

## Getting started with your language investigation: selecting a topic

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As part of your course, you will undertake a research project, using precise linguistic methods and writing it up as a linguistic paper.

### What does 'investigating language' involve?

You will be undertaking an investigation and writing it up like a research paper.

You will start by asking a question about a particular language topic. You will then ...

- collect the relevant data
- study and analyse the data
- draw conclusions from your analysis
- write up this whole process as a report.

Although there are basic rules about structuring your report, in the end how you write it will depend on your individual project and your ideas.

### Selecting a topic for research

You will do much better when you work on something that you have an interest in. You can pick any area from daily language use (including spoken and written language) that you are interested in, so think about this in detail first!

Here is a questionnaire to get you thinking about selecting a topic. Answer it in as much detail as you can - you may decide that some of the questions aren't relevant. This will be a good starting point and should give you several possible ideas for an investigation.

## Language investigation questionnaire

### 1. Your own language development - make a list of all the materials that you still have that relate to this, for example:

- school exercise books
- early readers (e.g. Dr Seuss books, books used in schools in early years)
- comics, magazines you read when you were younger
- audio or video recordings of you talking and interacting with others
- teachers' and/or school reports, school/college essays and other written work
- old diaries, scrapbooks, or other notebooks, blogs, tweets etc.

### 2. Your family:

- Do you have young relatives who are still in an early stage of language learning?
- Do the people in your family use a particular dialect, accent, or speak another language?
- Is there anyone in your family with particular language problems (e.g. speech impediment, dyslexia, etc.)?
- Do you have relatives who work in a particular area that use a specific type of language? (e.g. the language of professionals such as lawyers, doctors / medical staff, chefs, etc.)?
- Do you or your family have a collection of particular materials that have particular language in them (e.g. greeting cards, football or theatre programmes, specialist magazines, etc.)?
- Do you think you use language differently from your older relatives? If so, how?
- Do particular members of your family fall into predictable certain roles in conversation? For example: 'peacemaker', 'agitator', 'listener', 'leader' etc.?

### 3. Your own idiolect (personal language style):

- Do you belong to any groups or do you take part in any leisure activities that have their own forms of language? For example, particular hobbies such as rock climbing have their own sociolect, and interests such as musical genres often have specific lexical choices associated with them.
- Do you do any part time work that involves you using language in a certain way? Do you interact with customers face to face or on the phone?
- Do you collect, read and/or write certain types of materials such as specialist magazines or blogs?
- Do you have a particular accent or dialect, or use more than one language?
- Do you have driving lessons? How is language used by the instructor and/or by you in this situation?

### 4. You and your interests:

- What kind of things really interest you (e.g. sport, films, TV, hobbies etc.)?
- What kinds of language that you see/hear around you really fascinate you? Maybe it's easier to think of 'pet hates' in language usage - do you have any?
- Which topics or areas of the A-level course have you particularly enjoyed?
- Do you read any particular genres (e.g. comics/manga, messages on social media platforms, poetry/lyrics etc.)?

### 5. Which topics interest you:

- the conversations people have on buses/trains (can be mobile phone conversations or face-to-face)
- the way people speak on the phone or to voicemail/answering machines
- problem pages in magazines or papers or on-line
- shop names (can be a particular type, e.g. hairdressers' or chip shops)
- road signs such as signs informing people about diversions / work going on / advertising particular events
- signs in public spaces, e.g. at airports or railway stations informing/instructing passengers on how to behave with regard to luggage etc.
- graffiti: the messages people write in public spaces such as toilet cubicles or desks in classrooms
- ritual language used in ceremonies e.g. in church services, weddings, funerals
- greetings and phatic language used by different groups of people e.g. ages, genders etc.
- terms of address / pronouns to express non-binary gender identities or to avoid gender altogether
- non British varieties of English such as Australian English, South African, Singlish, etc.
- the languages of adverts and slogans
- persuasive speeches or the language of politicians e.g. in interviews on TV or radio
- particular genres of literature
- junk mail and flyers
- brand names such as cars or beauty products
- gravestones/obituaries
- the way other languages may affect the English of people who speak more than one language and/or do not speak English as their first language
- particular genres in a newspaper such as letters to the Editor, columns by regular writers, reviews (music, theatre, film, sport etc.)
- personal ads / dating website descriptions
- job / professional jargon; specialist lexis used in your A level subjects
- bias in the media, differences between tabloid and broadsheet or specific newspapers e.g. a right-wing newspaper reporting on same events as a left-wing newspaper
- children's expressions and language
- computer mediated communication: the language of texts/email/Twitter/Snapchat, comments given online to YouTube videos or online articles
- youth sociolect - a person's (could be a celebrity's) particular unique way of using language?

