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A Grammar for Writing across the Curriculum

**The word is the verb:
Verbs and tenses, modals and modifiers**

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The word 'verb' comes from the Latin *verbum* meaning, which means *word*.

Verbs are often simplistically described as 'doing words'. While verbs can indeed convey an **action** (*fetch, read, run, try, learn*), they also indicate an **occurrence** (*happen, become*), or a **state of being** (*be, exist, suffer*).

Verbs are often considered to be the 'muscle' of a sentence, and the extent to which they can be modified to encode **tense**, **aspect**, **mood**, and **voice** (among other things) is a constant source of fascination for linguists, and often frustration for language learners.

A knowledge of the various forms and meanings of a range of verbs is crucial for good talk and writing across the whole school curriculum.

Verbs and academic writing...

At Mulberry, the English department has had success in improving students' analytical writing by having them focus on how they use verbs to comment on, explain, analyse and evaluate language and texts.

Through activities and modelling embedded in schemes of work, students are given opportunities to use verbs in various ways so that the kind of analytical language required for successful writing becomes embedded in classroom talk and in students' vocabularies.

Students are encouraged to use a range of tense forms of analytical verbs (e.g. *suggests*, *suggested*, *suggesting*) and to nominalise these verbs, i.e. turn them into nouns (e.g. *suggestion*, *implication*, *representation*), where appropriate.

The next few slides show word banks of verbs for English, including differentiated lists for Key Stage 3 year groups, and a similar list of some analysing and reporting verbs for History. There follows a note about why understanding and ability around using verb tenses is important for different kinds of writing.

suggests
implies **means**
represents

Note of caution: Only use the verbs you're familiar with unless you take the time to examine the definition in the dictionary. This is *not* a list of synonyms. Each word has specific uses that are unique to its meaning.

Accentuates	Creates	Exemplifies	Intensifies	Remarks
Advises	Criticises	Exhibits	Introduces	Represents
Advocates	Deepens	Expands	Invokes	Reveals
Affects	Denotes	Explains	Juxtaposes	Shows
Alludes to	Depicts	Explores	Manifests	Signifies
Amplifies	Describes	Exposes	Means	Symbolises
Argues	Determines	Expresses	Mentions	Stresses
Articulates	Demonstrates	Forces	Narrates	Subverts
Builds	Displays	Foregrounds	Perceives	Suggests
Clarifies	Echoes	Foreshadows	Personifies	Supports
Compels	Elaborates	Foretells	Persuades	Tells
Confirms	Elicits	Forms	Pervades	Typifies
Connects	Embodies	Highlights	Portrays	Underlines
Connotes	Emphasises	Heightens	Presents	Undermines
Considers	Encapsulates	Hints	Promotes	Underpins
Constructs	Encourages	Illustrates	Recognises	
Contradicts	Establishes	Impacts	Refers	
Compels	Evokes	Implies	Reinforces	
Compounds	Exaggerates	Indicates	Reiterates	
Conveys	Examines	Informs	Relates	

Year 7: Active verbs for writing about texts...

Note of caution: Use a dictionary, or ask a classmate or teacher, to check the meaning of the word before you use it!

Argues	Emphasises	Implies	Refers
Builds	Establishes	Indicates	Represents
Confirms	Exaggerates	Informs	Reveals
Conveys	Explains	Introduces	Shows
Connects	Explores	Means	Signifies
Creates	Exposes	Narrates	Symbolises
Describes	Highlights	Persuades	Suggests
Demonstrates	Hints	Portrays	Supports
Displays	Illustrates	Presents	Tells

Year 8: Active verbs for writing about texts...

Note of caution: Use a dictionary, or ask a classmate or teacher, to check the meaning of the word before you use it!

