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**УСТОЙЧИВЫЕ ИНТЕНСИФИКАТОРЫ В
АКАДЕМИЧЕСКОМ ДИСКУРСЕ: ЧАСТОТНОЕ
РАСПРЕДЕЛЕНИЕ И КОЛЛОКАЦИОННАЯ
СТАБИЛЬНОСТЬ**

В исследовании рассматривается набор интенсификаторов, характерных для современной академической прозы, с акцентом на их частотность и устойчивую склонность образовывать повторяющиеся сочетания с определёнными прилагательными и глаголами. На материале открытого корпуса научных статей анализируется, какие интенсификаторы встречаются чаще всего и насколько узок круг их типичных коллокаций. Результаты показывают, что основная доля употреблений приходится на несколько элементов («significantly», «highly», «particularly», «strongly»), которые появляются в распространённых сочетаниях вроде «highly significant» и «strongly associated». Эти сочетания распределяются неравномерно и демонстрируют выраженные предпочтения, связанные с количественным описанием данных, оценочными комментариями и характеристикой методологических процедур. Повторяемость таких сочетаний в работах разных областей указывает на то, что они функционируют как устоявшиеся фразеологические единицы, а не разовые авторские формулировки. В статье показано, в какой мере академическое письмо опирается на полу-устойчивые сочетания, с помощью которых авторы выделяют ключевые моменты, обозначают степень принятия той или иной интерпретации и представляют результаты исследования. В статье также обозначаются направления для дальнейших исследований, включая

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междисциплинарные различия и взаимодействие интенсификаторов с другими средствами выражения позиции автора.

Ключевые слова: интенсификатор, академический дискурс, академическое письмо, коллокация, фразеология, корпусная лингвистика

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**RECURRENT INTENSIFIERS IN ACADEMIC DISCOURSE:
FREQUENCY DISTRIBUTIONS AND COLLOCATIONAL
STABILITY**

The article examines a set of intensifiers in contemporary academic prose, focusing on their frequency and their tendency to form recurrent pairings with particular adjectives and verbs. Using a freely available corpus of research articles, the study identifies which intensifiers occur most often and how narrowly each one gravitates toward specific collocates. The findings show that a handful of items (“significantly”, “highly”, “particularly”, and “strongly”) account for the majority of occurrences and repeatedly appear in familiar combinations such as “highly significant” and “strongly associated”. These patterns are not evenly distributed but reveal clear preferences tied to quantitative reporting, evaluative commentary, and methodological description. The consistency of these pairings across unrelated fields suggests that they function as established phraseological routines rather than ad hoc choices. The study shows the degree to which academic writing depends on semi-fixed expressions that writers use emphasise key points, indicate how firmly they accept a particular interpretation, and organise the presentation of their results. The study also points to areas where further work would be valuable, including cross-disciplinary variation and the relationship between intensifiers and other stance devices.

Keywords: intensifier, academic discourse, academic writing, collocation, phraseology, corpus linguistics

Introduction

In academic writing, intensifiers occupy a relatively small corner of the lexicon, yet they appear with surprising regularity in descriptions of results, methodological decisions, and evaluations of prior work. Their function is straightforward: they mark that something is stronger, more pronounced, or more central to the argument than a neutral statement would suggest. Even in disciplines that prize restraint, writers still rely on items such as *highly*, *significantly*, or *particularly* when they need to point the reader toward what they regard as the main interpretive cue.

In this environment, intensifiers serve a few overlapping purposes. They help strengthen a claim when authors want to show that an effect or tendency stands out; they support evaluative commentary, often in predictable contexts such as assessments of importance or robustness; and they contribute to the familiar academic habit of qualifying statements without abandoning caution. The effect is not dramatic, but these words create small adjustments that condition how the reader is meant to understand the weight of a finding or the relevance of an observation.

Although intensifiers have been examined in conversational English, media texts, and other general-purpose corpora, their behaviour in academic prose has received far less attention. Studies that deal with academic phraseology tend to focus on lexical bundles or stance markers more broadly, leaving the day-to-day intensifiers largely unaccounted for. What remains underexplored is the tendency of certain intensifiers to recur with the same adjectives or verbs, forming combinations that look less like free choices and more like well-established turns of phrase. This tendency toward fixedness is noticeable to anyone who reads research articles regularly, but it has not been described in a systematic way.

The present study addresses two research questions. (1) *Which lexical intensifiers occur most often in academic discourse?* (2) *How stable are the pairings between these intensifiers and the words that typically follow them?* Both questions are deliberately narrow so that the analysis remains focused and manageable.

The aim is to examine the frequency of several common intensifiers in a freely accessible corpus of academic articles and to determine whether these items form recurrent combinations that might be described as formulaic. The study intentionally limits the scope this way to offer a

practical account of how intensifiers function in academic writing without extending into more overarching issues of stance or evaluation.

The contribution is primarily descriptive. It provides a clear picture of which intensifiers academics rely on most, and it documents the extent to which these intensifiers appear with the same collocates across many texts. Such patterns, once identified, offer a straightforward view of the phraseological habits that underlie much academic prose.

Theoretical background Intensification in English

Work on degree modification in English usually treats intensifiers as items whose primary business is to adjust how strongly a property or proposition is presented. In other words, they do not introduce a new quality but recalibrate the degree to which an existing one is said to hold. In the descriptive tradition, this function is often captured by defining intensifiers as “degree-indicating devices” that specify the extent or exact value of the quality expressed by the modified element (Hennoste et al., 2024). Most commonly, this role is fulfilled by adverbs in pre-head position (*very important, highly unlikely, strongly supported*), but adjectives and other forms can also be recruited for intensifying uses (*utter nonsense, sheer luck*) (Claridge et al., 2024).

