Word order and focus

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Word order in this chapter is principally concerned with how the elements of the clause (subject, verb, object, complement, adjunct) are arranged. Word order choices also affect phrases, and the chapters on phrase classes (155–257) specify the patterns of word order found in noun, verb, adjective, adverb and prepositional phrases.

**Theme and rhyme**

Clauses may be considered as having two parts in relation to how information is arranged within them: the theme (or topic) and the rheme (or comment). The theme/topic is typically the starting point of the clause, who or what the clause is ‘about’. The rheme/comment is the main part of the message, the important information given about that topic. In the sentence:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>theme/topic</th>
<th>rheme/comment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sue</td>
<td>is starting a new job on Monday.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

the clause is ‘about’ Sue, and the new or important information is that she is starting a new job on Monday. In English, the theme/topic is located in the beginning of the clause (and is most typically the subject), while the rheme/comment occupies the latter part of the clause after the subject.

The end of the clause is important in English, as that is where the most ‘weight’ falls in terms of the focus on new information, sometimes referred to as endweight.

**Marked and unmarked word order**

Unmarked word order refers to the normal, most typical sequence of elements. For example, the unmarked word order for a declarative clause with an object is S–V–O, where S is the subject, V is the verb and O is the object. In English, the word order O–S–V is marked (possible but far less typical):

\[
\begin{align*}
S & \quad V & \quad O \\
He \ loves \ football. \\
(\text{unmarked, normal word order: the subject, } he, \text{ is the theme})
\end{align*}
\]

\[
\begin{align*}
O & \quad S & \quad V \\
That \ furniture \ we \ bought \ years \ ago, \ this \ lot \ is \ more \ recent. \\
(\text{marked word order: that furniture is the theme, rather than we})
\end{align*}
\]

Marked (untypical) word order may be used to create various kinds of focus, that is, special emphasis on particular elements for a variety of purposes.

The basic rules for clause and sentence structures (\textit{\&} 269–337) describe how to build unmarked sentences. However, in connected discourse, other choices have to be made concerning such things as introducing new topics, distinguishing between
new and old information, linking events in particular ways, flagging or highlighting the importance of something, foregrounding some things and backgrounding others, all of which may have implications for choices of word order.

**Simple word order choices**

Some choices of word order simply rearrange elements without any other grammatical changes. These include fronting and the use of headers and tails.

Fronting involves moving objects, complements and adjuncts to front position in the clause, which, in unmarked word order, is typically occupied by the subject:

**object**

*That bowl we got in Italy. The other one’s from Spain, I think.*

(fronting of the object in order to focus on a contrast between the two bowls)

**adjunct**

*First thing tomorrow morning we’ll have to check all the plants for frost damage.*

(fronting of the adjunct to emphasise when the task must be done)

The creation of headers and tails ([96, 97 and 474](#)), is another way of putting extra focus on selected entities.

In the case of fronting, the elements remain fully integrated within the clause. In the case of headers and tails, elements of the clause are placed outside of the clause structure, either immediately before the first clause element or after all other elements in the clause. This is a particular phenomenon of spoken grammar:

**header**

*That brown chair, we bought that years and years ago.*

(header: gives extra focus to *that brown chair*)

**adjunct**

*They’re awful people, my neighbours.*

(tail: gives extra focus to the subject)

**Choices of structure**

Some choices of word order involve choosing between alternative structures, for example choosing whether to use an indirect object or a prepositional complement with verbs such as *give* or *bring*, or choosing whether to use active or passive voice:

[talking about birthdays and activities associated with them]

*Do you send birthday cards to your friends?*

The new, important information here, which would be phonologically stressed, is *to your friends*. Birthdays and things associated with birthdays are already the topic of conversation; they are ‘old’ or ‘shared’ information. *Do you send your friends birthday cards?*, using an indirect and direct object, is also possible and correct, but would have suggested a focus on birthday cards as ‘new’, ‘non-shared’ information.

