

STUDENT
SUCCESS

How to be *Original*

Transform Your Assignments
and Achieve Better Grades

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3

Original Words

Introduction

In this chapter we look at how fresh, thought-provoking words and phrases can make your work original. The first part is about how you can identify key words and then adapt them. The second part introduces other ways in which you can use language to be innovative. We look at metaphors and similes, words from other languages, and the style and form of written work. There are many ways in which a bit of creativity in any of these areas can take your assignments to a new level. I'll be providing lots of examples and sample sentences. These will help you make choices about what may work for you and what won't. Finally, I look at how you can invent your own 'neologisms'.

Originality is nearly always communicated by key words that encapsulate a new field, approach or topic. If you think of any original idea – from the theory of 'quantum mechanics' to the 'decolonialised curriculum' – you will find a key word or phrase at the heart of it. These words deliver the idea: they sum it up. And they are *key* words: they open the door to new horizons.

When I first heard the expression 'moral panic', now much used by sociologists and many others, I was interested. It was a pithy encapsulation – a useful simplification – of a more complex idea; namely that the media were creating demonised targets to both explain and distract from wider problems of social decline. In part what impressed me was how succinctly those two words, 'moral panic', delivered this concept. Key words do important work: they tell us the essence of the argument, they organise its central principles and they proclaim to the world that an innovative concept has arrived.

Most 'new words' are seen as new for years after their first usage. This is good news for students because it tells us that you don't need to

invent your own new key word or phrase. It is just as effective, and less risky, to work with an existing one (as long as it is still breaking new ground in your area of study). So you do not need to be snatching up this week's copy of *The Journal of Soft Fruit Studies* to get the freshest buzz terms in Soft Fruit Studies. It takes time – years, even decades – for new words to become routinised, standard and, perhaps, quietly discarded.

TIP

Pick one

It is usually far more effective to pick ONE new key word or phrase to work with than try to give equal weight to many. Occasionally connecting two can also work. You should identify the new term early on. In an exam or essay, this means naming, defining and anchoring it (via references) in the first or second paragraph, and then coming back to it several times, including in your conclusion.

Working with innovative key words

Innovative key words are ubiquitous. Nearly all published academic work contains them. But what do they look like? To illustrate 'new key words' we can group them under two headings: (1) words that depict *new theories and topics*; and (2) words that point to *new disciplinary fields*. You may notice that these titles are call-backs to headings featured in Chapter 2. In fact, 'new words' are central to the communication and currency of all forms of originality.

New theories and topics

New theories are encapsulated in new words. Here are three examples: the theory of 'non-representational theory' was developed by Nigel Thrift and others in the 1990s; 'accelerationism' was first coined by Benjamin Noys in 2010; and 'tipping point' (in the sense of climatic tipping points) comes from a 2008 paper called 'Tipping elements in the Earth's climate system'.¹ People hadn't heard these terms before but they were chosen because they were intriguing and pithy. And they stuck. Although now decades old, all three of these *labels* (which is another way of thinking of 'new words') are still being debated, and 'working with' them could be an original thing for students, at any level of study, to do.

Sample sentences:

This essay will be drawing the work of ‘non-representational theory’ (Thrift, 1996) into conversation with accelerationist perspectives (Noys, 2010).

In this essay I will be arguing that the field of social psychology can be usefully challenged and interrogated by drawing on theories of accelerationism (Noys, 2010).

It is shown that the climatic ‘tipping point’ has parallels in the study of biodiversity.

All three of these sentences make it clear that you are not just taking a ‘new word’ ‘off the peg’ and waving it about. You are *working with it*, engaging and adding. This does not mean it is wrong to write ‘This essay will be using non-representational theory to explore...’. This is straightforward and might be the start of a good essay. Good but not original. Solid but not excellent. It takes an idea and plonks it down, unrefined and undigested.

Let’s look at another example. Richard Florida’s (2002) concept of the ‘creative class’ was an innovative social categorisation that identified ‘creatives’ as being key to urban change.² We can work with this expression by slightly expanding it, making it longer and more specific by adding one or two words.

