



# Constructing critical stance in University essays in English literature and sociology



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## ABSTRACT

The aim of this study was to investigate the means used by writers to establish a critical stance in university essays. Specifically, the study identified the particular statements in essays that overtly expressed a critical evaluation, and explored the textual resources that these statements employed. This involved the manual analysis of two samples of 15 student essays from the subject disciplines of English literature and sociology in terms of the social genre/cognitive genre model of the author (Bruce, 2008a). Two generic elements, operating together, emerged as the principal means used by writers to express a critical evaluation. First, the critical statements employed a small range of coherence relations operationalized in terms of Crombie's (1985) *interpropositional relations*. Most frequently they used: *Grounds Conclusion*, *Concession Contraexpectation* and *Reason Result*. Secondly, embedded within these relations, two devices from Hyland's (2005) metadiscourse model were also used to help construct a critical stance, specifically *hedging* and *attitude markers*. In relation to writing pedagogy, these findings suggest the need for novice writers to develop awareness of the use of these important textual elements to formulate critical statements and to develop the ability to incorporate them into their own writing.

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## 1. Introduction

This article reports a study that investigates textual elements employed to construct a critical stance in the university assignment genre of the essay. The study employs two samples of essays from the fields of English literature and sociology drawn from the *British Academic Written English Corpus* (hereafter the *BAWE Corpus*).<sup>1</sup> The notion of being 'critical' here is defined as making an evaluative judgement within any field of human activity about some aspect, object or behaviour of that field. 'Stance', for the purpose of this study, refers to the overall viewpoint or position taken by a writer in relation to the issue or proposition of an essay task. The particular focus of the study was on statements within the two samples of essays that overtly expressed an evaluative judgement and on the textual resources that such statements employed.

Section 1.1 considers definitions, theory and research relating to the university assignment genre of the essay in order to establish the nature and scope of the genre and, in particular, its requirement that the writer demonstrates critical thinking.

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<sup>1</sup> The data in this study come from the British Academic Written English (BAWE) corpus, which was developed at the Universities of Warwick, Reading and Oxford Brookes under the directorship of Hilary Nesi and Sheena Gardner (formerly of the Centre for Applied Linguistics [previously called CELTE], Warwick), Paul Thompson (Department of Applied Linguistics, Reading) and Paul Wickens (Westminster Institute of Education, Oxford Brookes), with funding from the ESRC (RES-000-23-0800).

Section 1.2 then reviews existing research that has examined the different means used to express critical thinking through written text, and argues for a more comprehensive, multi-variable approach, realized by the genre framework employed here. Finally, Section 1.3 briefly revisits the findings of previous genre analyses of the same samples of essays employed in the present study (Bruce, 2010, 2015), analyses that focused particularly on the structural/organizational elements of the essays, and then outlines the purpose and scope of the present study.

### 1.1. The university assignment genre of the essay

The ubiquity of the essay genre is illustrated by two large-scale surveys of university assignments, in both of which it was found to be the most commonly occurring genre in the humanities and social sciences (Hale et al., 1995; Moore & Morton, 1999). Similarly, in the composition of the BAWE Corpus, which aims to be representative of university assignment writing in undergraduate (Years 1–3) and postgraduate (Year 4) courses, essays constitute 86% of Arts and Humanities assignments (602 out of 724) and 56% of Social Sciences assignments (444 out of 791).

