

Teaching Common Rhetorical Patterns of Academic Prose

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Teaching common rhetorical patterns for academic prose can make a big difference for students, and this article shares a variety of practical strategies for practitioners.

Rhetorical patterns of academic prose

Teaching non-native English speakers to comprehend and compose expository prose can present many challenges. Students may lack familiarity with common rhetorical patterns of academic nonfiction (Leki, 1991). Knowledge of text structure is important in reading comprehension (Grabe, 2004; Koda, 2005) and in writing for academic purposes (Carson, 2001; Panetta, 2001). In my seven years teaching English to refugees and immigrants, a gradual approach has worked best. Patterns commonly referred to in instructional texts include *listing, chronological order, cause and effect, classification, argumentation, comparison and contrast, problem and solution.*

These patterns often use common signal words –cohesive devices that help structure academic prose (Halliday & Hasan, 1976; Hoey, 2001). They may be conjunctions (Biber, Johansson, Leech, Conrad, & Finegan, 1999; Trebits, 2009), adverbs or adverbial expressions (Biber, et al., 1999; Liu, 2008; Peacock, 2010) that link clauses, adjacent sentences, and span ideas across larger segments of text. Some linking devices are more common in print than speech (Biber, et al., 1999; Liu, 2008), and may present difficulties to students (Chung, 2000), particularly to lower-proficiency speakers (Pretorius, 2006). To recognize text structure and organize prose effectively, non-native speakers need relevant knowledge of grammar (Grabe, 2004; Koda, 1993; Olshtain & Celce-Murcia, 2001) and cohesive devices (Mahlberg, 2006).

While using exercises from a popular reading text several years ago, my students grappled to identify patterns of organization by locating related signal words. The exercises, though useful, required command of considerable English. The text did not include parts of speech or definitions of the signal words, or sentence-level exercises. Few students understood expressions such as *however, on the other hand, as a result of*, and others. I had more luck teaching the grammar of clauses and phrases with a composition text (Oshima & Hogue, 2006) that helped students recognize and write compound and complex sentences using coordinate and subordinate conjunctions, important not only to comprehend but to compose well-organized text (Bliss, 2001). While exercises from the composition text helped, I still contemplated the most effective scope and sequence in teaching rhetorical patterns. My curiosity led to research for my M.A. in ESL at Hamline University.

Research on linking devices for comparison and contrast

My research focused on linking devices that signal a pattern of comparison and contrast in nonfiction textbooks, but the results had broader implications. I chose this pattern because students struggle more with adversative devices (those showing contrast) than other types (Ozono & Ito 2003; Pretorius, 2006). There were inconsistencies in lists of linking devices

emphasized by corpus research and those included in four instructional reading and composition texts (Smith, 2013). Scholars have suggested that ESOL texts should more accurately reflect corpus research on use of these devices (Conrad, 2004; Liu, 2008). I began to agree that teachers need some knowledge of corpus linguistics (Conrad, 1999, 2000).

Next, I did a qualitative text analysis that examined how two adversative devices more common in print than speech, *however* and *although* (Biber, et al., 1999), structured passages in college-level science and history text. I explored trends. Did they most often structure individual paragraphs, serve as transitions between paragraphs, or connect larger sections of text? They served in all these roles, but to my surprise, most linked supporting details within paragraphs. Some marked transitions between paragraphs, without necessarily structuring either paragraph in a comparison and contrast pattern. Other instances helped organize paragraphs in a pattern of comparison and contrast, usually in combination with other words used to compare or contrast. These results echoed findings of other qualitative text analyses (Fairclough, 2003; Hoey, 2001) and corpus studies (Peacock, 2010). Many words such as *different*, *more*, *argue*, and others of a variety of lexical classes worked together to structure paragraphs.

If you are like me, you value research, but you also want practical teaching ideas. In that vein, I'll focus next on suggestions and resources I discovered.

Practical teaching ideas

Know corpus-based grammar

Teach grammar with an eye on corpus research, with adequate focus on sentence structure, clauses and cohesive devices. Noun phrases, pronouns, and determiners *this* and *these* often link statements about the topic or main idea (Gray, 2010). Adverbial expressions and conjunctions often, but not always, signal text structure (Smith, 2013). Students need to understand these words in sentences before comprehending or composing paragraphs. Devote attention to devices more common in print than in speech. Make it fun with varied approaches. In my teaching I've tried to follow a sequence where students: a) identify the word in sentences; b) use the word in fill-in-the-blank sentences; c) join or match clauses containing the word; d) write sentences using the word. Here are some resources:

- For instructors, you may already know of two encyclopedic corpus grammar texts: *Cambridge Grammar of English* (Carter & McCarthy, 2006), and the *Longman Grammar of Spoken and Written English* (Biber, et al., 1999)
- For students, the Longman Grammar above also has a student version and workbook. Another more recent student text may be useful: *The Longman Grammar: A Corpus-Based Approach to English* (Conrad, Biber, Daly & Packer, 2009).

Teach with technology, videos and apps

Use technology and make it fun. I asked students to write sentences comparing Youtube videos of a dancing Brazilian baby, and a dancing cockatiel. With student help, I wrote and recorded a [video](#) of rap music lyrics to compare and contrast our very international population using conjunctions such as *although* and *while*. Explore apps students can use independently. One English grammar app I found teaches conjunctions and adverbs is [English Grammar in Use](#). It costs about \$2, but gives instant feedback, has voice recognition and plays answers.