Sample sentence: In this essay I discuss the ‘racialised creative class’, forcing an encounter between Florida’s category and the racial politics of contemporary American cities.

In this sample sentence, an existing, well-known, new term (‘creative class’) is engaged, expanded and challenged. However, you don’t have to invent your own combinations. Instead you can make use of existing adaptations. Let’s take the example of ‘world systems theory’, a Marxist theory of global change developed by Immanuel Wallerstein in the 1970s. In the 1990s Alf Hornborg and others developed ‘Ecological World Systems Theory’.³ It’s a new departure and, given our pressing environmental crisis, it still remains fresh. So fresh, in fact, that we could co-opt it and still deliver an original intervention. The sentence ‘This essay will take a World Systems Approach (Wallerstein) ...’ is fine, but not original. Compare it to ‘This essay will take an Ecological World Systems Approach (Hornborg)’. Immediately, a sense of focus, or ‘working with’, comes into play, even though, in this case, all one is doing is hitching a ride on someone else’s originality.

How do you recognise new key words?

They often have pride of place: in the title of a chapter, paper or book. Let's look at three of the titles of the books on the shelf in front of me. Can you spot the new key words? I've been writing on racial and ethnic studies for a long time, so that explains why they are all on this topic:

Critical Multiculturalism: Rethinking Multicultural and Antiracist Education (edited by Stephen May, 1999)

Embedded Racism: Japan's Visible Minorities and Racial Discrimination (by Debito Arudou, 2015)

Psychedelic White: Goa Trance and the Viscosity of Race (by Arun Saldanha, 2007)⁴

The 'new words' that these authors employ are the centrepieces of their books, their nutshell contribution, and they are there in their titles. Let's pull them out:

Critical Multiculturalism

Embedded Racism

Psychedelic White and *Viscosity of Race*

All the other words in these three titles are descriptive and conventional. But the ones listed above are different. In each case the key term is made by adding an adjective to a well-known noun and it is that combination that creates the original idea. *Critical Multiculturalism* is more than yet another book on multiculturalism. It claims to have a new take, what it calls *critical* multiculturalism, an idea that is defined in and returned to throughout the book. *Embedded Racism* is more than just another book about racism. That key term is telling us the author has a particular theory, in this case that racism is woven into Japanese society so deeply that it goes unnoticed. *Psychedelic White* and the *Viscosity of Race* are pointing to something even more ambitious. The title tells us that the author has both an original idea and an original topic. He gives a label, 'psychedelic White', to a specific form of whiteness: a trippy, hippy, vacation whiteness. The author doubles down on his claim to originality with a second term, which promises a controversial new theory of race. His reference to the 'viscosity of race' runs counter to the conventional social science position on the topic, namely that race has no material reality because it is a social construction. Saldanha is arguing that race does have a material reality, albeit of an odd kind, a sticky, clinging physicality (thus, he says, it is not an imagined or mythical thing but 'viscous').

If you are a student who wants to ‘work with’ these topics, what you need to do is engage and build.

Sample sentence: Throughout this talk I have tried to explain the opportunities that Arun Saldanha’s notion of the ‘viscosity of race’ provides to historical research on French abolitionism.

When it comes to originality, new words do a lot of the heavy lifting. As the intriguing but rather hyperbolic expressions ‘psychedelic White’ and ‘viscosity of race’ imply, there has been a tendency for ever more striking and rhetorically bold new composites. For example, ‘disaster capitalism’, ‘zombie capitalism’, ‘hyper-capitalism’ became *au courant*. Perhaps they go too far, turning theories into intellectual eye-candy. But the allure of language matters. Creating a new term is not only about creating an accurate encapsulation: ‘new words’ need to roll off the tongue and weave a spell.

The value of ‘post’

A popular way of devising a new academic term is to bolt the adjective ‘post’ to the front of a noun. ‘Post’ has been added to a wide range of theories and topics in order to signal that a new idea has arrived. Post-truth, post-Western, post-socialism, post-structuralism, post-modernism are all terms that flag a critical engagement with and, in some way, a moving on from what has gone before.