Advises	Describes	Exposes	Juxtaposes	Reveals
Affects	Demonstrates	Expresses	Means	Shows
Argues	Displays	Forces	Mentions	Signifies
Builds	Echoes	Forms	Narrates	Symbolises
Confirms	Emphasises	Highlights	Perceives	Suggests
Connects	Encourages	Heightens	Persuades	Supports
Connotes	Establishes	Hints	Portrays	Tells
Conveys	Evokes	Illustrates	Presents	Underlines
Creates	Exaggerates	Impacts	Recognises	
Criticises	Examines	Implies	Refers	
Deepens	Expands	Indicates	Relates	
Denotes	Explains	Informs	Remarks	
Depicts	Explores	Introduces	Represents	

Year 9: Active verbs for writing about texts...

Note of caution: Use a dictionary, or ask a classmate or teacher, to check the meaning of the word before you use it!

Advises	Criticises	Exhibits	Implies	Recognises
Affects	Deepens	Expands	Indicates	Refers
Argues	Denotes	Explains	Informs	Reinforces
Articulates	Depicts	Explores	Intensifies	Relates
Builds	Describes	Exposes	Introduces	Remarks
Clarifies	Demonstrates	Expresses	Juxtaposes	Represents
Confirms	Displays	Foreshadows	Means	Reveals
Connects	Echoes	Forces	Mentions	Shows
Connotes	Emphasises	Forms	Narrates	Signifies
Considers	Encourages	Highlights	Perceives	Symbolises
Constructs	Establishes	Heightens	Persuades	Suggests
Contradicts	Evokes	Hints	Portrays	Supports
Conveys	Exaggerates	Illustrates	Presents	Tells
Creates	Examines	Impacts	Promotes	Underlines

Some analytical verbs for writing in **History**...

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Note of caution: Use a dictionary, or ask a classmate or teacher, to check the meaning of the word before you use it!

These verbs are appropriate for analysing sources and perspectives, rather than recounting historical events.

Advises	Considers	Exemplifies	Observes	Remarks
Advocates	Contradicts	Exhibits	Perceives	Reports
Affects	Declares	Explains	Persuades	Represents
Argues	Defines	Exposes	Points out	Reveals
Asserts	Denies	Foregrounds	Postulates	Shows
Claims	Depicts	Hints	Portrays	Signifies
Clarifies	Describes	Highlights	Predicts	Stresses
Concedes	Demonstrates	Illustrates	Presents	Suggests
Concentrates	Dismisses	Implies	Presumes	Supports
Condonates	Displays	Indicates	Proposes	Surveys
Confirms	Disregards	Informs	Proves	Symbolises
Connects	Doubts	Introduces	Refers	Tells
Constructs	Encourages	Maintains	Reflects	Typifies
Contends	Emphasises	Manifests	Refutes	Underlines
Compounds	Establishes	Means	Reinforces	Undermines
Conveys	Estimates	Mentions	Rejects	Validates
Criticises	Examines	Notes	Relates	Verifies

Verbs and tenses for your subject...

It is a good idea to have a secure understanding among subject teachers of the various verbs and tenses used in different kinds of writing demanded in the disciplines they teach. Many university faculties have guides to language use in their disciplines, and these are good places to start.

If we want students to talk and write like scientists, historians or geographers, then work around embedding the language skills to do so must be built into planning and lessons. Here follows a guide/model of how to use the historical present tense in English from Mulberry.

University of Toronto

A Guide To Verb Tense Voice And Mood In Scientific Writing

A. Present Tense

Use present tense:


1. To describe something that is happening now:

- Appendix A *summarises* the results of the survey.

2. To describe published research, articles or books whose conclusions you believe are currently valid and relevant. It doesn't matter whether the publication is recent or centuries old.

[**Link to full guide \(PDF\)**](#)

University of Melbourne



Using tenses in scientific writing

Tense considerations for science writing

When you write an experimental report, or draft a thesis chapter, you need to choose which tense, or tenses, to use.

This flyer provides advice intended to help you become more conscious of what the choice of verb tense involves, and to become better able to notice the tense choices that writers in your particular field have made.

