

# The 'Anatomy' of a Highly-Graded Assignment: Is there a relationship between linguistic and textual features and grade awarded?

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## 1. Aim of the Study

- To identify those features of academic writing which contribute to the grade an assignment receives.
- To inform the work of Learning Developers and allow us to prioritise areas on which to focus.

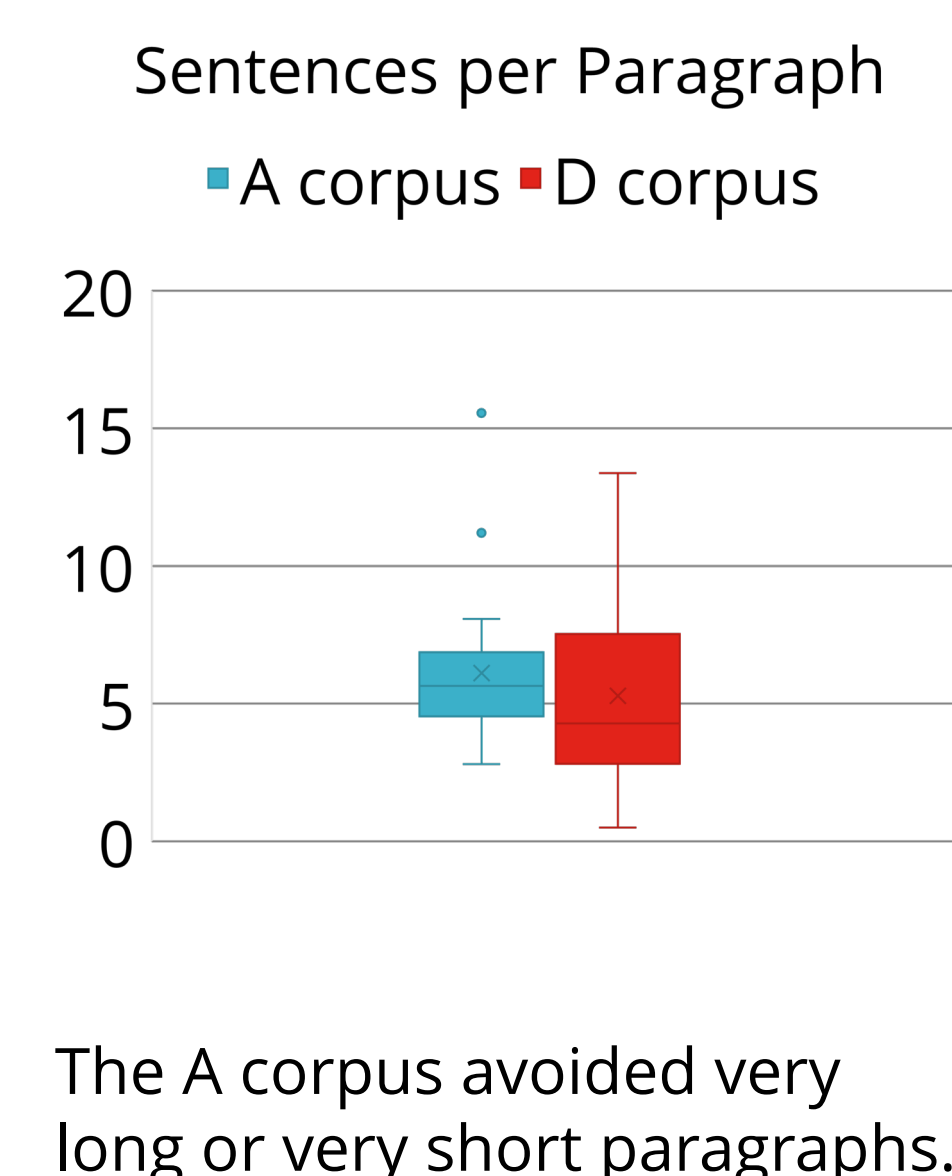
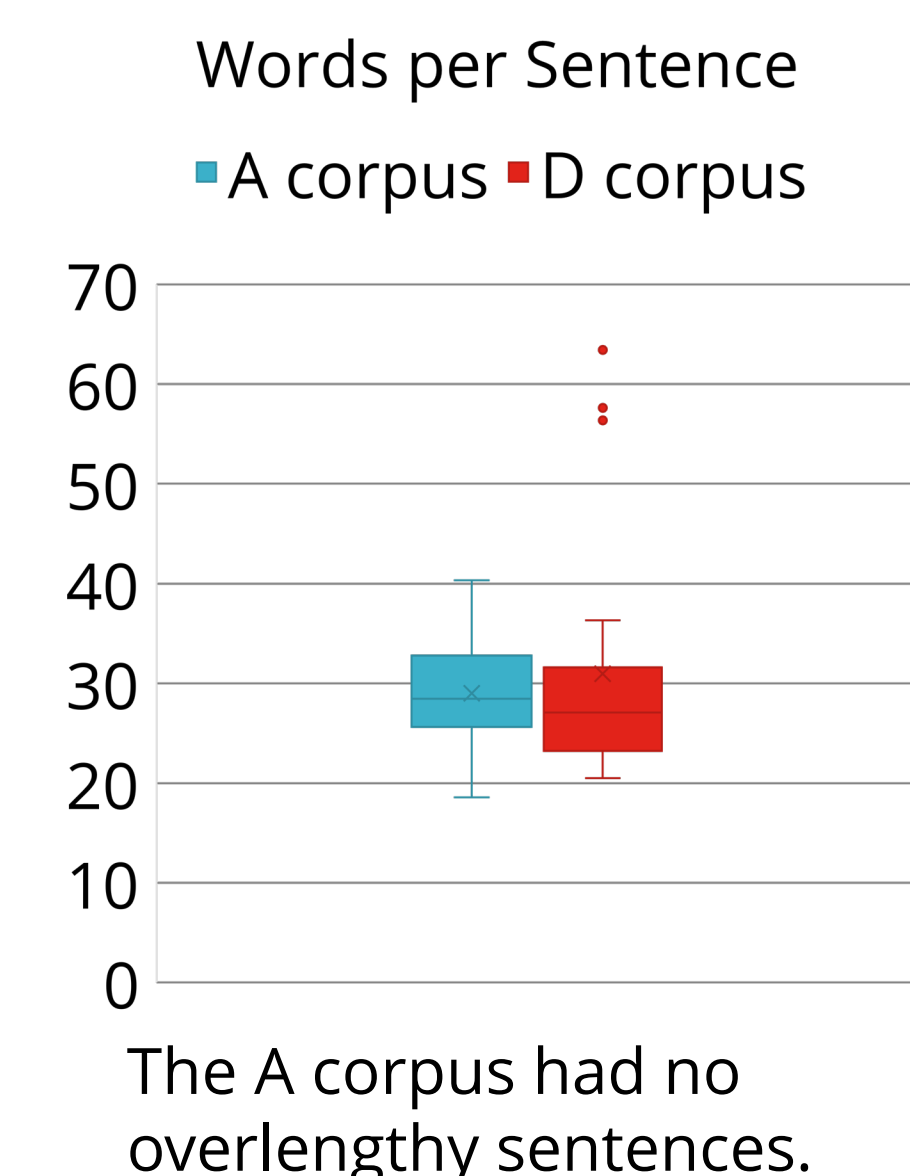
## 2. How the study was conducted

