

## “The work is seminal”: The use of positive summative comments in examiners’ reports on MPhil theses

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### *Abstract*

Assessment in post graduate higher education helps to understand student learning, and it provides the needed comments (feedback) that will enable students to master skills in achieving expected standards. Positive feedback is key here. The study investigates the use of positive summative comments in examiners’ reports, a key but occluded written genre in the academic discourse community. Adopting a qualitative approach, the study purposively sampled hundred examiners’ reports on MPhil theses from four disciplines (1, 2, 3 & 4) in University of Cape Coast (UCC). The analysis showed that positive comments are expressed on various aspects of the thesis, in line with UCC’s list of evaluative criteria. Key part-genres of the thesis, such as title, abstract, and the entire thesis also received positive comments from the examiners. The study contributes to the growing literature on the use of evaluative language in fostering learning. The findings on the use of positive comments in the examiners’ reports contributes to the literature on language of thesis examination reports. Finally, the findings have implications for further research.

**Keywords:** assessment, evaluation, examiners’ reports, positive comments, postgraduate pedagogy

## **“The work is seminal”: The use of positive summative comments in examiners’ reports on MPhil theses**

### **1. Introduction**

Feedback is often referred to as a form of communication (Higgins, Hartley & Skelton, 2001). Hughes, Wood and Kitagawa (2014) also highlight the dialogical role of feedback. They argue that feedback leads to discussion, clarification, and negotiation. Nicol (2009a) argues that effective feedback is associated with partnership, requiring collaborative actions by teachers and students. In this sense, feedback should be arrived at fairly promptly and must be understood and used by students. According to Hattie and Timperley (2007), feedback is usually thought of as information provided by an agent (e.g. teacher, peer, book, parent, self, experience) on aspects of one’s performance or understanding. A similar view is proffered by Hughes et al. (2014) who assert that feedback is information from instructors or peers that is provided to students about latter’s assignments. Feedback includes both information about the product (the paper or the assignment) and the process of writing.

Nicol (2009a) mentions that in higher education, it is usual to think about the instructor as the initiator and provider of feedback. Nicol (2009a) argues further that while teachers engage with ideas and arguments, they must analyse signals, have genuine interest, respect identities, and have strengths and potentials in written papers in order for them (teachers) to give appropriate feedback. The lecturer, in an expert role, offers various forms of feedback to students, which is aimed at supporting learning and to help students achieve higher levels in the learning process. Stracke and Kumar (2010) observe that through feedback, supervisors engage with supervisees. They explain that this engagement could be in the form of interactions that range from referential comments which provide information, directive comments which try to get the writer to do something or, finally, expressive comments which express the speaker’s (supervisor’s) feelings are attitudes about the postgraduate work.

Feedback has an agent that completes the process. Nicol (2009b) postulates that while the quality of expert (that is, supervisor, examiner etc.) comments is important, engagement with and use of those comments by students is equally important. Nicol (2009b) continues that numerous feedbacks may be provided by a lecturer but these may yield nothing unless the student responds appropriately to these feedbacks, processing and acting upon the feedbacks.

The thesis examiners’ reports is a form of feedback on the thesis the candidate has thrived to produce. These examiner comments are given by experts who are deemed gatekeepers in allowing entry or otherwise of the thesis into the research community. The, candidate, on the other hand, is expected to work on these comments, to help complete the process of feedback. It is within this assessment process that examiners’ comments can be positive to show approval of what the candidate has produced, the thesis. Thus, the present study seeks to examine how examiners express their approval of the thesis in response to the requirements of School of Graduate Studies, University of Cape Coast (UCC). In other words, how do examiners positive comments reflect the evaluative criteria of the School of Graduate Studies? What other issues do examiners respond to outside the evaluative criteria provided by the School of Graduate School?

### **2. Empirical Review**

The section presents reviews on studies on written feedback. Written feedback comments have extensively been studied from various perspectives, which include novices (e.g. Bruno & Santas, 2010; Hyland & Hyland, 2001; Hyland & Hyland, 2006) and experts (e.g. Hughes et al., 2014). In this section, I review studies on both perspectives, novice and experts.

Studies on feedback on novice writing have concentrated on the functions of feedback, effects of feedback (Razali & Jupri, 2014), and students’ reactions to feedback (Kumar & Kumar, 2009). Hyland and Hyland (2001) gave an elaborate description of written feedback offered by two tutors to non-native learners of aptitude subject, considering positive, negative and recommendations. A key finding of the study was that praise was the most frequently employed function in the feedback of these two teachers, but this was often used to soften criticisms and suggestions rather than simply responding to good work. Many of the criticisms and suggestions were also mitigated by the use of hedging devices, question forms, and personal attribution. They explored the motivations for these mitigations through teacher interviews and think-aloud protocols and examined cases where students failed to understand their teachers’ comments due to their indirectness. While recognizing the importance of mitigation strategies as a means of minimizing the force of criticisms and enhancing effective teacher–student relationships, they also pointed out that such indirectness carried the real potential for incomprehension and miscommunication.

