytical purposes and research because they were specific and described some of the visual aspects of students' design. However, they did not help me to describe the different kinds of meanings made in the multimodal documents themselves. I needed a specific metalanguage to adequately analyse the documents and then decide if shifts in students' literacy practices actually occurred. This led me to design two additional tools for discourse analyses on multimodal documents: a Multimodal Semiotic Discourse Analysis (MSDA) and Hypermedia Traversal Analysis (HTA).

### Doctoral writing 6.4 Calvin unpacks nominalizations.

While we might expect the process of unpacking nominalizations to result in a longer text, Calvin's revision is noticeably shorter and more concise. It is also more accessible. Importantly, he has not simply tried to rewrite each sentence or unpack each nominalization. Repetitive and confusing references to Lemke's questions have been deleted. And the focus shifts to how Calvin used and remade the questions and why. This shift is made possible by inserting verbs ('help', 'describe', 'needed', 'led') and actors ('I', 'me') where there were none previously.

they **did not help** me to describe

I **needed** a specific metalanguage to adequately analyse

This **led** me to design

The result is a much clearer statement of method – where the doctoral analyst is inserted and his actions and agency made visible. This writing will be much more acceptable to the CoP and to his examiners

### Nominalizing activity 3: identifying agency

Supervisors can help doctoral researchers become more aware of the ideological effects of removing agency from their text. Simple sentences are sufficient to make this point.

The detonation of an atomic bomb in Hiroshima resulted in widespread mortality.

There are two nominalizations ('detonation', 'mortality') in this sentence and they remove actions and actors. There are no identifiable people who either drop the bomb ('detonation') or who die ('widespread mortality'). These events just happen; who is doing what to whom remains implicit. Supervisors can make agents explicit by re-inserting verb forms.

When American planes *detonated* the atomic bomb in Hiroshima, thousands of Japanese civilians *died*.

In this less nominalized form, the ideological reasons for omitting agency and hence responsibility are made visible.

### Balancing active and passive voice

Much academic writing is characterized by the use of the passive voice. The passive voice converts the object of the action into the subject of the sentence. So, for example, 'The researcher found puzzling correlations in the survey' becomes 'Puzzling correlations were found in the survey.' The one who is performing the action (the researcher) disappears from view. If the passive voice carries on

regardless, page after page after page, it *can* be tedious to read. It can also create long, over-complicated and awkward sentences that trip up the reader.

Many online writing workshops and academic writing advice books contain sensible examples of the kinds of passive voice constructions that, when used continually, make for a uniform dullness. It is too simplistic, however, to tell doctoral researchers to just avoid the use of the passive voice. The passive voice *is* important in presenting research findings and in conducting discussions – as is the active voice. We suggest that both are required in doctoral writing.

The following extract by Bonhomme (2004), a writer on men's health, uses both active and passive voice effectively. In these three sentences, he puts the issue he is discussing, 'the economics of the family', at the beginning of a short sentence, using the passive voice. This draws the reader's attention at the outset to the topic discussed in the paragraph.

The economics of the family are adversely affected by male health problems. Illness among men often diminishes work productivity. When men become disabled or die, family income is usually reduced, often in the face of additional health care expenses.

(Bonhomme, 2004: 145)

Subsequent sentences use active voice to make the case in an uncluttered manner.

It is important to avoid passive constructions which obscure connections and lack specificity. For example, it is less informative to use the passive voice in the sentence, 'professional training was conducted across the public sector', than to give details of who conducted the training, when, where and how often. Or to say 'the young people were socially excluded' without also giving details of the conditions, decisions, and institutional practices and policies that produced this exclusion.

However, deciding whether to use the active or passive voice is not just a matter of clarity. When passive voice combines with nominalization the potential for stodgy prose lacking in specificity increases exponentially. Take for example the following extract also discussing men's health. We have numbered the sentences for ease of discussion.

