



Chapter 3

Useful Sentence Structures and Language for Academic Writing

- a) Passive Construction**
- b) Hedging Language**
- c) Noun Phrases and Clauses**
- d) Adjective Phrases and Clauses**

(With Suggested Answers and Explanations)

Useful Sentence Structures and Language for Academic Writing

As discussed in Chapter 1, academic texts are characterised by four distinct features and the language used is usually formal, objective, precise and technical. To achieve these and to present information and ideas in an effective manner, the following language items are often used in academic writing:

- a) passive construction
- b) hedging language
- c) noun phrases and clauses
- d) adjective phrases and clauses

3a: Passive Construction

The **passive voice** is commonly used in academic texts for the following purposes:

- **To focus on the key subject matter by putting it first or to emphasise the process/act/outcome over the doer**

e.g. The electric current **is created** by electrons or charges moving through a path called an electric circuit. An electric circuit **can be formed** by attaching conductors to the positive and negative sides of a power source (e.g. a battery cell).

(* “The electric current” and “an electric circuit” are the key terms and concepts to be defined and described here.)

- **To avoid mentioning an unknown/unclear doer or avoid attributing the action to a particular doer**

e.g. The electric current **is classified** into two types, i.e. alternating current and direct current. It **is measured** in ampere.

- **To present information, ideas or views in a more objective tone**

e.g. In an experiment (which was) conducted in the Physics lesson on 3 Oct 2021, **it was observed** that the length and thickness of a wire would affect the current flow in an electric circuit.

(c/f: In an experiment I conducted in the Physics lesson on 3 Oct 2021, I observed that the length and thickness of a wire would affect the current flow in an electric circuit.)

The **passive voice** is formed by a **verb “to be” (in different tense forms)** + **past participle**.

e.g. The electric current **is measured** in ampere.

Practice

Activity 1

Underline all the passive forms in the text below:

Body mass index (BMI) is used commonly as a first indicator to identify overweight and obese individuals. In the metric system, BMI is calculated by dividing the body weight in kilograms by the square of height in metres, i.e. kg/m². An Asian adult with BMI between 23.0 and 24.9 is classified as overweight, while an Asian adult with BMI above 25.0 is considered obese.

Activity 2

The following sentences are taken from an article on obesity. Identify the main purpose the passive voice serves in each sentence. Put the correct letters (A/B/C) in the spaces provided.

- A. To focus on the key subject matter by putting it first or to emphasise the process/act/outcome over the doer
- B. To avoid mentioning an unknown/unclear doer or avoid attributing the action to a particular doer
- C. To present information, ideas or views in a more objective tone

Purposes	Sentences from the Text
A	(i) Obesity is a health problem that is growing rapidly in many parts of the world. It <u>was</u> officially <u>defined</u> <u>by</u> World Health Organisation as “a disease in which excess body fat has accumulated to such an extent that one’s health may be at risk” in 2000.
B	(ii) Obesity <u>is associated</u> with the leading causes of death, which include strokes, diabetes and cardiovascular diseases.
C	(iii) Obese people <u>are</u> also <u>found</u> to be at a higher risk of suffering from some cancers, for example, breast, bowel and pancreatic cancers.
C	(iv) In an affluent city like Hong Kong, the main causes of obesity <u>are believed</u> to be the popularity of western fast food and a lack of physical exercise.
B	(v) To tackle the problem of obesity, education campaigns <u>must be launched</u> to raise people’s health consciousness. Cross-sectoral action <u>is</u> also <u>required</u> to promote healthy eating and physical activity.

3b: Hedging Language

Hedging language is often used to soften the tone and avoid making sweeping statements, over-generalisations and unsupported claims. Using **hedging language** allows us to be cautious and more accurate when explaining results or making a point.

There are several ways to hedge:

	Examples	Sample Sentences
(i) Using adjectives to indicate possibility and tendency	<i>possible, probable, prone to, (un)likely</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What are the possible reasons for young people to smoke? • Teenagers are prone to smoke with companions.
(ii) Using modal verbs to show uncertainty	<i>can, could, may, might</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A more radical measure the government might want to adopt is to introduce a licensing system for sales of tobacco and limit it to a few licensed retail locations. • Schools could launch an anti-smoking campaign.
(iii) Using adverbs to show frequency, approximation and probability	<i>often, perhaps, possibly, probably, apparently, presumably, approximately, nearly</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Noticeable drops were observed in 2007 and 2011, probably due to the comprehensive smoke-free legislation in 2007 and the 50% increase in tobacco tax in 2009.
(iv) Using “cautious” verbs and/or the passive voice to make statements less direct	<i>assume, believe, suggest, seem, appear, say, consider, think, tend to</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Smoking is considered a source of comfort for some people. • It is believed that curiosity is also a reason for teenage smoking. • Men tend to have a higher dependence on tobacco than women.