In another study, Hyland and Hyland (2006) examined feedback on L2 students’ writing, utilizing a different approach from the earlier study (Hyland & Hyland, 2001) which was devoted to textual analysis of the written feedback (WF) by only two teachers. Hyland and Hyland (2006) explored the role of feedback in writing instruction and discussed current issues related to teacher written and oral feedback, collaborative peer feedback, and computer-mediated feedback. Their exploration revealed that the research into feedback on L2 students’ writing had increased dramatically in the last decade. However, they found that there were uncertainties concerning the most effective ways of responding to different text features, the role of context, personal preference, and interpersonal factors in giving and responding to feedback, and the best ways were to employ peer and oral feedback. Again, there was the need to understand the long-term effects of feedback on writing development. Positively, they realized that feedback studies had moved away from a narrow obsession with the effectiveness of error correction and the practice of peer feedback to embrace a new range of issues, so that they were now more aware of the potential of oral conferencing and computer-mediated feedback, of the importance of exploring student preferences and responses to feedback, and the role of wider social, institutional and interactional factors on feedback and its uptake.

Razali and Jupri (2014) investigated the effects of teacher WF on undergraduates’ writing in an English L2 classroom at Universiti Malaysia Perlis, a local university in Malaysia. Their study explored the use of three types of feedback— suggestion, criticism, and praise— and which type of feedback from these three encouraged student revisions. The study revealed that all types of teacher written feedback encouraged student revisions. In addition, their findings showed that criticism resulted in revisions that were more successful, as it was more specific. Also, on the functions of feedback, Lee (2009) examined written feedback produced by students in an EFL AW program in the University of Tokyo, Japan. He limited his study to peer feedback, unlike Hyland and Hyland (2006) who included teacher written and oral feedback as well as computer-mediated feedback. The study found that students had an exceptionally high tendency for using suggestion-feedback and least tendency for praise-feedback.

Awiah, Gborsong, and Appartaim (2018) focused on the nature and location of teachers’ written feedback comment on sixty-two (62) students’ project essays selected from four Colleges of Education in Ghana, to, specifically, ascertain the syntactic/linguistic form of comments written by the teachers”. Adopting Ferris et al.’s (1997) discourse analysis model of teacher written feedback commentary, the three researchers found that the frequent linguistic form was the statement (116, 34.5%), followed by imperative syntactic form (115, 34.2%)q2q. Teachers’ comments were also mitigated, and mostly comments were found in margins and end points of the projects.

Apart from the functions of feedback, Kumar and Kumar’s (2009) exploratory study provided a window into two important thought processes of a writer’s repulsiveness and noticing, which had pedagogical implications. Concurrent verbal protocol data, which formed the main source of data, were supplemented by data in the form of written teacher feedback, written texts, and a questionnaire survey. The study found that while attending to

feedback, Wendy (the subject) recursively moved back and forth in no set order from written comments to her written text constantly. During that process, Wendy went through several thought processes before she either accepted or rejected feedback. In the first approach of accepting teacher feedback, she either justified herself first or made plans before she accepted feedback. She also indicated the changes that she intended to implement in her rewrite.

Conversely, Mahfoodh and Pandian (2011) did not limit their study to one participant, as found in Kumar and Kumar's (2009) study; instead, Mahfoodh and Pandian (2011) investigated EFL students' affective reactions to and perceptions of their teacher's written feedback (TWF). In addition, the study focused on contextual factors that might influence students' reactions to and perceptions of their TWF. Data were collected, using multiple methods that included semi-structured interviews, think-aloud protocols, TWF, and students' written essays. A finding of the study was that EFL students showed some variations in their affective reactions to their TWF. Again, the students wanted their teachers to focus on all aspects of written texts when they provide WF.

No clear correlation between a person's ability to tolerate ambiguity and his or her attitude toward scholarly writing was found when Hughes (2013) investigated student writings but not essays, as found in the earlier studies. Hughes (2013) examined what Master's students and their faculty mentors knew and understood in the writing process by investigating the practices and perceptions of a group of Master's level faculty members and graduate students. Student-participants, generally, were confident about their writing abilities; they were motivated to improve with assistance from their mentors, and held the belief that feedback was an important part of the writing process. These beliefs were present both in terms of providing formative assistance and for guiding the overall learning in the writing process.

Bruno and Santos (2010) studied the characteristics of written comments on assignments as well as the process of writing them. They also added interviews of three case-study middle school students, observation of lessons and content analysis of their assignments as data, excluding questionnaire. Bruno and Santos' (2010) study showed that features that promoted learning were: comments located next to what needs revision must be reviewed; use of topics to discriminate tasks; vocabulary familiar to students; short and direct comments when involving simple competencies, but supplying strategies when complex competencies were involved. Teachers felt difficulties related to: lack of space to write, selection of what to comment on and, occasionally, avoiding to give part of the answer. Being aware of students' competencies, giving timely feedback, using feedback systematically and student motivation were other factors that determined comments' efficacy.