[1] Understanding masculinity is crucial for analyzing men's health problems. [2] For instance it is important to appreciate that many men take risks with their health because risk taking is one way men are brought up to prove their maleness to each other and themselves. [3] The long-standing and largely unresolved debate about the extent to which traditional characteristics of masculinity are pre-determined by biology should however be set aside if progress is to be made. [4] The attitude that there is an inherent and thus inevitable relation between maleness and poor health could distract from the chances of changing male attitudes and behaviour to bring about improvements in health.

(Banks, 2004: 156)

The writer here takes an assertive stance by saying ‘is crucial’, ‘is important’ and ‘should’. But the use of nominalization and the passive voice in the third sentence, for example, creates an overly complex subject, *The long-standing and largely unresolved debate about the extent to which traditional characteristics of masculinity are pre-determined by biology* . . . As Sword (2012) would put it, there is too much distance between the heavily packed nominalization around *debate* and the passive verb *are predetermined*. This makes it hard to get the crucial importance that the writer wants to convey.

The use of the passive voice also leaves many unanswered questions. In sentence 1, who should understand men’s health problems? In 2, who should appreciate male risk-taking behaviour? In 3, who should set aside preconceived ideas about maleness and biology? And in sentence 4, whose attitude is likely to distract from changing male behaviour and thus bringing about improvements in men’s health?

But if we rewrote sentence 1 in the active voice, for example

[1] It is critical that the medical profession understands masculinity in order to analyze men’s health problems more effectively.

it now has a critical and vaguely accusatory tone, wagging a finger at the medical profession and telling them what to do. This may be a more provocative stance than the writer wishes. It may be more productive to attend to unpacking the nominalization. So for example, sentence 3 might become:

[3] There are long-standing and largely unresolved debates about masculinity. Disputes about the effects of biology hinder progress and should be set aside.

Unpacking the nominalization creates the opportunity to insert new verbs (are, hinder) and produce the urgency the writer wants to communicate. Clarity and assertiveness are enhanced, without attributing blame.

Our point in exploring these examples and possible rewrites is to suggest that both active and passive voice have their purposes and effects. Making them the focus of supervisor conversation is a better tactic than blanket rules and prohibitions.

### **Modality: the Goldilocks dilemma**

Doctoral writers ‘need to invest a convincing degree of assurance in their propositions, yet must avoid overstating their case and risk inviting the rejection of their arguments’ (Hyland, 2000: 87). Making choices about their writer stance is complex. They are not writing for peers. Relationships between doctoral candidates and examiners are culturally constrained as unequal. They are not yet ‘accepted’ in their scholarly communities and are seeking entry through writing the dissertation.

So the question of ‘what kind of stance is appropriate for doctoral writers’ creates a genuine supervisory quandary, what we call *the Goldilocks dilemma*. How much assertiveness is appropriate? *Not too cold*: passive, tentative, over-cautious or evasive. *Not too hot*: overly confident, too brash and assertive. *But just right*: confident, in charge, leading the reader through the dissertation.

Finding the right mix is not easy. Understanding modality can be helpful. Modality includes the hedges, emphatics, attitude and person markers described by Hyland (see Chapter 5). According to linguists Halliday and Matthiessen (2004), modality expresses two kinds of meanings: *probability*, judgments about the likelihood of something happening or being; and *usuality*, judgments about the frequency with which something happens or is. Writers have choices about how powerful, knowledgeable and authoritative they represent themselves as being in their writing. In short, modality encodes relations of power and affect. Modality is a productive site for supervisors to get down and dirty with some textwork/identitywork. In Figure 6.2 we set out some explicit markers of modality.

It is useful to explore two dimensions of modality: (1) the authority of doctoral researchers in relation to examiners and scholarly experts and (2) with respect to the truth or probability of their research assertions and findings. We encourage writers to discuss the difficulties of striking an appropriate balance between confidence and tentativeness. They need to learn to write with authority (hands on hips) but not fall into the trap of claiming too much.

Some advice books offer rules, cautioning students to use the language of tentativeness or what we’d call low modality: ‘it *is likely that*, *it seems obvious here*, *one tentative conclusion that might be drawn . . .*’ (Glatthorn, 1998: 112–13). But such rules oversimplify the decisions doctoral writers need to make. Qualifying every statement will lead to weak, unconvincing prose.

