Understanding the use of complex language in academic texts

Learning Advisers
UniSA
How much luggage do you pack for a weekend trip?  
How much luggage did you pack to come to Adelaide?  
What factors influence/d your choices differently when deciding what to pack?
Today’s workshop

- Recognising the use of lexical density, nominalisation & complex noun groups in academic writing
- Understanding how they are used to ‘pack in’ more information
- Noticing the use of suffixes in nominalisation
- Learning & practising strategies to help with ‘unpacking’ complex noun groups
• What does ‘community’ mean to you?

• What do you miss about the community that you come from?

• How can we build up communities?
Do you agree?

Community, as the eminent sociologist Zygmunt Bauman reminds us, is a word with a certain ‘feel’ (Bauman, 2003). By conjuring up a sense of warmth, belonging and comfort, community almost always feels like a good thing. This feeling rings true when it comes to thinking about and addressing the challenges of sustainable development.

(Evans 2010, p. 33)
Can you think of any examples that reflects the meaning of this statement?

Think globally, act locally
Indeed, locality is the seemingly appropriate scale of implementation insofar as it implies a movement beyond atomization and individualism without recourse to the unmanageable complexities that would accompany global solutions to global problems. Of course, community is not the same thing as locality but it occupies a similar context and in doing so carries connotations of empowerment, participation and ownership which in turn lend support to the idea that it is ‘community’ that feels right when it comes to the implementation of sustainable development policies and initiatives.

(Evans 2010, p. 33)
• What made the second text more difficult than the first to read?
3 reasons

Often used together in academic writing are:

• Lexical density (ratio of content words to grammatical words)

• Nominalisation e.g. implementation

• Complex noun groups e.g. the seemingly appropriate scale of implementation
Why are they used?

• The primary reason is that they allow you to say more

• Ideas that would need several sentences if you were talking about them can be compressed into tighter units

• They help you reduce the number of words but they also increase the ‘weight’ of each sentence!

• That is why they are often used in sentences where key concepts are being defined....
Lexical density

- We can measure the lexical density of a text by:
  - counting the number of content words (i.e. not grammatical/structural words) & working out the % of the total
Indeed, locality is the seemingly appropriate scale of implementation insofar as it implies a movement beyond atomization and individualism without recourse to the unmanageable complexities that would accompany global solutions to global problems. Of course, community is not the same thing as locality but it occupies a similar context and in doing so carries connotations of empowerment, participation and ownership which in turn lend support to the idea that it is ‘community’ that feels right when it comes to the implementation of sustainable development policies and initiatives.

(Evans 2010, p. 33)
Lexical density

• In the above text:

  87 words in total
  45 content words
  = lexical density of just over 50%

• Many content words are several syllables long compared to the one-syllable length of most grammatical/structural words)
Nominalisation

• turning a verb into an abstract noun
  e.g. implement → implementation

• turning an adjective into an abstract noun
  e.g. local → locality

• turning a concrete noun into an abstract noun
  e.g. owner → ownership
Nominalisation

- In ordinary conversation you might instead say:
  - implementation
  - locality
  - ownership

- carrying out
- local areas
- being an owner
Nominalisations are associated with academic writing because they:

• signal that what you are writing about is important

• suggest that you are writing about intellectual issues that should be taken seriously
Nominalisations & adjectives

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(Evans 2010, p. 33)
Nominalisation

- local (adj)
- implement
- move
- atom (n) – atomize
- individual (adj)
- complex (adj)
- solve
- connote
- power (n) – empower
- participate
- own – owner (n)
- develop
- initiate

- locality
- implementation
- movement
- atomization
- individualism
- complexity
- solution
- connotation
- empowerment
- participation
- ownership
- development
- initiative
Noun suffixes

- local (adj)
- implement
- move
- atom (n) – atomize
- individual (adj)
- complex (adj)
- solve
- connote
- power (n) – empower
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- solution
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- ownership
- development
- initiative
Tips

• Get to know the nominalisations used in your program & learn them

• Underline them in your course readings & keep a list of them

• Refer to this list when you have an assignment to complete
Practice

• *Rewrite the underlined words using the words in brackets. You will need to change these into their nominalised forms. You may need to include other words.* (Answer key at end of the exercise)

• *Ex. Where people work in a range of different places (distribute) varies according to a number of socio-economic factors.*

The **distribution of the workforce** varies according to a number of socio-economic factors.

1. Many staff members are lobbying for **more money** (remunerate)

2. An increasing number of people want (demand) better goods and services.

3. **How you use this** (apply) is numerous.

4. **Staff who feel cut-off from others** (isolated) is common in large corporations.