Studies on feedback abound in the higher education literature. However, what has been reviewed here indicates that feedback (1) performs different functions, (2) is practiced differently by teachers and students, and (3) is very much appreciated by students in their writings as well as the features that promote learning. It must be said that the thesis examiner's report (TER) is a form of a written feedback though it has been given little attention in terms of its evaluative language. We seek to add to these studies on written feedback (WF) by investigating the use of positive evaluative language employed in examiners' reports on MPhil thesis submitted to the School of Graduate Studies (SGS), University of Cape Coast (UCC).

### **3. Methods and Data**

This section of the paper discusses the research design, educational setting, data set, data collection and data analysis procedure, as outlined.

**Research Design and Educational Setting** - Because we aimed to describe, explain and interpret the use of positive evaluative comments in the thesis examiners' reports, we employed the qualitative research design. Specifically, we adopted the content analysis approach which allowed us to closely examine the thesis examiners' reports and understand the nature of positive evaluative comments employed by examiners in their submitted reports to the School of Graduate Studies (SGS), University of Cape Coast (UCC). The study is situated in University of Cape Coast, with specific reference to the SGS. UCC houses many schools like the

School of Graduate Studies. The vision of the SGS (UCC), from the school’s website, is to become “the hub of an outstanding multi-disciplinary context for graduate training and research for advancing the socio-economic development of Ghana”. The mission of the School is “to create a facilitating environment for teaching, learning and training of graduate students and researchers in the fields of the Sciences and Humanities, equipped with initiative and leadership in key sectors of international endeavor”.

To achieve its vision and mission, the School has a four-fold function: a). draft regulations for all higher degrees with a view to ensuring that acceptable academic standards are maintained. b). receive reports and consider recommendations pertaining to higher degrees and graduate diplomas from department and faculty committees of graduate studies. c). determine results of higher degrees and graduate diplomas. d). make recommendations to Academic Board for the award of higher degrees and graduate diplomas. It is within this school that postgraduate programs are housed, these are assessed and degrees awarded upon the completion of one’s study. Of particular interest to the present study is the second function which is about receipt of thesis examination reports and award of degrees, giving us the examiners’ reports that served as data for the present study. Thus, completed theses are forwarded by SGS for examination. After the examination of a thesis, the examiner writes report, proffering his/her impression about the thesis with the help of a list of evaluative criteria and recommending the award of a degree sought or otherwise in the same report. Thus, this function is key in producing quality postgraduate students in UCC. The study, therefore, sought to investigate the use of positive evaluative comments in the reports and their conformity or otherwise to the requirements of SGS, UCC, as contained in the evaluative criteria.

**Data Set, Data Collection, and Data Analysis Procedure** - The data were sourced from MPhil thesis examiners’ reports submitted to the disciplines of English and History (from Faculty of Arts), and Population and Health, and Hospitality and Tourism Management (from Faculty of Social Sciences), University of Cape Coast. We selected 25 examiners’ reports from each of the selected disciplines, totaling hundred (100). To commence with the collection of data, we submitted an introductory letter to the departments and explained the purpose of the study to the heads of the department. The administrators of the departments were asked by these heads to make the reports available to us, after we had explained the specifications to the administrators. The received reports were photocopied and the originals were returned to the departments. Later, the photocopied reports were tagged and put in envelopes, ready for analysis. The names of examiners and candidates that came with text (that is, thesis examiners’ reports, TER) were erased so as to conceal the identities of these individuals; thereby, ensuring confidentiality and anonymity.

Hundred (100) reports on MPhil theses were purposely sampled. In selecting the data, we were interested in reports with three or more sentences on a particular evaluative criterion at a time as there were some reports that had one-sentence comments. Again, a report was selected if it addressed all the rhetorical sections of a thesis, such as problem statement, literature review, methodology, analysis and discussion, and conclusion since these are the core components of a thesis and SGS (UCC) also expected examiners to comment on them. Examiners’ reports obtained from these disciplines were photocopied. Holbrook et al.’s (2004a) identification of summative evaluative comments is considered. They explain that summative comments (SCs) stand alone and concisely sum up the examiner’s expectations about the thesis in whole or a section of it. These comments pinpoint the qualities of the theses, as in, ‘This is a seminal thesis’, and ‘The thesis is well organized and presented’. Such statements are positive; it is the positive evaluative comments, which are given attention in the present study.

The present study adopted a textual approach. To code the texts, data were numbered (1-25) for each department. For example, the first Population and Health data was labelled “POH 1”; next “POH 2” till the final one, “POP 25”; “HOT” to represent Hospitality and Tourism Management; “ENG” signified English, and “HIS” meant History. Tagging the reports helped in the easy identification of the uniqueness of the many positive evaluative resources in the reports for analysis. The discussion was structured around the patterns that were established. Further, the established patterns were presented in reduced evolving forms.

