



Grammar choices for graduate and professional writers (2nd ed.)

Nigel A. Caplan

Michigan: The University of Michigan Press, 2019. 216 pages. ISBN: 978-0-472-03731-5.

The volume under review is the second edition of *Grammar Choices for Graduate and Professional Writers*. Compared with its first edition, published in 2012, the second has been revised to reflect classroom experience and users' feedback. For example, as emphasized by Caplan in the introduction, the improvement made in the new edition includes new sections, revised explanations, updated exercises, and revised example sentences. Born of Caplan's experience of teaching academic writing to graduate students at his institution (the English Language Institute at the University of Michigan), this book aims to provide practical guidance on the use of major grammar resources in academic writing. The book succeeds at presenting the diversity of grammar topics ranging from word to phrase and clause, and finally to text organization in a coherent manner, and at linking grammar choices with functions in authentic academic writing. The book will be of interest for graduate and professional writers, as well as for teachers of ESP (English for Specific Purposes).

The volume comprises eight chapters, preceded by an introduction, which sets the stage by highlighting how *Grammar Choices* differs from other grammar books and by clarifying grammar terminology. Each chapter covers a major topic of grammar useful to graduate and research writers and follows a similar outline, starting with a language awareness report and ending with the grammar of each discipline. The language awareness report draws readers' attention to the grammar topic to be discussed in the chapter, using authentic texts representative of a variety of academic genres, including the report, the introduction, the abstract, the literature review, the data commentary, the definition paper and the textbook. While sections in each chapter revolve around one major grammar topic, they can be skipped without loss of continuity. The grammar-in-the-discipline encourages students to think more specifically about discipline-specific language use through exercises that illustrate the grammar topic in each unit. This part can be used as a teaching resource or class exercise.

Chapter 1, “An approach to academic written grammar”, begins with the building blocks of written grammar, i.e., word forms, phrases and clauses. Caplan introduces readers to the notion of ‘slots’, which can be used to analyze the structures of clauses and phrases. Each finite clause comprises slots of subject, verb, and objects or complements. A noun phrase, requiring the head noun as the obligatory slot, involves complex and flexible modifiers (e.g., determiner, adjective, noun) and qualifiers (e.g., prepositional phrase, embedded clause). The author also introduces three levels of meaning in SFL, i.e., ‘experiential’ (the content of the sentence), ‘interpersonal’ (the writer’s attitude), and ‘textual’ (the organization of the text). The general approach to academic written grammar provided here connects with the more detailed discussion in subsequent chapters.

Chapters 2 and 3 deal with clause grammar. In more detail, Chapter 2 focuses on equal (coordinating) and unequal (subordinating) clauses as two types of clause combinations. Techniques for creating clauses of equal status (compound sentences) and unequal status (complex sentences) are described. In addition, Caplan discusses a no less important aspect of clause combination: the logic relations between the clauses combined. He illustrates Halliday’s (1994: 225) three categories of meaning: ‘elaborating’, ‘extending’ and ‘enhancing’. By listing sentence connectors or conjunctions as typical signals of each meaning category, Caplan makes the discussion accessible to readers who are not familiar with SFL. Chapter 3 continues the discussion of clause grammar by focusing on embedded clauses, where one clause is part of another. The types of clause covered range from restrictive relative clauses and reduced embedded clauses, to noun clauses, non-finite clauses and subjective clauses. The chapter ends with a section on common problems posed by the use of embedded clauses.

Caplan discusses verb forms, including tense and voice, in Chapter 4. Subject-verb agreement and subject-verb inversion are also topics of this chapter. The author starts with an overview of verb tenses and highlights that tense choice can affect three levels of meaning. The different functions of the present simple, present perfect, future tense, and other less frequent verb tenses are illustrated with numerous examples. The author then explains the reasons for using passive voice. For instance, the passive voice allows the writer to improve information flow (Chapter 8) by moving the agent to the end of the clause, i.e., the ‘new information’ position. Despite the general popularity of passive voice in academic writing, Caplan critiques the simplified assumption that passive voice is always preferred. He draws

readers' attention to lists of verbs rarely or never used in the passive, as a contrast to the frequently used passive verbs (e.g., ask, associate, base).

