

# Metadiscourse in Professional and Student Writing: A Corpus Study

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Linguists and discourse theorists have found differences between student and professional writers, often framing student writing as immature and lacking rhetorical skills. These differences are often explored through the examination of metadiscourse, elements within writing that show the author's explicit consideration of audience and organization. However, when discussing effective writing, difficulties arise because the criteria for effective writing differ depending on audience, context, and purpose. This paper reports on the results of a corpus study on the use of metadiscourse in undergraduate and professional writing in composition studies. The aims of the study are to offer possible reasons for differences between student and professional writers' use of metadiscourse and to stress the importance of audience, context, and purpose when teaching and learning how to write.

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Writing teachers hope students will use writing to develop and communicate their ideas. Although this statement may be obvious, learning to write effectively is difficult, and recent scholarship has articulated this difficulty as a threshold concept of writing studies (Rose 59–61). This difficulty stems in part from having no universal definition of what good writing is because all writing is contextual, multimodal, and performative. Applied linguists Ken Hyland and Polly Tse define effective writing as “anticipating the needs of readers, both to follow an exposition and to participate in a dialogue, and occasionally devices are used to perform both functions at once” (Hyland and Tse 175). For student writers to be able to anticipate the needs of an audience, Hyland and Tse suggest, they need to have the rhetorical tools to adapt and be flexible in the way they write to accommodate a specific audience.

Differing views regarding expectations for student writing further complicate the idea of effective writing: Are students

novices who need time and opportunities to explore concepts in writing, or are they mini-professional writers who need to read and imitate strategies already enacted within certain disciplines? If students are novices, their development is a slow process of exploring topics of interest and learning how to make contributions to an ongoing conversation. If students are mini-professional writers, their development happens when they write more and more like professionals already in a field of study, capable of writing in the style already validated by the other professionals.

The threshold concepts outlined by Linda Adler-Kassner and Elizabeth Wardle, along with composition theorists Nancy Sommers and Laura Saltz, describe the process in which students slowly mature in their writing as they learn to examine their rhetorical situation. On the other hand, much linguistic, corpus-based research on teaching effective writing has framed professional writers in academia—often those who hold PhDs in an academic field—as the standard

to which students should aspire (Hyland and Tse; Lancaster; Shaw). In studies comparing differences between the rhetorical strategies of student writers and professional academic writers, linguists and discourse theorists have found major differences in how each group accomplishes its goals for writing (Becher and Trowler; Hyland and Tse; Salager-Meyer; Shaw). Through corpus-based analyses of student and professional writing, these studies frame students as miniature professionals, providing evidence that students use more metadiscourse and concluding that student writing must be less effective because it differs from professionals' use of metadiscourse.

My study, however, aims to show that students are capable of meeting their goals to write effectively within their own rhetorical situations despite employing metadiscursive practices that differ from professional practices. To this end, my corpus study examines the types of metadiscourse students and professionals are actually using and whether or not the differences between the two groups influence the perceived effectiveness of student writing. This essay will define metadiscourse and its rhetorical function, present findings from a corpus study of student and professional papers I compiled and analyzed using the software program Antconc, and discuss the implications of framing students as future professionals or novices. Ultimately, I will argue through linguistic evidence and corpus analysis that it is best for teachers to view students as novices, equipping them with the rhetorical tools to become more flexible, adaptable writers, rather than giving students formulas to imitate professional writing.

## **Metadiscourse and its Function in Writing**

William Vande Kopple describes metadiscourse as “information that does not add propositional material but helps [the] readers organize, classify, interpret, evaluate, and react to such material. Metadiscourse, therefore, is discourse about discourse or communication about communication” (83). Metadiscourse gives readers directions about how to interpret a text, and in this way, it explicitly organizes texts, engages readers, and “signals writer’s attitudes to both their material and their audience” (Hyland and Tse 156). Studies of metadiscourse focus on the ways writers project themselves into texts to show their attitude toward the content and to show how they adapt to their readers by organizing their content in a way that is easily accessible.