5. All companies are subject to **the marketplace going up and down** (volatile)
1. Many staff members are lobbying for higher remuneration

2. There is a growing demand for better goods and services

3. The applications are numerous

4. Staff isolation is common in large corporations

5. All companies are subject to the volatility of the marketplace
Complex noun groups

• Using adverbs and adjectives before nouns
  the seemingly appropriate scale

• Using prepositional phrases to link nouns
  the seemingly appropriate scale of implementation
Indeed, locality is the seemingly appropriate scale of implementation insofar as it implies a movement beyond atomization and individualism without recourse to the unmanageable complexities that would accompany global solutions to global problems. Of course, community is not the same thing as locality but it occupies a similar context and in doing so carries connotations of empowerment, participation and ownership which in turn lend support to the idea that it is ‘community’ that feels right when it comes to the implementation of sustainable development policies and initiatives.

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Typical components of complex noun groups

• Prepositional phrases
  a movement beyond atomization and individualism

• Relative clauses
  the unmanageable complexities that would accompany global solutions

• ‘that’ complements
  the idea that it is ‘community’

• ‘wh-’ subordinate clauses
  when it comes
Why are they used?

• Writers want to define and specify ideas in detail
• They are typically used in sentences which explain the
  o features
  o characteristics
  o meaning

  of an abstract concept
Why are they used?

• What writers want to argue has many parts and is highly structured

• The use of structures like prepositional phrases and relative clauses allows writers to organise these segments into interlocking parts like train carriages!
Looked at another way, these parts often nest or fit inside each other.

This is called ‘embedding’.

That’s why such writing is very dense and compact.

There is a lot of information packaged into these noun groups.
Indeed, locality is the seemingly appropriate scale of implementation insofar as it implies a movement beyond atomization and individualism without recourse to the unmanageable complexities that would accompany global solutions to global problems. Locality appears to be the best place from which to act. Locality doesn’t break people into separate or single units. It moves beyond this problem. There are global solutions to global problems. But the complexities that accompany them are potentially impossible to manage. Locality doesn’t need to get involved in such complexities.
The complex noun groups in each sentence below are in the wrong order. Can you put them in the correct order? (Answer key at the end of the exercise)

Example:
• of practical advice
• despite the abundance
• for managing contemporary organisations,

....managers still seem to struggle with their role. (end of sentence)

Answer
• Despite the abundance of practical advice for managing contemporary organisations, managers still seem to struggle with their role.
1. *In consequence, executives are offered*....
   - for managing employees, customers, and suppliers
   - of potential solutions
   - a copious array

2. “*Unity*” represents a framework of values, but always overlaid on that are....
   - in pursuit
   - the deliberate efforts
   - to use power
   - of their own particular interests
   - of individuals and groups

3. *They see themselves engaged*....
   - of dealing
   - with these differences
   - in a continuous process

4. *Consequently, politically able managers recognise*....
   - the fallacy
   - of self-interest
   - of pursuing corporate goals
   - the significance
   - without acknowledging

*(Butcher & Clarke 2003)*
In consequence, executives are offered a copious array of potential solutions for managing employees, customers, and suppliers.

“Unity” represents a framework of values, but always overlaid on that are the deliberate efforts of individuals and groups to use power in pursuit of their own particular interests.

They see themselves engaged in a continuous process of dealing with these differences.

Consequently, politically able managers recognise the fallacy of pursuing corporate goals without acknowledging the significance of self-interest.
Looking back....
over today’s workshop

• Understanding the role that
  o lexical density
  o nominalisation
  o complex noun groups
    play in academic texts

• Recognising how grammar and vocabulary work together to produce writing that is authoritative, informative, and compact
Bon voyage!

Further grammar

Below is some more information on nominalisation for different types of verbs. More information can be found on the following links

Monash University
<http://www.monash.edu.au/lls/hdr/build/3.5.1.3.html>

British Council

University of New England
Transitivity

• If a nominalisation is formed from a verb, then you may need to know if the verb is

  o transitive

  o intransitive
Nominalising transitive verbs

- Transitive verbs take a noun group as an **Object**
  - e.g. implementing **sustainable development policies and initiatives**

- If we nominalise the verb, the Object can then become the **Complement** of a **preposition**
  - e.g. the implementation of **sustainable development policies and initiatives**
Nominalising transitive verbs

• Look at these other examples:
  o They rejected the plan
  o Their rejection of the plan (surprised us all)
  o She criticised the proposal
  o Her criticism of the proposal (was discussed at the meeting)
  o We investigated the company
  o Our investigation of the company (will be expensive)
Nominalising intransitive verbs

- Intransitive verbs do not take a noun group as an Object
  - e.g. X The students *participated* a project

- If we nominalise the verb, we can use:
  - a prepositional phrase as Complement
    - e.g. The *participation of the students* in the project was outstanding
  - or a genitive construction
    - e.g. The *students’ participation* in the project was outstanding
Nominalising intransitive verbs

• Look at these other examples:
  
  o Her manager resigned
  o The resignation of the manager (came at a bad time)
  
  o Their profits grew
  o The growth in their profits (was the highlight of the report)
  
  o The results arrived
  o The arrival of the results (was sooner than expected)