#### 4. Findings and Discussion

In this section, we present analysis and discussion of the data examined, focusing on how examiners present their positive summative comments on the theses in response to the evaluative criteria of SGS (UCC). The analysis of the data revealed that positive comments are presented on all part-genres of the thesis such as literature review and methodology.

**Problem Specific/ Research Objectives/Questions/Hypotheses** - A key rhetorical aspect of the thesis that elicited some positive comments was the Introduction. The introduction includes background to the study, statement of the problem, scope of the study, and research questions/hypothesis. The introduction is key in setting out the research questions in a study (Hyland, 2000). Afful (2005) articulates that in terms of structure, the introduction chapter is the first out of a number of chapters, with its function of orienting the reader towards the body of the text. Some examiners remarked positively on the introduction either as the entire Chapter One or parts of the chapter:

Extract 1

*Candidates' introduction of the study provides a fitting contextualization for understanding the entire work. (ENG 13)*

Extract 2

*The problem to be investigated has been clearly and carefully spelt out. (HIS 11)*

Extract 3

*The research objectives are reasonably well stated and dealt with satisfactorily in the work. (HIS 7)*

Extract 4

*The hypotheses were satisfactorily tested. (POH 19)*

Extracts 1 and 2 illustrate the positive comments received on the introductions of the theses. In Extract 1, the introduction given by the candidate is deemed by the examiner to be 'fitting', expressing positivity. An introduction should provide a context for the rest of the sections of the thesis. By achieving this, the proper grounding of the other chapters or sections of the thesis is guaranteed.

In Extract 2, the problem statement is identified to be well defined. There is a positive evaluative comment of the statement of the problem through the use of adverbs of manner, 'clearly' and 'carefully'. The candidate's ability to express the statement of the problem as expected confirms the view of Lunenburge and Irby (2008) and Calmorin and Calmorin (2007) that the statement of the problem for the thesis must be succinct. For Bui (2014), the establishment of the statement of the problem is the actual part of writing Chapter One, Introduction. Thus, statement of the problem is an essential section of the thesis as it allows the writer to justify to the reader why it is necessary for the topic to be studied (Bui, 2014). In Extract 3, the examiner clarifies his/her value of the research questions through the use of multiple adverbs: 'reasonably', 'well', and 'satisfactorily'. There is also evidence in Extract 4 that the hypotheses used in the thesis were judged favourably, as 'satisfactorily tested'. Calmorin and Calmorin (2007) explain that the research objectives are to be stated specifically in simple language for ease of measuring the instruments in the research process, and this the candidate has done, warranting that positive remark from the examiner.

**Knowledge of Relevant Literature/Theoretical Framework/Conceptual Framework** - A major component of the thesis that attracts examiners is the literature review (LR) section. This consists of the theoretical framework, key concepts, and relevant empirical review. The LR is expected to demonstrate the student's

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“The work is seminal”: The use of positive summative comments in examiners’ reports on MPhil theses mastery of knowledge of the field, relationship between past studies and the present study, sense of criticality/voice, argumentation, gap in the existing literature, and varied referencing skills (Afful, 2012; Hart, 1998). According to Holbrook et al. (2004b), examiners use the literature review as a ‘litmus test’ for the quality of a thesis as a whole. The data manifest some positive comments on the LR, as shown in the extracts below:

Extract 5

*The candidate’s knowledge of pertinent literature on the area studied is satisfactory. (HIS 4)*

Extract 6

*The researcher demonstrated extensive knowledge on the relevant literature on the research topic. Most of the references cited were current and relevant to the study. (POH 9)*

Extract 7

*The candidate demonstrates a good acquaintance with the literature in the field and quotes extensively from authors of seminal works. (ENG 17)*

Extract 8

*The framework was reviewed critically by the researcher by assessing the strength and weaknesses of the framework. The framework sufficiently guided the study. (HOT 15)*

From the above extracts (5-8), we find confirmation of propitious statements on the LR of the theses examined. Here, knowledge of the candidate with reference to the LR was expressed adjectivally as ‘good’ and adverbially ‘critically’. It may mean that what the LR is, that is, it being an examination of scholarly articles, books and other sources (dissertations, conference proceedings) carried out on a particular topic or relevant to a particular issue, area of research, or theory (Lynch, 2014; Paltridge & Starfield, 2007) has been a success. Afful (2020) identified that examiners often commented on the LR in the examiners’ reports. Nimulola (2018) also found examiners’ comments on the application and accuracy of literature review to be appropriate.