- Analysis of summative assignments of second year (Level 5) students in a health discipline.
- A corpus comprised 30 assignments awarded a grade of 70%+
- D corpus comprised 30 assignments awarded 40-49%.
- Features were investigated by either manual inspection or by using the software AntConc<sup>1</sup>

## 3. Main Findings

### Words, sentences and paragraphs

- The students receiving A grades adhered much more closely to established norms.
  - The mean no. of words per paragraph was significantly higher in the A corpus ( $p < 0.05$ ): A corpus = 171; D corpus = 143
- Does this indicate a fuller development of points made?



### Hedges (cautious language)

- Use of hedges shows the ability to follow norms when presenting suppositions.
  - Overall, the A corpus used significantly ( $p < 0.05$ ) more hedges: 2.5 per 1000 words compared with 1.9 per 1000 words: 35% higher.
  - Most common hedges investigated (freq. per 1000 words):
- | A corpus     |        | D corpus |        |
|--------------|--------|----------|--------|
| may          | (1.15) | may      | (1.02) |
| could        | (0.37) | would    | (0.29) |
| would        | (0.32) | could    | (0.25) |
| possible     | (0.16) | perhaps  | (0.13) |
| likely       | (0.09) | possible | (0.09) |
| suggest/s/ed | (0.07) | quite    | (0.03) |
- Increased use of hedging could indicate increased presentation of suppositions or simply the more skilful framing of suppositions.
  - The A corpus used more traditionally academic hedges – 'perhaps' and 'quite' were absent from the A corpus.

