

Rhetorical functions in academic speaking

Examples of texts and language. A good source of language is Leech & Svartvik (1975). Typical rhetorical functions used in academic speaking are:

1. Describing objects, location and direction
2. Reporting and narrating
3. Defining
4. Giving instructions
5. Describing processes and developments
6. Classifying / categorising
7. Giving examples
8. Including tables and charts
9. Comparing and contrasting: similarities and differences
10. Generalising
11. Expressing degrees of certainty
12. Expressing reasons and explanations / cause and effect
13. Arguing and discussing
14. Giving introductions
15. Drawing conclusions

Features of academic spoken English

Introduction

Academic speaking is similar in many ways to academic writing: it is linear, it is explicit, it has one central point and it is presented in standard language. Academic spoken style is also similar in many ways in that it is formal, explicit, hedged, and responsible. However, it is less complex and objective than written language.

Formal

In general this means that when you are speaking you should avoid colloquial words and expressions.

Explicit

It is the responsibility of the speaker in English to make it clear to the listener how various parts of the talk are related. These connections can be made explicit by the use of different signalling words.

Hedged

In any kind of academic speaking you do, it is necessary to make decisions about your stance on a particular subject, or the strength of the claims you are making. Different subjects prefer to do this in different ways.

A technique common in certain kinds of speaking is known by linguists as a 'hedge'.

Responsible

In academic speaking you are responsible for demonstrating an understanding of the source text. You must be responsible for, and must be able to provide evidence and justification for, any claims you make.

Complex

Spoken language is less complex than written language. Spoken language has shorter words, it is lexically less dense and it has a less varied vocabulary. It uses more verb-based phrases than noun-based phrases. Spoken texts are longer and the language has less grammatical complexity, including fewer subordinate clauses and more active verbs.

Objective

Spoken language in general has more words that refer to the speaker. This means that although the main emphasis should be on the information that you want to give and the arguments you want to make, it is not unusual to refer to yourself or your audience.

Features of academic spoken English

Spoken language is different from written language for many reasons. One important reason is that it usually has to be understood immediately whereas written language can be read many times. For that reason, spoken language has many different features.

Spoken language has the following characteristics (Halliday, 1989, p. 31):

- Variation in speed - but it is generally faster than writing
- Loudness or quietness
- Gestures - body language
- Intonation
- Stress
- Rhythm
- Pitch range
- Pausing and phrasing

As well as this, there are differences in the actual language used (Biber, 1988; Biber, Johansson, Leech, Conrad & Finegan, 1999; Chafe, 1982; Cook, 1997; Halliday, 1989).

Less Complex

Spoken language is less complex than written language.

Spoken language is grammatically less complex than written language. It has fewer subordinate clauses, fewer "that/to" complement clauses, fewer sequences of prepositional phrases, fewer attributive adjectives and more active verbs than written language.

Spoken texts are longer. This means that there is more repetition. According to Ure (1971), the percentage of different words in a text is generally below 40% for spoken texts and above 40% for written texts.

Spoken texts also have shorter, less complex words and phrases. They have fewer nominalisations, more verb based phrases, and a more limited vocabulary. Spoken texts are lexically less dense than written language - they have proportionately more grammatical words than lexical words.

Spoken language has more words that refer to the speaker, more quantifiers and hedges, and less abstractness.

Spoken language has:

- more verb based phrases
(e.g. having treatment (W), being treated (S), hospital care (W), go to hospital (S))
- more predicative adjectives
(misleading statistics (W), statistics are misleading (S))
- more pronouns (*it, they, you, we*)
- more lexical repetition
- more first person reference (*I*)
- more active verbs than written language
- fewer complex words and phrases

Spoken texts are:

- more fragmented - more simple sentences and more use of coordination *and, but, so, because* rather than subordination (embedding)
- lexically less dense
- longer

Halliday (1989, p.79) compares a sentence from a written text::

The use of this method of control unquestionably leads to safer and faster train running in the most adverse weather conditions.

with a typical spoken variant:

If this method of control is used trains will unquestionably (be able to) run more safely and faster (even) when the weather conditions are most adverse

and a more natural spoken version:

You can control the trains this way and if you do that you can be quite sure that they'll be able to run more safely and more quickly than they would otherwise, no matter how bad the weather gets.

The main difference is the grammar, not the vocabulary.