A standard point of departure is the distinction between intensifiers and neighbouring categories such as quantifiers, focus particles or modal adverbs. While these classes frequently co-occur in discourse and sometimes draw on overlapping inventories, degree-based intensifiers are usually defined by two properties. First, they are tied to gradable material: they modify adjectives, verbs or other expressions that allow for more/less contrasts (*important, increase, probable*). Second, their contribution is scalar rather than propositional: they do not change the basic content of the clause but alter the strength with which that content is asserted or evaluated (Stratton, 2021).

Within this broad functional frame, the literature typically differentiates two main tendencies. On the one hand are items that raise the perceived intensity, often referred to as amplifiers or boosters (*very, really, highly, markedly, strongly*) (Mansouri & Boroujeni, 2023). On the other hand are items that move the description downward on the scale, usually called downtoners, diminishers or minimisers (*slightly, somewhat, a bit, hardly*) (Hennoste et al., 2024). The distinction is not purely terminological: amplifiers tend to be associated with emphasis

and upgrading of claims, whereas downtoners are more often linked to softening and the expression of caution. Paradis's (2008) work on degree modification, for instance, treats both types as "upwards" and "downwards" adjustments to a gradable concept, whose function is to reinforce or attenuate a variable feature in the element the intensifier applies to.

Cross-cutting this simple two-way division is the observation that intensification is not a marginal curiosity but a productive and dynamic subsystem of English. Corpus studies have shown that intensifiers are subject to diachronic renewal and competition: older forms persist while newer ones enter the system, leading to cycles of layering and replacement (Funke & Bernaisch, 2022). Ito and Tagliamonte's (2003) analysis of adjectival intensifiers in a British English community, for example, documents the coexistence of long-established items such as *very* with newer forms like *really*, and shows how different generations redistribute their preferences across the available set. Similar patterns of variation and change are reported in later work on regional varieties and learner English, where intensifiers prove to be sensitive to social, stylistic and acquisitional factors (Tagliamonte, 2008).

From a discourse-oriented perspective, intensifiers have attracted attention because they are tightly bound up with evaluation and stance. Méndez-Naya's (2008) overview of English intensifiers describes them as "degree words" that do more than register scalar information; they also participate in expressing the writer's or speaker's assessment of the situation. Amplifying items such as *absolutely*, *completely*, *utterly* are often drawn into emphatic assessments or categorical judgements, while more moderate elements like *rather* or *fairly* can signal a degree of distance or tentativeness (Ghesquière, 2021). In this sense, intensifiers sit at the intersection of lexis, argumentation and interpersonal meaning.

For the present study, however, a somewhat narrower understanding is sufficient. The focus will be on lexical adverbial intensifiers that precede gradable adjectives or, more occasionally, verbs, and whose main function is to increase or decrease the perceived strength of the modified element. This includes both boosters (*highly*, *significantly*, *particularly*, *especially*, *strongly*, *greatly*, *markedly*, *considerably*) and at least one downtoner (*slightly*), but the analysis does not attempt a full semantic taxonomy of the amplifier/downtoner space. Instead, the

interest lies in two connected properties that emerge clearly from earlier work.

First, intensifiers tend to be concentrated in relatively small sets of high-frequency items, rather than being evenly spread across the lexicon. Studies of spoken and written English repeatedly show that a handful of forms account for the majority of tokens, with *very* and *really* as the classic examples in general language (Ito & Tagliamonte, 2003). Second, intensifiers exhibit strong preferences for particular hosts. Paradis (2008) and later authors (Vartiainen, 2021) argue that the modifier and the modified element are mutually constraining: adjectives select certain degree adverbs, and those adverbs in turn narrow the way the adjective's gradability is construed. This interaction is visible in recurrent combinations such as *highly significant*, *deeply concerned*, *strongly correlated*, which start to behave less like free compositional pairings and more like conventional expressions.

These observations motivate a view of intensification that is both scalar and phraseological. Intensifiers adjust the degree of a gradable meaning, but they do so in patterned ways, making repeated use of familiar lexical pairings. Much of the existing work that documents these tendencies has concentrated on conversation, youth speech, popular media or learner writing. The present study takes the same basic understanding of intensification as its starting point, but applies it to academic prose, where degree marking is closely tied to the formulation of claims, the description of results and the presentation of evidence.

Intensifiers in written academic English

When one looks specifically at written academic English, it quickly becomes clear that not all intensifiers are equal across registers. Corpus work repeatedly shows that items such as *really* or *so* cluster in conversation, while research articles and similar genres gravitate towards a relatively small set of more formal adverbs, among them *significantly*, *highly*, *particularly*, *especially*, *strongly*, *markedly*, *considerably*, *profoundly* and the occasional downtoner such as *slightly*. A recent overview of lexical intensification, drawing on Biber-style register comparisons, notes that *really* and *so* belong firmly to informal spoken usage, whereas *highly* and *profoundly* are characteristic of written academic discourse (Nasibullo, 2025). Earlier large-scale grammars already hinted at this distributional contrast, but the more recent corpus-based studies confirm that academic prose relies on a restricted and fairly

stable inventory of intensifiers, most of them adverbs in pre-adjectival position (Adrefiza et al., 2025).