The ‘post’ prefix contains an inherent claim to originality. But be careful. Some of the ‘posts’ still knocking about went out of fashion decades ago. Post-modernism is a good example. It was all the rage in the 1980s. ‘Post-modern’ was *everywhere*. However, this very popularity provoked a pushback, a revulsion against the new norm. Post-modernism became a victim of its own success and nothing looks more dated than the recently but no longer fashionable. In practical terms, this means that any student assignment that starts by claiming to ‘take a post-modern approach’ will not be seen as original; indeed, quite the opposite, this choice is likely to be seen as behind the times. In Chapter 1 I explained how you can tell when a new idea is no longer being seen as original. These tips apply just as well to new words. If you typed ‘critique of’ or ‘anti’ alongside ‘post-modernism’, you will find plenty of evidence that this is a ‘new word’ whose day in the sun came and went; intense but brief.

Not all ‘posts’ are equally current or equally useful. However, they are constantly rolling off the intellectual production line and searching them

out can lead to innovative outcomes. One long-odds tip is simply to write 'post' in front of the key term you need to write about and see if you can find it being employed, from the last 10 years or so. You need to write an essay on gentrification? Search for 'post-gentrification' and – at least in this case – there it is; indeed, there is a debate centred on this concept. It took you 15 seconds to make that search but it could make all the difference: suddenly, you are in the driving seat, your essay transformed into something that is focused and up to date. Other examples include the Anthropocene and the West. A lot of people are talking about the post-Anthropocene, while recent years have witnessed the development of discussion on post-Western politics and sociology. Then there is 'post-sustainability', 'post-ecology'... I could go on. If you want to invent your own 'post', see the section on 'Inventing your own words' at the end of this chapter.

Using 'beyond' and 'after'

'Post' implies you have a clear programme. It may be a more definite and bolder claim than you want and, if so, a term like 'beyond' or 'after' can be useful. For example, in the corridors of my department this week I see they are advertising a talk titled 'Beyond post-colonialism'. It's not post-post-colonialism. Two 'posts' in a row looks silly. But that is not the main reason 'beyond' was being used. 'Beyond' and 'after' carry a different message. They suggest the speaker or author is going to raise some questions and probably introduce some new directions. This is more open-ended than 'post'. 'Beyond' and 'after' do not claim a new paradigm, but rather the promise of critique.

Whatever prefix you choose, you have to deliver. I went to that talk on 'Beyond post-colonialism' and left frustrated, as did everyone else I spoke to afterwards, because the speaker didn't deliver on the promise of the title. Indeed, the theme of 'beyond post-colonialism' was barely mentioned. It is a basic and easily avoided error: do not set up expectations and then fail to follow through.

New fields

Academic disciplines often produce new fields of enquiry. The most important way young academics forge their careers is by creating or contributing to a new field. These new fields have their own labels. The new fields of 'transcultural economics', of 'big data history', of 'carceral education studies' are like named brands and there will be some key authors associated with their creation and development. Engaging with

a new field involves naming it and its key authors and explaining how you are contributing to it. It is important to make it clear that you are doing more than simply describing and repeating. As we have seen, originality is an active state: it is not passive reflection but a moulding, shaping and pushing forward.

Sample sentences:

In this essay I draw on the new field of ‘critical behaviour studies’ (Blue; Green) to show that ...

I argue that although the recently developed field of ‘existential history’ (Red; Brown) provides a compelling new framework to understand ..., the topic continues to be simplified and misrepresented.