Practice

Activity 3

Compare the two texts below. Choose the one with a **softer** tone.

Text 1

There are different reasons for teenagers to take up smoking. Some teenagers see smoking as a way of rebelling and showing independence. The developmental changes in adolescents fuel their urge to imitate adult behaviour, one of which is to make their own decisions. Coupled with the urge to rebel against authority, adolescents will start smoking. Boredom also causes teenagers to smoke. Although teenagers know the harm caused by smoking, they continue to smoke simply because they have become addicted to nicotine.



Text 2

Surveys conducted by some non-government organisations **suggest** that there are different **possible** reasons for teenagers to take up smoking. Some teenagers **may** see smoking as a way of rebelling and showing independence. The developmental changes in adolescents are very **likely** to fuel their urge to imitate adult behaviour, one of which is to make their own decisions. Coupled with the urge to rebel against authority, adolescents are **prone to** smoke. Boredom is **likely** to be another reason for youth smoking. **It is believed** that although most of the teenagers interviewed know the harm caused by smoking, they **may** continue to smoke because of **possible** nicotine addiction.



Notes: With the use of the **verb** “suggest”, **adjectives** “possible”, “likely” and “prone to”, **modal verb** “may” and **the passive voice** “it is believed”, the tone of the paragraph is softened to avoid over-generalisation.

Activity 4

Rewrite the following sentences with the use of hedging language.

(Suggested answers)

- 1) Peer influence is the most common reason for teenage smoking.
(Using a “cautious” verb)

Peer influence **appears** to be the most common reason for teenage smoking./

Peer influence **tends to** be the most common reason for teenage smoking.

- 2) The significant drop in the number of teenage smokers is due to the recent anti-smoking campaign.
(Using an adverb showing possibility)

The significant drop in the number of teenage smokers is **probably/possibly** due to the recent anti-smoking campaign.

- 3) Teens with emotional problems always have nicotine addiction.
(Using adjectives indicating possibility and tendency)

Teens with emotional problems are **prone to** (have) nicotine addiction./

Teens with emotional problems are more **likely** to have nicotine addiction.

- 4) Nicotine is as addictive as other drugs, including cocaine and morphine.
(Using the passive voice)

Nicotine **is considered** as addictive as other drugs, including cocaine and morphine./

It is believed that nicotine is as addictive as other drugs, including cocaine and morphine.

3c: Noun Phrases and Clauses

➤ Noun phrases

A **noun phrase** acts as a **noun** and can be the subject or object of a sentence. It is formed by a group of words consisting of a noun/pronoun and words that add meanings to it. The words that help add meanings to a noun/pronoun are called “modifiers” and they can be placed before or after the noun/pronoun.

Modifiers	Examples of Noun Phrases
determiners	the/these/my opinions
quantifiers	a lot of/some of them
adjectives	novel/inspiring ideas
prepositional phrase	the equipment with a new design
present participle	those (the people) supervising the production
past participle	the products exported

➤ Noun clauses

A **noun clause** is a group of words acting together as a **noun** to add more details to a sentence. Unlike noun phrases, noun clauses contain both **a subject and a verb**, while a noun phrase does not have any verbs.

Noun clauses are dependent clauses. They **cannot stand alone** as full sentences. They can be the subject or object of a sentence.

“That-clauses” are also examples of noun clauses. They can be the subject or object of a sentence.

Examples:

A. Noun clauses as **subject**:

- **How often people shop** will affect the sales strategies.
- **(The idea) that humans and chimpanzees share the common ancestor** is widely accepted.

B. Noun clauses as **object**:

- It is important to understand **what customers want**.
- Astronomers believe **that there are billions of galaxies**.

Practice**Activity 5**

Decide whether the **underlined parts** are **noun phrases (NP)** or **noun clauses (NC)**. Put **NP** or **NC** in the spaces provided.