When linguists and discourse theorists use metadiscourse to compare student writing to professional writing, the expectation is that students should imitate professional uses of metadiscourse, incorporating organization and attitude markers similar to professionals in their own papers. Yet a major component of how metadiscourse is employed is based on audience, and students and professionals often write for very different audiences. Students must adapt to their given audience—professors—while professionals adapt to their own audiences—peers and journal publication reviewers. In this way, these two different rhetorical situations should lead to differing uses of metadiscourse.

Metadiscourse functions in two ways: to show the rhetorical strength of a claim and the writer’s attitudes towards that claim, or to give logical structure and organization, helping readers navigate through a text. First, the metadiscursive elements that

allow writers to express attitudes towards the strength of their claim include hedges and intensifiers. Hyland and Tse describe hedging as a rhetorical strategy that allows writers to soften their claims according to how confident or cautious they want to be (158). Françoise Salager-Meyer gives four reasons for hedging: 1) to minimize the “threat-to-face” involved in every act of communication, 2) to be “more precise in reporting results,” 3) to ensure claims are not over-asserted while still providing evidence and personal opinion, and 4) to “conform to an established writing style” (106–108). While hedges soften the writer’s claims, intensifiers such as *undoubtedly*, *clearly*, and *always* do the opposite. They show certainty and invoke the reader as a “co-participant” (Bizup and Williams). Second, metadiscursive elements that clarify, connect, and direct readers through the writer’s claims are commonly conjunctive adverbs. Martha Kolln includes a list of common adverbial categories: addition, time, contrast, result, concession, apposition, summary, and reinforcement (36, 37). Common conjunctive adverbs or adverbial phrases used as metadiscourse include *furthermore* (addition), *previously* (time), *however* (contrast), *therefore* (result), *nevertheless* (concession), *for example* (apposition), *in conclusion* (summary), and *indeed* (reinforcement).

## Background and Previous Research

Philip Shaw’s study of student and professional academic writers examines each group’s use of conjunctive adverbs. He compiled a corpus of thirty essays by Newcastle University first-year students and another of articles from *English Literature in Transition and Nineteenth-Century Literature*. He found that students “over-use” adverbs that

“perform metadiscoursal functions” when compared with professional academic writers (215). Shaw concludes that, at least in literary studies, students’ overuse is “the result of complex differences in generic demands, stylistic maturity, and above all, disciplinary maturity” (231). Shaw evaluates students according to professional standards, and his statement assumes that knowledge of the discipline is connected to the ability to write within the discipline at a professional level. Citing “disciplinary maturity” further implies there is a standard way of writing within the discipline of literary studies.

Holding students to these professional standards—as Shaw, Lancaster, and Salager-Meyer do in their corpus study of student metadiscourse—may set students up for failure. While some students might have had access to professionals within the discipline they wish to enter, other students might not have been given opportunities to gain experience and write for a disciplinary audience. Students with less experience writing within a specific discipline will struggle more with employing rhetorical strategies within that specific discipline. Heidi Estrem highlights this problem in her discussion of the threshold concept “Disciplinary and Professional Identities are Constructed through Writing.” She argues that “for many students in college encountering disciplinary writing for the first time, discipline-specific writing threatens their sense of self because these ways of thinking and writing are so distinct from other more familiar reading and writing practices, such as those valued at home or in other communities in which the students are members” (56). In this way, students with more experience writing in a specific discipline, not simply access to textbooks or texts written by professionals within a discipline,

will write more effectively in that specific discipline.