TRY THIS

Aim: Finding new words

Go into a research search engine and type in your topic plus one or two words that might help you track down some of the new labels that are current in your field. These include ‘new’, ‘new term’, ‘post-’, ‘beyond’, ‘recently’ and ‘neologism’. You will probably need to play around with a few such combinations. Use the ‘custom range’, or other time limit function, to limit your search to the last five years. You don’t need to look beyond the titles of papers, chapters or books. After 20 minutes you should have arrived at one or two likely candidates, or concluded that you need to change how you express your topic and/or that you need to expand your search to abstracts and have a wider timeframe. You may decide the topic is not going to yield any results. The candidates you do find may be new ‘isms’, new composites or new sub-fields. This exercise is about finding such terms, so you can stop at this point, especially if none of the results interest you. But if something catches your attention, keep mining, you might strike gold.

Language tips for original thinking

Metaphors and original thinking

‘He is drowning in money’ and ‘she’s feeling blue’ are metaphors. A metaphor is a figure of speech that swops a literal description with something more imaginative (in the two examples ‘has a lot of’ is swopped for ‘is drowning in’ and ‘sad’ for ‘blue’). A metaphor is a way of encapsulating and explaining something in a creative, ingenious and compelling way.

Let's look at the example of 'genetic code'. You may wonder, 'is that a metaphor? Isn't that just a fact, a description of genes?'. Not at all. Genes are not, literally, a form of 'code', nor do they contain 'code'. Code is encrypted information. Genes no more contain code than the movement of the planets contains code, or the motion of the waves. 'Genetic code' is a metaphor. And it's a good one. It communicates, explains and sums up a complicated topic and it does it so well that people have lost sight of the fact that it is a metaphor or that it was ever invented. The metaphor of inherited 'code' was created by the physicist Erwin Schrödinger in 1944. He explained:

[i]n calling the structure of the chromosome fibres a code-script, we mean that the all-penetrating mind ... could tell from their structure whether the egg would develop, under suitable conditions, into a black cock or into a speckled hen, into a fly or a maize plant, a rhododendron, a beetle, a mouse or a woman.⁵

The metaphor of 'code' does a lot of work here: it captures what chromosomes do and how. It also offers us an intellectual framework to go further. For example, it implies that the 'code' can be 'broken', i.e., written out and understood, and thus the 'mystery' of inheritance can be revealed.

Metaphors matter. How can students make use of them in ways that are original? The answer is 'in the same way they can work with other new words' – with one difference: showing an understanding that this form of 'new word' *is* a metaphor – that its insight is based on an identification of one thing with a very different thing – is helpful and will shape the way you engage with it. We can look at another example to explain this.

The term 'cultural capital' reimagines cultural knowledge and power (for example, knowing another language or speaking with an 'educated' accent) as a form of economic asset (that is, as 'capital'). Pierre Bourdieu coined the term in the mid-1970s, and it is now a staple part of the social science lexicon.⁶ It's no longer original, but it is still much discussed. So, if you 'worked with' the term – engaging recent debates and, by doing so, added to the term or adapted it – your work might well be seen as original. One of the ways you can do this is by expanding the term, for example, 'green cultural capital' or 'religious cultural capital'. Another way forward is to think about how 'cultural capital' works as a metaphor, more specifically, exploring, and perhaps critiquing, the way the topic you are concerned with *can* be understood and depicted as a fiscal asset. We might ask, for example, 'has capitalism changed today, so that "cultural capital" now carries new implications?', or 'does the image of capital provide a simplistic, economically reductive, model for understanding [my topic]?'.

It is hard to underestimate the importance of metaphors in understanding the world. In different eras, society has been understood as an organism, a system, a performance, a theatre, a machine, a network. All of these are metaphors, some current and some dated. 'Working with' the more recent of these metaphors can result in profound insights. But a word of caution is also necessary. Not all metaphors are equal. Some are little used or merely decorative. There is no point in engaging a metaphor that is mentioned in passing but is not central to an author's argument. The importance of a metaphor is indicated by its widespread use, by its place in the title of a paper or book, and by the way an argument relies on it.