Some choices of word order involve more complex grammatical structures and choices, for example embedded clauses or cleft sentences:

*It was on Sunday I first noticed I had a rash.*

(cleft sentence enabling emphasis on ‘on Sunday’)

*So what you really want is a hotel that’s got the facilities for the children, isn’t it?* (wh-cleft enabling extra focus on the complement ‘a hotel that’s got …’)*

—[539 Glossary for any unfamiliar terms](#)
That they thought they could use the computers without permission is hard to believe.
(that-clause as subject enabling extra focus on the object of 'believe')

FRONTING 473

Direct objects 473a

A direct object may be fronted, that is, made the theme (or ‘thematised’) in a declarative clause, especially in spoken language; this occurs most typically when the speaker wishes to contrast things. Phonologically, the fronted object (bold in the examples below) is typically stressed:

[speaker is talking about the early days of computers, and how he bought one type after another and occasionally upgraded the power]

And then we bought an Impact, and that we couldn't get upgraded.
(the ‘Impact’ is contrasted with other computers which the speaker upgraded)

I must admit, my favourite books I do read over and over.
(here there is an implicit contrast with other books which the speaker would not read over and over)

[talking about pipes a plumber is working on; contrasting different ones]

He's got those disconnected, but that one he's still got connected.

Objects of prepositional verbs and phrasal verbs may also be fronted:

The other list we can look at later.
[wife talking about how she and her husband share the work in their garden]
I do the flowers; the vegetables he looks after.

Object fronting can also occur in interrogatives in informal speech, but this is not very common:

[speaker is looking over someone's shoulder while they are cooking]

Soup are you making? Wow, lovely!

Predicative complements 473b

Subject predicative complements are often fronted for extra focus or for contrast. This may occur in declaratives and in interrogatives.

In informal spoken language, fronted noun subject complements are more common than fronted adjective subject complements:

[looking at a photo of an old car]

Mm, my very first car, that was.
Fronted complements which are expressions of comparison may be followed by subject-verb inversion, especially in more formal written styles:

[from a text about the Maastricht Agreement signed in 1992 by 12 member states establishing the European Union]

Maastricht was not a triumph for any Government, although each of the Governments present claimed it as one. Least of all was it a triumph for the British Prime Minister.

Children make a substantial contribution to the social, economic and cultural life of their families, communities, and even to national economies. These contributions are rarely recorded by official statistics and are usually ignored when policy decisions are made. Equally unnoticed is the unpaid ‘work’ that children do around the home, in the fields, or at institutions of learning.

[discussing a conference on debt and international development]

The conference was helpful in aiding my understanding of the great mass of information that I am faced with in my volunteer role. But much more important for me was to be exposed to the experience of people working with the poor in the Third World whose suffering results from debt.

Object predicative complements may also occasionally be fronted:

A: Down our end in Victoria Street there was a bookmaker they used to call Ray, and he had just one arm. ‘Ray the Bookie’ we used to call him.
B: Yeah. I can remember him.
In rather formal styles, inversion may occur after initial *thus*, and after expressions such as *in this way, for this reason*:

> [at the time of writing, Mr Blair was the British Prime Minister, and Mr Campbell was his press secretary, with whom he had a very close working relationship]

> **Thus does Mr Blair find himself ever more closely closeted with Mr Campbell.**

---

> 324 Front position in Adjuncts for a full account of fronting of adjuncts

---

A lexical verb with an accompanying complement or adjunct may sometimes be fronted for purposes of focusing on some other element of the verb phrase:

> [British Prime Minister Tony Blair, speaking when newly elected in 1997]  

> *The British people are a great people. There is no greater honour than to serve them, and serve them we will.*  

> (creates strong endweight on *will*, since it must be phonologically stressed in final position)

> **Sitting in the garden I've been, all morning.**

Occasionally, an auxiliary/modal verb and a lexical verb may both be fronted. This typically occurs in spoken language:

> *Why didn't you phone your mother? Been really panicking she has.*

---

**HEADERS AND TAILS**

Headers and tails stand outside of the normal subject – verb – object – complement – adjunct clause structure. They typically occur in informal spoken language.