Many scholars have studied metadiscourse to understand the differences in writing across disciplines and to understand how writers fulfill goals specific to the discipline in which they are writing (Hyland and Tse; Peacock; Salager-Meyer; Shaw). According to these scholars, to suggest simply that students should examine any piece of academic prose to see how professional writers make certain rhetorical moves is not enough, since these rhetorical moves differ depending on the academic discipline in which the text is being written. For example, Becher and Trowler studied the differences in writing across academic disciplines by examining how hard sciences (chemistry, biology, physics) and soft sciences (sociology, psychology, and speech pathology) share information and claims. They interviewed professional academic writers in those fields and coded articles based on an established matrix, and their conclusions addressed epistemological differences: “Knowledge in hard-pure disciplines is quantitative and tends to develop steadily and cumulatively; new findings derive linearly from an existing body of knowledge. Soft-pure knowledge, on the other hand, is qualitative and new developments in these disciplines tend to derive from the combination and recombination of existing work and results” (39). Certainly differences in knowledge-building across disciplines may result in different presentations of that knowledge.

Because metadiscourse structures and organizes written knowledge, it is likely that there would be a difference in the use of metadiscourse across the disciplines. In his corpus-based study of eight disciplines, Matthew Peacock discovered a difference in

the use of conjunctive adverbs, specifically linking adverbs like *then*, *thus*, *however*, and *yet*, across disciplines. He searched for linking adverbials within eight disciplines—four science and four non-science—finding that the sciences used adverbials at a lower rate. One reason Peacock gives for this difference is that scientific writers described their methods and results using a “narrative or descriptive style” while writers in the non-sciences explicitly made connections between ideas, claims, and facts for their readers (28). Peacock’s and Becher and Trowler’s findings suggest that metadiscourse varies within professional academic writing depending on the academic discourse community—and the audience and purpose—in which the professionals are writing. And just as scientists might use metadiscourse differently from historians because of their differing audience, purpose, and context, student writers might also use metadiscourse differently from professional writers.

In the recent *College Composition and Communication* article “Do Academics Really Write This Way? A Corpus Investigation of Moves and Templates in *They Say/I Say*,” Zak Lancaster asks if students or professionals actually use the phrases outlined in the textbook *They Say/I Say*. Intended to help students develop argumentative rhetorical skills, these phrases act as templates that are supposed to help students incorporate both outside sources and their own voices, “entertain objections,” and “make concession while standing your ground” (433). The textbook attempts to help students enter a conversation or a discipline using strategies that have already been used by people who are considered to be professional academic writers. Lancaster found that these rhetorical skills, though not necessarily the specific phrases outlined

in the textbook, are often employed by professional writers to make their arguments stronger (438).

Lancaster asserts that the *They Say/I Say* templates too narrowly present recurring phrases in professional academic writing because neither students nor professionals actually employ them (366). He supports this point with a corpus study of student and professional writing, finding few of the phrases from *They Say/I Say* in either corpus. However, in his concluding remarks, he argues “that there is pedagogical value in recognizing that there are recurring moves in academic writing and that, while there are many ways writers can go about accomplishing these moves, they are often realized through specific wordings, ones which can be studied and deployed” (460). Lancaster believes that writing instructors should not pressure students to write like academics but that they do have “a responsibility to assist students to understand some of the linguistic peculiarities of academic registers” (460). When students understand some of the “linguistic peculiarities” or needs of their audiences, they can develop ways to accomplish their rhetorical goals. Teachers can assist in this process in more ways than simply having their students imitate professional writing.

## The Present Study

One way teachers can help students see these “peculiarities” and develop rhetorical strategies is by looking at how writers use metadiscourse across academic disciplines. Students may see how metadiscourse is used based on the changing discipline and audience within that discipline, perhaps becoming flexible writers, able to use different rhetorical strategies based on the discipline or context in which they are

writing. In order to see how different rhetorical strategies were being employed, I searched common types of metadiscourse—strategies beyond the *They Say/I Say* formulas as searched in Lancaster’s study—to determine what students and academics are using in their writing. Although Lancaster focused specially on argumentation strategies, I examined the broad range of metadiscourse in Table 1.