A more general note of caution is also worth voicing. It is useful to ask, 'what is the real point, the aim, of using a metaphor?'. If it is not to understand better the thing that the metaphor is supposedly shedding light on (whether it be genetics or society or any other topic), but an end in itself, then you might be accused of getting lost in semantics or 'word spinning'. The linguist Noam Chomsky (1997) was warning against this danger when he wrote:

metaphors are metaphors. If they're a stimulus to the imagination, fine. Let your imagination be stimulated. But one should not confuse metaphors and imaginative leaps with understanding; they may be a help to understanding, but then we await the understanding to make judgments. ... Use whatever metaphor happens to help you to think, but don't confuse the metaphor with a conclusion.⁷

Is Chomsky right? No and yes. Developing and refining a metaphor can give us a better picture of our topic; it can make us think more deeply about, for example, genetics or cultural power. Nevertheless Chomsky's words offer a useful steer. The point of engaging metaphors, and 'new words' more generally, is not to perfect the way we describe the world, but to know the world better.

TRY THIS

Aim: Looking for metaphors

This exercise is based on the reading list provided for a course you need to complete an assignment for. Can you identify metaphors in any of the titles of these set readings? It is especially useful if these metaphors can be found in

(Continued)

core texts and appear to be central to an author's argument. Sometimes there aren't any, or least they don't swim into view easily. This may be disappointing, but the point of this exercise is to get us to start looking for them – to notice the work they do – so even a nil result will not be a waste of time. If you can locate even just one metaphor, note it down along with one or two simple ways it might be helpful or misleading – for example, if it usefully makes us think of related processes (remember how 'genetic code' makes us think of 'code breaking') or if it suggests comparisons which are helpful or, alternatively, distort the topic.

International languages and original words

Academic writing often makes use of key words from other languages. These terms express something that is not easily expressed in one's own language and/or they point to a particular tradition or school of work. There is a bit of 'cultural capital' here too: using a term from another language can make you appear knowledgeable.

You do not need to be fluent to make use of other languages. I have schoolboy French that, traumatised by holiday encounters, my daughter says 'is the most embarrassing thing a human ear could hear'. But that doesn't stop me. I make use of French terms in my academic writing not because I am pretending to be bilingual, but because they accurately reflect a topic and its specific traditions. To grasp this point, it is useful to look at some other examples.

Gemeinschaft and *gesellschaft* refer, respectively, to traditional and modern social relationships: the former bonded through tradition and the latter held together through civic and legal association. These classic sociological terms arose from late nineteenth-century German sociology and they remain in use both because they encapsulate a distinction that still matters and because they point to a specific intellectual tradition (associated with Ferdinand Tönnies).⁸ Among the world's living languages, German has produced the most academic loan-words. Others include *verstehen* (understanding/interpreting subjective meaning), *dasein* (existence), *gesamtkunstwerk* (total work of art) and *unheimlich* (uncanny).

Untranslated terms are also adopted because they refer to a specific ideology or practice rooted in a particular part of the world. For example, in the Spanish speaking parts of Latin America, the ideology and practice of 'race mixture' is called *mestizaje*. It's an evocative term that

communicates much more than ‘race mixture’. Therefore, English language scholarship on ‘race mixture’ in Latin America will usually be framed as a discussion of *mestizaje*.

Some words are said to be untranslatable. This is because they are embedded in a distinct, complex and culturally specific context. For example, *moksha* is a spiritual term in Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism. Much like *nirvana*, *moksha* means to be free of the cycle of death and rebirth due to the principle of *karma* (another word that is said to be impossible to translate). *Moksha* could be translated as ‘freedom’ or ‘liberation’, but neither is adequate: *moksha* is *moksha*; it arises and relates to a particular world view.

Untranslated terms are not always from living languages. The Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben’s influential book *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (1998, first published in 1995 as *Homo sacer: Il potere sovrano e la nuda vita*) stacks up three claims to originality by making use of two ‘new words’ (‘sovereign power’ and ‘bare life’)⁹ and fronting them with the obscure Latin expression *Homo Sacer* (‘sacred man’; a Roman legal category for someone who can be killed by anyone and has no civic rights).¹⁰ Agamben reanimates this ancient category and ties it to his two neologisms to argue that the art of statecraft and politics relies on demarcating certain lives as without legal worth.