**Headers**

Headers usually take the form of an initial noun phrase which refers to the same entity as a later pronoun. They are used to focus on an entity, or to highlight contrasts:

> **Paul, in this job that he's got now, when he goes into the office, he's never quite sure where he's going to be sent.**  

> (Paul is the speaker’s new topic or entity focused on)

> **Edward, he's always the first person to complain.**

Headers may also occur with interrogative clauses:

> **That key, did you put it there or did I?**
Headers may involve more than one extra noun phrase used initially, to take the listener step-by-step from familiar entities to the new entity the speaker wishes to focus on or say something about:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>given/old information</th>
<th>new information</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| His cousin in Bedford, her boyfriend, his parents bought him a car for his birthday.

Tails

Tails involve noun phrases used at the end of the clause, referring to the same person or thing as a previous pronoun in the clause. Such word order is typically used to highlight judgment, comment or evaluation rather than mere statement of fact:

And he’s quite a comic, the fellow, you know.

It’s really nicely done out, this place, all wooden.

The tail may involve a demonstrative pronoun rather than a full noun phrase:

It’s a speciality, that.

It’s driving me crazy, this.

---

96 Headers; 97 Tails

**STRUCTURAL OPTIONS**

**Indirect object versus prepositional complement**

In expressing the recipient or beneficiary of an action, there is often a choice between an indirect object or a prepositional complement.

Unmarked word order is indirect object (IO) + direct object (DO):

\[
\text{IO} \rightarrow \text{DO}
\]

Did you give him the money?

If the recipient/beneficiary is to receive more focus, it can be expressed as a prepositional complement (PC) and placed at the end of the clause, giving it endweight:

[speaker B has just given speaker A a present]
A: Oh, you didn’t have to do that!
B: I bought a present for Rhonda as well.
(Rhonda is the new, important information here; ‘presents’ are old, given information)

The plans were revised about 1974 but they still gave a disproportionate focus to France.

---

539 Glossary for any unfamiliar terms
Where two pronouns are involved, a prepositional complement is often preferred:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{She wrote her name and address on the card and gave it to me.} \\
(\text{or: \ldots and gave me it./\ldots and gave it me.)}
\end{align*}
\]

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{I think my mother gave them to them.} \\
(\text{preferred to: \ldots gave them them.)}
\end{align*}
\]

Delexical expressions, using verbs such as do, get, give, make, take enable a verb-type meaning to be expressed in a following noun object. In expressions where the verb give is used delexically, IO + DO is preferred to DO + PC:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Well, I gave them a song.} \\
(\text{I sang}) \\
(\text{I gave a song to them.)}
\end{align*}
\]

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{The doctor gave him a quick examination.} \\
(\text{examined him}) \\
(\text{The doctor gave a quick examination to him.)}
\end{align*}
\]

Prepositional complements may be fronted, especially in formal styles, creating endweight on the direct object:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{To his wife he gave a pearl necklace.}
\end{align*}
\]

Indirect objects are not normally fronted:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{I gave Liam the wrong postcode.} \\
(\text{Liam I gave the wrong postcode.)}
\end{align*}
\]

Active versus passive voice 475b

Unmarked active voice word order places the subject first, since the subject is typically the theme (who or what the clause is ‘about’). Passive voice enables the speaker either to omit reference to the agent/doer altogether (unless the agent is required by the verb) or to place the agent/doer in a prepositional phrase after the verb and thus create focus on it:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{I was admitted to hospital.} \\
(\text{focus is on the rheme, my being admitted to hospital; compare: ‘The hospital admitted me’, where the hospital would be unmarked subject/theme, thus losing its focus}) \\
\text{I was just coming home and five minutes after I left this friend I was with, he was attacked by two men.} \\
(\text{the rheme includes the agents – two men})
\end{align*}
\]
*He got arrested.*
(focus on the event of his arrest; there is no need to explicitly mention the agent, understood as probably the police; compare: ‘He was arrested by a huge, ugly police officer’, with focus on the agent)

*The audio-lingual method of teaching was imposed upon us.*
(no one is named or blamed for the event)

*The hotel was owned by the Greek Church, wasn’t it?*
(obligatory agent phrase with the verb *own*; but compare: ‘The Greek Church owned the hotel’, where the *Greek Church* loses its special focus)

---

A cleft sentence is one where a single message has been split/divided (or ‘cleft’) into two clauses. Cleft sentences with *it* allow different clause elements to be brought into focus. In a typical *it*-cleft structure, the focus is on the final element of the *it*-clause (in green in the examples below), with the subsequent *wh*-clause (underlined in the examples) reiterating given or previously known information:

[talking of someone whose job it is to evict people from houses for unpaid rents, mortgages, etc.; the dwellings are ‘repossessed’ by the bank or other lender]

*He was telling me he was called in for a repossession this week. It was an elderly lady who had this house and they’d sent her umpteen letters and appeals and she’d ignored the lot.*
(focus on the subject, an elderly lady; ‘who had this house’ is given/old information in the context of house possession)

[talking about waiting for an eye operation]

A: *I talked it over with my optician then went to my doctor and got a reference to the hospital which would be about March and he warned me that it would be about six months.*

B: *So it was in March that you went?*
(focus on the adjunct *in March*; ‘going (to the hospital)’ is already given/old information in the context)

*I doubt people would have as many pets because it’s usually the children who say ‘Mum can I have a pet?’.*

*I’ve always had morning stiffness, I accept that’s part of my life. By the time I’ve had my pills for two hours in the morning, the stiffness eases and I’d sooner have a bit of stiffness than I’d have the pain. It’s the pain I can’t cope with.*
(focus on the object of the prepositional verb ‘cope with’: *the pain*)
**Wh-cleft sentences (What we need is a hammer.)**

*What* …

Wh-cleft sentences are most often introduced by *what*. Wh-cleft structures shift the focus to the end of the clause. The information in the *wh*-clause (bold in the examples below) is typically old or given in the context, while the copular complement (in green in the examples) contains the new, important information:

- [speakers are discussing speaker B’s banking needs]
  A: *What you need* is a telephone bank account.
  B: Mm.
  (focus on the object; the listener’s state of ‘need’ is already given; the telephone bank account is the new, important information)

- [speakers are talking of someone they dislike]
  A: *It never happens really that I get angry with people* but I did with him last night and I had to go for a walk to calm down.
  B: Well *what gets me* is the way he spends his time being sexist and unpleasant.
  (focus on the way he spends …)

The *wh*-cleft construction may itself receive end-focus by occupying the complement slot in the main clause:

- [university literature tutorial about the writer Samuel Beckett and a critic who has written about Beckett’s work, Martin Eslin]
  A: You aren’t just saying Eslin is occupying a philosophically untenable position therefore I’m occupying one which is tenable.
  B: No that’s *what I don’t want to say*.
  A: That’s *what you don’t want to say*.
  B: But I think that’s *what James thought I wanted to say*.
  C: Yeah. What you’re saying is Eslin is occupying a philosophically untenable position and also has misread Beckett.

*How* …, where …

Wh-clefts with a *what*-clause as subject are far more frequent than *wh*-cleft sentences introduced by *why*, *where*, *how*, etc. as subject. One reason for this is that the meanings of *why*, *where*, *who*, *when* and *how* are often expressed by nouns such as *the person*, *the place*, *the way*, used in front position to create the same kind of focus on the complement of the main verb:

- [university literature tutorial about the writer Samuel Beckett and a critic who has written about Beckett’s work, Martin Eslin]
  A: *Well, the way I see it going* is that the European Union will expand to include not only Lithuania but also other former Soviet Republics.
  (or: How I see it going is that …)
  
  **The place where** I’ve been is where they train local midwives.
  (or: Where I’ve been is where they …)
  
  **The reason** it wasn’t sorted out earlier was because they were short of staff.
  (or: Why it wasn’t sorted out earlier was because …)

- [university literature tutorial about the writer Samuel Beckett and a critic who has written about Beckett’s work, Martin Eslin]
  A: *The person you need to talk to* is the manager.
  (preferred to: Who you need to talk to is the manager.)
The day we wanted to travel was a Monday, but it was all booked up.
(more frequent than: When we wanted to travel was a Monday, …)

However, when the wh-cleft clause is in complement position, wh-clauses are often used:

[an elderly man, speaker A, is recounting how he was an apprentice railway wagon-maker as a young man]
A: And, of course, I gradually built up then to until I got the main overall jobs, and by the time I was twenty-one, of course, I was considered a full wagon repairer.
B: Twenty-one was when you finished your apprenticeship.
A: Yes, that’s right.