From your chosen tense, your reader receives two kinds of information. One concerns **time**: it is about 'when' (past, present or future). The other relates to whether an event or process is **open** or **closed**.

The examples below illustrate the distinction between 'open' and 'closed' events:

How long *were* you at Melbourne Uni?

Simple past / closed event: the other person has already graduated.

How long *have you been* at Melbourne Uni?

Present perfect / open event: the other person is still

Abstract

This usually refers to your unpublished results and uses the **past tense**.

Introduction

Your introduction needs to include background information which is generally accepted as fact in a discipline. You also need to explain why the research you are reporting is important. It is usually presented in the **present tense**. Example:

*Genomics **provides** crucial information for rational drug design.*

You will need to refer to existing research relevant to your work, and you can indicate your opinion of the research you are writing about by careful tense selection.

For example, when you use the **present tense** you are indicating to the reader that you believe that the

[**Link to full guide \(PDF\)**](#)

We use the **historical present tense** when writing about a text. Why do you think this is?

- When you write about a text, you write about it in the present:

“In this scene, Juliet is presented as a calm and level-headed girl.”

- At this moment, you also know what has happened in the past:

“In this scene Juliet is presented as a calm and level-headed girl. Paris has shown an interest in marrying her, but she will not be rushed.”

- You also know what happens in the future!

“Compared to how she will be portrayed just a few scenes later, in this scene Juliet is presented as a calm and level-headed girl. Paris has shown an interest in marrying her, but she will not be rushed.”



Modal verbs

Can
Could
May
Might
Must

Shall
Should
Will
Would

A **modal verb** is a type of auxiliary verb that indicates modality – that is, **likelihood**, **ability**, **permission**, or **obligation**. The most common modal verbs in English are shown here.

Students aren't always in the habit of using this class of words, or their negated forms (*cannot*, *shouldn't*), yet they are useful in a range of subjects and for lots of different kinds of classroom talk and writing.

The next few slides explain how modality is encouraged in pupils' talk and writing in English at Mulberry, and then suggest how, by using images and being mindful of the language used in questioning, this kind of language use can be enabled in other disciplines.

Combining modal verbs with modifiers

Modals can be combined with various modifying words and phrases to further aid the expression of certainty, possibility, perception, interpretation etc.



English and Media
Modals and
modifiers

Modal verbs	Some modifiers	
<p>Can</p> <p>Could</p> <p>May</p> <p>Might</p> <p>Must</p> <p>Shall</p> <p>Should</p> <p>Will</p> <p>Would</p>	<p>Almost</p> <p>Certainly</p> <p>Clearly</p> <p>Consequently</p> <p>Definitely</p> <p>Effectively</p> <p>Essentially</p> <p>Evidently</p> <p>Immediately</p> <p>In effect</p> <p>In fact</p>	<p>In a sense</p> <p>Necessarily</p> <p>Often</p> <p>Perhaps</p> <p>Possibly</p> <p>Probably</p> <p>Somewhat</p> <p>Ultimately</p> <p>Undoubtedly</p> <p>Unquestionably</p>



An analysis and interpretation activity

This is from a Key Stage 3 unit of work in which students analyse non-fiction texts, such as leaflets, articles and adverts. In this de-contextualised activity, students are asked shown an abstract painting and asked what it *is* a picture of.

Students tend to fixate on one interpretation (and use the verb 'is' to express it). They are then asked for more interpretations, and to discuss or write about them using the modal verbs and modifiers shown here.

Words to show uncertainty/possibility

Modal Verbs	Modifiers
Can Could May Might	Perhaps Possibly Probably

3.

IN GROUPS

THEY OFTEN HAVE TO GO WITHOUT

MEDICAL TREATMENT

SKIP MEALS

SO THEIR FAMILIES CAN EAT

& KEEP THEIR KIDS OUT OF SCHOOL

POWERLESS

STUCK IN

POVERTY

An analysis and interpretation activity

Before students analyse the details of a Fairtrade television advert, they are encouraged to use modality in their talking and writing, and are shown a model of this kind of language in use.

