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Modality in Writing

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In linguistics, modality is a category of meaning used to talk about likelihood, ability, permission, or obligation. Explicitly teaching the language of modality enables students to move from being too forceful, or too tentative, and towards interpreting and writing with clarity and credibility.

This workshop will explore the way that Swanlea School, as part of the Fetch Me a Pen project, has been working across a range of subjects to teach the language of modality in order to develop a common understanding and usage.

Participants will be given opportunities to engage in tasks and consider how this approach to language will support the improvement of writing in their schools.

Modality in Writing

- ‘How is this (principle/strategy/approach etc.) relevant to your school/context?’
- ‘How could this work in your context?’
- ‘How will you make it work?’

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1. Here is a short case study for health and Social care. Read through it and answer the T/F questions. Discuss your answers with your group or partner.

Jayne is a looked after child. She has been in residential care since she was three years old. Jayne finds it difficult to make friends as she doesn't always feel confident, She often feels that she is less important than other children who live at home with their parents" extract from a case study)

True or false

1. Jayne has no friends T/F
2. Jayne never feels confident T/F
3. Being a 'looked after child is the main reason for Jayne lack of confidence T/F
4. Jayne knows that she is less important than other children T/F
5. Jayne has been in care for most of her life T/F

1. Here is one student's response to the question about the case study. One person in the group should read the paragraph out loud; the other group members should listen and underline the verbs.

Version 1

Jayne is a looked after child which means she will get positive comments from the residential home people. This will lead her to having a positive self concept. When Jayne is at school she will compare herself with other children who all have parents and think negatively because they've got their parents to turn to when things go wrong as she hasn't got anyone to talk to or turn to. Finding it difficult to make friends will have a negative effect on her self concept because she might think that everyone else can make friends and also have a family. Due to this her self image is negative because she might blame herself for the life she has. This will lead to her having a low self esteem because she hasn't got any friends, as she feels less confident this will have a negative effect on her self concept because she cannot talk to her peers as she hasn't got any.

b) How true do you think this paragraph is? Is it a true analysis of Jayne's situation?

Version 2

Jayne is a looked after child which means she **might** get positive comments from the residential home people. This **might** lead her to having a positive self concept. When Jayne is at school she **might compare** herself with other children who all have parents and **might think** negatively because they've got their parents to turn to when things go wrong as she hasn't got anyone to talk to or turn to. Finding it difficult to make friends **might have** a negative effect on her self concept because she **might think** that everyone else can make friends and also have a family. Due to this her self image **might be** negative because she **might blame** herself for the life she has. This **might lead** to her having a low self esteem because she hasn't got any friends, as she feels less confident this **might have** a negative effect on her self concept because she cannot talk to her peers as she hasn't got any.

Now look at versions 2 and 3:

d) How have the verbs changed? What is the effect of all these changes?

e) What is the difference between version 2 and version 3?

f) Which do you think is more convincing? Is either of these an accurate analysis of Jayne's situation?

Version 3

Jayne is a looked after child which means she **is likely to** get positive comments from the residential home people. This **will probably lead** her to having a positive self concept. *However*, when Jayne is at school she **might compare** herself with other children who all have parents and **might think** negatively because they've got their parents to turn to when things go wrong as she hasn't got **many** people to talk to or turn to. Finding it difficult to make friends **might have** a negative effect on her self concept because **it is probable that she thinks** that everyone else can make friends and also have a family. Due to this her self image **is likely to be** negative because she **possibly blames** herself for the life she has. This **might lead** to her having a low self esteem because she hasn't got **many** friends, as she feels less confident this **might have** a negative effect on her self concept because she cannot talk **much** to her peers as she hasn't got **many**.

Feedback:

What is the purpose of this task?

The goal of this activity is to make students think about how the language they use (particularly the verbs and modifiers) can make their writing more or less convincing and credible.

It has been designed by changing the verbs and modifiers in an original piece of pupils writing to make them more or less convincing, and comparing these with the original version.

| Modal Verbs | Modifiers |
|-------------|-------------|
| Can | Clearly |
| Could | Essentially |
| May | Effectively |
| Might | In a sense |
| Shall | Perhaps |
| Should | Possibly |
| Will | Probably |
| Would | Somewhat |
| | Undoubtedly |

Guidelines for use and adaption – Writing convincingly



1. Close to the start of the activity you will need to review what a **verb** is and what it looks like so they students are able to identify all the verb forms in the text. Later in the activity it is useful to introduce the words **modality and modal verbs (1)** and **modify/modifiers (2)** and give definitions

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(1) Linguistic devices that indicate the degree to which an observation is possible, probable, likely, certain, permitted, or prohibited.

(2) A word, phrase, or clause that limits or qualifies the sense of another word or word

Guidelines for use and adaption – Writing convincingly

2. Work through the activity or one of your own, using the questions and instructions, taking time for discussion and questions you include.
You could remove the T/F section and put it on the board for discussion
3. Give students the rewritten paragraph to consider, looking at how the verbs and modifiers are more or less likely to persuade the reader.
4. Consider the changes between the rewritten and the original paragraphs, looking at how the verbs and modifiers are more or less likely to persuade the reader.

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To note:

There is no 'rule' for this activity as each subject and each topic will have its own conventions for explanation and persuasion; the key point is to highlight here is that using different verbs and modifiers make a difference to the reader, and that students can be aware of how they do this in their own writing. The examples provided in this activity are not perfect and students should be encouraged to critique and improve them if time allows.

Over to you activities

1. Choose an example of writing (paragraph or possibly a sentence) in your subject which persuades or convinces in part by using a range of verbs (might do, definitely, does etc.) OR choose an example which fails to do so because it is too tentative (too many mights, coulds, perhaps's) or too definite.

2. Re write the sentence or the paragraph either by making it entirely definite or entirely tentative, limiting the range of verbs and modifiers you include.

3-4 as per last page

Encourage students to go through a section of their own writing looking at the verb and modifiers and to judge whether they are making a persuasive case, being too tentative, or too forceful and so on; students can then change the verbs and modifiers in a section of their work to see if they can change the tone.

This can act as the starting point for a discussion of their writing, editing or rewriting

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