Akindele (1995) avers that the LR is designed to identify related research, to set the current research project within a conceptual and theoretical context. As a result, an effective LR should describe, analyze, and synthesize materials from a range of sources. Hence, the examiner, who is a gatekeeper, examines this aspect of the thesis and concludes that the LR has achieved what it is supposed to do. In Extract 7, the examiner comments on the organization of the whole section in addition to the nature of the sources/materials included in the LR; that is, the candidate has ‘a good acquaintance’ with the literature in the area and quotes ‘extensively’ from ‘authors of seminal works’. In a sense, the LR is not merely any set of other materials but those that are important and influential in nature, affirming Holbrook et al.’s (2004a; 2007) finding that examiners restrict their recognition of a good literature review to appropriate coverage in terms of depth, breadth, recency, and adequacy. Also, examiners identified working understanding, critical appraisal of the body of literature, connection of the literature to findings, and disciplinary perspective as key indicators of good performance in a candidate’s use of the literature (Holbrook et al., 2007) and the candidate achieves this in Extract 23 by critically reviewing literature. Holbrook et al. (2004a) also found that examiners comment on students’ understanding and application of the literature, including contribution to theory, and that examiners favors a thesis that engaged the literature and the findings (Golding et al., 2014)

***Design of Research/Data Collection Methods*** - Hofstee (2006, p. 107) asserts, “a result can only be accepted, rejected, checked, replicated or even understood in the context of how you got there”— that is, the methodology. In other words, the methodology of a thesis describes the ways in which a study is carried out, outlining the design, setting, data, sample, and analytical framework. If there ought to be a replication of the study, the method of the study will tell. Find below some comments on the methodology by some examiners:

Extract 9 25

*The research design is well explained. (HOT 14)*

Extract 10

*The data on which he bases his conclusions are adequate. (POH 18)*

Extract 11

*Analytical framework adopted for the study is worthwhile. (ENG 23)*

Extract 12

*The candidates' methodology is in line with historical research. He relied on primary and secondary sources. (HIS 6)*

The examiner, in Extract 12, is satisfied with what the candidate has done or exhibited. The predicative adjective 'worthwhile' in Extract 11 shows positivity, realizing that the purpose of research methods is to help researchers obtain valid and reliable outcomes (Nimehchisalem, 2018). These positive remarks by the examiners suggest that the methods are deemed worthwhile for the study and that acceptance of the findings of the study is not a problem. Examiners favored a thesis with a convincing research design; experienced ones tend to be open to different research approaches (Mullins & Kiley, 2002). Nimulola (2018) also found appropriate use of design in approach/methodology to be worthwhile.

Contrary to the findings of the present study, Afful (2020) and Holbrook et al. (2004a) found that examiners did not comment at length on the research design and its appropriateness. This may be discipline specific as it must be mentioned that although the present study does not seek to establish any disciplinarity, the analysis revealed that the presentation of methodology in theses is discipline specific, as shown below in the comments of a History examiner:

Extract 13

*The research was well designed. He used archival data as well as information from secondary and oral sources. He demonstrates that he understood what he did. He managed to interview people from the different areas involved for the purposes of authentication and balance. (HIS 2)*

Extract 13 provides evidence of a combined approach in the collection of data, primary and secondary; this runs through almost all the History data where qualitative History inquiry was employed by the candidates. Examiners did not request for any statistical analysis. Dunne, Pettigrew, and Robinson (2016) note that historical inquiry starts with choosing a period or theme, focusing on a specific event, presenting an overview of the topic, asking historical questions, locating, and analysing historical sources to establish historical evidence. The candidates in History followed this doggedly to establish their discipline-specificity. This candidate adheres to Lea and Street's (2006) view that academic literacies are socially situated within disciplines as well as within specific education settings (e.g. institutions, departments) and are subjected to instructors' expectations.

**Problem Solving/Logical Reasoning/Data Analysis** - Problem Solving /Logical Reasoning/ Data analysis as some evaluative criteria is embedded in the Analysis and Discussion section of a thesis. In other words, it is at the Analysis and Discussion section that candidates analyze data, in an attempt to solve the research questions/hypotheses posed in a thesis. Samraj (2005) identified that the discussion section of the thesis contains the background, report, commentary, interpretation, evaluation, summary, deductions from the results, research deductions and applied deductions. Against the background of expectations in the analysis and discussion section of a thesis, below are some positive comments (PCs) on Problem Solving/Logical Reasoning/Data Analysis:



Extract 14

*The analytical arguments are quite sound, justifiable, objective and adequate in terms of the problem that has been investigated. (ENG 13)*

Extract 15

*The analysis and interpretation have been well done; it is extremely impressive. (POH 10)*

Extract 16

*Generally, the flow of discussion was logical. (HIS 9)*

Extract 17

*The presentation and discussion of the results were very well handled. (HOT 19)*

Generally, the comments above (14-17) cover the issues of logicity and soundness in the analysis. The examiner expresses satisfaction with the candidate’s reasoning and concludes that it is logical and the analysis of the data is critical (Extract 14). Again, in this extract (14), the examiner employs adjectives to provide a more detailed description of what he/she feels about the analysis: ‘sound’, ‘justifiable’, ‘objective’, and ‘adequate’. These comments are in line with Paltridge and Starfield’s (2007) position that the candidate should be able to interpret results.