## Methods

In order to understand what metadiscursive strategies student and professional writers are actually using and to highlight differences among the two groups, I used Philip Shaw’s article “Linking Adverbials in Student and Professional Writing in Literary Studies” as a model. Shaw records how often conjunctive adverbs (or linking adverbials) were used within a corpus of student text and compares this to the frequency of use in professional text. To examine metadiscourse in student writing, I searched for and recorded the frequency of specific hedges, intensifiers, and conjunctive adverbs in the Michigan Corpus of Upper-Level Student Papers (MCULSP), a free, web-based corpus. The entirety of the MCULSP consists of 823 papers spanning sixteen disciplines, which were written by University of Michigan students in their final year of undergraduate studies to their third year of graduate studies.

I examined 423 academic papers—totaling just over one million words—written for humanities courses by native speakers of English. When searching the corpus, I excluded papers written by self-identified non-native English speakers as a way to eliminate results that might be related specifically to English as a second or foreign language teaching methods. I also excluded creative

Table 1  
Types of Metadiscourse (Kolln; Shaw)

Type of Metadiscourse	Category	Keywords/Phrases
Hedges	Adjectives	<i>most, many, some</i>
	Adverbs	<i>usually, perhaps, possibly, probably, almost</i>
	Modal Verbs	<i>might, may, could</i>
	Lexical Verbs	<i>seem(-s,-ed), tend(-s,-ed), suggest(-s,-ed), indicate(-s,-ed), I think, I believe, and I doubt</i>
Intensifiers	Adjectives	<i>fundamental, essential, crucial</i>
	Adverbs	<i>undoubtedly, clearly, always, inevitably, certainly</i>
	Lexical Verbs	<i>show(-s,-ed), prove(-s,-ed), establish(-es,-ed), it is clear that, there is no doubt that</i>
Conjunctive Adverbs	Addition	<i>moreover, furthermore, likewise, also, in addition, again</i>
	Time	<i>meanwhile, afterwards, previously</i>
	Contrast	<i>however, instead, rather, in contrast, on the other hand</i>
	Result	<i>therefore, consequently, as a result, of course</i>
	Concession	<i>nevertheless, still, yet, after all</i>
	Apposition	<i>namely, for example, for instance, in other words</i>
	Summary	<i>thus, in conclusion, finally</i>
	Reinforcement	<i>further, indeed, in particular, above all, in fact</i>
	Organization	<i>first, second, third</i>

writing samples and essays written in the hard sciences, in order to make the student corpus more comparable in content and genre to my professional corpus. Further, I examined only papers that were given an A grade; this high grade indicates that the papers were deemed effective or successful by the professor who graded them. I compared papers from MCULSP with a corpus of professional academic writing that I constructed: all articles from *College Composition and Communication* (CCC) between the years 2005 and 2010. Using AntConc, a corpus analysis software program, I searched for the same hedges, intensifiers, and conjunctive adverbs in each corpus.

## Results

When I compared the MCULSP to CCC, my results were similar to previous studies (Hyland and Tse; Lancaster; Salager-Meyer; Shaw). Overall, student writers used more metadiscourse when compared to professional writers in the humanities.

As Table 2 demonstrates, students used almost 400 more hedges per million words compared with CCC writers. Students used hedging modal and lexical verbs and adverbs at a higher frequency, and within the hedging lexical verbs, the verb *seems* was used at a much higher frequency by students. The number of times *seems* was used in the corpus of student papers was

622 times per million compared with the professional academic writers, who only used it 327 times per million. While students used more verbs and adverbs as hedges, professional writers had a higher frequency of adjective hedges. The frequency that professionals used the adjectival hedges *some*, *many*, and *most* totaled 4,285 words per million, but those three words appeared in the student corpus at a frequency of 3,916 words per million.

**Table 2**  
**Frequency of Hedges per Million Words**

Part of Speech	Frequency in CCC Corpus	Frequency in MCULSP
Adjective	4,285	3,916
Modal Verb	3,250	3,483
Lexical Verb	1,988	2,298
Adverb	783	948
Total	10,306	10,645

Professionals showed more confidence in expressing and referencing personal opinions by using *I think*, *I believe*, and *I doubt* at a higher frequency—a total of 288 times per million compared to 197 times by students.