		NP or NC
e.g.	<i><u>A short circuit</u> can overheat cables and cause a fire.</i>	e.g. NP
1.	Nylon was <u>one of the earliest synthetic fibres.</u>	NP
2.	The main concern is <u>how the government can prevent a further increase in crime.</u>	NC
3.	The chart shows <u>what students usually buy online.</u>	NC
4.	<u>Mendel's work on genetics</u> provided new perspectives for agronomists.	NP
5.	The survey identified <u>three categories of voluntary workers.</u>	NP

➤ **Using noun phrases/clauses**

(i) **Nominalisation**

Academic writing is characterised by the use of noun phrases/clauses. Turning verbs and adjectives into nouns helps create a more formal style and make the sentences more compact. For example,

As transportation network has improved , time to travel to other places has shortened .	➔	The improvement in transportation network results in the shortening of travel time.
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As shown above, changing a verb or other word forms into a noun is called “**nominalisation**”.

Practice

Activity 6

Change the **underlined parts** into nouns.

e.g. **Money supply increases** and shifts the money supply curve to the right.
An increase in money supply shifts the money supply curve to the right.

- As technology advances, crops **grow** faster than they used to be.
Advanced technology accelerates the **growth** of crops.
- By **providing** the right amount of support and challenge, young children can learn to be **independent**.
Young children’s **independence** can be nurtured by **provision** of proper support and challenge.
- The assessment was **difficult**. Many students did not **perform** well.
The **difficulty** of the assessment resulted in poor student **performance**.
- The government **decided** to increase the VAT (value-added tax) to 15% and this **concerned** the general public.
The government’s **decision** to increase the VAT to 15% caused **concern** to the general public.
- We **analysed** the data and they showed that peer pressure could **influence** drug addiction.
The **analysis** of the data showed the **influence** of peer pressure on drug addiction.
- More and more people use** the Internet. As a result, **people’s shopping habits have changed**.
Widespread use of the Internet has led to a major **change** in people’s shopping habits.

(ii) Using noun phrases/clauses after cohesive devices

Noun phrases are used after some cohesive devices. Compare the following two sentences:

A.	The metabolism of organisms is affected	because	<u>new genes</u> (subject) <u>are inserted</u> (verb).	← clause
B.	The metabolism of organisms is affected	because of	the insertion of new genes.	← noun phrase

Some cohesive devices are followed by a **clause**, which is a group of words that has a **subject** and a **verb** (e.g. **because** – see Sentence A), while some are followed by a **noun phrase** (e.g. **because of** – see Sentence B).

The table below shows some cohesive devices of different functions:

Functions	Followed by a Clause	Followed by a Noun Phrase				
Stating cause and effect relationships	because as since due to the fact that so therefore as a result consequently	because of due to as a result of as a consequence of <i>See examples below for verbs stating cause and effect relationships:</i> <table border="1"> <thead> <tr> <th>cause ... effect</th> <th>effect ... cause</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td>e.g. bring about lead to result in</td> <td>e.g. result from stem from (be) attributed to</td> </tr> </tbody> </table> Examples: - It is believed that excessive pressure at work (cause) could bring about mental illnesses (effect). - The failure of the project (effect) stemmed from inadequate resources (cause).	cause ... effect	effect ... cause	e.g. bring about lead to result in	e.g. result from stem from (be) attributed to
cause ... effect	effect ... cause					
e.g. bring about lead to result in	e.g. result from stem from (be) attributed to					
Making concession	although though even though	despite in spite of				
Showing purpose/intention	so that	with the aim of with a view to				

Practice

Activity 7

Choose the correct answer for each of the sentences below.

1. A lot of consumers still prefer shopping online **despite** ...
 it can be very dangerous.
 the security risks.
2. The genetically modified (GM) salmon can produce growth hormone all year round.
Therefore, ...
 they can reach maturity in a shorter time.
 early maturity in a shorter time.
3. Improvement in health **results from** ...
 regular exercise and a balanced diet.
 people exercise regularly and eat a balanced diet.
4. During the Great Depression, consumer spending and investment dropped tremendously. **As a result,** ...
 countless workers were laid off.
 large-scale unemployment.
5. New measures have been proposed **with a view to** ...
 increasing the company's profits.
 the company could make more profits.
6. The unpopularity of electric vehicles in Hong Kong is mainly **due to** ...
 there are inadequate charging spots and facilities.
 a lack of charging spots and facilities.
7. The success of David Beckham can **be attributed to** ...
 his perseverance and passion for soccer.
 he is always persevering to the end and he really loves soccer.

3d: Adjective Phrases and Clauses

Sentences in academic texts tend to be dense. They contain lots of grammatically complex sentences which are composed of phrases and clauses of different purposes. Some common examples are **adjective phrases and clauses**, which are used to provide additional information and descriptions to nouns.

