Data Commentary

In many academic writing tasks, there comes a place where you need to discuss data. In fact, research has shown that in some fields such as engineering the ability to make a point or build an argument based on data is essential to successful writing. In many disciplines, the data are displayed in a table, graph, or figure. The data may come from a source, or it may be the outcome of your own work, that is, your results. Data-focused writing subtasks can be called data commentaries. The amount and level of specificity of commentary provided for a data set can vary considerably depending on the type of text being written. For instance, in published journals articles, some data commentaries may be as short as a single sentence and be very general. In a technical report, the commentary may be much longer.

Strength of Claim

Like many other aspects of academic writing, data commentaries are exercises in positioning yourself. There are, as a result, both dangers and opportunities. One danger is to simply repeat in words what the data have expressed in non-verbal form - in other words, to offer description rather than actual commentary or interpretation. As opposite danger is to read too much into the data and draw conclusions that are not well supported. The art of the commentary is for you to find the right strength of claim in discussing the data and then order your statements in some appropriate way (perhaps in order of interest or relevance). This may involve moving in a general-specific direction. To illustrate the right strength of claim consider the following.

Decide whether the verb phrase choice results in a strong, weak, or neutral statement:

Many studies have concluded that excessive credit growth __________________ the global financial crisis.

_____ a. contributed to
_____ b. caused
_____ c. may have contributed to
_____ d. was probably a major cause of
_____ e. was one of the causes of
_____ f. might have been a factor in

Your choice of verb can convey your stance or perspective and the extent to which you believe the explanation to be correct.

Some common purposes of data commentaries:

● highlight the result of research
● use the data to support a point or make an argument
● assess theory, common beliefs, or general practices in 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
● make recommendations