CCC writers also used *I think* over *I believe* at a higher ratio than students, as shown in Table 3. Both groups were also more likely to write about what they personally thought or believed over what they doubted.

**Table 3**  
**Frequency Per Million Words of *I think*, *I believe*, and *I doubt***

Keyword	Frequency in CCC Corpus	Frequency in MCULSP
I think	192	114
I believe	91	77
I doubt	5	6
Total	288	197

However, while CCC writers expressed more confidence by inserting these signals of personal opinion at a higher frequency than students, Table 4 shows that students may signal their stance through intensifiers.

**Table 4**  
**Frequency per Million Words of Intensifiers**

Part of Speech	Frequency in CCC Corpus	Frequency in MCULSP
Adjectives	277	297
Adverbs	812	648
Verbs	801	997
Total	1890	1942

Students used slightly more intensifiers on average than CCC writers, but both groups used significantly fewer intensifiers than hedges. Students used more intensifying verbs like *show*, *prove*, and *establish* (and their lemmas), while professionals used more intensifying adverbs like *always*, *certainly*, and *inevitably*.

Students also used more conjunctive adverbs than professional writers. Table 5 shows the total frequency of conjunctive adverbs by category. Students used far more conjunctive adverbs of addition (*moreover*, *furthermore*, *likewise*, *also*, *in addition*, *again*), time (*meanwhile*, *afterwards*, *previously*),



result (*therefore, consequently, as a result, of course*), and summary (*thus, in conclusion, finally*).

**Table 5**  
**Frequency per Million Words of**  
**Conjunctive Adverbs**

Category	Frequency in CCC Corpus	Frequency in MCULSP
Addition	2451	3069
Time	74	141
Contrast	2191	2719
Result	628	824
Concession	1127	1110
Apposition	946	727
Summary	681	1050
Reinforcement	1043	1046
Organization	300	317
Total	9440	11002

CCC writers did use more conjunctive adverbs of apposition (*namely, for example, for instance, in other words*) than students, and both groups used conjunctive adverbs of reinforcement (*further, indeed, in particular, above all, in fact*) at a similar frequency.

## Discussion

Some studies mark student writing as inferior because it is different from professional writing, yet I argue that student writing differs in both audience and purpose. When examining the differences between student and professional writing, student writing should be recognized as taking place within different disciplinary and rhetorical constraints. Different audiences and purposes may account for why students use more metadiscourse, just as in studies that found variation in metadiscourse used across different academic disciplines. Students often

write for their professors, and they often aim to show how much they know to get a good grade. Professional academic writers write for their peers, arguing that what they have to say is relevant, new, and interesting. Professionals may use more adverbs of concession to concede one point of their argument in order to gain acceptance of their overall argument by their peers; however, students do not need to persuade a large group of people to accept their overall argument. They only need to write in such a way that one professor will deem their writing successful. In this way, professionals are able to acknowledge and involve those with differing opinions, while students can show their range of research and their explicit logical progression so the teacher can easily grade their writing. Professionals might weave together different opinions using conjunctions like *while, yet, or nevertheless*, moving back and forth between scholar's opinions, while students might be more straightforward in their organization, using *first, second, next, and finally*.

Students may purposely use more hedges because they feel they lack authority—a sense that might actually benefit them. In a multi-year, longitudinal study of college writers, Nancy Sommers and Laura Saltz came to the conclusion that first-year students who were cognizant of their role as novices—beginning writers with much to learn about the craft and context of their writing—were actually the students who maintained a deeper interest in writing over their college career and were “most capable of learning new skills” (127). It was not until later in their college careers that “[t]o move forward with their writing, students need[ed] to shed the role of novice that was at one time the key to their success” (146). So while professionals may use fewer hedges



to express confidence in their claims, it may be beneficial for student writers to embrace their status as novices, hedging claims about topics they are just entering into in order to be successful writers later. When students understand their broader rhetorical situation as writers within a discipline, beyond their position as authors of a particular paper, they might not set their goals on mastery or expertise based on professional standards—something perhaps unattainable at the undergraduate level—but on flexibility, which will lead to expertise later on.