Other equivalents are given below (p.81):

Written	Spoken
Every previous visit had left me with a sense of the futility of further action on my part.	Whenever I'd visited there before, I'd ended up feeling that it would be futile if I tried to do anything more.
Violence changed the face of once peaceful Swiss cities.	The cities in Switzerland had once been peaceful, but they changed when people became violent.
Improvements in technology have reduced the risks and high costs associated with simultaneous installation.	Because the technology has improved its less risky than it used to be when you install them at the same time, and it doesn't cost so much either.
Opinion in the colony greeted the promised change with enthusiasm.	The people in the colony rejoiced when it was promised that things would change in this way.

Active verbs

In formal written English, we often use a passive when we do not want to specify who the agent is. In spoken English we can use a subject such as "people", "somebody", "they", "we", or "you".

Compare:

They're installing the new computer system next month.

The new computer system is being installed next month. (more formal)

Language of giving example

We	show exemplify illustrate	this	by	...
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For example, For instance,	...
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A key experiment	shows exemplifies illustrates	this.	...
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This is shown by the following examples, The following are examples of this: The following is a case in point:	...
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...	is a case in point.
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...	institutions	such as	the family	...
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Rhetorical Functions in Academic Speaking: Arguing & discussing

In academic life, arguing and discussing is often part of a larger element of speaking. In arguing and discussing, you are expected to present two or more points of view and discuss the positive and negative aspects of each case. On the basis of your discussion, you can then choose one point of view and persuade your readers that you are correct. This means giving your opinions (positive and negative) on the work of others and your own opinions based on what you have learned. You need to evaluate arguments, weigh evidence and develop a set of standards on which to base your conclusion.

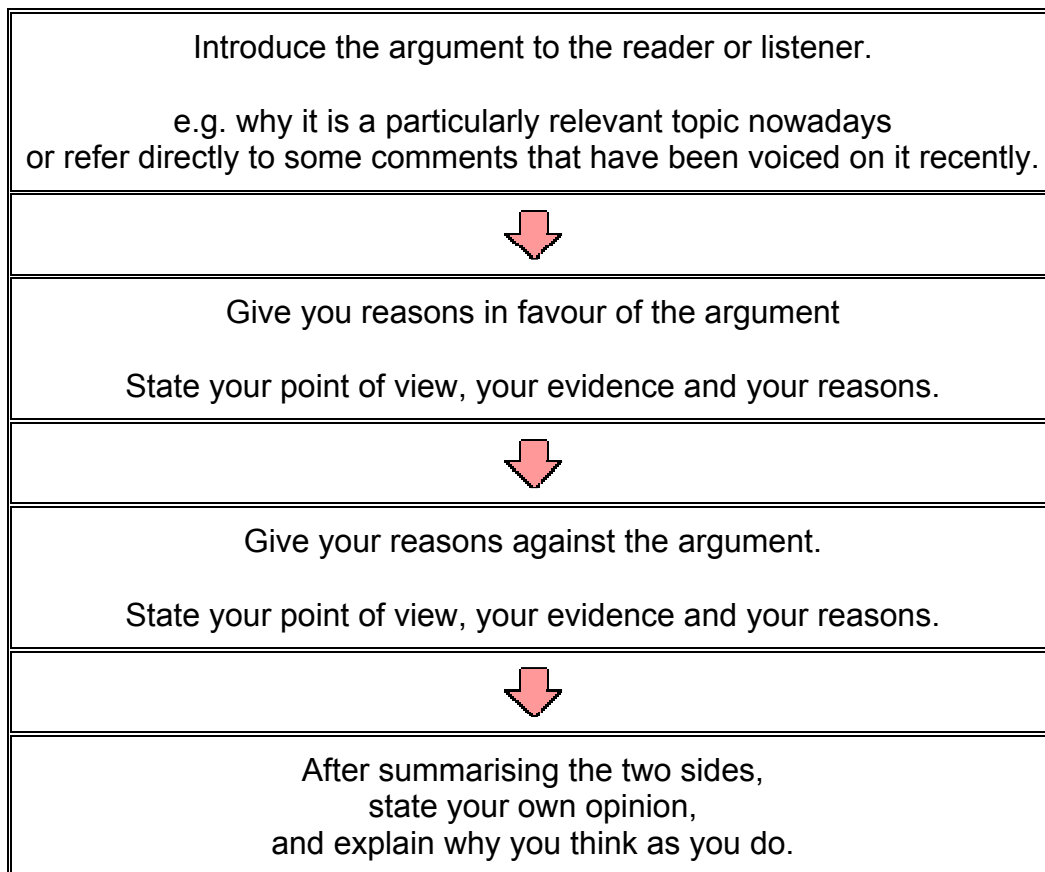
As always, all your opinions must be supported - you should produce your evidence and explain why this evidence supports your point of view. It is important to distinguish between **your claim** (proposition, thesis) - your point of view, what you believe; **your evidence** (support or grounds) - the facts, data and examples that support your point of view - and **your reasons** (warrant or argument) - why you believe what you do, how the evidence you have provided leads to the claim you are making. (See Toulmin, 1958).