How to work with international words

Taking an interest in translation will help most students who want to push their topics in innovative directions. You can add original value to existing terms or create your own (perhaps drawing on your own language skills). Where an untranslated term is clear and prominent in your area of study, you can show originality by engaging it in one or both of the two ways identified below.

Note: Where students find no such terms in their reading lists or lectures (and this is not uncommon in the more monoglot parts of the English-speaking world), the second method is still applicable, as it addresses how topics can be misunderstood through mistranslation.

1. *Explore and engage a relatively new international word that is current in your area of study.* In some disciplines and courses, especially those with international reach, such terms are plentiful. However, students need to make sure they are ‘adding to’ them in a substantive and original way. You can do this by engaging untranslated words with the kind of original themes discussed in Chapter 2 and using the techniques discussed earlier in this chapter.

Sample sentences:

In this essay the new political power of Hindutva ideology will be framed in terms of Agamben's theory of 'bare life'.

Note: Here a well-known term for an Indian political ideology – Hindutva – is brought into conversation with a well-known theory. The originality does not reside in either one but in their being brought together.

This essay draws on the work of Yellow and Red to reimagine and revisit the situationist notion of *détournement* through a post-colonial lens.

Note: Here is another example of originality stemming from a 'bringing together'. In this case, it is supported by an explicit claim to be giving new life ('reimagine' and 'revisit') to an avant-garde practice first developed in 1950s France, *détournement* (a diversion, or turning about).

2. *Explore the context of translation and/or critique a translation.* It is often the case that terms are imported from other languages without consideration for either the context in which they arose or the possibility of other translations. Exploring either of these areas can provide an original intervention.

Samples sentences:

The study of *apartheid* South Africa has tended to neglect the historical origins of the term in Afrikaans' mythology and cultural history. Often associated with the period 1948–1992, this essay draws on recent studies by Blue and Red to arrive at a longer historical perspective on the ideology of *apartheid*.

Note: Here the Afrikaans word *apartheid* – meaning 'held apart' – is used as the centrepiece of a re-examination of South African history. The approach is anchored by reference to academic authorities.

The perception and reception of the work of the Gutai art group has been shaped by the translation of their work for a Western audience, specifically the translation of *gutai* as 'embodiment' or 'concrete'. In this essay, I draw on the work of Pink to show that the term '*gutai*' was designed to signal a rejection of European avant-gardes and both abstract and figurative art.

Note: Here the Japanese name of a Japanese art movement is used as a launching point for an essay on its interpretation and intentions.

My references in the two sentences above are made up. Let's look at a real example. It can be argued that understanding Sigmund Freud's

'new words' (and there are many; we already saw one, *unheimlich*, and another example is *narzissmus* or 'narcissism') requires an understanding of the context of their birth, in late nineteenth-century Vienna. Even more striking, in the case of Freud, is the nature of the translations applied to some of his 'new words'.¹¹ These translations profoundly altered how Freud was understood internationally. For example, his trio *Ich* (directly translated: 'I'), *Es* ('it') and *Uber-Ich* ('over-I') was translated into English, and other languages, via Latin, so becoming the more expansive and suggestive 'ego', 'id' and 'superego'.

Here is another example, this time from the study of 'race' and 'ethnicity' in China. Placing those words in inverted commas shows that I have them under surveillance. These words are often used in Western-language debates about China, but are they appropriate? Do they mislead us? Have people in China now or in the past thought of people, inside or outside their country, as being divided by 'race'? In English, the term implies communities with clear inherited physical differences. Some scholars argue that there is a long history of race-thinking in China.¹² This argument relies, in part, on translating the Chinese words *zu* and *minzu* as 'race'. If you do that, you can find Chinese writings about 'race' going back centuries. Others are doubtful. They argue that the idea of race in China is a Western import and that these Chinese terms do not refer to physically distinct peoples. Thus, for example, the word 'zu', it has been argued, refers to established, historical separate communities; not 'race' as someone in the West might understand 'race'.¹³

This is a very specific example and you might think it sounds too specialised and particular to emulate. But pause a moment: that reaction tells us something. It tells us that, with a little effort and care, exploring how a word is translated goes a long way; it has scholarly weight and it impresses. Perhaps you can think of a word that is important to your topic or subject area and do some preliminary research about how it is transposed to other societies, with different traditions and languages. Typing 'translation' and 'language' along with other key terms into an academic search engine may direct you to an existing literature that can anchor your work.