The candidates handling of the analysis and discussion section is also in line with Holbrook et al.’s (2004a) observation that reporting of results must be clear and adequate. Holliday (2007) explicates that the discussion should be well structured, using themes and headings to convey the finding from the data analysis and how the data provide evidence for what has been done. Lynch (2014) adds that the discussion should help relate data in the discussion to the research literature by taking care of the degree of certainty in expressing the reasons for the findings.

**Major Findings and Soundness of Discussion** - Per the SGS (UCC) requirements, examiners were expected to comment either favorably or otherwise on the major findings and soundness of the discussion in the thesis. Samraj (2005) identified that evaluation of the results/findings as well as limitations, significance/advantage of the study, evaluation of the methods, and evaluation of the field are key in thesis writing. Find examples on the use of positive comments (PCs) on the major findings and soundness of discussions below:

Extract 18

*The general discussions of the results and findings are satisfactory and logical. (ENG 6)*

Extract 19

*The main findings of the study are therefore very relevant to the development of Maternal and Child Health Care in Ghana. (POP 14)*

Extract 20

*The findings relating to both the quantitative and qualitative aspects of the work were well presented and discussed. (HOT 18)*

Extract 21

*The candidate effectively juxtaposed his findings to his objectives therefore contributing to the general history of Ghana. (HIS 22)*

The examiner expresses satisfaction with the presentation of results and findings and concludes that it is logical (Extract 18). Also, positive comment on candidate's ability to link findings with objectives is found in Extract 21, where contributions are made to "general history of Ghana". Paltridge and Starfield (2007) observe that candidate must provide the meaning and relevance of findings. Again, they noted that a good candidate should compare the present findings and previous studies so as to validate the methods used in the work, bringing to the fore their strengths and weaknesses. Unfortunately, data in the present study did not reveal any positive comment on the applicability of this assertion; that is, the examiner comments did not show any comment on candidate's ability to link findings of present studies to previous studies.

**Conclusion and Recommendations** - The penultimate issue to be discussed in relation to the use of positive comments (PCs) in the data is the conclusion chapter of the thesis, which encompasses summary of findings, implications of the study, and recommendations for further study. Hewings (1993) and Thompson (2005) observe that typically the conclusion recapitulates the purpose and research questions, presents findings, implications, and recommendations for future research. Paltridge and Starfield (2007) assert that it is in the concluding section of the work that the summary of the whole study is presented. Evans and Gruba (2002) also note that conclusions are derived from the arguments in the Discussion section.

Also, this chapter may be either presented alone or added to the discussion section. In the analysis of the data in the present study, the conclusion was observed to be separated from the Discussion section. Evans and Gruba (2002) further state that the conclusion must not contain any additional discussions. The conclusion should respond to the aims that were stated in the first chapter. In terms of textual space, often, a conclusion chapter is only a few pages long, as opposed to the discussion chapter which is very long and more extensive in its elaboration and reference to prior research, as noted by Paltridge and Starfield (2007). Hess (2004) indicates that drawing of conclusions should be supported by data. Illustrations of the use of positive comments (PCs) on the concluding chapter are presented below:

Extract 21

*Undoubtedly, the candidate makes valid conclusions which are borne out of fact. (HIS 10)*

Extract 22

*The arguments (conclusion) are well articulated and logically linked. (ENG 18)*

Extracts (21 and 22) variously present either the satisfaction of the examiners in relation to this section of the thesis or the good qualities that can be identified with this section of the work. In Extract 22, the examiner finds merit in what the candidate has done, observing that valid conclusions which are based on facts have been outlined by the candidate.

**Quality of Presentation** - The last issue to be discussed under positive comments is the presentation of the thesis. Inclusive in this evaluative criterion are the references, lay out, figures and tables, heading and subheading, language, and formatting. Examiners assess the suitability or otherwise of the quality of presentation of the thesis. Examiners express a sense of relief, pleasure or even surprise when a well-presented thesis is encountered (Johnston, 1997). Some of the positive comments are shown below:

Extract 23

*The candidate writes well. Additionally, the write up was not a mere narrative, but was also analytical, descriptive, thematic and chronological, thus making the work exceptional (under quality of presentation). (HIS 2)*

Extract 24

*As well, the referencing of the dissertation is good, given the reference sections of recent*

Extract 25

*Typing is competent and proof reading satisfactory. (HOT 7)*

Extract 25

*I am impressed with the level of language use. The candidate has used language which is appropriate for academic research work. (POH 12)*

In Extract 23, the examiner uses multiple adjectives to evaluate the work: ‘analytical’, ‘descriptive’, ‘thematic’, and ‘chronological’. The examiner sums up how s/he feels about the presentation of the thesis, concluding that the candidate writes ‘well’. Perhaps, this evaluation of the writing as being well executed relates to skills in the development of paragraphs, and the use of good grammar at the word and sentence levels, which aid in comprehension of the text (Hinkel, 2004; Kroll, 2003; Swales & Feak, 1994; 2012). Besides, if a reader is assisted through the use of summaries, logical sequencing, signposts and the removal of excessive repetition, as maintained by Johnston (1997), it makes a researcher a good writer. Clarity and logicity are essential in writing, as indicated by Silva and Matsuda (2001) and Afful (2009), and these the examiners found worth commenting on.