In this kind of activity, modals can be combined with verbs for analysis to comment on details of the advert (“*blue and green could symbolise...*”) and to consider the purpose and audience of this text (“*this might convince the audience...*”).

1.

HOW FAR WILL YOU GO FOR FAIRTRADE IN 2012?

The Fairtrade advert uses a rhetorical question: “How far will you go for Fairtrade in 2012?” This question directly addresses the audience by using the second person pronoun ‘you’.

2.

The use of this rhetorical question may encourage people to think about whether they are buying Fairtrade products when they are available and could possibly persuade an audience to buy these products more often.

3.

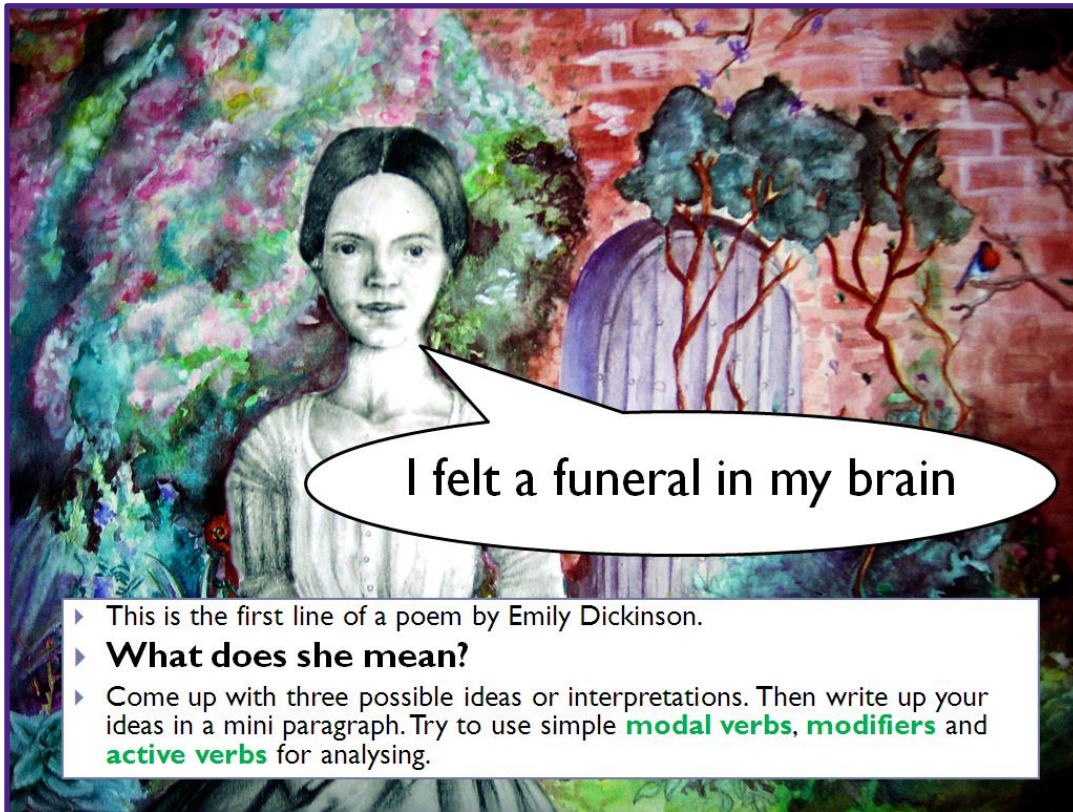
The text is illustrated by images which represent Fairtrade products available: flowers, tea and bananas. These pictures might help the audience understand just how many Fairtrade products are available and could convince them to look out for them next time they go shopping.