In research articles, these adverbs attach first and foremost to adjectives that encode evaluative, methodological or statistical information. Typical clusters include *highly significant*, *statistically significant*, *particularly important*, *especially relevant*, *strongly associated*, *strongly supported*, *markedly different*, *considerably higher* and *slightly lower*. Such combinations are not random as they mirror the main communicative needs of the genre: authors must describe the size and reliability of effects, indicate the centrality or marginality of findings, and comment on the strength of associations and trends. Intensifiers provide a compact way of doing this, and it is no coincidence that one of the most frequent items in this group is *significantly*, whose everyday scalar meaning overlaps with the technical vocabulary of statistical testing. Corpus-based work on synonymous intensifiers also reports that forms like *extremely*, *remarkably*, *exceptionally* tend to be rare in research articles compared to more neutral items such as *highly* or *particularly*, which suggests that academic discourse tolerates emphasis, but not of the exuberant kind that would be acceptable in more expressive registers (Schweinberger, 2021).

The broader stance literature makes it clear that intensifiers are part of the resources writers use to position themselves in relation to their claims and their readers. Hyland's (2014) work on stance and metadiscourse, for instance, treats boosters as one side of a system that also includes hedges, attitude markers and self-mention, all contributing to how authors present their judgements and their degree of commitment. Boosters, in this sense, are those items that reinforce a statement and "close down" interpretive space, while hedges keep it open. From this perspective, an expression such as *strongly suggests* differs from *suggests* not only in scalar terms but also in how forcefully the writer invites the reader to accept the conclusion (Hyland et al., 2022). Recent pedagogically oriented studies on hedges and boosters in student writing adopt a very similar view: they treat intensifying adverbs as one of the main devices by which writers either tone down or step up their assertions, and they link these choices directly to the balancing act between caution and confidence that academic writing demands (Hyland & Zou, 2021).

Evaluation, in the sense developed by Hunston and Thompson (2000), is likewise tied to such degree choices. Research articles constantly sort information into what is central and peripheral, robust and tentative, interesting and trivial. Intensifiers belong to the small class of lexical items that participate in this sorting. Adjectives like *important*, *relevant*, *robust*, *clear*, *strong* can be used without modification, but in practice they frequently appear with adverbs that push them upward on a scale: *particularly important*, *especially relevant*, *robustly supported*, *clearly evident*, *strongly argued*. Each combination foregrounds a ranking: this result is not just important, it is *particularly* important; the evidence is not just clear, it is *clearly* or even *highly* compelling. Studies of stance in research articles, both classic and more recent, consistently treat such clusters as parts of a wider evaluative repertoire that includes reporting verbs, attitude adjectives and epistemic adverbs (Hyland, 2014; Hyland & Zou, 2021).

A third strand of work concerns epistemic caution. The well-known studies on hedging in scientific texts, beginning with Salager-Meyer (2000), Malyuga et al. (2019) and Hyland (2011), have shown that writers rely heavily on devices which mark uncertainty, limitation or conditionality. Intensifiers appear here in two roles. On the one hand, boosters such as *strongly*, *clearly*, *firmly* heighten epistemic commitment, aligning the writer with a claim as something more than a mere possibility. On the other hand, downtoning adverbs like *slightly*, *somewhat*, *rather* can be read as “epistemic brakes” which signal that, although an effect is present, the author is unwilling to present it as large or decisive. In this way, intensifiers interact with modal verbs, conditional clauses and other hedging devices to signal caution and assertion that characterises the research article genre.

Thus, academic writing does not use the full range of English intensifiers; instead, it relies on a reduced, genre-specific subset whose members carry an air of technicality or restraint. These items serve, at one and the same time, as degree modifiers in the narrow sense and as small but regular signals of how far the writer is prepared to go in presenting a claim. Existing studies tend to treat them under the broader umbrellas of hedging, boosting or stance, which means that their local, collocational behaviour in academic prose (especially the tendency to form fixed or semi-fixed pairings with particular adjectives) has received less direct attention than their pragmatic role. This observation motivates

the present study's decision to focus not only on which intensifiers are frequent in academic discourse, but also on how tightly they are bound to their recurring hosts.

Collocational behaviour and formulaic sequences

In corpus linguistics, a collocation is usually understood as a pair (or small set) of lexical items that occur together more often than chance would predict, under certain syntactic or positional constraints (Malyuga & McCarthy, 2021). In other words, collocation describes statistically significant co-occurrence: two (or more) words that tend to “co-habit” in text more than would be expected if their distribution were random.

Meanwhile, a formulaic sequence (or formulaic expression / multiword unit) is a longer or more fixed lexical grouping – continuous or (sometimes) discontinuous – that is stored and retrieved as a chunk rather than assembled word by word from scratch. Such sequences may span a few to many words (e.g. “on the other hand”, “in the case of”, or longer academic-style phrases) (Malyuga, 2023).

These two related notions – collocation and formulaic sequences – are central to a phraseological view of language, where meaning and usage reside not only in individual words but in recurrent combinations that reflect patterns of actual use in a community or register.

In academic writing, it is common to observe that certain intensifier + adjective (or verb) combinations have become entrenched. Pairs such as *highly significant*, *particularly important*, *strongly associated*, *markedly different* and *considerably higher* appear often enough across independent texts to suggest that they are part of a stable repertoire of academic phraseology. From the collocation/formulaicity perspective, these combinations qualify as collocations, because intensifier and host word co-occur disproportionately often, and potentially as formulaic sequences, insofar as they recur with high frequency and display a degree of fixedness in usage.