A good or professional reference list takes care of the currency of information given, the sequencing of sources in the thesis; that is, the organizing principle for the sources, and the nature of sources included in the work, either as journals, peer reviewed articles or books which may be classic in that discipline etc. (Akindele, 2008; Case & Higgans, 2000; Holbrook et al., 2004a; Mullins & Kiley, 2002). Thus, Extract 24 presented a positive summary feedback on the quality of the references found in the theses, and even compared that with previous ones that had been assessed recently. It can be deduced from the above statement that it is not always enough to get all the current, classic materials in an area of study, and use them in a work, but also their appropriateness in terms of the time of their introduction in the work counts a lot.

The above comments (Extracts 23-25) show that the examiners are contented with the quality of presentation of the work; hence, they variously endorse these features, using noun phrases, adjectives, and adverbs. These presentation features aid understanding, as observed by Johnston (1997) who admits that readers require assistance to understand the work.

***Extra Evaluative Criteria*** - This section presents analysis of some part-genres of the thesis which fall outside of the evaluative criteria of SGS (UCC) but examiners chose to comment positively on them, to bring their individual preferences to bear on the evaluation process and to place value on candidates’ abilities and skills in the thesis writing process. Such areas are termed “Extra Evaluative Criteria” and they include the whole thesis, title/topic, and abstract.

#### *4.1 Whole Thesis*

First, positive comments were passed on the whole thesis. In other words, judgment was passed on the entire thesis that had been submitted for assessment. Extracts are presented below:

Extract 26

*This is a sign of good scholarly work and must be encouraged. (POH 3)*

Extract 27

*The work is seminal. (HIS 1)*

Extract 28

*The dissertation itself is logically structured. (ENG 14)*

Extract 29

*I find the thesis a good one meriting a strong Upper to First Class pass (79%). (HOT 8)*

In Extract 28, using the adverb, ‘logically’, the examiner remarked ‘the dissertation itself’ has a logical structuring, employing the use of a reflexive, pronoun, ‘itself’ to show emphasis. Again, Johnston (1997) noted that examiners appreciate well-written, interesting and logically presented arguments. Also, the assertion of the examiner on the good thesis confirms Atkinson and Curtis’ (1998, p. 17) view that academic writing is more than “just getting ideas down on paper” and being sure that they are in “good English” but being able to organize information well for effective communication of ideas. Similarly, Dong (1998, p. 369) observes that writing challenges do not only lie in demonstrating knowledge related to research but also using that knowledge to “argue logically and coherently the meaning of the research results.”

#### 4.2 Topic/Title

Examiners commented positively on the topics/titles of the theses. The topic is mostly embedded in the title, which Afful (2017b) describes as ‘front’ rhetorical device. For Haggan (2004), through titles, writers provide the first point of contact for readers, determining whether texts have to be read or not. Afful (2017b) adds that titles catch the attention of readers before the content of the text is actually read. Although it is the first point of contact for the entire work, serving as a form of summary (Jalilifar, 2010), the topic/title of the thesis did not always receive mentioning, much less positive comments:

Extract 30

*It addresses a very interesting topic. (HOT 5)*

Extract 31

*This is a worthwhile study of an interesting topic. (ENG 20)*

Extract 30 recognises that the topic/title is interesting but in Extract 4, this recognition comes with a reference to the whole study, ‘the worthwhile study has an interesting topic’, where the examiner has employed an adjective, ‘worthwhile’ as a pre-modifier of ‘study’ and a prepositional phrase, ‘of an interesting topic’ as a post-modifier to express the nature of the ‘study’. It is quite worrying that the topics/title which sum up the content of entire theses received very few positive comments, confirming the findings of Boa and Leikin (2013) that examiners’ comments on the topic were relatively few.

Titles create distinctiveness for such a text, and appeal to readers or otherwise (Afful, 2005b; Hartley, 2005; 2007). Interestingly, the instruction of School of Graduate Studies (SGS), UCC, to examiners in the assessment of theses is silent on the topic/title; thus, probably, warranting their avoidance of comments on it. It may also be that examiners think that providing a good topic/title for the work is natural, ordinary, and ‘given’; without commenting on it, nothing will be lost. Meanwhile, titlelogy research and published advice indicate its centrality in research reporting, drawing attention to its aesthetics, semantics, grammar, and communicativeness, among others (Afful, 2005b; Hartley, 2005; 2007)

#### 4.3 Abstract

The abstract of the thesis, as a key front rhetorical element, also attracted positive evaluative comments. It is within the abstract that important facets of the thesis are highlighted. Bhatia (1993), citing ANSI’s (1979, p.1) definition of abstract, states that it is “an abbreviated, accurate representation of the contents of a document”, and