A central requirement of the essay genre appears to be to express a critical stance through the text. For example, based on research of university essay assignment tasks, Moore and Morton (2005) suggest that most involve a “requirement that students argue for a particular position in relation to a given question or proposition” (p. 74). Similarly, Hewings (2010) defines essays as “relatively short pieces of writing on a single subject, which offer an evaluation of ideas or opinions presented as ‘claims’ or ‘generalizations’” (p. 253). In the United States, the guidelines for first-year, university composition programmes (*WPA Outcomes Statement for First-Year Composition*), specify that, through their writing (which will include essays), students will display six types of knowledge, the second of which is critical thinking, which the Statement defines as “the ability to analyze, synthesize, interpret and evaluate ideas, information, situations, and text” (Council of Writing Program Administrators, 2014). Confirming the role of the essay as a genre that involves the expression of critical thinking, Nesi and Gardner (2006), on the basis of interviews with British university faculty from different disciplines, found that the essay is often employed as an assignment task (in both undergraduate and postgraduate courses) because of its “loosely structured ability to display critical thinking and the development of an argument within the context of the curriculum” (p. 108). However, in terms of the length and frequency of essays, they found some variation: “some tutors expect short essays every two weeks, others require a 3000-word essay per module per term, and possibly one larger essay of 8,000 to 10,000 words in the final year” (p. 106).

In terms of the pedagogic advice given in relation to essay writing, such as in writing textbooks, a common characteristic is that essays need an introduction that states the overall argument or thesis, a body section that presents and develops key thesis-supporting points and an appropriate conclusion that consolidates and restates the writer’s position (see, for example, Bailey, 2011; Craswell & Poore, 2012; Creme & Lea, 2008; Murray, 2012; Oshima & Hogue, 2006). In addition to this common textbook advice about essay writing, two streams of theory and research have offered advice concerning the functional staging of content and structuring of argumentation in essays. In one approach, theorists and researchers drawing upon Systemic Functional Linguistics propose different types of internal content structures for essays with different overall communicative purposes (e.g. Coffin & Hewings, 2003; Nesi & Gardner, 2012). In another approach that focuses on argumentation within essays, a number of studies have drawn upon the argument structure proposed by Toulmin (2003). These two approaches will be reviewed briefly here.

In identifying an organizational structure for academic essays as a genre designed to express an extended argument or case, Coffin and Hewings (2003) propose three ways of structuring essays relating to three types of overall rhetorical purpose: *exposition*, *discussion* and *challenge*. For each type of essay, Coffin and Hewings identify an internal structure called “functional stages” (p. 60) involving background information, stance taking (which differs for each type), detailed sub-arguments and some kind of a restatement of the overall position. In extending this approach, Nesi and Gardner (2012) identify six essay genres again in terms of the overall communicative or rhetorical purpose of essays: *exposition*, *discussion*, *challenge*, *factorial*, *consequential* and *commentary*. For each essay genre, they propose *genre stages* for its internal organization, organization in terms of the types of content information that each stage conveys. For example, the essay genre that they term ‘exposition’, has the structure of: *thesis*, *evidence*, *restate thesis*, and the essay genre of ‘discussion’ has the structure: *issue*, *alternative arguments*, *final position*. Each proposed set of genre stages is a synoptic macrostructure accounting for the organization of the content of an essay employed to construct an extended argument or case. However, following this approach, it is a macrostructure that appears to assume one overarching general rhetorical purpose for the essay and does not allow for shifts in or changes of general rhetorical purpose, such may as occur in longer, more extended essays. Evidence for such *rhetorical shifts* (Selinker, Todd-Trimble, & Trimble, 1978), the act of moving from a segment of text that communicates one type of general rhetorical purpose to another (e.g. explain, argue) within an essay, was a key finding of previous studies of the present samples (Bruce, 2010, 2015). This issue will be discussed further in Section 1.3 following.

In relation to the investigation of critical thinking through university essays, a number of studies have focused on approaches to the structuring of argumentation using Toulmin’s (2003) model for argumentation (involving three fundamental parts – *grounds*, *claims*, *warrants*), such as the studies by Bacha (2010) and Stapleton and Wu (2015). However, some researchers have questioned the applicability of the Toulmin approach to argumentation in student writing. For example, although students may correctly employ this argument pattern in their writing at a superficial level, they still may not adhere to the communicative requirements of a particular academic community (Sampson & Clark, 2008; Simon, 2008) and the substance of their actual reasoning may still be poor (Stapleton & Wu, 2015, p. 20). In addition, Riddle (2000) found the three

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