TIP

Using the word 'foreign'

In multicultural and multilingual societies, calling languages that are widely spoken 'foreign' can be inappropriate. The term 'foreign languages' may be replaced by 'global languages' or 'international languages' and 'foreign word' by, for example, 'non-English word'.

TRY THIS

Aim: To explore key words through translation

Sometimes untranslated terms are obvious in the titles of papers and books on your reading list. If so, *try this*: limiting your search to the last 10 years, type 'critique' (or a similar word) and the most common of these untranslated words into a search engine. What you are looking for are attempts to develop and re-examine this key term. You may also find an anchor text that does something similar and provides a launching point for your own engagement.

At other times, untranslated terms are hard to find. If so, *try this*: take a key word from your area of study and explore its meaning and usage in another language. It does not need to be a 'new word'. In fact, this exercise works better if it is a well-known word. Earlier I looked at the way the English word 'race' translates into Chinese as my example. Here's an illustration between more similar languages. To adapt it for your own use all you need to do is replace the key term and the language. This illustration is of a translation that might seem not to change much. The key term is 'geopolitics' and the language is Italian. 'Geopolitics' translates into Italian as *geopolitica* (with the same meaning but a somewhat different heritage and debate). Type this Italian term in an academic search engine, time-limiting your search. A lot of Italian commentary on *geopolitica* will come up. If you can read Italian so much the better; if not, do what I do and use a translate function to look at one or two essays. What you are looking for is either a sense of the distinctive context and heritage of the Italian debate or evidence of an original contemporary Italian debate, or 'take', on geopolitics. Here is one example of the kind of sentence that may emerge from this evidence: 'In this essay English-language geopolitics are reframed through an encounter with the specific concerns of Italian debates on *geopolitica*.'

Inventing your own words

Inventing your own new words is not as daunting as it may appear. Here are two ways to do it:

1. *Adding to existing labels*. In other words, creating what I have called 'composite' terms. This is the approach I recommend. It is straightforward and less risky than method 2 (creating your own neologism). Say, for example, you want to talk about hospitals in a sociology course. 'This essay outlines "hospital sociology" as a distinct societal arena...'. Studying horses in geography? 'I develop and identify the field of "equine geography" as a contribution to the new sub-field of "animal geographies"'. As the last example hints, there is a limit to how niche you can go: more minor topics are best slotted into existing sub-fields. Here are some more examples. Interested in exploring South

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Asian material in a course on memory? Why not argue that ‘South Asian Memory Studies’ should be recognised as a distinctive area of enquiry? Want to engage the work of specific Feminist Marxist authors with post-colonialism? You are off to a good start: being specific in at least one of these areas is a lot more likely to lead to originality than working with very broad traditions (if your ambition was to ‘engage the work of Marxists’, it would sound too general). Next step, come up with a category. For example, perhaps you could write ‘this is a body of work that can be grouped under the label “post-race Feminist Marxism”’. You are looking for just one word to combine with the existing label: ‘new words’ lose effect if strung into long phrases, so try to keep your constructions short and punchy.

As this last case tells us, you can also take inspiration from the academic penchant for finding and categorising ‘posts’ (and ‘beyonds’ and ‘afters’). You will need to make sure that the work or phenomenon you are describing does indeed critique and/or signal a departure from whatever you are claiming it is ‘post’ to. It bears repeating that having one substantial innovation is better than trying, and probably failing, to introduce several. So, for example, keep to one ‘post’ and get it upfront, anchored and clear. For example: ‘In this essay, I draw on the work of Blue in order to identify a new phenomenon in public architecture, which I call the “post-civic”’. Such a sentence is focused and specific, and promises something ambitious but doable.