Chapter 5 delves into noun phrases and nominalizations, which, as suggested by Caplan, are more information-bearing than verbs and adjectives. Caplan begins by distinguishing between count and non-count nouns and then takes readers through several sections on the structural slots of noun phrases, including articles, quantifiers, adjectives and possessives. He also explains differences between generic reference, indefinite reference and definite reference. Based on Halliday and Martin (1993), Caplan proposes three primary functions of nominalization: to pin down the phenomena they are studying as facts, to avoid repetitiousness, and to improve information flow.

While Chapters 1-5 mainly deal with experiential meaning, i.e., the content, Chapter 6 moves to interpersonal meaning: what one thinks about the content. This chapter follows Hyland's (2000) framework of hedging and boosting to analyze interpersonal meaning. Whereas the grammar resources of hedging, boosting and general evaluation are plenty, Caplan focuses on modal verbs, adverbs, conditionals and comparatives. These word forms are less central to the content of a clause than verbs or nouns, but play a key role in conveying the writer's stance and attitude. The author concludes the chapter with a discussion on evaluative language, suggesting that "very few language choices are completely neutral in terms of interpersonal meaning, so effective writers choose words carefully to establish their authority and align the reader with their ideas" (p. 153). Examples of evaluative language include noun phrases, reporting verbs, action verbs, linking verbs, and descriptive adjectives.

For readers who struggle with finding appropriate word combinations in writing, Chapter 7 will be of great value, as Caplan introduces corpus searching to facilitate collocation learning. The author suggests using Google Scholar, a popular academic search engine, as the easiest corpus, the Michigan Corpus of Upper-level Students Papers (MICUSP) as a reference corpus of excellent graduate student papers, and the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA) as a massive corpus representing different registers and allowing sophisticated searches. Following this, the author details how corpus searching can be applied to collocations of different word forms, including verb-preposition, noun-preposition collocations, verb-noun collocations, and adjective-noun and noun-noun collocations. Caplan ends the chapter with the suggestion of using "skeletal

sentences” (p. 171), known elsewhere as “the bare bones of a sentence” or “sentence/phrase stems” in one’s own writing. For example, the search for “it is ADJ that” will provide lists of skeletal sentences (e.g., *it is clear that, it is possible that*) functioning to express the author’s stance in academic writing.

The final chapter, “Beyond the sentence”, examines the third level of meaning: textual organization. Caplan first highlights the importance of following the old-new information structure to attain a smooth information flow. He then explores forms and functions of theme, defined as the first elements in a clause. Devices of controlling the theme of a clause include moving adverbs, prepositional phrases, or dependent clauses to the theme position. As with the rest of the chapters, the author consistently adheres to the principle of making grammar choices according to functions. Finally, drawing on Daneš (1974) and Weissberg (1984), Caplan extends the discussion of theme to paragraph patterns, among which he illustrates with examples the linking pattern, the repeated theme pattern, the super-theme pattern, the theme preview pattern, and blended patterns. In so doing, the author informs readers of the choices available and the different functions of each option. For example, he shows that while the repeated theme pattern, where several sentences share the same theme, is “useful for defining or explaining a complex concept” (p. 185), the theme preview pattern is “more useful for organizing long texts than single paragraphs” (p. 187).

Caplan’s *Grammar Choices for Graduate and Professional Writers* is a valuable resource for graduate and professional writers. The book consistently builds on the central concept of grammar choices, rather than on rules in academic writing. The grammar resources are explained with reference to specific functions using authentic academic texts. Its approach to grammar provides readers with the opportunity to think specifically about the motivations behind their choices.

Received 02 September 2020
Accepted 09 September 2020

Reviewed by **Yan Zhang**

School of Foreign Languages, East China University of Science and Technology (China)
richinhopezy@gmail.com

References

- Daneš, F. (1974). "Functional sentence perspective and the organization of the text". *Papers on Functional Sentence Perspective* 23: 106-128.
- Halliday, M.A.K. (1994). *An Introduction to Functional Grammar* (2nd ed.). London: Edward Arnold.
- Halliday M.A.K. & J.R. Martin (1993). *Writing Science: Literacy and Discourse Power*. London: Taylor & Francis.
- Hyland, K. (2000). *Disciplinary Discourse: Social Interactions in Academic Writing*. Harlow: Pearson.
- Weissberg, R.C. (1984). "Given and new: Paragraph development models from scientific English". *TESOL Quarterly* 18: 485-500.