We take a playful approach and encourage doctoral researchers to experiment with the extremes of modality. First we ask them to rewrite a passage of text with high assertive modality. ‘Be extremely confident and sure of your propositions. Use all the language resources you can muster to assert the truthfulness of your claim.

- **modal auxiliary verbs** (may, might, must, should, can, can’t, ought) which modify the verb to express degrees of possibility, probability, intention or necessity:
  - She may win
  - She should win
  - She might win
- **modal adverbs**, such as perhaps, *probably*, *possibly*, *obviously*, *questionably* *definitely*:
  - She will probably win
- **conditional clauses**, i.e. by adding a whole clause:
  - She will win, if she has the skill.
- **hedges**, such as *sort of*, *a bit*, or *something*:
  - She had a bit of a win

Figure 6.2 Modality markers.



You are aiming for maximum impact.’ Then we ask them to rewrite the same passage with low modality ‘Be as tentative, cautious and careful as you can. Emphasize your unequal power relationships in the academy. Trim your hedges.’

This is a strategic way to address the Goldilocks dilemma. It makes light of the difficulty of getting modality right. But it raises a serious issue for doctoral writers. Playing with modality encourages a more explicit engagement with the identity consequences of dissertation textwork. It makes obvious the need for doctoral researchers to develop resources that enable a confident stance about their contribution. If they are to be successful scholars, they must come to the ‘just right’ combination of certainty, humility, personal claim, dis/agreement and authoritative stance.

### Working with doctoral researchers on Theme

*Theme analysis* is a tool that can help supervisors identify which meanings students make prominent and which they bury or ignore. When texts seem incoherent or unfocused, it helps to pinpoint the problem and make explicit how information develops and flows. Before we go any further, we note that our use of the capital letter *T* (Theme vs *theme*) signals that we are using Theme quite differently from its everyday usage, where it means *topic* or *main idea*, as in ‘the theme of my dissertation is industrial workplace relations’.

Linguistically, Theme is the starting point of the sentence or clause. It is what the clause is going to be about (Halliday and Matthiessen, 2004: 64). (In our earlier discussion of nominalization, we showed that a clause is a stretch of language with a verb. A sentence will often have more than one verb and hence more than one clause.)

Martin and Rose (2003) use the metaphor of a wave to capture the way in which information flows in a text. The sentence or clause is seen as a wave of information, in which there are peaks or crests, followed by troughs of lesser prominence. As they put it, ‘the peak of prominence at the beginning of the clause is referred to as its Theme’ (Martin and Rose, 2003: 177).

While these peaks (Thematic waves with a crest) occur at the sentence level, they also occur at the paragraph level. This is what many of us learned as the topic sentence. These are higher level Themes which orient the reader to what is to come. ‘They establish expectations about how the text will unfold’ (Martin and Rose, 2003: 181). Here we turn our attention to Theme and how it operates at the sentence level.

### Doing Theme analysis

When we write, we make choices about the way words are ordered in the clause (even though this may not be a conscious choice). Linguistically, Theme comprises those words and phrases we put at the beginning of the clause, presented in italics.

*Careful revision of each thesis chapter* increases the likelihood of a good result.

*Careful revision of each thesis chapter* is Theme. It comes first in the sentence, before the verb 'increases'. The remainder of the message – all the other words in the clause following the verb – is called the Rheme (Halliday, 1985). Rheme generally contains unfamiliar or new information, 'since we typically depart from the familiar to head towards the unfamiliar' (Eggins, 2004: 300).

As writers and speakers of English, we have a choice about how to order Theme and Rheme. In the above example, we change Theme by changing what we put first in the clause.

*The likelihood of a good result* increases with careful revision of each thesis chapter.

*The likelihood of a good result* is now Theme. The verb 'increases' and the remainder of the clause is Rheme. When we compare these two examples, we can see that their wording is similar. What has changed is Theme and this creates a different emphasis in meaning. In the first example, textual work ('careful revision') is made prominent; in the second, it is the purpose of textual work ('a good result') that is important.