➤ Adjective phrases

An **adjective phrase** is a group of words that describes a **noun or pronoun**. It provides further details and specifies the features/characteristics of an object, a person or a place. An adjective phrase is usually placed before or after the noun or pronoun in a sentence. There are different kinds of phrases that can act as adjectives. Below are some examples:

a.	Prepositional phrases	Growing tomatoes with a longer shelf life can reduce fruit loss.
b.	Present participle phrases (-ing phrase)	Nowadays, those (employees) working from home can still communicate with colleagues using information and communication technology.
c.	Past participle phrases	Most of the squatter settlements built in the 1940s were destroyed during World War II.

Practice

Activity 8

Read the following sentences and decide which type of adjective phrase is used for the underlined parts.

e.g. Compulsory education is adopted in many places of the world and in general, children between 6 and 15 years old have to attend school.

- A prepositional phrase
- A present participle phrase
- A past participle phrase

1. The skyline along the coast of the Victoria Harbour is a famous tourist attraction in Hong Kong.

- A prepositional phrase
- A present participle phrase
- A past participle phrase

2. In Hong Kong, the first housing estate **built by a private developer** is Mei Foo Sun Chuen.
- A prepositional phrase
 - A present participle phrase
 - A past participle phrase
3. The film **featuring the iconic locations in Hong Kong** was well received globally.
- A prepositional phrase
 - A present participle phrase
 - A past participle phrase

➤ Adjective clauses

An **adjective clause**, which is also called a **relative clause**, functions as an **adjective** to describe a noun. It can be used to link up ideas, compress information and make communication more effective. For example,

A nurse is a professional. A nurse cares for sick people.

➔ A nurse is a professional **who** cares for sick people.

By connecting the two sentences with '**who**', the ideas are better linked and the message becomes clearer.

A **relative clause** begins with a **relative pronoun** (i.e. that, who, which, where, whose, when, why, what or whom) and provides essential information (defining relative clauses) or non-essential information (non-defining relative clauses) about the noun it modifies.

	Examples	Notes about the Defining/ Non-defining Clauses
Defining clauses	People who are allergic to wheat may suffer from nausea and diarrhoea.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <i>essential information as it specifies the group of people who may have the problems</i> - cannot be omitted
Non-defining clauses	Nicholas II, who was the last Emperor of Russia , was put to death in July 1918.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <i>additional information about the person that is already known to the reader</i> - can be omitted - <i>a comma before the relative pronoun, separating the relative clause and the noun it modifies</i>

Practice

Activity 9

Decide whether defining or non-defining clauses are used in the following sentences. Then choose the best relative pronouns to complete the sentences.

1. The mechanical lifting device _____ is used to lift heavy loads is called a jack.

- | | |
|--|--|
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> A defining relative clause | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> which (<i>Notes: 'that' is also correct</i>) |
| <input type="checkbox"/> A non-defining relative clause | <input type="checkbox"/> who |
| | <input type="checkbox"/> why |
| | <input type="checkbox"/> what |

2. Sir Charles Kuen KAO, _____ laid the groundwork for fibre optic communications, was awarded the 2009 Nobel Prize in Physics.

- | | |
|--|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> A defining relative clause | <input type="checkbox"/> that (<i>Notes: 'that' is not used in non-defining relative clauses</i>) |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> A non-defining relative clause | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> who |
| | <input type="checkbox"/> where |
| | <input type="checkbox"/> whom |

3. Nick Vujicic, _____ stories are full of hope and motivation, has warmly moved a lot of people.

- | | |
|--|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> A defining relative clause | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> whose |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> A non-defining relative clause | <input type="checkbox"/> who |
| | <input type="checkbox"/> which |
| | <input type="checkbox"/> whom |

4. Passwords _____ are simple and repetitive must be avoided.

- | | |
|--|--|
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> A defining relative clause | <input type="checkbox"/> whose |
| <input type="checkbox"/> A non-defining relative clause | <input type="checkbox"/> where |
| | <input type="checkbox"/> why |
| | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> that |

➤ **Relative pronouns with fronted prepositions**

A **relative clause** may contain a **preposition** with the **relative pronoun** serving as the **object** of the preposition. In informal English, the preposition is usually placed at the **end** of the relative clause while in more formal academic contexts, the preposition is usually put **before** the relative clause.

Less Formal	More Formal
Samuel Morse sent his first public telegraph message on 24 May 1844. The picture shows the apparatus which he sent the message with .	Samuel Morse sent his first public telegraph message on 24 May 1844. The picture shows the apparatus with which he sent the message.

Practice

Activity 10

Read the following sentences and decide where the prepositions should be best placed ((a), (b), or (c)) to suit the academic contexts.

e.g. in

(a) *New York City is the place* (b) *which you can find almost all the big businesses* (c).