Find frequencies and corpus data

Familiarize yourself with high-frequency vocabulary and grammar. It's as easy as clicking on a few web sites. For my research, I discovered inconsistencies when comparing adversative linking devices listed in corpus studies, high-frequency word lists, a free corpus, and instructional texts. The General Service List (GSL), contains more than 2,000 of the most frequent English words that appear in printed text, and the Academic Word List (AWL), consists of 570 head words found most frequently across a wide range of academic disciplines (Coxhead, 2000). In my research, I found that the instructional texts did not necessarily include the most common devices such as *despite*, *rather*, and *instead*. It was valuable for me to do this research to learn more about what students may struggle with.

Useful links

Here are some links where you can similarly explore:

- In addition to the Longman grammar text, another corpus research study expanded the list of [Linking Adverbials](#) and compared spoken and written registers (Liu, 2008), available free online
- The GSL Frequency Lists and AWL are published on several web sites, including these with extensive resources: http://www.lex tutor.ca/freq/lists_download/ and <http://www.uefap.com/vocab/select/awl.htm>.
- Do quick corpus research with the free [Corpus of Contemporary American English](#) (COCA), which contains 450 million words from spoken and written texts, including newspapers, magazines, fiction and academic articles, with an interface designed by a professor (Davies, 2008). You can get instant results for words or collocations for these registers, showing instances in sentences and surrounding text with list citations.

Know what students know

Pre-assess student knowledge of cohesive devices or signal words commonly used with various organizational patterns, particularly more cognitively sophisticated patterns such as cause and effect, or comparison and contrast. Use a range of exercises such as those used in the study by Pretorius (2006) to measure comprehension at local and global levels: writing conjunctions or adverbs in blanks, matching sentence fragments or pairs, reordering scrambled paragraphs, answering multiple choice and true or false questions. Without practice, students risk misusing these devices in composition, and misunderstanding them in academic prose.

Plan curriculum collaboratively

Develop a scope and sequence that suits your educational setting and teach patterns and relevant grammar over time in more than one course. Work with other instructors to ensure that students gain proficiency at various levels. At the school where I teach, beginning students first learn the more simple listing or chronological pattern, and the high-frequency adverbs that signal this pattern, i.e. *first*, *next*, *then*, *later*, *finally*. We obtained a grant to use a school-wide approach and successfully taught beginning level students to use more complex phrases such as *as a result* in their writing.

Teach reading, writing and grammar together

Combine reading and writing instruction in recognition and use of patterns and relevant linking devices. A text with a complete list of patterns of organization and linking devices can help guide you and students. Of more than two dozen texts I reviewed, four had more complete coverage. *Patterns for College Writing: A Rhetorical Reader and Guide* (Kirszner & Mandell, 2010), has many published essays and writing exercises. Used primarily for regular college composition classes, it has also been used in at least two college ESOL courses. The *Reading Power* series (Mikulecky & Jeffries, 2009), emphasize recognition of signal words and patterns of organization in paragraphs. It is the only text I have seen that lists a variety of lexical classes such as *more, different, cause, result* which can overlap to create structural patterns, but it has no sentence-level exercises. Two writing texts with sentence-level and longer exercises using cohesive devices include: *The Longman Academic Writing Series* (Oshima & Hogue, 2006), and *Developing Composition Skills: Academic Writing and Grammar, 3rd Ed.* (Ruetten & Pavlik, 2012).

Use visual methods

Use free graphic organizers to help students map structure of paragraphs and excerpts from text, or develop outlines for their own essays. Visual aids such as graphic organizers, semantic maps, outlines, hierarchical summaries and tree diagrams have aided in comprehension (Grabe, 2004). From a google search (try images) you can find sequence diagrams for listing or chronological order, cause and effect diagrams showing arrows pointing between boxes, and Venn diagrams to show comparison and contrast. For reading, students can outline the details, and list the linking devices. Have them read paragraphs or essays to prepare for writing. Students can write key words in the diagrams, then build sentences with the linking devices.

Recognize real patterns

For reading, give students plenty of practice identifying various patterns of organization in real texts – science, history, economics or psychology—and about culturally relevant topics. Students eventually need to translate skills to comprehending career-related or college-required nonfiction. Often various signal words and linking devices will appear in close proximity within one paragraph, and patterns may be mixed, or more prevalent in certain genres (Peacock, 2010). A history text may use predominantly chronological order, a science text relays causes and effects (Smith, 2013). Students can bring in required texts from other courses. Or screen and select books from the [Google Books Corpus](#) of 155 million words (Davies, 2011). The interface permits searching for books based on counts for particular words and topics.

Practice personal writing

For writing, give students plenty of practice writing sentences using unfamiliar linking devices in the context of personal, familiar topics. Before writing paragraphs and essays, use graphic organizers to outline ideas. Help students recognize these patterns in model paragraphs and essays before replicating them independently. You can write model essays that work like templates. As a former journalist, I enjoyed writing several to help students compare and contrast themselves with a friend or family member. I wrote one about a friend I worked with as a Peace Corps volunteer. Writing about a personal topic may help learn a more complex organizational pattern.

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