
Phrasebank: a University-wide Online Writing Resource

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Summary

A salient feature of academic writing is the high frequency of conventional multi-word combinations, and it is now recognised that effective performance in an academic setting involves knowledge of these. *Academic Phrasebank* is a freely available online resource comprising a stock of conventional written phrases drawn from over 100 native-speaker dissertations, and other sources, representing a broad range of disciplines. Although designed primarily for international students whose first language is not English, it is increasingly apparent that many British students also find this resource helpful.

Keywords

academic writing phraseology dissertations online support international students

Biography

John Morley is the Manager of the Academic Support Programmes at the University Language Centre at Manchester University. He is responsible for a team which provides classes in English for Academic Purposes for international students, and runs workshops and courses in effective writing for postgraduate students and academic staff.

Background

Conventional phrase combinations, also termed ritualized language, have been shown to make up a significant part of native speaker language production in both speech and writing (Nattinger and DeCarrico, 1992; Cowie and Howarth, 1996). In particular, a notable feature of the writing of academic discourse communities is the high frequency of conventional multi-word items, and there is now a growing acceptance within the field of Applied Linguistics that appropriate and effective academic performance involves knowledge of a considerable stock of conventional collocations and other word combinations. Research has also shown that there is a much greater incidence of non-standard phraseology in non-native speaker writing, reflecting a general lack of awareness of preferred phraseological structures (Howarth, 1998). Even if they have a well-developed knowledge of English grammar and vocabulary, non-native users of English often still have a restricted repertoire of ritualized language. There are few textbooks for non-native students that incorporate sections on this very important area, and those which do tend to include a very limited range of idealised constructions.

Project

In 2004, I was successful in obtaining a small amount of money from the University's Curriculum Innovation Fund to design and develop an online writing resource for international students. The

resource would comprise a comprehensive bank of typical written phrases organized under the common rhetorical moves of academic writing; in effect, it would provide students with the phraseological "nuts and bolts" of academic writing. Although designed primarily for international students whose first language is not English, it was also expected that all students would find the tool useful.

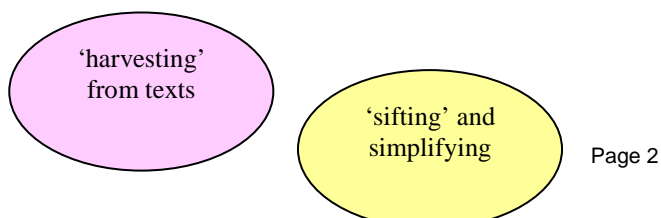
Linguists have classified phrase combinations in language in many different ways. For this project Nattinger and DeCarrico's term *lexical phrase* was found to be useful. These are defined as commonly combined words, or collocations, which serve a pragmatic function in the discourse. Lexical phrases can range from short fixed phrases, such as: *for the most part*; to sentence builders that provide a framework for the whole sentence and allow for the possibility of variation, such as: *one of the most important _____ in the recent literature is _____*. (Nattinger and DeCarrico, 1992: 165). Phrases of the latter category were felt to be particularly relevant to the development of the *Phrasebank*.

Method

Using the definition above, typical phrase structures were 'harvested' from an electronic corpus of 100 dissertations from a broad range of humanities, social science, life science and physical science disciplines. The dissertations were obtained from British postgraduates who were currently studying at Manchester, or from students who had recently completed their studies here, and consisted of work at Masters and at PhD level. Once identified, the phrases were 'sifted' from their particularized subject specific content. In other words, specialized content words were either removed or substituted for more generic items. In addition, where appropriate, the number of words was reduced for simplification. Not all content words were removed, however, since it was felt that a certain number of content items were necessary for students to see how the phrase structures operated in conjunction with other lexical items.