What … + clause
The wh-cleft may serve as a marker highlighting a whole clause or a longer stretch of discourse instead of focusing on one clause element. This is especially common in spoken language:

[speaker B is asking for advice about pensions and insurance, on the telephone]
A: Would you like me to get one of the advisers to give you a call sometime? And they can go over with you basically what pensions are available to you and what life insurance.
B: That would be good yeah.
A: Okay that’s fine. What I’ll do is I’ll take all your details from you.
B: Uh-huh.
A: And then we’ll send it out to your closest branch and they give you a call in the next few days.

[talking about arriving late for an interview for a teaching post]
But by the time I got to that school I thought, well, nothing else can possibly go worse than this. And I went in and I got met at the front gate. And what happened was I’d arrived so late that I’d missed the tour round the school which I’d had previously when I’d been up. And I got there the time that I was due to see the headmistress. So I went straight to see the headmistress, went in and apologised for being late.

This …/that … + clause
A clause introduced by this or that with a wh-cleft complement can also serve a similar purpose. This clauses generally point forward, that clauses generally point back in the text:

So this is what we’ll do. Firstly, introduce the speakers.
So if you want to stay warm in winter all you do is you wear, instead of wearing one thick layer of clothes, you wear lots and lots of layers of clothes. They may be thin but lots of, lots of layers and what they’ll do is they’ll trap air between them and that’s what will keep you warm.
(in this example, several types of focusing structure occur together; note also the construction with all: all you do is …)
**What I did…**

In spoken language, the connecting copular verb is often omitted:

- What I did, I bought the medium size and they said I can take it back if it doesn’t fit.
- What happened, I drove through one of those speed cameras and I wasn’t concentrating.

**The thing, one thing, something**

Initial constructions with *the, a, something* plus a relative clause can be used to create focus on subsequent clause elements in a similar way to other cleft constructions. These constructions occur typically in informal contexts:

- The thing I was struck by was their complacency.
  (similar to: What I was struck by was their complacency.)
- One thing she’s been doing recently is buying white shoes to decorate them for people.
- Something you might like to look at is the sequence of events in the story.

**Anticipatory it**

Anticipatory *it* often enables a subject to appear at the end of the clause, thus producing end-focus:

- It amazes me how open and honest the staff are.
  A: Beatrice says that it’s hard to insure antiques because, you know …
  B: It’s hard to put a value on it all for that, isn’t it?
  A: Yeah.

- It says that you’ve got to pay certain legal fees if you leave. You know, we were thinking it was wrong paying £25 a week.

Extra focus on fronted time adjuncts may be created with *it is/was not until, it is/was only when*:

- It’s not until we lift the carpet in our bedroom that we’ll know what we’ve got to deal with.
  (compare: ‘Until we lift the carpet in our bedroom, we won’t know …’, or ‘We won’t know what we’ve got to deal with until we lift …’)

- It was only when he mentioned that he lived in Cambridge that I knew who he was.
Existential *there* makes possible an optional (and often preferred) variant of clauses with an indefinite subject. The pattern enables focus to be placed on the subject by locating it in the rheme of the clause instead of its usual position as the theme:

[talking about visiting a house with a view to buying it]

*We drove past it one time and there was a woman standing outside, she said, ‘Oh what do you want?’ I said, ‘Oh, well, we’ve come to see the house.’*

With verbs other than *be*, the *there* construction is confined to formal/literary styles:

*A few days after that meeting with Lucian, there came the letter.*

*All signs of the market had vanished and in its place in front of the squat town hall, there stood only a platform.*

There are often different structural options available with adjectives such as *certain, difficult, easy, hard, impossible, likely, sure*, verbs such as *appear, look, seem*, and mental process verbs in the passive such as *be considered, be estimated, be found*.

