



Session

READING AND SUMMARISING FORMAL LANGUAGE: NEWS ARTICLES

These short activities provide international students with practise in:

- Recognising how journalists use English language conventions to create a formal 'tone' in news articles
- Summarising (using an example news item)
- Reading an article for different layers of meaning

How and when to use this material

The focus of these activities is on how to summarise a news article, and also how to identify the conventions used in 'formal' news writing. The session links closely with the session on **Reading critically** which it is helpful to have worked through with students previously, especially as the second activity here builds on the ideas introduced in **Reading critically**.

Before beginning, lecturers may find it useful to read the following Briefing Notes:

Why Chinese postgraduate students struggle with listening, reading, writing and speaking in English and Thinking critically and creatively, and the asking of questions.

Introduction

International students may have limited experience with different genres of English and so the differences in 'tone' may need to be pointed out. Many Chinese students are expected in the Chinese education system to write brief summaries so will be relatively practised in this technique. However, depending on language proficiency, they will be less familiar with writing summaries in their

own words, so initially their assignments may contain extensive quoting from the set reading.

Lecturer input

- Prior to beginning the session, students should be asked to read through two articles about corporate responses to the collapse of a garment factory in Bangladesh. Because many international students need time to think and prepare a reading, it may be worth giving these references out in the previous weeks' session.

BBC Report: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-22520415>

Guardian Report:

<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/apr/29/primark-compensation-bangladesh-factory-collapse>

- At the beginning of the session, the lecturer should explain that media articles might use formal or informal *tone*, depending on how they will best 'engage' their audience.
- Most serious news journalism uses a formal tone. News journalists generate credibility amongst their readers by appearing 'distant' and 'neutral' and by citing informed, respected sources. The more 'serious' the news outlet is, the more 'formal' the writing.
- It is important to ensure that students have grasped that there are conventions for writing in a formal tone. Use the attached **Handout 1: A framework for identifying 'formal' tone'** to help students think about how to identify and write in a formal tone. The examples in the right hand column indicate how this tone is used by journalists. Point out that this tone will apply when/if they are required to write their own journalistic assignments. The Handout is replicated on page 3.

Lecturer input (continuing)

Handout 1: a framework for identifying 'formal' tone

Use of precise, unemotional language	e.g. 'Television audiences continue to value public service broadcasting. Industry research indicates that four in five (76%) of people who watch any public service channel claim to be very satisfied. This is broadly in line with results seen in 2011 (80%).'
Citing of credible sources	e.g. 'The Public Relations Institute of Australia states that when a company reflects a good reputation, it is seen as a desirable employment opportunity.'
Neutral expression	e.g. 'Despite general consensus about the need for all companies to employ public relations experts, new research suggests otherwise.'
Passive structure which creates distance	e.g. 'Little is known about' 'Reports have not been confirmed'
Use of formal technical terms and expressions	'Aggregated viewing share', 'stakeholder engagement', 'A breach of Occupational Health and Safety regulations'
No abbreviations or short forms	e.g. 'It is' (not it's), 'do not' (not don't), 'For example' (not e.g.), 'and so forth' (not i.e.).

- Note that this contrasts with an informal tone such as that used by magazine journalists, activist campaigners, writers of gossip columns, and advertisers who often use 'informal writing' to engage their readers. *Continued on page 4.*

Lecturer input (continuing)

Use of an informal tone

Use of 'you'	'If you are thinking of postgraduate study, talk to the student hotline.'
Use of rhetorical questions and exclamations	'Sick and tired of study? Come to the student party!'
Use of sensational and generalised claims	'Thousands of people can't be wrong'
Use of short forms	'it's', 'you're', 'OK'
Use of slang or clichés	'It's as easy as ABC!' 'It's a bargain!'
Use of emotional language and sensational headlines	'In a shocking revelation, teen star accused agent of blackmail'

Student activity 1: Identifying the features of formal news writing

1. Looking at *The Guardian* article (see link on page 2), ask students in pairs to discuss the impact of the phrases underlined (below):

How does *The Guardian* report use the highlighted words and phrases below to generate an **emotional** response from the reader?

The illegally constructed, eight-storey Rana Plaza collapsed in a heap while thousands of people were working inside in five garment factories ... About 2,500 survivors have been accounted for so far.

(The Guardian)

2. Now ask students to examine the more 'formal' impression created by the **reserved and unemotional** language in the BBC report.