There are two main methods of presenting an argument, and in general the one you choose will depend on exactly what the speaking task is (See Writing: Understanding the question and Organising the answer for more information).

a. The balanced view

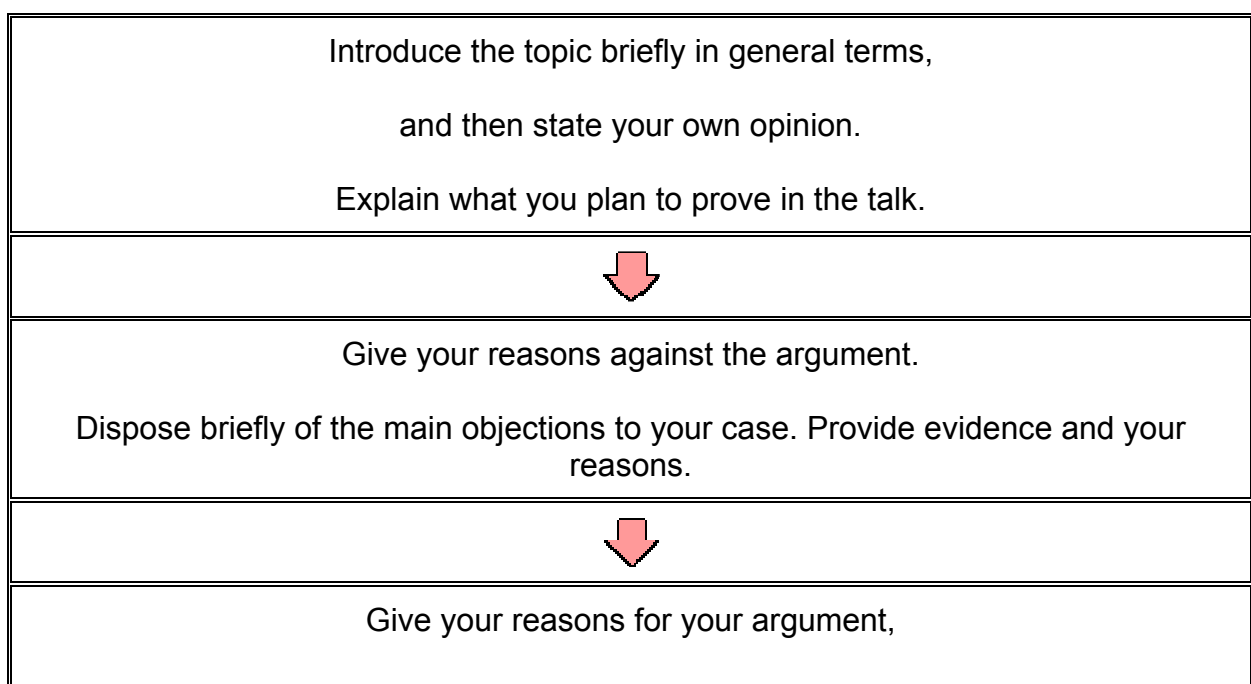
In this case you present both sides of an argument, without necessarily committing yourself to any opinions, which should always be based on evidence, until the conclusion.


