
SIGNAL PHRASES

WHAT IS A SIGNAL PHRASE?

Writers use signal phrases to persuade us, guide us, and alert us to particularly important parts of a text. Signal phrases are common phrases that announce – or “signal” – to you that a key argument, fact, or piece of evidence is coming up soon.

This Tip Sheet will introduce you to common signal phrases, then offer you guidelines for using signal phrases effectively in your reading, note-taking, and writing.

COMMON TYPES OF SIGNAL PHRASES

Signal phrases have many different functions in academic writing.

Introduction and Emphasis Phrases

These signal phrases alert us to the introduction of a new topic, or to a fresh approach to a topic that has already been introduced. They urge us to pay attention – something important is coming!

I wish to argue...

Spivak shows that...

As I suggest...

In this chapter we...

Greenblatt points out that...

We want to demonstrate that...

Framing Phrases

Framing phrases direct us to key points and *frame*, or guide, our understanding. They highlight the author’s interpretations, suggestions, and recommendations.

It is important to...

It is necessary to...

The fact that the...

This can be used to...

A key feature of this is...

The central point is...

Sequence Signals

These signals introduce a new argument or piece of evidence, and draw attention to its place in the article or chapter as a whole.

First...

Next...

Second...

Finally...

Third...

In conclusion...

Comparison and Contrast Signals

These signals warn us that a shift is occurring in the text: the author is moving from one position to another, or offering an opposing view for our consideration.

On the other hand...

Still...

By contrast...

Rather than...

Yet...

While...

SIGNAL PHRASES AND EFFICIENT READING

When you first encounter a new text, look out for signal phrases: they will help direct you to the most important parts of the text, the places where the author's argument is presented most clearly and concisely. Skimming (reading quickly) in order to locate these signal phrases and identify the text's key arguments is a useful first step.

Signal phrases can help you to...

Predict what a reading might be about. Because signal phrases often direct you to a text's central arguments, they can give you a sense of the "gist," or overall focus, of the text.

Ask the right questions of the text. Before you dive in and read every word of an article or chapter, use signal phrases to locate those places in the text where key points are highlighted, then ask yourself: "What do I already know about this topic? What do I want to learn?"

Take better notes. Signal phrases highlight a text's most important terms, phrases, and arguments; these are the points that you want to record in your notes. Signal phrases can also help you to distinguish between a writer's claims ("I argue...") and another critic's ("Shuger suggests..."), helping you grasp an author's views with precision. **Important reminder:** Always use quotation marks when recording another writer's words in your notes!

Review a text that you haven't read in a long time. If you are returning to a text you read weeks or months ago in order to prepare for an exam, use signal phrases to help you locate key points and refresh your memory.

USING SIGNAL PHRASES TO ESTABLISH BOUNDARIES

When you are writing, signal phrases help you to *establish boundaries* between your own ideas and other writers' arguments, clearly indicating to your reader which ideas are your own. Establishing boundaries is particularly important for avoiding charges of plagiarism: signal phrases (along with proper citation) can help your instructors recognize that you are acknowledging another writer's influence on your work. Signal phrases also help you emphasize your own original contributions.

While many critics have argued that *Waiting for Godot is a postmodern comedy, I wish to argue that it adapts many conventions of classical tragedy.*

We wish to demonstrate that *there is an important relationship between obesity and genetics.*

Though this study is convincing, it is important to note that it has a number of limitations.

For Further Reading:

Gerald Graff and Cathy Birkenstein, *They Say/I Say: The Moves That Matter in Persuasive Writing* (Norton, 2012).

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