In order to assist the users to understand the different functions of the phrases, they have been organized under headings reflecting the typical rhetorical moves in academic writing. A move may be broadly defined as a recognizable section of text that has a particular rhetorical purpose. The identification of these moves has drawn on earlier analyses such as those of Dudley Evans (1986), Swales (1990). The phrases are therefore presented under pragmatic headings that make their function within text apparent to novice writers. Examples of these are: *Statement of Findings, Comparison of Findings with Previous Research, Explaining the Findings*. These headings are in turn organized into web pages that relate to the principal macro-organizational sections of academic writing, eg. *Writing Introductions; Referring to the Literature, Discussing the Findings*

Since initial identification of the ritualized language was carried out intuitively by only one native-speaker writer, it was considered necessary to validate the web pages by seeking corroboration from expert writers. A further stage in the construction of the *Phrasebank*, therefore, has been to ask for comments and feedback regarding the suitability/typicality of the phrases from experienced academic writers representing a broad range of disciplines taught in the University. Feedback was sought from senior academics in the following subjects: Geography, Sociology, Psychology, Bioscience, Electrical Engineering, and Pharmacy. Each member of staff was asked to comment on and validate at least two of the pages. The diagram below presents this work schematically:



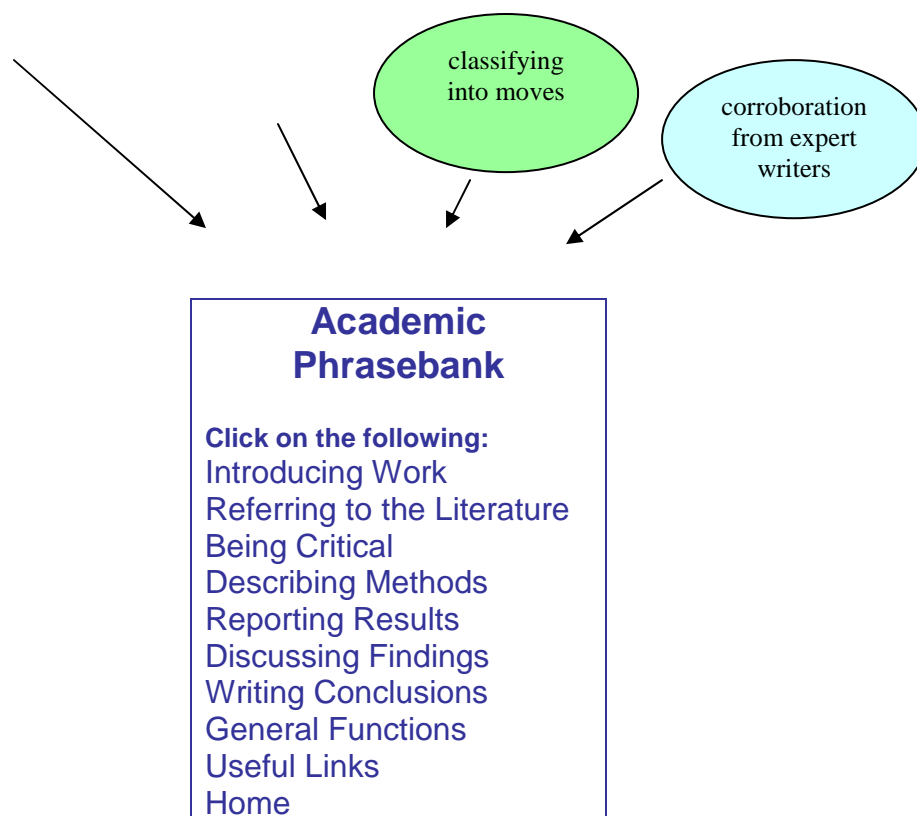


Figure 1. Schematic representation of the *Phrasebank* development process

Outcome

The *Academic Phrasebank* can now be viewed at: <http://www.phrasebank.man.ac.uk> It can be viewed by all students who have internet access. Initial evaluations indicate that the resource has been greeted enthusiastically by our international students attending the University's in-session English for academic purposes courses. I also have obtained positive informal evaluations from home students. What was not expected, however, were the high number of unsolicited positive comments from academic staff, not all of which related to student support. In fact, although the resource was designed for students, it seems that some members of staff at Manchester have also found it useful for their own writing. One member of staff in the Faculty of Humanities, for example, has commented:

I am thrilled to have seen your website containing so much material supporting academic writing skills - I will find it very useful myself, as I am currently suffering from writer's block and need a 'nudge' sometimes on ways even to start a sentence! So many thanks!

The site has also attracted interest from outside the University. A recent unsolicited email from a member of staff in an Australian university, read:

Thank you for putting together such a useful website. I teach academic English (in Australia) and I'm constantly on the lookout for sites like yours. It's helpful to jog one's memory when searching for a useable phrase. Your site is definitely one of the best I've seen.