At its simplest your essay plan will be as follows:



b. The persuasive talk

This second type of argumentative talk involves stating your own point of view immediately, and trying to convince the reader or listener by reasoned argument that you are right. The form of the talk will be, in outline, as follows:



<p>the arguments to support your own view, with evidence, reasons and examples.</p>

<p>Conclusion - Do not repeat your opinion again. End your talk with something memorable e.g. a quotation or a direct question.</p>

Language

Presenting another point of view

<p>Some people X In a study of Y, X</p>	<p>maintain(s) say(s) argue(s) assert(s) believe(s) claim(s) point(s) out is/are of the opinion seem(s) to believe</p>	<p>that</p>	<p>...</p>
<p>It is the view of X The opinion of X is It can be argued It has been suggested It might be said</p>			
<p>According to X</p>			

Commenting on another point of view

Negatively

<p>They He She X This</p>	<p>is/are may be seem(s) to be would seem to be</p>	<p>somewhat rather -</p>	<p>mistaken. wrong. rigid. inadequate.</p>
<p>X's approach position methods</p>			

	beliefs			
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This These views	is/are	open to doubt. not always the case. not necessarily true. unlikely to be true. highly debatable. incorrect. highly speculative.
	cannot be upheld.	

Serious	doubts reservations	can may	be raised against this.
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I disagree with X when he	writes says	that ...
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However, it is clear that ...

One of the main arguments	against	X is that	...
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One disadvantage of Another point against A further argument against One other disadvantage of	X	is	...
One objection to this argument			

Plus negative words: wrong, mistaken, false, erroneous, misplaced, inaccurate, incorrect, debateable, untrue, not the case.

Positively

I agree with X when he	writes says	that ...
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X is certainly correct X may be correct	when he	says	that ...
	in saying		

One advantage of	X	is	...
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Another point in favour of			
A further argument supporting			
One other advantage of			
One of the main arguments in favour of			

Plus positive words: correct, right, accurate.

Presenting own point of view

There are many reasons why ...

It is	important true necessary essential	to	remember bear in mind point out	that	...
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The first thing First of all,	we have I would like	to consider	is	...
The first thing to be considered is				

It is a fact There is no doubt I believe	that	...
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The first reason why ... is ...

First of all, ...

The second reason why ... is ...

Secondly, ...

The most important ...

In addition, ...

Furthermore, ...

What is more, ...

Besides, ...

Another reason is ...

A further point is ...

Qualification

In all cases points of view may be qualified and generalisations may be made. You may also have different degrees of certainty about your claims.

Language

Percentage	Quantity	Frequency	Certainty	Verbs
100%	all/every/each most a majority (of) many/much some a number (of) several a minority (of) a few/a little	always usual(ly) normal(ly) general(ly) as a rule on the whole often frequent(ly) sometimes occasional(ly)	certain(ly) definite(ly) undoubtedly clearly presumably probably/probable likely conceivably possibly/possible perhaps maybe	will is/are must have to should ought to can could may might
0%	few/little no/none/not any	rare(ly) seldom hardly ever scarcely ever never	uncertain unlikely	could not will not cannot is/are not

Some of the probability qualifications can be further qualified, e.g.

It is	fairly	certain likely	that ...
	very quite	probable possible likely unlikely	
	rather	unlikely	
	almost quite	certain	

Sometimes generalisations may be introduced or qualified in the following way:

In	the (vast) majority	of	cases, ...
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a large number	
most some a few (+ other “quantity” words)	

Language

	Verbs	Degree of certainty
complete	is (not) will (not) must (not)	certain(ly) definite(ly) clear(ly) undoubtedly
strong	can/cannot should (not)	probably (is) presumably
partial	could (not)	likely/unlikely
less strong	may (not) might (not)	possibly (not) perhaps (not)
impersonal (i.e. no commitment)	It is said that ... It appears that ... A reports that ... There is evidence to suggest that... (etc.)	

Rhetorical Functions in Academic Writing: Giving instructions

Language

Sequence

Sequence, or order, is important in giving instructions. The table below shows some common expressions used.

Firstly,	The first step is
First of all,	The first stage is
To begin with,	... begins with
Initially	... commences with
Beforehand,	Before this,

Previously,	Prior to this,
Earlier,	
At the same time,	During
Simultaneously,	When this happens
	While
Secondly, Thirdly etc	After this,
Next,	The next step is
Then,	In the next stage,
Subsequently,	In the following stage,
Later,	Following this,
	As soon as the committee has finished its work, ...
Eventually,	... until ...
Lastly	... finishes with ...
Finally,	concludes with
In the last stage,	The last step is ...

Manner - how something is done

in such a way that...

slowly, carefully, etc

with care/precision

in a careful way/manner

Purpose - why something is done

so as to ...

so as not to ...

so that ...

in order to ...

in order not to ...