Several converging factors, discussed in the literature, help explain this entrenchment.

1. Communicative and rhetorical need. In academic discourse, authors frequently have to express degrees of emphasis, certainty, importance, or evaluation. Intensifiers + evaluative adjectives or statistical/methodological adjectives (e.g. *significant*, *relevant*, *strong*, *robust*) meet this need efficiently. Once a particular intensifier–host

combination becomes recognized as “appropriate” in a context, users re-use it, reinforcing its frequency and conventional status (Popova, 2018).

2. Register and genre constraints. Academic prose tends to hold to norms of clarity, precision, and economy. Writers may avoid overly colloquial intensifiers (*really, so, very*), favouring more formal ones (*highly, significantly, strongly*). Over repeated use, certain combinations become part of the expected style in research articles. Corpus studies confirm that the repertoire of intensifiers in academic writing is narrower and more stable than in informal or conversational genres (Grishechko, 2023).

3. Cognitive and lexical processing economy. From a psycholinguistic perspective, formulaic sequences reduce processing load: once stored in memory, they can be retrieved as whole units rather than recomposed each time. This is one of the motivations behind the phraseological (or “idiom principle”) view of language use, which many scholars of multiword expression endorse. For academic writers (often under time pressure or dealing with dense argumentation) utilizing ready-made sequences offers a fast, reliable means of conveying nuance without risking awkwardness or error (Hřebačková, 2019).

4. Disciplinary stabilization and community norms. As members of a discourse community repeatedly read and produce similar texts, certain collocations become conventionalized across authors and publications. Studies of academic collocations note that many of them are common to multiple subfields and persist over time, marking membership in the academic register. In this sense, using intensifier + adjective collocations becomes part of the collective norm for “proper scholarly writing” (Danilina et al., 2019).

Empirical studies confirm these tendencies. For instance, a recent analysis of academic collocations showed that written academic collocations in a large corpus outnumbered spoken ones by roughly two to one, which indicates that formulaic pairing is more prevalent in writing than in speech (Ismail et al., 2022). Another contemporary study found that academic writing draws heavily on formulaic sequences (lexical bundles or n-grams) which perform cohesive, evaluative, and organizational functions (Grishechko & Tomalin, 2025).

Despite this recognition, much of the existing research emphasises longer multiword patterns (bundles, complex phrases, discourse markers) rather than the simplest kind of pairing – intensifier +

adjective/verb. As a result, the collocational behaviour of intensifiers per se remains underexplored: we lack systematic data on which intensifiers are most common, which host words they collocate with most reliably, and how fixed these pairings are across academic disciplines and text types. This gap underpins the present study's rationale.

Material and methods

Corpus

For the purposes of this study, the material was drawn from the CORE corpus, a large, openly accessible collection of full-text research articles made available through the CORE aggregation infrastructure. The choice of this resource followed from several considerations. First, CORE offers broad disciplinary coverage and contains a substantial proportion of peer-reviewed work, which makes it suitable for examining features that permeate academic prose rather than being tied to a single field. Second, the texts are available under open licences, which allows for reproducible corpus-based research without the restrictions associated with proprietary datasets. Finally, the scale of the corpus, running into several million words, provides a sufficiently robust sample for a frequency-oriented study of relatively low-salience items such as intensifiers.

To keep the dataset manageable and to ensure comparability across texts, a subcorpus of research articles published in the last ten to twelve years was selected. The resulting dataset comprised approximately 5 million words of running academic prose, covering fields in the humanities, social sciences, and natural sciences. Although heterogeneous in content, the texts share the stylistic conventions of contemporary academic writing, which is precisely the register in which intensifier use is of interest. Research on multiword sequences and collocation in academic English has repeatedly emphasised that sizable corpora are essential for identifying recurrent pairings and longer-range phraseological tendencies (Ädel & Erman, 2012; Biber & Gray, 2010). A corpus of this size provides a practical balance between breadth and depth for the present analysis.

Intensifier set

The study focused on a predefined set of adverbial intensifiers: *highly*, *significantly*, *particularly*, *especially*, *strongly*, *greatly*, *markedly*, *considerably*, and *notably*, alongside one downtoner (*slightly*) used primarily for comparative purposes. These items were chosen on the basis of prior literature describing typical intensifiers in written academic

English and their distribution across registers. Studies of degree modification and register variation (Ito & Tagliamonte, 2003; Méndez-Naya, 2008; Ismail et al., 2022) note that, whereas conversational English draws heavily on items such as *really* or *so*, academic writing tends to rely on a more restricted, formal set of adverbs. The selected group reflects this established inventory and follows earlier corpus analyses of stance and evaluation in research articles.

Inclusion criteria were deliberately narrow. All items had to (1) function prototypically as degree-modifying adverbs, (2) appear frequently in academic prose according to existing research, and (3) occur in contexts where they modify gradable adjectives or verbs. Limiting the set in this way made it possible to map usage patterns in some detail without diluting the analysis across too many infrequent forms.

Extraction procedure

Each intensifier was queried in its adverbial form across the subcorpus. Searches were case-insensitive and restricted to whole-word matches to avoid spurious hits embedded in longer strings. For each item, all occurrences were extracted in the form of concordance lines, with approximately five words of context on either side. This window was sufficient to capture the immediate syntactic environment (in particular, the adjective or verb to the right of the intensifier) while keeping the dataset compact enough for manual inspection.

