Factsheet

Understand and use signal words and phrases

Basics

Signal (or *signalling*) words and phrases are the parts of English that help the reader or the listener to follow the structure of a piece of writing or speech. They usually tell the reader the direction the writer is going to go in, much like signposts on a road. You may have met some of these as linking words and phrases. They range from basic, single words like *and* to longer, more specific phrases like *As mentioned in the introduction* …

The academic context

When we are reading as part of our studies, it is important to be able to follow the writer's thoughts. Understanding signal words and phrases help us to do this. It helps us recognise important points in the text, such as when the writer is introducing an example, introducing a new subject, or changing direction to write about a different aspect of the subject (such as the opposing viewpoint).

Developing the ability to understand signal words and phrases helps us to follow a text and understand it more deeply. It also helps us to find relevant information quickly, so it saves us time.

Being able to use signal words and phrases is a great skill because it improves our ability to communicate what we know. In an academic situation, we often have to present our thoughts, either on paper or orally, and this skill helps us to do it in a clear and organised way.

Key features

Mastering this skill depends on learning the meaning of certain signal words and phrases. These can be classified according to function. For example, the writer might want to:

- add a point, e.g. *and*, *moreover*
- show a difference or a contrast, e.g. *however*, *in contrast*
- a show a cause/effect or explain something, e.g. *as a result* (*of*), *in other words*
- introduce an example, e.g. *for instance*, *such as*

More functions and examples are given in the worksheet.

Challenges / difficulties

Most of the signal words and phrases are not difficult to learn. However, you need a variety of them so that you can avoid repetition. For example, it would be useful to know three or more different ways of explaining a *result* (e.g. *leading to* / *causing* / *resulting in*).

There are specific rules relating to these words and phrases which you have to learn before you can use them correctly. For example, *as a result* and *although* are followed by a sentence while *as a result* <u>*of*</u> and *despite* are followed by a noun. For words/phrases followed by a noun, you may also use a gerund or a possessive pronoun, e.g *Despite his* <u>*tiredness*</u> / *Despite him* <u>*being*</u> *tired* / *Despite* <u>*his*</u> *being tired* …

Signal words and phrases have a *register* (that is, they can be formal or informal). Some students find it difficult to understand the difference. For example, we often use the phrase *as well as* when we're talking or writing to a friend. There is nothing wrong with *as well as* in academic writing, but you might want to use the more formal *in conjunction with* or *together with*.

How can I develop this skill?

Focus on signal words and phrases when you see them in texts, and make sure you understand exactly what their function is. Learn as many of them as you can, and use them in your writing and speaking. Be aware of repetition – try not to use the same words and phrases too often – although words like *and* are so common that it doesn't matter if you repeat them.

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Learning outcome

When you learn to understand and use these words and phrases, there are two distinct benefits:

- You will be able to follow what a writer says more easily.
- Your own writing and oral presentations will be easier to follow for other people (including examiners!).

Theory to practice

Read the text and match the signal phrases in bold to their functions, 1–5.

Road safety

The number of serious accidents on the roads of Great Britain obviously increased as the number of cars increased. From the first figures in 1926, the number rose until it reached a peak in 1941 when over 9,000 people lost their lives in a single year. **Fundamental to this** was the fact that it was during the war, and many collisions occurred at night between cars driving without lights. **Furthermore**, a lot of those deaths were pedestrians and cyclists who car drivers simply did not see.

We would expect the number of casualties to continue rising as the number of cars on the road entered the tens of millions. **However**, the general trend since then has been constantly downwards. **This is largely because of** safety features on cars and improved roads, although laws – **for instance**, making seatbelts compulsory – have also helped. Figures these days are the lowest since records began and are considerably lower than in 1926.

1 to introduce an example _____

2 to add an additional point _____

3 to show contrast _____

4 to introduce an explanation _____

5 to show something the writer considers important _____

Ways to get more practice

Simply being aware of these words and phrases when you read is a good start. When you are reading a text, make sure you understand how the writer links ideas, and the direction the text is taking. The other way to get practice is to use signal words and phrases – both in your writing and your speaking. Start by trying to use a variety of the words and phrases from the worksheet. Then gradually add more words/phrases of your own.

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