Adjectives such as *difficult, easy, hard, impossible* most typically take an infinitive-clause complement and most frequently occur with anticipatory *it*:

*It was impossible to say hello to everyone.*

*It’s not easy to ride a monocycle.*

The infinitive complement may, however, occur as the subject of the clause or as a ‘raised subject’, to create different types of focus:

- **Infinitive clause as subject:**
  
  *To summarise our work is impossible.*

  *To find a shop open so early in the morning isn’t going to be easy.*

- **Infinitive clause as ‘object-raised-to-subject’**:  
  
  *In practice, however, this distinction is impossible to make.*  
  
  *(this distinction is the object of *make* but becomes the grammatical subject of the clause)*  
  
  *Jina’s quite difficult to understand.*  
  
  *(Jina, the object of *understand*, becomes the subject of the clause)*
Verbs such as appear, look, seem present various structural options, which include raising:

**He always seems to come at some unlucky moment.**
(subject-to-subject raising: he is the subject of come and is chosen as the subject of seem; compare the anticipatory it alternative: ‘It always seems (that) he comes at some unlucky moment.’)

**It seems that nobody does anything.**
(anticipatory it as subject; nobody is the subject of does; compare: ‘Nobody seems to do anything.’)

**That looks to be the right place.**
(subject-to-subject raising; compare: ‘It looks as if that is the right place.’)

Mental process verbs in the passive such as be considered, be estimated, be observed and verbs reporting research results such as be discovered, be found also present raising options, especially in formal and academic styles:

**Overall, the scheme was found to produce clear benefits on an individual level, largely in terms of teachers’ revised perceptions and attitudes.**
(subject-to-subject raising: the scheme is subject of produce and subject of was found)

**On analysis of the women’s diets, it was found that all the women in the control group consumed a minimum of 500 ml of cows’ milk daily.**
(anticipatory it as subject; compare subject-to-subject raising alternative: ‘All the women in the control group were found to consume …’)

[text about the relationship between brain hemispheres and left- and right-handedness in humans]

**The proportion of right hemisphere speakers was estimated to be about 9.27 per cent of the population irrespective of handedness.**
(subject-to-subject raising; compare anticipatory it alternative: ‘It was estimated that the proportion of …’)

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**Pseudo-intransitive constructions (Fish cooks quickly.)**

Verbs which are normally used transitively are sometimes used intransitively in clauses where the real recipient/beneficiary of the action becomes the grammatical subject (→ 475h above to compare raising), and where the agent is not mentioned. This gives endweight to the verb (and any accompanying complement/adjunct).

Verbs used in this way include:

- clean
- close
- cook
- drive
- fold (up)
- iron
- keep
- open
- pack
- photograph
- print
- read
- sell
- store
- wash (up)
The base of the bed is still in the dining room, they can't get it up the stairs although it folds up, you know, it's standing like this in the dining room.

A: I like your outfit you had on on Sunday.
B: Frank bought it last year for my birthday.
A: I thought maybe you'd got it while you were abroad.
B: No, no, he bought it from a woman, a friend, she makes them and she knitted it. Well, she knew my size so …
A: Yeah.
B: And it washes up lovely.

[looking at a photograph of a woman called Helen]

Helen photographs really well doesn't she?

---

An option which is often chosen in academic and more formal styles is to use a noun-form of a verb as subject in order to turn the verb into the theme and to give extra focus to the rheme.

Nominalisation may be seen as the opposite of clefting (\(\text{\textup{\textbf{475c, above}}}\)) in that two clauses are condensed into one. The nominalised clause (bold in the examples below) typically represents old, background or given information, and the complement (in green in the examples) represents new, important information:

The capture of the suspected terrorists is a major breakthrough for the authorities.

(compare: The suspected terrorists have been captured, and this is a major breakthrough for the authorities.)

[about ex-US President Richard Nixon, whose presidency fell after the Watergate crisis]

Ironically, his insistence on taping all White House conversations to ease the writing of his future memoirs was to be the major stumbling block to his surviving the crisis.

(compare: He insisted on taping … and this was the major stumbling block …)

Adjective forms of verbs along with their complements may also function in a similar way to rearrange or condense information in the clause:

She seemed most insistent that we should know it.

(compare: She really insisted that we should know it.)

I am very desirous to serve a friend.

(compare: I very much desire to serve a friend.)

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also 283a Pseudo-intransitive construction in Verb complementation

Nominalisation and adjectivalisation 475j

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also 142 Nominalisation in Grammar and academic English and 175 Formation of nouns (nominalisation)