Answer: (b) *New York is a city in which you can find almost all the big businesses.*

1. with

It is the software (a) *which people use to edit* (b) *videos* (c).

Answer: (a) *It is the software with which people use to edit videos.*

2. during

(a) *Ramadan is the ninth month of the Islamic calendar,* (b) *which almost all adult Muslims fast* (c) *from dawn to sunset.*

Answer: (b) *Ramadan is the ninth month of the Islamic calendar, during which almost all adult Muslims fast from dawn to sunset.*

➤ **Reduced relative clauses**

When the **relative pronoun** is the **subject** of the **relative clause**, the relative clause could be 'reduced'. **Reduced relative clauses** can make the writing more concise and add variety to sentences. A relative clause can be reduced to:

i) **an adjective phrase**

Hand, foot, and mouth disease is a contagious disease ~~which is prevalent among children under 5~~.

Can be reduced to → Hand, foot, and mouth disease is a contagious disease **prevalent among children under 5**.

Notes:

A related kind of structure that adds additional information is called **appositive phrase**, which consists of **two nouns/noun phrases** that refer to the same person/thing. For example,

Jeoh Ming PEI, ~~who was a Chinese-American architect~~, designed the Louvre Pyramid in Paris and the Bank of China Tower in Hong Kong.

Can be reduced to → **Jeoh Ming PEI, a Chinese-American architect**, designed the Louvre Pyramid in Paris and the Bank of China Tower in Hong Kong.

ii) **a present participle phrase**

Shops ~~that offer~~ **delivery service** are popular during the pandemic.

Can be reduced to → Shops **offering** **delivery service** are popular during the pandemic.

Notes:

If the relative clause is in the **active voice**, it can be reduced to a **present participle phrase (verb + -ing)**.

iii) **a past participle phrase**

Cheung Sha Beach, ~~which is located on Lantau Island~~, is the longest beach in the Hong Kong area.

Can be reduced to → Cheung Sha Beach, **located on Lantau Island**, is the longest beach in the Hong Kong area.

Notes:

If the relative clause is in the **passive voice**, it can be reduced to a **past participle phrase**.

Practice**Activity 11**

Choose the most appropriate answer for each of the sentences below. 'x' means no word is needed.

The first one has been done as an example.

e.g.	Cheung Sha Beach, _____ on Lantau Island, is the longest beach in the Hong Kong area.	<input type="checkbox"/> locating <input type="checkbox"/> x <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> located
1.	Cheetahs are carnivores that hunt small to medium-sized prey _____ 20 to 60 kg.	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> weighing <input type="checkbox"/> x <input type="checkbox"/> weighed
2.	In Hong Kong, all children _____ between 6 and 15 are eligible to attend public sector schools.	<input type="checkbox"/> are <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> x <input type="checkbox"/> aging
3.	The bureau _____ for developing policies in environmental protection is managed by the Secretary for the Environment.	<input type="checkbox"/> x <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> responsible <input type="checkbox"/> is responsible
4.	Consumption vouchers can be used at local retail, catering and service outlets or their online platforms _____ payments by different mobile payment apps.	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> accepting <input type="checkbox"/> x <input type="checkbox"/> accepted
5.	The Big Buddha, _____ the second largest outdoor Buddha statue in the world, is an iconic attraction of Lantau Island.	<input type="checkbox"/> is <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> x <input type="checkbox"/> that is

Activity 12

Complete the passage with the following relative pronouns/adjective clauses. Use each answer ONCE only. Put a cross '✗' if no word is needed. One of them has been done as an example.

for those who want to stay healthy	who	in which
that is fun and affordable	in summer	which are affordable
who cannot afford	suffering from joint pain	needed for swimming

Swimming (i) in summer is a favourite pastime for most people and it is an excellent form of exercise (*e.g.*) for those who want to stay healthy and burn calories.

Swimming, (ii) X a type of aerobic exercise, can also result in a reduction in stiffness and joint pain. People (iii) suffering from joint pain share that swimming is much better than other forms of sports like running as it is easier on the joints. In addition to the benefits it brings, swimming also attracts people (iv) who cannot afford expensive equipment. The equipment (v) needed for swimming is no more than just a swimsuit and maybe a pair of goggles, (vi) which are affordable to most people.

Some public pools, (vii) in which “fun pools” with special designs and water toys are built, provide excitement and enjoyment for the public (viii) who no longer regard swimming as a mere form of exercise. If you are looking for a sport (ix) that is fun and affordable, swimming could be an option for you.