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### Once you have a topic/text type(s):

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1. Ask yourself first what you already know about it. Then, you can use language levels as a way of getting to grips with your topic: consider lexis, semantics, grammar, pragmatics, discourse, phonology, graphology. Theories and concepts relating to gender, power, spoken language features or CLA could all be relevant to your topic - consider how you might apply them.
2. You will need to read secondary sources on your investigation topic. Keep a reading log where you write down ...
  - the name of the author
  - title of the article
  - title of the book or publication
  - date of publication
  - web address
  - your thoughts on what you've read
  - potentially useful quotations.

Every text you've read must be listed in your investigation's bibliography.

### Useful starting places include:

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- *Emagazine* - published by the English and Media Centre written especially for A-level students (your school/college will need a subscription).
- *Babel: The Language Magazine* - published by the University of Huddersfield, the website [www.babelzine.com](http://www.babelzine.com) has a searchable database as well as online access to issues (your school/college will need a subscription).
- [www.davidcrystal.com/books-and-articles](http://www.davidcrystal.com/books-and-articles) - a searchable database of all of David Crystal's articles.
- BBC Radio 4's *Word of Mouth* has downloadable podcasts on wide range of language topics. Search for *Word of Mouth* on [www.bbc.co.uk/radio4](http://www.bbc.co.uk/radio4)
- Language Log - a blog ([www.languagelog.ldc.upenn.edu/nll/](http://www.languagelog.ldc.upenn.edu/nll/)) run by linguists from Pennsylvania University with a search facility.
- The Ling Space - a blog ([www.thelingspace.com](http://www.thelingspace.com)) run by linguists from McGill University in Canada; also a Youtube channel, covering language levels, CLA, prescriptivism etc.
- Dan Clayton's English language blog - ([englishlangsfx.blogspot.com](http://englishlangsfx.blogspot.com)) an accessible linguistic blog which is a great resource for A-level students.

### Teaching notes

#### Choosing a topic

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Almost any topic can lend itself to a successful investigation, as long as students think about it carefully. Once they express an interest in a type of language:

- They need to think of an angle - so if it's advertising they are interested in - what product? What brand? Will it be a synchronic or diachronic approach?
- If they wish to investigate song lyrics, it tends to work better if they focus on a particular genre or artist with the intention of exploring representation of aspects of identity (ethnicity, race, gender, sexuality etc.) or topics (e.g. romance, poverty, feminism etc.). A similar approach can work well with texts collected from social media such as Twitter.
- Most text types will lend themselves to analysis using the language levels fully - however, where data such as slogans or brand names are selected, it may be that there is little to say about grammar for example.
- To ensure that students are still able to receive the best possible results, they may need to collect more examples of data (e.g. two dozen instead of six texts), but they may also need reminding that even when investigating brand names there is scope for language level word with discussions of semantics, derivational morphology and processes of word formation, phonological effects such as phonaesthetics (the aesthetics of phonemes - some sounds are more pleasant than others) for example.

#### Secondary Reading and starting research:

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Apart from *Emagazine* and *Babel*, all resources listed are free and are written to be accessible for non-academics and non-linguists. These resources might also help to spark an interest or help students to select data or decide on a precise topic.

While students can search for more academic material via Google Scholar and the academic site [www.academia.edu](http://www.academia.edu), materials found through these may be hard going for A-level students. It is worthwhile to make contact with linguistics departments in local universities, as staff are often keen to be interviewed or give talks to sixth formers.

Universities will have an outreach programme, which means that talks and visits can often be arranged for free. Similarly, many universities will allow teachers and students in local sixth form colleges access to their libraries - it is worth looking at your local university's widening participation programme.

With regard to referencing and bibliography writing - there are lots of websites and downloadable apps available that prompt students to fill in details and then generate the bibliographical entry and the reference, for example:

UK Essays referencing generator: [www.ukessays.com/referencing/apa/generator/](http://www.ukessays.com/referencing/apa/generator/) or  
Cite this for me: [www.citethisforme.com](http://www.citethisforme.com).