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## USING PHRASAL VERBS IN ACADEMIC WRITING

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## ABOUT ARTICLE

**Key words:** phrasal verbs, academic writing, formal language, informal expressions, writing style, vocabulary choice.

**Received:** 10.06.25**Accepted:** 12.06.25**Published:** 14.06.25

**Abstract:** This paper explores the role and appropriateness of phrasal verbs in academic writing. While phrasal verbs are widespread in everyday spoken English, their use in formal academic contexts is often limited due to their informal tone. The study highlights common phrasal verbs, their formal equivalents, and provides guidelines for academic writers to maintain clarity and formality in their writing. It also emphasizes when and how certain phrasal verbs may still be acceptable depending on the genre and purpose of the text.

## Introduction

Academic writing is a distinct style of communication that prioritizes clarity, objectivity, and formality. Unlike informal or conversational English, academic texts are expected to follow specific conventions, one of which is the careful selection of vocabulary. Among the various language features that require attention, the use of phrasal verbs stands out as a particularly debated topic. Phrasal verbs—combinations of verbs with one or more particles (such as give

up, find out, or bring about)—are widely used in spoken English and informal writing due to their expressive and idiomatic nature. However, their suitability in academic writing is often questioned.

One of the main concerns with phrasal verbs in scholarly contexts is their informality. Many phrasal verbs are idiomatic and can be ambiguous or vague to non-native speakers or readers unfamiliar with English colloquialisms. Moreover, academic writing often demands precision and a neutral tone, which can be better achieved through more formal and specific vocabulary. For example, instead of saying *look into*, an academic writer might use *investigate* or *examine*, which are clearer and more appropriate in scholarly discourse. Despite these concerns, the complete avoidance of phrasal verbs in academic writing is not always necessary. Some phrasal verbs are widely accepted, particularly in disciplines such as the social sciences or in reflective writing, where a slightly less formal tone is permissible. The key is to understand the context, audience, and purpose of the writing, and to make informed lexical choices accordingly.

This paper explores the role of phrasal verbs in academic writing, highlighting their potential drawbacks and offering formal alternatives. It also discusses when their use might be acceptable and how writers can strike a balance between natural expression and academic rigor.

Literature Review: The use of phrasal verbs in academic writing has been a topic of discussion among linguists and academic writing specialists for many years. According to Biber et al. (1999), phrasal verbs are far more common in spoken and informal written registers than in academic prose. Their research in *Longman Grammar of Spoken and Written English* highlights that academic texts favor Latinate, single-word verbs over multi-word verbs due to the formality required in scholarly contexts.

Swales and Feak (2012), in their influential work *Academic Writing for Graduate Students*, also advise learners to minimize the use of phrasal verbs in academic writing. They argue that phrasal verbs can reduce the perceived professionalism of the text, especially in high-stakes writing such as research papers or theses. Instead, they suggest that writers use precise, discipline-specific terminology to convey meaning more effectively.

Other researchers, such as Gardner and Davies (2007), emphasize that while phrasal verbs are traditionally avoided in academic contexts, there are cases where they may appear in published academic writing—especially in less formal genres like book reviews, reflective essays, or qualitative research reports. They found that some phrasal verbs, such as *carry out* and *point out*, are used quite frequently even in academic journals, indicating a possible shift in norms depending on context and discipline. Moreover, Hyland (2004) notes that language use in academic writing is discipline-specific. For instance, fields like the humanities or social sciences may tolerate more phrasal verbs compared to the hard sciences, where technical precision and conciseness are prioritized. This disciplinary variation further supports the need for academic writers to be aware of the conventions within their specific field.

Overall, the literature suggests a cautious but not absolute approach to using phrasal verbs in academic writing. While many experts discourage their use due to their informal tone, others acknowledge that some phrasal verbs are well-integrated into academic discourse and can be used effectively when chosen appropriately.

**Research Methodology:** This study adopts a qualitative research approach to explore the use of phrasal verbs in academic writing and evaluate their appropriateness across different academic contexts. The methodology consists of two primary components: a textual analysis of selected academic texts and a comparative review of language guidelines from academic writing manuals.

Firstly, a corpus of academic texts was compiled from various disciplines, including linguistics, social sciences, and natural sciences. These texts were analyzed to identify the frequency and types of phrasal verbs used, with particular attention paid to their context and function within the academic discourse. The selection included journal articles, student essays, and research reports to ensure a representative sample of academic writing styles. Secondly, the study examined recommendations from well-established academic writing guides, such as those by Swales & Feak and the APA Manual. These sources were used to determine standard practices and attitudes regarding the use of phrasal verbs in academic writing.

The findings from both the corpus analysis and literature review were then compared to highlight any discrepancies between actual usage and theoretical recommendations. This

methodology allows for a comprehensive understanding of how phrasal verbs function in academic writing and offers insights into when and how they may be used effectively.

**Analysis and Results:** The analysis of the selected academic texts revealed notable patterns in the use of phrasal verbs across different disciplines and genres. In scientific and technical writing (e.g., engineering and biology papers), phrasal verbs were used sparingly. Authors in these fields preferred more formal, Latinate verbs such as analyze, examine, or construct, rather than their phrasal counterparts like look into or set up. This supports the widely accepted view that formality and precision are highly valued in scientific discourse. Conversely, in disciplines such as education, sociology, and linguistics, phrasal verbs were more common, particularly in reflective writing and qualitative research papers. For example, phrasal verbs like carry out, point out, and set up appeared frequently, often used to describe research procedures or highlight key arguments. These instances suggest that in certain fields, especially those involving human behavior and interpretation, a slightly more conversational tone is acceptable and sometimes even preferred for clarity.

Furthermore, a comparison between student essays and published journal articles showed that students tend to overuse informal phrasal verbs such as find out, get across, or go on, which may reduce the academic quality of their work. In contrast, published authors used more formal alternatives or restricted their use of phrasal verbs to those deemed acceptable in academic contexts.

### Phrasal Verbs

find out	discover	determine	Researchers discovered a new method for data analysis.
look into	investigate	examine	Researchers discovered a new method for data analysis.

come up with	come up with	suggest	The authors propose a new framework for evaluating teaching effectiveness
carry out	conduct	conduct	The experiment was conducted in two different environments.
point out	indicate	highlight	The results highlight a strong correlation between the variables.
go up	increase	rise	The number of infections increased significantly over the past year.

Overall, the findings indicate that while phrasal verbs are generally less favored in academic writing, their use is not entirely prohibited. Acceptability depends on several factors: the academic discipline, the type of document, and the writer's purpose. The results also emphasize the importance of raising students' awareness of formal vocabulary choices and helping them distinguish between acceptable and informal phrasal verbs in scholarly writing.

### **Conclusion**

In academic writing, the choice of vocabulary plays a critical role in maintaining clarity, precision, and a formal tone. While phrasal verbs are common in everyday language, they often carry informal connotations and may lack the specificity required in scholarly discourse. This study has shown that although some phrasal verbs are acceptable in certain disciplines or contexts—such as qualitative research or reflective writing—their use should generally be

limited. Writers are encouraged to replace informal phrasal verbs with formal, academic equivalents to enhance the professionalism of their work. Ultimately, understanding the appropriate use of language based on academic conventions is essential for producing effective and credible scholarly writing.

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