Theme analysis can help supervisors pinpoint why some doctoral writing seems to miss the point or wander about. When Barbara reads drafts that seem disconnected or somehow incoherent, one of her first strategies is to look at how sentences begin. What does the writer put first? What meanings do they foreground? She takes her pencil and circles those words or phrases that come at the start of the clause – before the verb – in order to see if there is any pattern across sentences.

It is also possible to do a more formal analysis by dividing clauses into Theme and Rheme columns in order to make the pattern of Theme more visible. We can illustrate by using an extract from Mia's literature work, which we previously examined in Chapter 4. To do the analysis, we divide her text into clauses and put those words that come before the verb in Theme (this is a somewhat rough and simplified rule of thumb). The remainder of the clause we put in the Rheme column (see Figure 6.3)

In our earlier discussion, we saw Mia's first draft was overly descriptive and excluded her point of view. Theme analysis shows us why. Almost every Theme in her text includes terms like 'scholars', 'many studies', 'majority of studies', 'observational studies', 'influential studies'. Separating out Theme makes it easier to see this pattern. While not intentional, Mia's use of Theme creates a pattern which highlights the authority of other scholars, rather than her own!

Mia found this surprising. She had not realized the consistency of this pattern in her writing. With her supervisor Andrew's help, she experimented with changing Theme and consequently made significant changes to what she put

Theme	Rheme
Several scholars who have reviewed the academic literature on homework (Hoover-Dempsey, 1995; Coulter, 1979)	suggest that the equivocal nature of the findings into the effects of homework . . .
Apart from the quantitative studies previously discussed, many studies	have used evidence from interviews with children, parents and teachers.
There	has also been little research evidence derived from classrooms which explores teachers' framing of homework or children's understandings of their tasks.
Further, the majority of studies	have concentrated on homework practices of adolescent secondary students.
Scholars who have reviewed the academic literature on homework (Hoover-Dempsey, 1995)	have directed little research attention to primary school students' homework, with the exception of the role of parents in the development of child literacy.
Few observational studies	have examined the webs of social interaction between children and their parents, siblings, friends and schools within which homework is constructed (Coulter, 1979: 27)
A few influential studies	have looked at the family interactions around homework in diverse socio-cultural contexts (Breen et al, 1994; Freebody et al, 1995; Lareau 1987) and will be discussed in a later section of this review.

Figure 6.3 Theme analysis: Mia's first draft.

first in the clause. Mia's revised text shows a very different pattern of Theme (see Figure 6.4).

The changes to Theme are striking. The repetition of phrases like 'little attention', 'little classroom-based research evidence' and 'little research attention' highlight gaps in the research. That is, they Thematize what is *not* being attended to by other scholars. More evaluative terms are also included in Theme ('despite', 'little', 'to date'). The result is a less descriptive stance to the research Mia reviews. The text now builds a more argumentative or critical stance in the review – previously missing. By shifting Theme, Mia can begin to stake out her territory and make a claim for her work.

This linguistic textwork also accomplishes identitywork, helping doctoral researchers clear the way for their own work. With explanation and discussion, supervisors can guide students to look for patterns in Theme in their dissertation writing and try alternatives. Theme analysis becomes a useful and concrete pedagogical tool for the production of a more persuasive argument.

Theme	Rheme
It seems, then, that despite a century of research, the equivocal nature of the findings	say more about the methodological challenges of researching this complex subject than about any definitive relationship between homework and achievement itself [Hoover-Dempsey, 1995; Coulter, 1979].
The qualitative research evidence to date	has relied heavily on interviews with children, parents and teachers, that is, on what people say they do.
There has been little attention	given to the practice of school homework as it occurs in the family context.
There has been little classroom-based research evidence	which explores teachers' framing of homework or children's understandings of their tasks.
Further, little research attention	has focused on primary school students' homework, with the exception of the role of parents in the development of child literacy.

Figure 6.4 Theme analysis: Mia's second draft.