If teachers cultivate flexibility in their students, students could embrace their present rhetorical situation as a novice learner, growing and adapting as they write into their discipline. My corpus study suggests that teachers already value the moves of novice writers; the papers in my study were deemed successful. My study reflects how teachers value undergraduate metadiscourse use, despite its difference from professional use, in that the papers in student corpus—those that received an A—were deemed “successful,” despite the fact that they used much more metadiscourse than the professionals. While previous corpus studies from Salager-Meyer and Shaw have proposed a deficit between student writing and professional writing, my study reveals an alternate definition of success at a novice level. Ultimately, my corpus analysis supports the conclusions of Sommers and Saltz’s longitudinal study: “Being a novice allows students to be changed by what they learn, to have new ideas, and to understand that ‘what the teacher wants’ is an essay that reflects these ideas. Second, we also observed that freshmen build authority not by writing from a position of expertise but by writing into expertise” (134). Successful students used more hedges to signal their lack of confidence, taking not a

position of expertise, but of a novice. While their metadiscourse use differed from the experts, the papers succeeded in a major goal that students, rightly or wrongly, have when writing papers: being deemed successful by their teacher.

Sommers and Saltz’s study offers another possible explanation as to why students “overuse” metadiscourse when compared with professionals. They found that freshman writers often wrote descriptive, rather than argumentative, thesis statements:

The ubiquity of the descriptive thesis freshman year suggests that learning happens in stages; ideas need to be ingested before they can be questioned. Students need to immerse themselves in the material to get a sense of the parameters of their subjects, familiarize themselves with the kinds of questions asked of different sets of evidence, and have a stake in the answers before they can articulate analytical theses. All of this takes time, more time than any freshman can possibly devote to a subject. The descriptive thesis is not a flaw in freshman writing but a symptom of a novice working on an expert’s assignment. (134–135)

Just as the “ubiquity” of the descriptive thesis in freshman writing is not a flaw, the apparent “ubiquity” of metadiscourse in undergraduate writing is also not a flaw in student writing. The novices or students who wrote the papers in the MCULSP corpus used more metadiscourse in their writing than the writers in the professional corpus, but the students nonetheless succeeded in accomplishing a primary rhetorical goal.

While choices in metadiscourse may be different in student and professional writing, student writing is not less effective or

mature. Instead, it may be the case that students are already making effective rhetorical choices that teachers are rewarding with high grades. Students did use the intensifying verb *shows* and *proved* twice as often as professionals. The “overuse” of these verbs could be a strategy students used to incorporate outside sources into their papers, which is an effective way to show the audience that they have read broadly on their topic. In this case, these students are already making mature rhetorical choices, reaching their goals using strategies that differ from academic writing at a professional level.

By teaching the rhetorical aims behind metadiscourse, as Lancaster and others suggest, rather than formulas for how to use metadiscourse, students may use metadiscourse more effectively and become more adaptable writers. Not only should rhetorical strategies be taught, but the audience for

whom the rhetorical strategies are being deployed should be taught as well. Students will not only have formulas and templates as tools to write effectively in specific situations; they will also have the rhetorical skills at work behind those formulas and templates at their disposal to write effectively within any context. Audience, context, and purpose, rather than imitation of professional writers or usage of metadiscourse, should be emphasized to a greater extent in classroom teaching of writing. Students will not just write like professional writers, but will be better able to communicate their ideas by changing and adapting their writing through the awareness of their audience—a far more useful skill than simply imitating professional writing by using formulaic phrases and templates.

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