Following extraction, the concordance lines were cleaned. This involved removing matches in reference lists, tables, captions, and other non-prose sections; false positives arising from mis-OCR or artefacts of PDF-to-text conversion; instances where the adverb occurred in non-intensifying uses (e.g., *significantly* used parenthetically in an authorial aside).

The remaining lines formed the basis for the two analytic components: frequency and collocation. Cleaning of this kind is standard practice in corpus studies dealing with lexical items whose contextual behaviour can vary considerably, and it ensures that subsequent quantitative measures reflect genuine usage rather than textual noise.

Frequency analysis

Two measures of frequency were used. Raw frequency provided a straightforward indication of how often each intensifier appeared in the subcorpus. Normalised frequency (per million words) allowed for

comparisons between items of different absolute frequency and ensured that the data remained interpretable in relation to corpus size.

The analysis proceeded in two steps. First, all intensifiers were ranked according to both raw and normalised counts. This yielded a preliminary overview of the relative prominence of each item. Second, intensifiers were compared against one another to assess the degree of concentration within the set, that is whether usage was evenly distributed or dominated by a small number of high-frequency items. Similar approaches are common in studies of intensifier variation across registers and social varieties, where normalisation is essential for making meaningful comparisons (Ito & Tagliamonte, 2003; Biber & Gray, 2010).

Collocational analysis

The collocational analysis centred on immediate right-hand collocates (R1), as intensifiers in academic prose most frequently occur in pre-head position before adjectives and, less commonly, before verbs. For each intensifier, the word immediately following it was extracted from the cleaned concordance lines. These R1 items were then tallied to identify recurrent pairing patterns.

A combination of frequency-based and pattern-based criteria was used to determine whether a pairing could be treated as *fixed* or *formulaic*. A minimal threshold was applied: if an intensifier–collocate combination appeared at least five times across different texts and authors, it was retained as a candidate for formulaicity. This modest threshold reflects the fact that academic writing, while stylistically uniform, is still heterogeneous enough that even five occurrences of the same pairing can be meaningful. Measures such as Mutual Information (MI) or log-likelihood can be applied in principle, but given the register-specific nature of the corpus and the focus on local behaviour, a frequency-based approach was sufficient for identifying stable pairs.

After identifying these recurrent combinations, collocates were manually classified according to their semantic and functional properties. Three broad categories were used: (1) evaluative adjectives (e.g., *important, relevant, substantial*); (2) significance markers and statistical descriptors (e.g., *significant, correlated, associated, different*); (3) methodological descriptors (e.g., *robust, consistent, effective*).

The manual classification was necessary because many academic adjectives sit at the intersection of evaluation and methodology, and automated methods do not reliably capture these nuances. Previous

research on academic collocation and lexical bundles (Biber & Gray, 2010; Ädel & Erman, 2012; Paquot & Granger, 2012) likewise stresses that manual inspection is indispensable when the aim is to understand the functional role of recurrent combinations, rather than merely quantify them.

These procedures made it possible to observe how often each intensifier appears in academic prose and also how tightly it gravitates toward particular hosts. The dual perspective (frequency and collocational stability) forms the basis for the analysis presented in the following section.

Results and discussion

Frequency distributions

The overall distribution of intensifiers in the subcorpus shows a pattern that is both uneven and, in many respects, predictable given what earlier studies have reported about academic registers. A handful of items account for the majority of tokens, while several others occur only occasionally. This concentration mirrors findings from research on degree adverbs in academic and scientific writing, where a small group of conventionalised forms tends to dominate (Biber & Gray, 2010; Méndez-Naya, 2008).

Table 1 presents the frequencies for each intensifier in the dataset of approximately 5 million words. Raw frequencies are followed by normalised values (per million words) and relative proportions within the intensifier set.

Table 1
*Frequency of target intensifiers in the academic subcorpus**

Intensifier	Raw freq.	Per million words	% of all intensifiers
significantly	1,042	208	28.4%
highly	836	167	22.8%
particularly	614	123	16.7%
especially	402	80	10.9%
strongly	355	71	9.7%
considerably	128	26	3.5%
greatly	96	19	2.6%
markedly	64	13	1.7%

notably	52	10	1.4%
slightly	39	8	1.1%

*Total intensifier tokens: 3,628.

A few tendencies stand out immediately. First, *significantly* is by far the most frequent item in the set, accounting for nearly a third of all tokens. Its dominance is not surprising: it functions simultaneously as a degree adverb and as part of the metadiscursive vocabulary of statistical reporting, which gives it a dual presence in both evaluative and technical descriptions. The same tendency has been noted in corpus analyses of scientific prose, where *significant* and its derivatives routinely appear at the top of lexical frequency lists for adjectives and adverbs in methodological sections.

Second, *highly* and *particularly* form a distinct cluster below *significantly*, together making up nearly 40% of all intensifier usage. These two adverbs tend to occur in evaluative contexts (*highly relevant*, *highly effective*, *particularly important*, *particularly useful*) which are central to many parts of an academic article, from literature review to discussion. Their high frequency suggests that writers lean heavily on these forms when they need to elevate the prominence or relevance of a point without resorting to more overtly expressive or colloquial intensifiers.

Items such as *especially* and *strongly* occupy a middle range. They are frequent enough to be part of the routine vocabulary of academic English, yet not as dominant as the top three. *Especially* often introduces contrastive emphasis in argumentative prose, while *strongly* appears in contexts where authors comment on associations, correlations or interpretive force. Their distribution reflects the rhetorical functions they serve: useful, but not indispensable in every section of a research article.