Modals and modifiers and literary analysis



Working in pairs, predict what you will do and what will happen to you during the rest of the day. Choose things you're certain of, and others you're less certain of. Notice which modal verbs you use.

In this lesson, from an academic writing unit on the language of analysis, students use modal verbs in a de-contextualised speaking and listening activity.



- ▶ This is the first line of a poem by Emily Dickinson.
- ▶ **What does she mean?**
- ▶ Come up with three possible ideas or interpretations. Then write up your ideas in a mini paragraph. Try to use simple **modal verbs**, **modifiers** and **active verbs** for analysing.

Students then combine modal verbs with modifiers and analytical verbs to analyse the opening line of a poem to suggest different interpretations of it.



a) Coastal pollution

Questions to encourage modality...

*“What **could** have happened here?”*

*“Why **might** have been the cause or process?”*

*“What **should** be done to prevent this?”*



b) A burnt-out circuit board

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Using modal verbs in Science



a) A forest fire in Chile

Questions to encourage modality...

*“What **might** have happened here?”*

*“Why **could** have been the cause or process?”*

*“What **may** be the consequences?”*



b) An ash-covered village after a volcano eruption in Indonesia

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Using modal verbs in Geography



a) German bombers over London, World War II

Questions to encourage modality...

*“What **could** be happening here?”*

*“Why **may** it have happened in this place?”*

*“What **can** this suggest to us?”*



b) ‘And When Did You Last See Your Father?’ - a scene from the English Civil War

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Using modal verbs in History



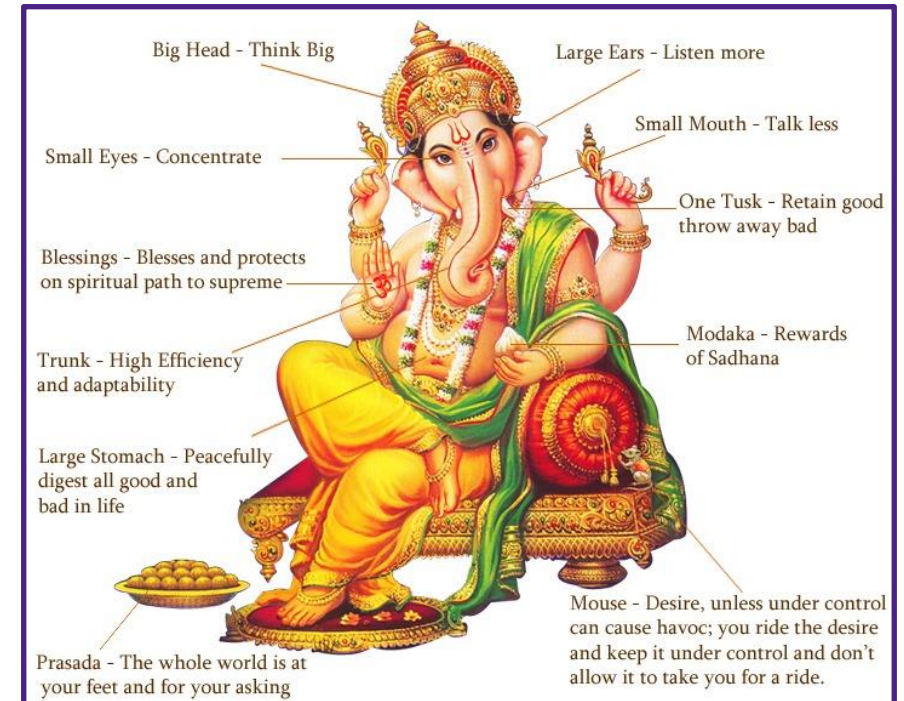
a) The Great Mosque-Cathedral of Córdoba

Questions to encourage modality...

*“What **might** this reveal or suggest?”*

*“What **could** this symbolise or represent?”*

*“Why **might** this be significant?”*



b) Hinduism: Ganesha symbolism

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Using modal verbs in RS