2. *Inventing your own neologism.* For students, creating your own new word from scratch presents more of a risk than adding to an existing one. My advice is don’t. There is a chance that such terms will sound redundant, unwanted, even a bit silly. I’m playing safe. Too safe maybe. Let’s say you want to give it a go.

There are many ways to create single new words but the simplest form is another type of composite. ‘Mythogeography’, ‘schizocartography’, ‘sostalgia’ are three examples of new words that all take an existing root (‘geography’, ‘cartography’, ‘algia’) and splice it with another term. If it suddenly feels like we have wandered into a Greek or Latin class, that is because Greek (ancient not modern) and Latin are the privileged languages for this kind of operation. There is no reason why you can’t do it with other languages, but these ones remain the most widely used. ‘Algia’ is Greek for pain and sickness. We know it from its combination with the Greek for ‘homecoming’ (*nostos*); creating ‘nostalgia’ or home sickness (a word that was invented in the late seventeenth century). ‘Sostalgia’ splices the Latin root for ‘comfort’ – *solacium* – into ‘algia’, creating a neologism which today is sometimes used to describe a sense of loss in the face of environmental change. It is an instructive example,

for there is nothing in either of the contributing root words directly about the environment. So long as the author's definition is in the same ballpark as the literal meaning that is fine; the inventor is the one who defines the invention.

Let's give it a go. I'll also start with 'algia' (sickness), as it is a common root word and widely understood. Let's create a brand new composite with it. The Latin for night is *nyx*. So *nyxalgia* literally means 'night sickness'. To make this new word work for us we will want to define it less literally. For example, we could define it as referring to modern societies' fear of the dark. In summary, the 'word-creating' process has three stages: identify a root, find a word or word-part to combine with it, and then define the word's meaning.

TRY THIS

Aim: Devise your own new word

This exercise is based on your last written assignment. Could its argument have been improved and made more original if you had devised a 'new word'? Stick to adding to an existing label, as this is the most common and practical option. Can you see a group of scholars, or type of scholarship, which could be given a particular label, one based on adding a word to a pre-existing sub-field or topic field? It is important that you don't force the point. Realising that, no, such a term would be unhelpful, because it would corral people and things together that don't have a clear connection, is more useful than imposing a label that doesn't fit. In fact, it is one successful outcome of the exercise. What you are aiming at is not a list of 'new words', come what may, but to start to think about when and why innovative categorisations work and when they don't.

Conclusion

Words matter. One way of reading this chapter is as a supplement to Chapter 2. There we explored six types of original argument. The new words and phrases introduced in this chapter can help communicate any of these six arguments. However, to restrict an interest in language to a supplementary role is to miss the centrality of language in innovation. As we have seen, there are many cases where discussion of how and why certain terms are used is at the heart of pioneering work. In part, this centrality reflects the mutable nature of language. Language is constantly being adapted and diversified to accommodate social change and the agendas of different groups. It is a peculiarly plastic thing that can be shaped and reshaped by many different actors.

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Academic language tries to capture this mobility and its formal, precise and often rather laborious nature provides both a structure and a tradition through which the world can be dissected and understood. It is, however, worth thinking about how this distinctive academic dialect frames the world. Critics often accuse academics of writing in impenetrable prose and of being more concerned with communicating with a tiny community of colleagues than with the public. There is tolerance for mathematicians and physicists to express themselves in terms that take years to master but, understandably, far less leeway is given to scholars in the humanities or social sciences. It is useful to acknowledge such concerns for they reflect the rising importance across higher education of a commitment to impact and dissemination (both of which provide many opportunities for student innovation, as discussed in Chapter 6). These topics also force us to face a wider question: 'What is academic language trying to achieve?' My answer is that it is attempting, or should be attempting, to depict and understand reality in all its complexity without sacrificing clarity. This fundamental ambition, to be both truthful and lucid, is always worth bearing in mind, especially for students on the pathway to originality.