What is interesting about these two comments, both from native speakers who we can assume are fairly experienced writers of English, is that the resource seems to help them overcome

writing 'blockages'. They both use similar words to describe the effect: 'nudge' and 'jog'. In other words, the phrases serve as a trigger for the production of text and, one can assume, ideas.

In addition to this 'triggering effect', other native-speaker users tell me that the resource has also played a key role in helping them to organize and structure their written texts, particularly complex sections of academic texts, such as Introduction and Discussion sections. I have also used the resource to teach sessions both to home and international students on, for example, '*The Language of Criticism*'. Many study skills guides and manuals cover this area, of course, but very few actually demonstrate how the act of being critical can be realized in language. I have found that students tend to be extremely interested in looking at how other writers express their criticisms. For some, it is a kind of revelation because they tell me that they never really understood what being critical in writing meant until they saw how this communicative function may be achieved linguistically.

Further Development

More work remains to be done on the resource in the following areas:

- Information on interdisciplinary differences that may affect written styles and rhetorical structures needs to be included. For example, not all the rhetorical moves are common across the disciplines but they may be very frequent in some. In addition, there is the question of variation of written style. An obvious area for elucidation, for example, is the acceptability of the use of personal pronouns v the passive voice in student writing in different disciplines.
- Contextualised examples of certain phrases and rhetorical moves should be included so that users can fully appreciate their meaning and function within the broader text structures. For example, many students would find it useful to understand the common characteristics of a research introduction based on the CARS model ("create a research space"), and see how particular phraseological elements might fit into this.
- A major part of the resource is currently structured around the classic research dissertation model (Introduction, Literature Review, Methods, Results and Discussion/Conclusion). And many of the phrases are useful for writing about research. When first accessed, therefore, the resource may not seem very useful for undergraduates, particularly in the humanities and social science disciplines. To address this problem, more work needs to be done to develop and augment the more generic functional areas and to give these a higher profile on the site. This may mean collecting a large number of undergraduate student essays as a data source.

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Appendix: Extracts from the *Phrasebank* web pages

From Writing Introductions: Highlighting a knowledge gap in the field of study

So far, however, there has been little discussion about

However, far too little attention has been paid to
Most studies in X have only been carried out in a small number of areas.
The research to date has tended to focus on X rather than Y.
In addition, no research has been found that surveyed
So far this method has only been applied to
However, there have been no controlled studies which compare differences in
However, few writers have been able to draw on any structured research into.....
This indicates a need to understand the various perceptions of X that exist among

From Being Critical: Identifying a study's weakness

(However,) the main weakness of the study is the failure to address
the author overlooks the fact that X contributes to Y.
what Smith fails to do is to draw a distinction between
the study fails to consider the differing categories of X that
the research does not take into account pre-existing Xs such as
the author offers no explanation for the distinction between X and Y.
Smith makes no attempt to differentiate between various different types of X.
Smith limited his study to only two levels of
Smith fails to fully acknowledge the significance of

From Describing the Method: Indicating sequence

Prior to commencing the study, ethical clearance was sought from
After collection, the samples were shipped back to X in
Once the exposures were completed, the Xs were labelled and placed in
Once the positions had been decided upon, the Xs were removed from each
On completion of X, the process of model specification and was carried out.
Following this, the samples were recovered and stored overnight at
The results were corrected for X and then averaged before being converted to.....
The analysis was checked when initially performed and then checked again at the end of
Finally, questions were asked as to the role of

From Discussing the Findings: Giving explanations

A possible explanation for this might be that
Another possible explanation for this is that
This result may be explained by the fact that/ by a number of different factors.
It is difficult to explain this result, but it might be related to
It seems possible that these results are due to
The reason for this is not clear but it may have something to do with
It may be that these students benefitted from
The observed increase in X could be attributed to
The observed correlation between X and Y might be explained in this way.

From Writing Conclusions: Recommendations for further work (research)

Further work needs to be done to establish whether
It is recommended that further research be undertaken in the following areas:
Further experimental investigations are needed to estimate
What is now needed is a cross-national study involving
More broadly, research is also needed to determine
It is suggested that the association of these factors is investigated in future studies.
Further research might explore
Further investigation and experimentation into X is strongly recommended.
It would be interesting to assess the effects of