The Language of Data Commentary

In order to get closer to the language of data commentary it is first of all important to understand what role data commentary plays in academic writing. The following **reasons for data commentary** provide insight into the nature of data commentary and are taken from Swales, J. and Feak, C. (1994). Academic Writing for Graduate Students. University of Michigan Press: Ann Arbor. p. 78.

- Highlight results

- Assess standard theory, common beliefs, or general practice in the light of the given data

- Compare and evaluate different data sets

- Assess the reliability of the data in terms of the methodology that produced it

- Discuss the implications of the data

In these early stages of your academic writing career you will not be developing *all* of these reasons, but will instead focus on the first and third of the above: how to highlight, elaborate, compare and evaluate results. It is important to follow the conventional pattern this text type and learn the conventional **moves**, common to texts which elaborate and comment on significant data presented in the tables and figures.

There are **three** main moves:

1. **Location Element and Summary Statement**

2. **Highlighting Statements**

3. **Comments**

The concise but specific language used during data commentary is formal in register. This means there is an absence of contracted forms and is characterised by extensive use of passive. The writer and his/her opinion is absent from the text. Rather her/his role is to present data and elaborate the facts. Therefore, learning to **hedge** language is also an important element in this academic style. This means you should never directly give your personal opinion but suggest possible interpretations and readings of data, which is also an important characteristic of essay writing.

Texts of this type are lexically dense and you should always aim to use a variety of lexis. For example in the location summaries you should attempt to use a variety of verbs such as shows, indicates, provides, etc. Here are examples of common verbs used in data commentary.

| believe | claim | confirm | demonstrate | display | estimate | expect | foresee | give | illustrate |

| indicate | note | observe | perceive | present | prove | reveal | show | suggest | summarize |

Another way to vary language is to use related words from different word classes, as illustrated below. Look at this example of how you can describe high and low points in figures

The number of live births outside marriage *reached a peak* during the second world war.
The *peak* age for committing a crime is 18.
Oil production *peaked* in 1985.
Gas production reached a (new) *low* in 1990.

Now that you have a general idea of what the language of data commentary is like, let us look in detail at the language used in each of the three moves you will be expected to produce.

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1. Location and summary statements In the first move your aim is to state what the table/chart shows and should be as clear, objective and logical as possible. Here are some examples of phrases commonly used in this move.

This line graph/bar graph/pie-chart/table shows…
The x-axis/y-axis represents…
The shaded/dark/light area indicates…
Table 1/Figure 1 shows/compares/presents...
The results of… are shown/can be compared/are presented in Table 1/Figure .

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2. Highlighting statements point out significant data in a table/chart and make observations and generalizations from the details of the data This is the main body of your text and is divided into paragraphs according to the subjects you address.

It is apparent from this table that very few ...
This table is quite revealing in several ways. First, unlike the other tables ...
Data from this table can be compared with the data in Table 4.6 which shows ...
From the data in Figure 9, it is apparent that/it is interesting to see that...
From this data we can see that …
The histogram in Fig 1. indicates that ...
As can be seen from the table (above),
It can be seen from the data in Table 12.1 that
From the graph we can see that…
The table illustrates …/The pie chart shows…
As shown in /As revealed by…

In this move you will be reporting and elaborating statistics. Here are some common phrases used when qualifying comparisons of data.

A vast/clear/significant/narrow/small majority/minority of…
Only a fraction of …
Nearly half of/ Nearly all of/ …
Less than half of…
Less than 50% of…/More than 50% of…/Just over/under 50% of…
The majority of…/Few…/Many…
One in ten of the respondents…
Sixty-nine percent of Group A (verb) as opposed to thirty-five percent of Group B.
Thirty-four percent more of Group A (verb) than did Group B.
Almost exactly twice as many of Group A (verb) as did Group B.
A marginally smaller percentage of Group A…
Slightly over twice as many Group A…
Close to three times as many Group A…
Group A exceeded Group B in the times they (verb)… by a ratio of 3.5 to 1.
The percentage of Group A who (verb) … is roughly twice that of Group B
In 2013, the United Kingdom had the highest/ the lowest divorce rate in the EU.

You may be required to report results from questionnaires and interviews. Here are several ways to do this.

The majority of respondents felt that .....
Over half of those surveyed indicated that ......
70% of those who were interviewed indicated that .....
Approximately half of those surveyed did not comment on ......
A small number of those interviewed suggested that ......
Only a small number of respondents indicated that ......
In response to Question 1, most of those surveyed indicated that ......
The overall response to this question was very positive.
When asked ......, the majority commented that .....
Other responses to this question included ......

When describing trends you can use the common collocation combination of adjective + noun

The graph shows that there has been a	slight gradual steady marked steep sharp	increase rise decrease fall decline drop	in the number of divorces in England and Wales since 1981.

3. Commenting / Elaborating means attempting to explain the data and/or discuss implications.

This was probably because …
It seems that…/It appears that…
This could have been the result of …
This trend indicates that if …
There is a broad consensus …
It is interesting that …
It is not surprising to find that …
Interestingly, …/Curiously, …/Surprisingly, …/Predictably, …
In general,…/On the whole,… / In the main…
To sum up,… / To summarise…

Each of the points you wish to make will follow this tri-partite sequence. Each time you will locate, highlight and comment. Your final text will be a series of cycles commenting on various elements you wish to draw from the given data. You can check you have successfully commented on the data by asking yourself the following questions for each of points you make.

Move 1. Is my Location and Summary statement clear and effective? Will my reader be able to pinpoint my chosen aspect quickly and easily?

Move 2. Are appropriate results highlighted? In your Highlighting statements you should try to show you can spot trends or regularities in the data and that you can also separate more important findings from those less important.

Move 3. Are appropriate explanations of results provided? It is important that you do not attempt to cover ALL the information, showing you are able to select, elaborate and compare relevant data. Neither should you claim more than is reasonable or defensible for the data given. In other words, stick to the facts!