

The organization of linguistic writing

1 Sections and section headings

Linguistics documents are nowadays divided into sections, each of which has a title, also known as a section heading.¹ Section headings (and the outline that can be generated from them) are like a map of your document. They provide the big picture for the reader, while the content of the paragraphs themselves provide the details. Section headings should be used in your homework write-ups in this class (and really all types of documents in all of your linguistics classes). If section headings are not provided for you in the homework instructions, one way to structure your homework would be to create section headings that answer the questions that are posed to you.

Sections can be and often are nested within each other, leading to subsections, subsubsections, etc. Thus a document might have the following outline:

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section
section
    subsection
    subsection
        subsubsection
        subsubsection
    subsection
section
    subsection
    subsection
    subsection
    subsection
  
```

The headings of the largest divisions with a document are known as level 1 headings.

Headings only come in sets of 2 or more. Thus if you have one level 2 heading (within a section) you must have another level 2 heading within the same section. Thus, the following organization would be “wrong” (because there is only one subsection within the second section).

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section
section
    subsection
section
  
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The first thing in a section (after the heading) should always be prose. In particular, a section should not start with a table or figure. There should always be at

¹This is the current norm for linguistic writing. In older journal articles, e.g. Hockett 1947, sections are numbered but not given a title.

least a sentence or two introducing the table or figure and telling the reader what to notice in it, as in the following passage from Lindblom 1990:413:

3. What Do Speakers Do?

3.1 CLUES FROM BIOLOGY I: ECONOMY

The themes of the next two sections are summarized in Figure 2. It shows a window cleaner and the compensatory articulation of a bite-block vowel (Lindblom 1983). Two important movement characteristics are illustrated here: economy and plasticity. The bottom diagrams illustrate the expected normal behaviors in which the feet and the jaw synergistically participate to facilitate the two tasks, cleaning the pane on the right and producing the vowel /i/. The top diagrams show compensatory behaviors. The feet and jaw assume positions that necessitate extreme displacements of the arm-body and the tongue respectively. The point is this: Unconstrained, a motor system tends to default to a low-cost form of behavior.

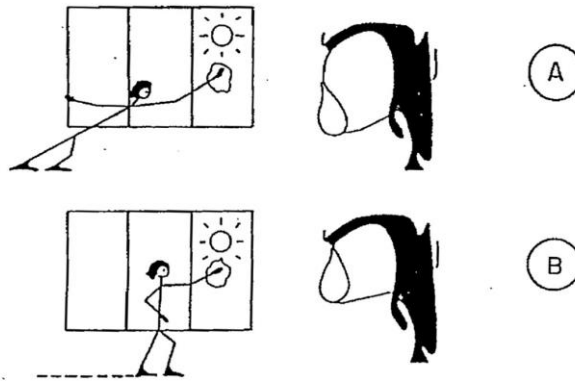


Figure 2. Movement economy and plasticity. A: Compensatory behaviors. B: Normal behaviors.

In this example from Lindblom 1990, the section actually begins with two section headings. Normally there would be a short introduction to section 3 before 3.1 begins.

Ideally a section should also end with prose as well, rather than end with a table or figure. However, that rule is less important to follow than the “never start a section with anything but prose” rule. If you have a table or figure at the end of a section, only add prose when there is something contentful to add after the table or figure.

Finally, your document should always have a title. A title is a section heading par excellence, the biggest picture yet you can give the reader of what you are writing about. Like your section headings, the title should strive to convey the maximum amount of information with the clearest, most succinct wording. Which is a more informative title, “Homework 1” or “Lango Phonemes”?

2 Conventional formatting of section headings in linguistics

Section headings are conventionally flush left rather than centered or indented in linguistics documents, unlike the outline above on p. 1. Often there is a change of font style and/or size for headings of different levels. For example, bold might be used for level 1, italics for level 2, and plain for level 3.

In long, complex documents it is a good idea to number section headings. The convention in linguistics is to use “legal” numbering: 1, 1.1, 1.1.1, etc. Note the use of Arabic, not Roman, numbering. Thus, the sections in our hypothetical example would be numbered as follows:

- 1. section
- 2. section
- 2.1 subsection
- 2.2 subsection
- 2.2.1 subsubsection
- 2.2.2 subsubsection
- 2.3 subsection
- 3. section
- 3.1 subsection
- 3.2 subsection
- 3.3 subsection
- 3.4 subsection

(You can see another example of “legal numbering” of section headings in the passage above from Lindblom 1990.) Numbering section headings is another device that helps the reader keep track of where they are in your article. Obviously this is more important in a 50-page document than in a 5-page one, but can be useful even in short documents. Section heading numbering is also used in linguistics to refer to a section in another location in the document.

When you use section headings, all text must be assigned to some section. The only exception to this is sometimes the very first paragraph or two of the document, which normally provides an overview of the document. Alternatively, longer documents may start with an abstract.

3 Cross referencing

The convention in linguistics is to refer the reader to other parts of your document by referring to that section by its number, not by its title (probably to save space). An example of section cross-referencing style in linguistics can be seen in the following passage from Lindblom 1990:404:

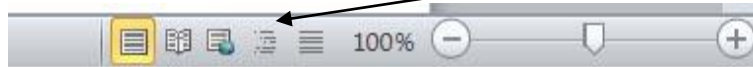
The main theme of the present chapter is: How do we make sense of this pervasive intra-speaker phonetic variation? My account is not new. It uses many well-known facts and traditional ideas. It may nevertheless differ in significant ways from answers currently obtainable from competing frameworks such as the Motor Theory, the Quantal Theory, the Direct Realism and Action Theory approaches, and 'Icebergs' (Fujimura 1989) just to mention a few (see Section 5.1).1)

(However, in a cross-reference the word ‘section’ is not normally included before the section number, except for a level 1 heading, where the symbol ‘§’ can also be used for ‘section’.)

Again, the need for cross-references to other sections is likely to come up only in a longer or more complex document.

4 Tricks and tips for Microsoft Word users

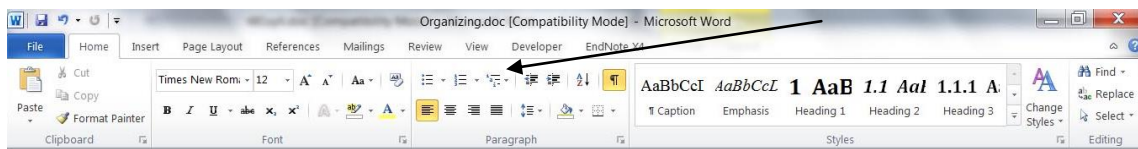
Outline View is a great feature that allows you to check the organization of your document. There are two ways to access it: via View, Outline and also by clicking on the outline icon which is probably near the bottom right of your display:



Then use the Show Level box to condense the display, check your organization, and adjust if necessary.

Headings are also used to create a table of contents via References, Table of Contents.

Adding numbers to section headings is trickier in the latest versions of Word than it used to be. In a relatively simple document, it may be as simple as clicking the Multilevel List button under Home, Paragraph and selecting the appropriate numbering style.



However, in more complex documents it may be necessary to define a new List style.

For one way to do so, see:

<http://www.shanakelly.com/word/numbering/numbering20072010.html>

5 References

Hockett, Charles F. 1947. 'Problems of Morphemic Analysis.' *Language* 23:321-343.

Lindblom, Bjorn. 1990. 'Explaining phonetic variation: a sketch of the H&H theory.' In *Speech Production and Speech Modeling*, ed. by William J. Hardcastle and Alain Marchal. Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers. pp. 403-439.