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he proposes a four-move structure: (1) introducing purpose, (2) describing methodology, (3) summarizing results, and (4) presenting conclusions (IMRC structure). Examiners positively remarked on the abstracts in varied ways, as shown below:

Extract 32

*The abstract states very succinctly the purpose and the conclusions of the thesis. (POH 9)*

Extract 33

*The abstract is an adequate statement of the thesis. (HOT 11)*

Extract 34

*The abstract clearly states the substance of the thesis. (ENG 11)*

In Extract 33, the attributive adjective ‘adequate’ is used to describe the abstract. The examiner points out that the abstract of the theses is succinctly presented. The abstract is required to have a clear purpose, methodology, findings, conclusions, and, probably, recommendations (Samraj, 2005). The existence and quality of these ‘moves’ may account for the positive appraisal of the abstract in Extracts 32- 34. This finding confirms the assertions of Myers (1990) and Feng (2006). For Myers (1990, p. 42), the abstract gives reviewers “a good first impression, of tantalizing them into further reading, and of persuading them; for Feng (2006, p. 2), the abstract is “more than a statement of intent, or a summary of the main text; rather, it is like goods on display, showing the buyers the sparkling points and encouraging them to make positive decisions.”

The abstract, commented on positively by examiners, can be seen to have performed their communicative function of promoting the researcher and the research on the one hand, and displaying professional credibility on the other, as expected by Bazerman (1994) and Bhatia (2004), who classify abstracts as part of the genre colony of academic introductions. As explained by Ahmad and Mehrjooseresht (2012), the abstract cannot be divorced from the thesis since researchers use it to situate their work in the academic community (AC); hence, the comments from the examiners.

## 5. Conclusion and Implications

The study has investigated the use of positive summative comments in examiners’ reports, a key but occluded written genre in the academic discourse community. Adopting a qualitative content analysis approach, hundred (100) examiners’ reports on MPhil theses were purposely sampled from four disciplines (English, History, Population and Health, and hospitality and Tourism Management) in University of Cape Coast. From the analysis, it was noticed that positive comments were expressed on various components of the thesis such as the knowledge of relevant literature, design of research, major findings and quality of presentation, which are in line with SGS’s (UCC) requirement. Contrary to SGS’s (UCC) requirement for assessment of a thesis, examiners commented positively on part-genres of the thesis such as the title/topic and abstract to show their idiosyncrasies and acknowledge the candidate’s abilities, attitude, and knowledge.

The findings of the study have some implications. First, the study contributes to the growing literature on language of evaluation in fostering learning, as positive feedback enhances performance (Hattie & Timperley 2007). Positive feedback is more efficient than negative feedback in improving learning performance (Arbel et al. 2014). Professionally, the use of positive comments in thesis examiners’ reports indicates that something is being done right, helping others (students and teachers; candidates and supervisors) to see what is worth doing and what is to be refrained from. Again, the findings of the study draw attention to how the thesis is to be written and the language that is used. Thus, the study serves to orient teachers, supervisors, and examiners of the need to be conscious of the language used in assessing students. In other words, the use of positive comments excites supervision and the kind of language used in re-enforcing learning. Thus, the study offers insight in getting

examiners to move from using language that is descriptive and not evaluative so that the practices of supervisors can be assessed for their conformity to standards or otherwise. Candidates (students), on the other hand, will be rewarded for their efforts and granted entry, as core, not peripheral members, to the academic community, as positive comments help learners (students) to successfully cope with future demands (Bandura, 1983). In essence, writing is not just an academic requirement but also an essential skill for success beyond tertiary education.

Again, the findings of the study that examiners chose to comment positively on part-genres of the thesis which fall outside of the evaluative criteria of SGS (UCC) has some implications. First, the findings suggest that examiners bring their individual preferences to bear on the evaluation process, placing value on candidates' abilities and skills in the thesis writing process. Though examiners share in the general practice of the community by responding to the evaluative criteria of SGS (UCC), they create their individual identities and preferences by responding to other part-genres of the thesis that are missing on the evaluative criteria of SGS (UCC). Thus, examiners' individual preferences appeal to the concept of style, where the language of the individual member (here, the examiner) of the community is a variation on a common /shared linguistic framework (Afful & Mwinlaaru, 2010; Hyland, 2008). In other words, examiners draw on a common linguistic repertoire of resources to perform their communicative function of assessing the thesis. These examiner idiosyncrasies in the examination process may be explained with the many international and local training that examiners might have had, exposing them to different practices in the assessment of thesis. Because examiners are privy to other practices elsewhere, they would like to bring these other practices to bear in the examination of thesis. Second, as University of Cape Coast (UCC) prides itself in having good rankings internationally (See Times Higher Ranking of universities in the world, 2021), there is the need for SGS, UCC to respond to changes in higher education by re-structuring its evaluative criteria to capture all the other equally important part-genres of the thesis such as the abstract and title.

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