

Writing about the ideas of others

Referring to others

(Information prominent and author-prominent references)

Swales (1990, pp.149 & 153) shows how you can decide whether to focus on the source of an idea or on the idea itself in your writing. He provides two categories of referencing: author prominent, where the author's name appears in your sentence, or information prominent, where the author's name appears only in brackets. An adaptation of his examples follows.

Category				
Author prominent	Brie (1988) showed that the moon is made of cheese.	Brie (1988) established that the moon's cheesy composition.	According to Brie (1988), the moon is made of cheese.	Brie's theory (1988) contends that the moon is made of cheese.
Information prominent	Previous research has established that the moon is made of cheese (Brie, 1988)	It has been shown that the moon is made of cheese (Brie, 1988)	It is currently argued that the moon is made of cheese (Brie, 1988)	The moon may be made of cheese (Brie, 1988, but cf. Rock, 1989)

Source: Swales, J. 1990 *Genre analysis: English in academic and research settings*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

Verbs of attribution: words for the brain-weary

Below are some verbs and their synonyms for you to draw on when you want to talk about someone else's ideas or words - a thesaurus of verbs of attribution just for you.

Show:	demonstrate, establish
Persuade:	assure, convince, satisfy
Argue:	reason, discuss, debate, consider
Support:	uphold, underpin, advocate
Examine:	discuss, explore, investigate, scrutinise

An argument can be:

- founded on
- based on
- grounded in a theory/view/set of data
- embedded in
- underpinned by

Propose:	advance, propound, proffer, suggest (the view that.)
Advise:	suggest, recommend, advocate, exhort, encourage, urge,
Believe:	hold, profess (the view that.)
Emphasise:	accentuate, stress, underscore
State:	express, comment, remark, declare, articulate, describe, instruct, inform, report
Evaluate:	appraise, assess
Hypothesise:	speculate, postulate
Disagree:	dispute, refute, contradict, differ, object, dissent
Reject:	refute, repudiate, remonstrate (against), disclaim, dismiss
Claim:	allege, assert, affirm, contend, maintain

Note that the above words are value-laden. Your choice of word will reveal to your reader your stance toward the author you are reporting on. It will show whether or not you consider his/her claims to be substantiated.

Another look at verbs used in critical analysis

Arnaudet & Barrett (1984, P.153-5) provide a useful resource on verbs of attribution reproduced in the box below

Neutral verbs of restatement

Add	inform (of, about)	remind (of, about)
Clarify	Present	report (on)
Describe	Remark	speak / write of

Verbs of restatement with a + or – connotation

apprise (someone of)	Explain	indicate
argue (about)	Express	observe

Verbs of opinion

This category is used to report the content of another writer's opinion (or conclusion or suggestions).

Positive opinions:

Affirm	agree (with)	applaud
concur (with, in)	Praise	support

Reporting opinion (usually neutrally)

Assert	believe (in)	claim
Determine	Expound (on)	maintain
point out	Think	

Verbs of uncertainty

This category is used to report the content of another writer's expression of doubt or uncertainty.

Challenge	Dispute	question
disagree (with)	Doubt	suspect (of)
Dismiss	Mistrust	wonder (at)

1. McClelland has observed that affiliative managers spend too much time on the telephone. (*present, appraise, argue*)
2. McClelland *appraises us of the fact* the affiliative managers spend too much time on the telephone.
3. McClelland describes the rationale for the training program which he conducts for managers. (*point out, mistrust, present*)
4. McClelland doubts the validity of the conclusions of Chris Argyris. (*wonder, remind, claim*)
5. McClelland remarks that power has been given a bad image by social scientists. (*set forth, report, assert*)
6. McClelland maintains that employees respond better to a well-defined authority system. (*suspect, claim, support*)
7. McClelland argues that managers must understand the positive side of power. (*point out, dispute, express*)
8. McClelland recommends that managers attend a training course to make them aware of power. (*describe, challenge, urge*)
9. McClelland dismisses the work of McGregor, Maslow, Argyris and others. (*observe, speak, disagree*)
10. McClelland reminds the reader of the evidence that has shown that high morale results from a well-defined authority system. (*question, determine, speak*)
11. McClelland thinks that democratic management is so ineffective that companies which use it go out of business. (*assert, present, doubt*)
12. McClelland believes that the institution is more important than the individuals who compose it. (*support, report, wonder*)

Source: Arnaudet, M.L. & Barrett, M.E. 1984. *Approaches to academic reading and writing*. Prentice Hall Regents, Englewood Cliffs, NJ.

Attribution and critical analysis

The following paragraph is an excerpt from an essay on approaches to intercultural education. Notice the words that indicate what the writer thinks about the ideas of the other writers that he or she mentions. How does he or she use particular verbs of attribution to convey a particular attitude to the work of the writers he or she refers to? What words or phrases signal his/her own ideas?

Ballard and Clanchy (1991) propose a continuum of attitudes to knowledge and specify learning approaches and strategies that correspond to these attitudes. Drawing mainly on anecdotal evidence, they suggest that their three learning approaches, namely the "reproductive", "analytical" and "speculative" approaches, are characteristic of certain stages of schooling (in Australia) or of certain cultures (Ballard and Clanchy, 1991, p.11). In their consideration of learning strategies, however, they have presented only a limited understanding of the ways in which the strategies assist learning. For example, they see memorisation as a way of retaining "unreconstructed" (p.11) knowledge. In contrast, the work of Biggs (1996) demonstrates that memorisation serves the purpose of retaining ideas so that they can be considered and understood.

Verb tense, attribution and authorial stance

Verb tense in academic writing may exercise a greater influence on your reader's interpretation of your text than you bargained for. **Past tense** can give more than a time perspective; it can **distance** the reader from the ideas being expressed. Present tense is often used to make generalisations - you need to be sure you wanted readers to feel this was a generalisable point. Below is a simplified description of the uses and possible effects of tense on the meaning made.

The tense you select for your verbs in your essay, report or literature review reveals a great deal more to your reader than the time frame. It tells your reader whose idea is being proffered (yours or someone else's, something about your attitude towards the ideas you are reporting if you have attributed them to a researcher or theorist, and indicates how general or specific the point is. In brief - and note that this is a simplified description of the use of tense - the three tenses which appear most frequently are used in the following ways:

The present tense is used for: generalisation (in overviews, statements of main points); a statement which is generally applicable or which seems relevant; a statement made by you as writer; or to report the position of a theorist/ researcher to which you feel some proximity, either in time or allegiance (eg. Piaget (1969) outlines the stages..).

The past tense is used to 'claim *non-generality* about past literature' (Ostler, 1981, cited in Swales, 1990, p.152); that is, it is used to report or describe the content, findings or conclusions of past research. The specificity of the study is thus emphasised.

The present perfect is used to indicate that inquiry into the specified area continues, to generalise about past literature, or to present a view using a non-integral form of referencing (the name of the author does not appear in the text of the sentence; it appears only in the subsequent parentheses).

The future tense is often used in the methodology section in a proposal to state intention. When you are describing what appears in your writing, use the present tense, not the future (it is not your intention, since you've already done it): eg, "The sections below describe the process of .", not, "the sections below will describe the process of ."

Sources: Ballard, B. & Clanchy, J. 1991 Essay writing for students : a practical guide [2nd Edition] Melbourne: Longman, Cheshire.

Biggs, J. 1996 Western misperceptions of the Confucian-Heritage Learning Culture. In: D. A. Watkins & J. B. Biggs (eds.) *The Chinese learner : cultural, psychological, and contextual influences* / CERC, Hong Kong & ACER, Melbourne. Pp. 45-67.