At the lower end of the list are *considerably*, *greatly*, *markedly*, and *notably*. These items are recognised in descriptive accounts of academic English but appear far less often than one might expect from their dictionary definitions. Their relative scarcity corresponds with what earlier studies on intensifier variation have observed: academic writers tend to rely on a small, stabilised cluster of degree adverbs and use peripheral items more sparingly. *Slightly*, the only downtoner in this group, occurs least frequently, which again matches previous findings

that academic prose tends to favour upgrading rather than downgrading devices unless the rhetorical context explicitly calls for mitigation.

The results confirm a pattern already described in studies of academic phraseology and register variation: intensification in scholarly writing is not scattered across the full English inventory but restricted to a compact set of items that recur with notable regularity. The internal distribution of this set (heavily skewed towards *significantly*, *highly* and *particularly*) points to a shared repertoire through which academic authors express emphasis, evaluation and graded claims.

Collocational profiles

The collocational analysis reveals that each intensifier gravitates toward a relatively narrow set of preferred hosts, and many of these pairings recur often enough to appear conventional rather than improvised. This tendency has been observed in earlier research on academic phraseology, where intensifier–adjective combinations are described as part of a “stable evaluative repertoire” shared across disciplines (Hyland, 2014; Paquot & Granger, 2012). The present data follow this general pattern closely.

To give an overview, Table 2 lists the most frequent R1 collocates for each intensifier, restricted to the top four for clarity. The purpose here is not to capture the full range of possible combinations (which is, naturally, larger) but to show the recurring clusters around which usage tends to coalesce.

Table 2
Most frequent R1 collocates for each intensifier

Intensifier	Top R1 collocates (in order of frequency)
significantly	different, higher, lower, related
highly	significant, relevant, effective, variable
particularly	important, relevant, useful, noteworthy
especially	important, true, when, given
strongly	associated, supported, correlated, suggests
considerably	higher, lower, reduced, more
greatly	reduced, increases, enhanced, improved
markedly	different, higher, reduced, more
notably	absent, lacking, higher, seen
slightly	higher, lower, more, less

Several observations arise immediately. First, the collocates of *significantly*, *considerably*, *markedly*, and *slightly* are heavily concentrated in quantitative or comparative contexts, which fits with the dual role these items play in both informal degree marking and formal statistical reporting. Words such as *different*, *higher*, *lower*, *reduced*, and *more* form the backbone of quantitative description in research articles, and the repeated appearance of intensifiers before them suggests that writers use these adverbs to fine-tune numerical interpretation: strengthening contrasts, marking effect sizes, or adjusting the perceived weight of a difference. This pattern echoes findings in corpus studies of scientific English, where degree modification is frequently tied to comparative structures and result reporting (Hyland & Zou, 2021; Mansouri & Boroujeni, 2023).

Second, the most conventionalised pairing in the entire dataset is *highly significant*. Its frequency far exceeds that of any other intensifier–collocate pair, and it appears across unrelated fields. The collocation benefits from a coincidence between an everyday sense (“to a high degree”) and a technical one (statistical significance), which leads to a degree of entrenchment not easily matched by other items. A similar convergence can be seen in combinations such as *strongly associated* and *strongly correlated*, which belong to the shared vocabulary of disciplines that report effect sizes or relational patterns. These collocations have become so well established that they arguably function more as fixed turns of phrase than as free combinations. Research on formulaicity in scientific writing has repeatedly noted this phenomenon: adjectives central to interpretation (e.g. *significant*, *associated*, *correlated*) frequently acquire stable intensifying partners (Calle-Martín & Lorente-Sánchez, 2021).

Third, items such as *particularly* and *especially* anchor a different domain, one concerned less with numerical comparison and more with evaluation and importance. Their typical collocates (*important*, *relevant*, *noteworthy*) reflect the rhetorical needs of literature reviews, discussion sections, and argumentative prose, where writers signal the relative weight of ideas, findings, or conceptual distinctions. The pairing *particularly important* is the most frequent case in this group, and its wide dispersion across the corpus suggests that it has become part of the habitual vocabulary used to foreground conceptual prominence. *Especially important* and *especially true* point in the same direction,

forming a small cluster of evaluative collocations used to mark emphasis without drifting into informality.

Fourth, some intensifiers occupy a more methodological niche. *Highly effective*, *highly variable*, and *greatly reduced* appear regularly in descriptions of experimental procedures, intervention outcomes, or distributional properties of datasets. The semantic field here tilts towards methodological reporting: words like *effective*, *variable*, *enhanced*, and *improved* belong to the lexicon of method and outcome description rather than interpersonal evaluation. Previous work on lexical bundles in scientific writing has shown that method sections draw on their own set of recurring adjective–adverb pairings, and the present data support that observation (O’Flynn, 2022).

Across the dataset, then, the semantic domains of collocation fall into three broad categories:

1. Quantitative and comparative statements (*significantly different*, *considerably higher*, *markedly reduced*, *slightly more*). These collocations organise numerical interpretation and align with the statistical orientation of many contemporary research articles.

2. Evaluation and importance (*particularly important*, *especially relevant*, *notably absent*). These are central to argumentative and interpretive sections, where authors prioritise some ideas over others.

3. Methodological and descriptive claims (*highly effective*, *strongly supported*, *greatly enhanced*). These occur in accounts of procedures, results, or mechanism descriptions.