At least 1,127 people died when the nine-storey Rana Plaza collapsed on 24 April.

(BBC)

3. Have students in pairs compare the following examples and decide which example conveys a slightly more 'formal' tone. How is this achieved?

- i) *Rescuers were using heavy machinery on Monday to cut through the debris after giving up hope of finding any more survivors.*
(The Guardian)
- ii) *Authorities have said that the rescue operation is now drawing to a close...The military ends its search for bodies on Tuesday and will hand the site over to the district administration.*
(BBC)

4. After a couple of minutes, take responses from some of the pairs, and then give out the attached **Handout 2: BBC formal tone** asking students individually to write examples from the BBC report. We reproduce the Handout here:

Handout 2: BBC formal tone

Use of precise, unemotional language (i.e. impersonal language)	
Use of formal technical terms and expressions (i.e. specialist words)	
Citing of credible sources	
Use of the passive tense	

5. Lead a discussion based on the exercise in Handout 2 and the framework in Handout 1 on how a more formal tone is created in the BBC example.

Lecturer input

In the next exercise, students will examine the same article from *The Guardian* more closely. This time they are going to pull out the main points in the article. These points will highlight how, by searching the text for different levels of meaning, the reader gains a greater understanding of the full story. Students will examine the article for its *literal meaning*, the *author's underlying concern*, the *judgements put forward* and the *responses suggested*. (See the Session on **Reading critically**.)

Ensure that students have read the article before this activity.

Student activity 2: Summarising main points from a news report

This activity builds on the ideas about how to read for different forms of meaning which were first introduced in the (earlier) session on **Reading critically**.

1. Students should re-read *The Guardian* article:
<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/apr/29/primark-compensation-bangladesh-factory-collapse>
2. Divide students into four groups. Give them ten minutes to write two sentences per group which tell a part of the 'whole story'. They may use words or even phrases directly from the article.

Group One – The literal account: Ask the first group to discuss and agree on two sentences which tell the main points about the building collapse in Bangladesh. The group leader should write these down.

Group Two – Inferred meaning: The second group should agree on two sentences which describe the *underlying issue in Bangladesh*, which concerns the journalist.

Group Three - Evaluating the problem: The third group should agree on two sentences which capture the journalist's evaluation of *corporate responsibility* in this case.

Group Four – Creative response: The fourth group should agree on two sentences describing the *actions which the journalist suggests are needed*.

After they have written their two sentences, ask the groups to read them out and put them on the board. (Another way of doing this is to ask the groups to write their sentences on a flipchart sheet and blutack these to the whiteboard for everyone to read together.)

3. Now, ask the whole class to discuss whether the eight sentences represent the main points. During the discussion, make suggested revisions to any sentences on the whiteboard.
4. Highlight that in a summary these eight sentences could be reduced to four sentences, without losing any important points. Ask the class to suggest ways to reduce the summary to four points, using **a combination of words from the article and their own words**. Put these on the board.

Lecturer input: Summary

Wind up the exercise by telling students that summarising a news article involves pulling out main points according to the **literal** meaning, the **inferred** (less explicit) meaning, the **judgements** made, and the **responses** suggested in this journalist's account.

Student activity 3: Summarising main points from a slightly different article

As a follow up homework activity, students can be asked to conduct the same exercise with the BBC article. This will produce two summaries of slightly different accounts of the same story.

The two journalists are using language in slightly different ways to tell the same story. The two student summaries should highlight the different emphasis and inferred meanings in the journalist accounts, not just the literal facts of the story.

Student activity 4: Personal glossary

Students to add new / key vocabulary / phrases to their personal glossary from their learning in this session.

Each student to share one phrase with the whole group.

Note to lecturer

The creation and ongoing development of a personal glossary enables students to build a working vocabulary - with definitions - for important, unfamiliar or frequently encountered concepts, idioms and metaphors that will be useful during their study of media and communication.



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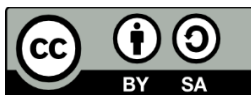
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Additional materials and resources are available from
<http://chinapostgraduates.murdoch.edu.au>

Project Team
Christine Daymon (Murdoch University, Project Leader)
Lindy Norris (Murdoch University)
Maree Keating (Victoria University)
Fiona Henderson (Victoria University)
Haixia Yu (Communication University of China)
Dawei Wang (Communication University of China)
Jennie Bickmore-Brand
Linda Butcher (Murdoch, Project Manager)
Yibing Liu (Research Assistant)

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