### Theme and cohesion

Theme also has a profound influence on the coherence of a text. As Eggins argues:

The most striking contribution of Thematic choices is to the internal cohesion of the text: skillful use of Thematic selection results in a text which appears to 'hang together and make sense'.

(Eggins, 2004: 321)

Eggins discusses a variety of Theme strategies that writers use to achieve coherence, including repetition and zigzag patterning (see Eggins, 2004: 324–5).

Mia's revised text illustrates how repetition can be used effectively to create cohesion. The repetition of 'research evidence', 'little' and 'attention' in Theme provides unity and a clear focus to her argument:

- The qualitative research evidence to date
- There has been little attention
- There has been little classroom-based research evidence
- Further, little research attention

Repetition is a common strategy used in doctoral writing. A text with little or no repetition will seem disconnected. However, a text in which Theme never varies will not only be boring to read or listen to, but indicates a text that is going nowhere.

If Theme is our point of departure, constancy of Theme would mean we are always leaving from the same spot, and that the 'new' information introduced in the Rhemes would not be being followed up.

(Eggins, 2004: 324)

This idea helps us understand why Calvin's text, which we looked at in our earlier discussion of nominalization, did not work as effectively as it might. Calvin used a repetition strategy in his first draft, as the Theme analysis in Figure 6.5 shows. However, his use of repetition is not as effective as Mia's.

He repeats the term 'questions' frequently in Theme position. This repetition creates some coherence, but it does not take the discussion of method forward. Calvin also uses a variety of adjectives to describe these 'questions' ('above', 'initial', 'some of the more advanced', 'most of these', 'above') and these descriptors actually confuse the reader. What's the difference, for example, between the 'initial questions' and the 'more advanced ones'? Which questions were 'relevant' and which were 'not entirely adequate'? And more importantly, how was Calvin as researcher *using* these questions?

After conducting the joint analysis with his supervisor, Calvin tried to put himself back into the text by unpacking nominalizations. But in the process of rewriting, he also changed the pattern of Theme (see Figure 6.6). As he clarified how

Theme	Rheme
The above questions (Lemke 2003)	were designed to focus my attention on a variety of meaning types and functions during the analysis of multimodal semiotic artefacts.
The initial questions	applied to nearly all media
some of the more advanced ones	applied only in specialised cases
Not all meaning types	were equally salient in all multimedia genres students designed
Most of these questions	were relevant for my analytical purposes and research
because they	were specific and described some of the ways students' literacy practices shifted and/or remained unchanged through hypermedia design.
They also	offered insights into the relationship between shifting or unchanged literacy practices in relation to understandings of adolescence, literacy and pedagogy.
But the questions above	were also not entirely adequate for my research purposes

Figure 6.5 Theme analysis: Calvin's first draft.

Theme	Rheme
At first, Lemke's (2003) questions	seemed relevant for my analytical purposes and research
because they	were specific and described some of the visual aspects of students' design
However, they	<b>did not help me to describe</b> the different kinds of meanings made in the multimodal documents themselves
I	<b>needed</b> a specific metalanguage to adequately analyse the documents and then <b>decide</b> if shifts in students' literacy practices actually <b>occurred</b> .
This led me	to design two additional tools for discourse analyses on multimodal documents: a Multimodal Semiotic Discourse Analysis (MSDA) and Hypermedia Traversal Analysis (HTA).

Figure 6.6 Theme analysis: Calvin's second draft.

he used Lemke's questions, he also changed what came first in the clause. And, in the process he shifted from description to explanation.

In the revision Calvin foregrounds his judgment of Lemke's work and then goes on to show how this shaped his own work as a researcher. Rather than discussing the more abstract notion of research questions, Calvin talks about researchers and has assumed more agency through explaining to his reader.

The changes to Theme are subtle, but create an important shift in emphasis. Lemke's questions appear in Theme position in the first three clauses, but an evaluative stance is introduced through the conjunctions 'because' and 'however'. In the fourth and fifth clauses, Theme shifts to the researcher ('I', 'me'), so Calvin's reasoning for creating new analytic tools is now made explicit.

Calvin's revision highlights the benefits for supervisors of doing Theme work with doctoral researchers – making the writing sharper and more authoritative.