The consistency of these patterns across the subcorpus supports the more general claim advanced in recent literature on academic phraseology: intensification in scholarly writing is not haphazard, but corresponds to the communicative routines of the genre. Writers rely on a circumscribed set of intensifier–host pairs that help them calibrate quantitative descriptions, organise evaluation, and summarise methodological outcomes. Over time, these repeated collocations acquire a degree of formulaicity, becoming part of what Gisle (2022) called the “phraseological tendency” of language – here manifested in a specifically academic form.

Degree of collocational stability

The collocational patterns described above show a level of recurrence and structural narrowing that suggests genuine formulaicity. Several pieces of evidence support this view.

A first indication comes from the frequency and dispersion of specific intensifier–host combinations. Certain pairings recur across a wide range of disciplines and are attested throughout the corpus rather than clustering within particular subdomains. *Highly significant*, for example, appears repeatedly in articles in the natural sciences, but it is also well represented in the social sciences, applied linguistics, and even in some humanities research that incorporates quantitative procedures. The same holds, in a slightly more limited but still traceable way, for *strongly associated*, *strongly supported*, and *strongly correlated*. These collocations occur consistently in texts that report relationships, evidence strength, or causal interpretation, regardless of the specific field. Their cross-disciplinary dispersion indicates that the pairing is part of a common academic repertoire. This observation corresponds to what Paquot and Granger (2012) describe as “discipline-transcendent phraseology”, where certain formulaic expressions enjoy unusually broad uptake across scholarly fields.

A second indication lies in the narrow collocational ranges of many intensifiers in the present dataset. Although intensifiers are theoretically free to combine with a wide array of adjectives and verbs, the corpus shows that actual practice is far more constrained. *Significantly*, for instance, overwhelmingly combines with a set of comparative adjectives and past participles: *different*, *higher*, *lower*, *related*. Rarely does it occur in contexts where the host adjective marks interpersonal evaluation or conceptual abstraction. Similarly, *markedly* appears in a limited cluster of quantitative and comparative contexts (*markedly different*, *markedly reduced*), with very few deviations into other semantic domains. This narrowing of co-occurrence patterns is precisely what Sinclair’s (1991) “idiom principle” predicts: frequent combinations fossilise into semi-fixed expressions that speakers and writers retrieve as units rather than constructing anew each time.

The case of *particularly* and *especially* illustrates a slightly different kind of formulaicity. Both are used primarily in evaluative environments, but *particularly* shows an especially strong pull towards the adjective *important*. This collocation appears in introductions, literature reviews, and discussion sections, often serving to single out a specific concept, finding, or theoretical contribution. The repetition of this pairing in texts of markedly different topics, methodological orientations, and publication venues suggests that writers perceive it as an efficient way to

signal prominence without sounding overstated. *Especially important* and *especially relevant* show the same tendency, albeit with lower frequency. In phraseological terms, these collocations behave as what Erman (2007) called “prefabs” – combinations that are not idioms in the strict sense but exist as ready-made linguistic material that saves effort and ensures stylistic conformity.

Among the intensifiers studied, three stand out as having the strongest degree of collocational fixation: *significantly*, *highly*, and *strongly*. Each of them exhibits a small set of repeatedly used collocates, high text dispersion, and strong semantic coherence within their respective domains. *Significantly* is tightly bound to comparative and quantitative adjectives (*different*, *higher*, *lower*), forming the backbone of result reporting. *Highly* gravitates towards evaluative and methodological adjectives (*significant*, *relevant*, *effective*, *variable*), suggesting a role in value assignment and methodological strength. *Strongly* shows a similarly narrow range, almost exclusively preceding relational or evidential verbs and adjectives (*associated*, *supported*, *correlated*, *suggests*). These intensifiers also show the highest proportion of repeated pairings relative to their total occurrences, which is a hallmark of entrenched formulaicity.

Other items in the set (*considerably*, *greatly*, *markedly*, and *notably*) also show consistent pairing patterns, but their more modest frequencies make the evidence for formulaicity less forceful. They nonetheless display restricted collocational tendencies: *considerably* and *greatly* with adjectives of degree change (*higher*, *reduced*, *improved*), and *markedly* with adjectives marking contrast. However, their lower dispersion across disciplines suggests that they operate somewhat closer to the margins of the academic phraseological repertoire.

The findings point to an important conclusion: intensifier–collocate pairings in academic prose are not random or evenly distributed, but organised around a set of stable, semi-fixed expressions. These expressions appear frequently enough to form part of the shared linguistic habitus of academic writers and are sufficiently stable to warrant treatment as formulaic sequences. Their recurrence across disciplinary boundaries, and their narrowed semantic and syntactic scope, indicate that intensification in academic writing is governed not only by general principles of degree modification, but by phraseological norms that came into being through repeated use in the genre.

Intensifiers as conventionalised rhetorical tools

One of the more striking outcomes of this analysis is that certain intensifier–collocate pairings operate as recognisable rhetorical instruments whose presence signals adherence to familiar conventions of academic argumentation. Their rhetorical work is not exhausted by emphasis alone; rather, these combinations assist authors in conditioning how readers interpret the status of claims, evidence, and conceptual distinctions.

To begin with, formulaic pairings allow writers to position assertions within the hierarchy of relevance and interpretive weight that governs academic prose. Expressions such as *particularly important* or *especially relevant* function as compact organisational devices: they guide readers toward focal points without requiring metacommentary. What gives these pairings rhetorical force is their predictability. Because readers regularly encounter the same forms across different articles, they learn to treat them as cues that a statement occupies a privileged place in the argument. In this sense, intensifiers participate in what has been described in the evaluation literature as “value-framing devices” – linguistic means by which writers assign salience to selected information (Thompson & Alba-Juez, 2014).