### Linking adverbials

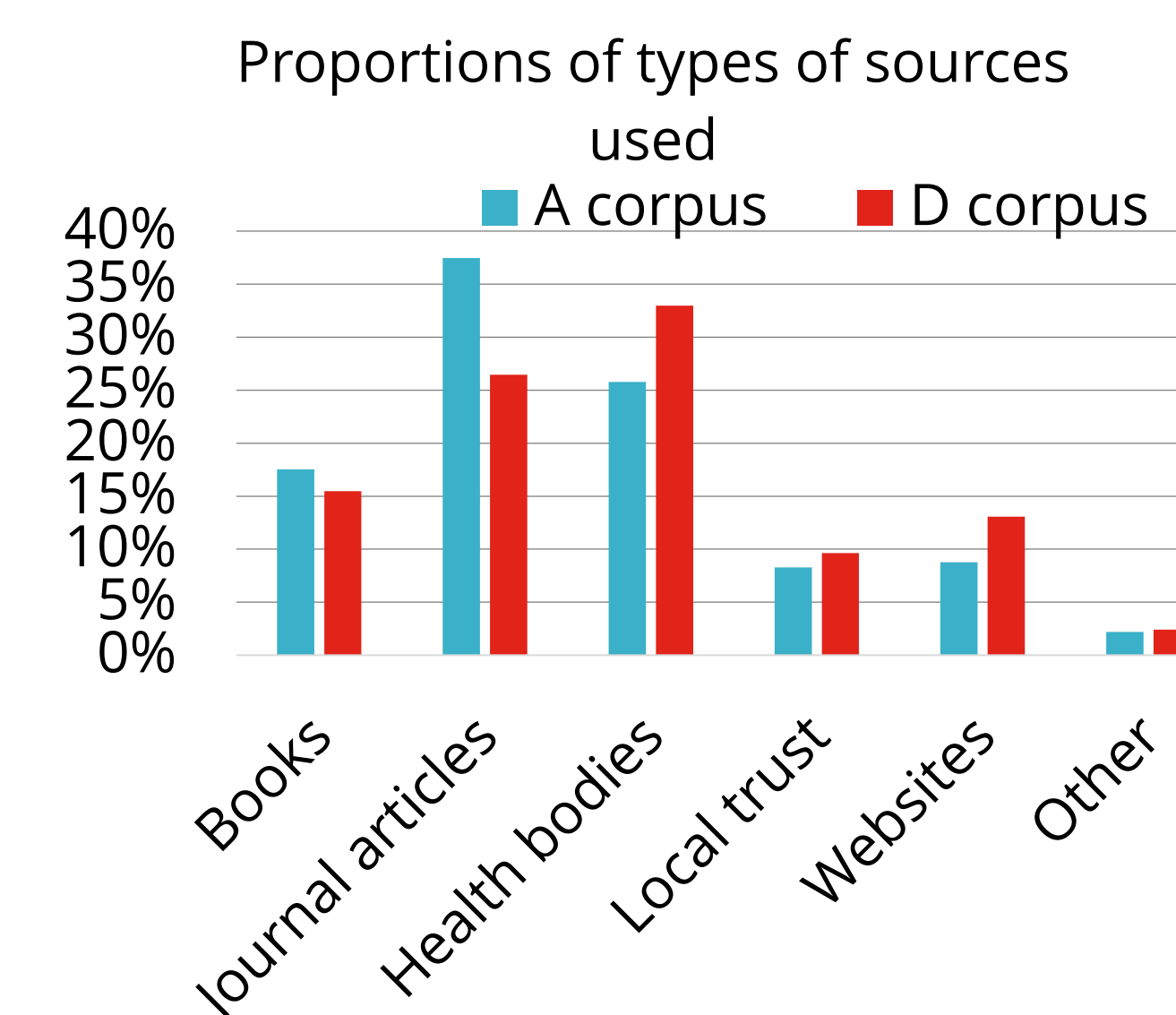
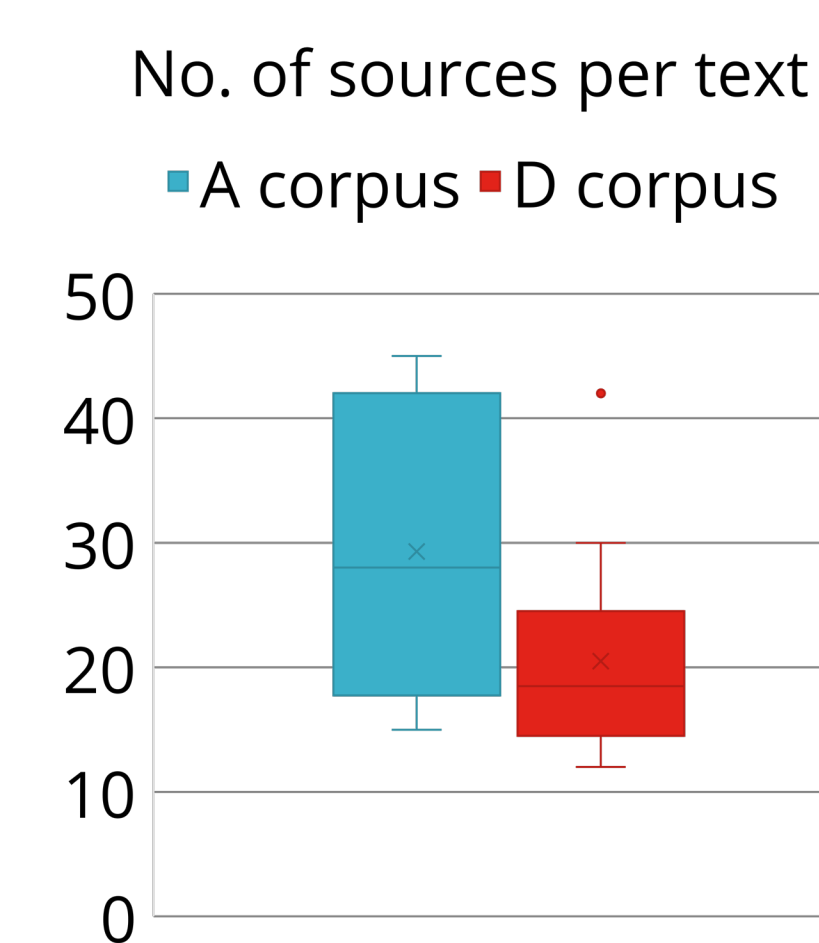
- Use of linking adverbials is often linked to successful academic writing<sup>3,4</sup>.
  - Overall, the A corpus used slightly but significantly ( $p < 0.05$ ) more linking adverbials: 12 per 1000 words compared with 11 per 1000 words.
  - The most common linking adverbials investigated were (freq. per 1000 words):
- | A corpus     |       | D corpus      |       |
|--------------|-------|---------------|-------|
| also         | (2.6) | also          | (2.7) |
| however      | (2.4) | however       | (2.0) |
| therefore    | (2.2) | therefore     | (1.8) |
| so           | (0.8) | so            | (1.0) |
| additionally | (0.4) | in conclusion | (0.4) |
| for example  | (0.4) | for example   | (0.4) |
- Both corpora relied on a small number of linking adverbials.
  - From this analysis, use of linking adverbials is unlikely to be a factor affecting grade awarded.

### Features showing no significant relationship:

- No. of citations** – A corpus assignments used 22.0 per 1000 words; D corpus assignments used 20.7 – this is not a statistically significant difference.
- Turnitin similarity score** – scores were in the same range for both corpora – there was no evidence of plagiarism contributing to lower grades.

### Use of sources

- The sources used by 14 assignments in each corpus were manually inspected and there were significant differences ( $p < 0.05$ ) in both the number and the type of sources used.



## 4. What this means for LD

Some features show a relationship with grade awarded. Learning Developers should continue to focus on:

- the structure of a paragraph
- the selection of appropriate sources
- hedging suppositions appropriately

There is no clear evidence that focussing on other aspects of writing will give high returns in terms of grades achieved: indeed the quality of the content appears key.

BUT – are these findings discipline dependent?



### References

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