### Zigzag patterning

The zigzag pattern in Theme achieves cohesion by building on newly introduced information. This gives a text the sense of cumulative development . . . (Eggs, 2004: 325). In linguistic terms, this means that an element which is introduced in Rheme, becomes the Theme of the following clause. An extract from doctoral researcher Jennifer's writing (Figure 6.7) illustrates this strategy for structuring information.

Jennifer's dissertation examines migrant women's experiences with the law in Australia. In this extract she explores the viewpoint of a legal professional, who is commenting on the workplace discrimination case of one migrant woman, Serena. The Rheme and corresponding Theme have been placed in italics and connected with an arrow.

Theme	Rheme
Even with the assistance of an experienced lawyer, migrant women	may find themselves unequally positioned in the legal process.
The harassing behaviour of the barrister in Serena's case and the delaying tactics of the CSIRO	were definite examples of power play used against the more vulnerable party.
Such bullying behaviour	has no place outside the courtroom and should be reported to the Law Institute.
Nevertheless, the use of 'vigorous' cross-examination experienced by Serena at the Equal Opportunities Commission	is an important feature of the adversarial system
Although, aggressive, adversarial court tactics	may be more appropriate to proceedings in the criminal courtroom than to civil cases such as Serena's.

Figure 6.7 Zigzag patterning in Theme.

In this zigzag patterning, the information Jennifer introduces in Rheme is taken up and expanded in Theme in the following clause. We find at least two clear examples of this tactic. First she draws on the Rheme 'examples of power play used against the more vulnerable party' and uses it as the point of departure in Theme of the next clause, 'such bullying behaviour'. That is, she further develops the notion of power play by naming it as bullying.

This happens again in the fourth clause, where she introduces the 'adversarial system' in Rheme and then picks it up again in the following Theme, 'aggressive, adversarial court tactics'. The effect is to create a text that moves forward and is cohesive. It is also worth noting the way Jennifer uses nominalizations in Theme position:

the assistance of an experienced lawyer  
 the harassing behaviour of the barrister  
 the delaying tactics of the CSIRO  
 the use of 'vigorous' cross-examination  
 aggressive, adversarial court tactics

These nominalizations compress information. So for example, instead of writing 'the experienced lawyer provided assistance', the verb 'provided' has been deleted. This changes a simple noun, 'experienced lawyer', into a more complex nominalization: 'the assistance of an experienced lawyer'. These nominalizations build argument, by increasingly repackaging and re-presenting information in a nominalized but accessible form.

Theme patterns are strongly influenced by whether language is written or spoken. In face-to-face conversation, the Theme is most often ourselves or those

connected with us. In scholarly writing, abstractions and generalizations about people, situations and causes are more likely to be Theme, rather than our own experience (Eggins, 2004: 323). When doctoral writers consistently place the personal pronoun 'I' in Theme position, it alerts supervisors that they may be writing patterns of speech, with too much personal assertion and too little argument.

While speech can have rapid shifts in Theme because it is dynamic and unplanned, sudden shifts work less successfully in writing. They disrupt the flow and confuse the reader. As the text becomes hard to follow, the reader may suddenly have a million questions: Why did the focus shift so suddenly? What's the point? Supervisors can identify disjointed texts, but don't necessarily know how to show students the problem.

There are thus great benefits in supervisors using Theme analysis as a tool for engaging students in discussions of text organization and coherence. There is no formula for what comes first in a clause, but there are tangible effects on a text, its coherence and its method of development. Getting doctoral researchers to experiment with Theme makes them more conscious of available choices. The capacity to make choices, in turn, gives them greater agency as writers.

### **In sum**

Supervisors can benefit from having a linguistic toolkit at their disposal. It makes the problems with doctoral writing more tangible; doctoral researchers are able to revise more effectively with specific rather than generalized feedback. In attending to nominalization, active and passive voice, modality and Theme, supervisors can support students to do significant textwork/identitywork. Their prose will become more dynamic, readable and credible at the same time as they put themselves and their doctoral agenda centre stage.