In contexts where claims involve empirical results, formulaic intensifiers help authors calibrate the degree of interpretive commitment expected from readers. For instance, combinations like *strongly supported* or *robustly evident* suggest that the writer considers alternative readings less plausible. These expressions create a background sense of stability around the reported finding. Because the phrasing is familiar to readers, the evaluative move is absorbed almost automatically, which makes it an efficient rhetorical strategy. Several recent studies on scientific stance (Smirnova & Pérez-Guerra, 2025; Hyland & Zou, 2021) emphasise that such evaluative clusters help maintain a tension between authoritativeness and restraint, which is a defining characteristic of contemporary academic writing.

A related function concerns the management of epistemic distance. Scientific prose often requires writers to move between stronger and weaker commitments without interrupting the flow of exposition. Formulaic intensifiers facilitate these movements as they provide recognisable signals of how close the writer stands to a claim. When a result is presented as *highly plausible* or *strongly indicated*, the phrasing

gestures toward a firmer footing than would be conveyed by a bare adjective. Because these adverb–adjective sequences are conventionalised, they perform this calibration unobtrusively, without the explicit hedging or boosting constructions that might attract attention to themselves. In other words, intensifiers offer a means of modulating stance while maintaining the rhythm and impersonality of academic prose.

There is also another rhetorical dimension that concerns reader expectations of objectivity. One might assume that intensifiers, being inherently scalar and evaluative, would compromise the impression of neutrality. However, the opposite often occurs. Precisely because the collocations are predictable and widely used, they can appear less subjective than more idiosyncratic alternatives. For instance, *highly significant* is so entrenched that it reads as part of the methodological code of academic writing rather than as a personal judgement. The routinisation of such expressions allows writers to adopt a more assertive tone without seeming overtly opinion-driven. This paradox (that formulaic evaluation can appear more objective than non-evaluative paraphrase) reflects what Hunston and Thompson (2000) have described as the “naturalisation of evaluative language” in academic discourse.

Another consequence of this conventionalisation is that intensifier–collocate pairings help stabilise disciplinary norms of rhetorical strength. Fields that rely heavily on comparative or correlational reasoning routinely employ intensifiers to condense interpretive moves into concise lexical units. Once established, these patterns contribute to the shared expectations of how arguments should be framed. As one corpus-based account of disciplinary writing notes, recurrent evaluative constructions gradually acquire the status of “collective stylistic habits” (Hyland, 2023), and their presence signals not only the writer’s stance but also membership in a disciplinary community. Intensifiers thus function as small markers of disciplinary belonging.

Finally, the repeated use of these combinations can influence the perceived argumentative coherence of an article. Because certain intensifiers are linked to specific rhetorical functions, a text that employs them judiciously can appear more cohesive. When similar intensifier–collocate pairings appear in the introduction, results, and discussion, they help maintain a unified evaluative frame across sections. Such coherence

is rarely achieved by design but rather emerges indirectly from the shared phraseological resources on which writers draw.

The evidence suggests that intensifier–collocate pairings play an integral role in conditioning how readers interpret the argumentative force and epistemic orientation of academic prose. Their formulaic character allows writers to distribute evaluation and commitment across the text in a way that feels orderly, conventional, and, crucially, in alliance with the expectations of scholarly communication.

Conclusion

The analysis presented here set out from two research questions: which intensifiers appear most often in academic prose, and how firmly they attach themselves to particular lexical partners. Although modest in scope, these questions open a useful window onto an aspect of academic writing that tends to escape notice precisely because it is so familiar. What emerges from the data is a picture of intensification that is both more regular and more patterned than a purely compositional view would suggest.

A small group of adverbs (*significantly, highly, particularly, and strongly*) accounts for the bulk of intensifier use in the corpus. Academic writers rely on a compact, well-established repertoire that meets the rhetorical needs of the genre without straying into informality. Even more striking is the narrowness of the collocational ranges associated with these items. Many of the combinations recur across unrelated fields, forming lexical pairings that have become, for lack of a better phrase, part of the shared toolkit of academic exposition.

The stability of these pairings reflects the roles these expressions play in structuring argumentation and influencing how readers make sense of a claim. Whether marking contrasts, accentuating the weight of a point, or lending firmness to an empirical conclusion, intensifiers operate within recognisable phraseological routines that contribute to the characteristic texture of scholarly writing. They provide small but regular cues that support the organisation of information and the calibration of stance, carrying out most of this work unobtrusively, without drawing attention to themselves.

At the same time, the findings point toward avenues that merit further attention. This study has confined itself to a limited set of intensifiers and to a broad cross-disciplinary corpus. More fine-grained work (for example, on disciplinary variation, diachronic change, or the interaction

between intensifiers and other stance devices) would allow for a more detailed and differentiated account than the one outlined here. It would also be valuable to examine how novice writers acquire these phraseological patterns and how closely their usage corresponds to the conventions observed in expert prose.

For now, the results serve as a reminder that academic writing is built not only from terminology and argument structure but also from the small, repeated lexical choices that accumulate into recognisable stylistic habits. Intensifiers occupy a stable place within these habits. Their recurring partnerships with particular adjectives and verbs show how even the most compact combinations can contribute to the characteristic voice of academic discourse.

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