

REGISTER ANALYSIS OF BBC BLOG POSTS

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the variation of register within a single subject domain by examining three purposively chosen blog posts on Technology and Artificial Intelligence about wearable devices, autonomous delivery robots and cognitive effects of AI use. Drawing on Halliday's (1978) Systemic Functional Linguistics and its model of Field, Tenor and Mode, the study has three aims: to identify the linguistic characteristics of register (vocabulary, tone, sentence structure); to analyze the interplay of Field, Tenor and Mode in the creation of communicative style; and to investigate the degree of hybridization between formal journalistic and informal digital-writing conventions in these texts. The analysis is based on a qualitative descriptive research design and involves close textual reading of each post and cross-textual synthesis. The analysis demonstrates that even within the same domain, register is not homogenous, but varies according to communicative purpose and section. In all three texts, lexis consistently combines specialised technological lexis with accessible lay lexis, but tone and sentence structure are markedly different, from the more news-oriented texts where evaluation is always mediated through quotation to the more essayistic post which is confessional, first-person hedging. It was found that Field, Tenor and Mode worked in conjunction rather than independently, and technology was repeatedly constructed as Actor acting upon a comparatively passive human participant. All three texts mix formal conventions (attributed sourcing, cautious modality, structured paragraphing) with informal, digital-native features (contractions, rhetorical questions, colloquial idiom) but the extent and manner of combination differs, producing a graded continuum mediated by authorial persona and communicative purpose rather than by topic. The study finds that the BBC blog post is a flexible hybrid register space even within a single domain, extending Halliday's SFL model to contemporary digital journalism.

1.1 Introduction:

Language does not function the same in each context of use. Instead, it varies systematically with the situational demands of different communicative contexts, adapting its vocabulary, grammatical structures, and organizational patterns to the purposes, participants, and medium of each interaction. This fundamental principle of linguistic variation is central to the theory of register which is the theoretical framework to the present study. Register analysis, developed in the tradition of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), offers a principled and comprehensive way of examining the impact of contextual factors on the language of texts. It is thus well suited to the study of complex, institutionally produced digital discourse such as BBC blog posts.

The theoretical basis of the present study is Halliday's (1978) SFL framework. This framework considers language as a social semiotic, a resource for making meaning that is inseparable from the social contexts in which it operates. Register, within this framework, is

defined as the functional variety of language appropriate to a particular type of situation and is described in terms of three contextual variables: field, tenor and mode. The subject matter and social activity being enacted through language is referred to as field; the nature of the relationship between the participants in the communicative event, including their relative roles, status, and degree of familiarity is referred to as tenor; and the role played by language in the interaction and the medium through which it is transmitted is referred to as mode. Further expanding on this tripartite model, Halliday and Hasan (1985) demonstrated that each of these contextual variables is realised by a different functional domain of language the ideational, the interpersonal and the textual and that collectively these determine the overall register of any given text. Halliday and Matthiessen (2004) extended this framework within the larger framework of SFL, viewing register analysis as a systematic approach to linking the linguistic features of texts to the social contexts that generate them. This tripartite model of field, tenor and mode is the primary analytical framework for the present study.

While Halliday's SFL framework is the primary analytical model, the present study also engages with a variety of supporting scholarship to contextualize the digital and journalistic dimensions of the data under investigation. The work of Biber (1988, 1995) and Biber and Conrad (2019) offers corpus-linguistic perspectives on register variation across text types; Bell (1984, 1991) provides foundational insights into the language of news media and the role of audience design in journalistic writing; Herring (2007) and Herring, Scheidt, Bonus, and Wright (2004) offer frameworks for understanding computer-mediated discourse and the generic properties of blog texts; Crystal (2001, 2006) and Myers (2010) inform the analysis of digital language more broadly; and Bednarek and Caple (2012, 2017) provide perspectives on news values and the discourse of online journalism. They are not employed as competing analytical frameworks, but purely as a contextual background to the linguistic, medial and institutional aspects of the BBC blog posts that this study is concerned with.

The digital transformation of journalism has led to new and hybrid forms of institutional writing that defy established genre categories and register conventions. BBC blog posts, as commodities of one of the world's most prominent public media organizations functioning in the digital domain, are precisely this hybrid form. They combine the informational authority and institutional voice of traditional journalism with the interactive, audience-oriented and often informal qualities of digital blog writing, producing texts whose register is complex and potentially variable across different topic areas and genres. While there is increasing research into media language and digital discourse, the specific register of institutional journalism blogs and BBC blogs in particular is an under-researched area of the existing literature. This paper addresses this gap by conducting a systematic register analysis based on SFL of three selected BBC blog posts from 2026, to describe the lexico-grammatical features that contribute to the creation of their distinctive register.

1.2 Problem Statement

Institutional blogging occupies a hybrid position within mainstream journalism, producing digital writing that is neither purely journalistic nor purely informal, as seen in BBC blog posts, which are authored by professional journalists within a globally recognized public media institution yet published in a format associated with informal, interactive, conversational communication; their register is therefore shaped jointly by formal journalistic conventions and informal digital-medium norms, and how this register is realized across different topics remains an underexplored question, since existing research on media language has focused mainly on traditional print journalism, broadcast news, and general online news texts — Bell (1991) and

Bednarek and Caple (2012, 2017) address news-media language and online news values without treating institutional blog posts as a distinct genre, Herring et al. (2004), Crystal (2006), and Myers (2010) examine digital and blog discourse but focus chiefly on personal or informal blogs rather than institutionally produced writing, and Biber and Egbert (2016) demonstrate register diversity in web-based texts through corpus analysis without addressing BBC blog posts specifically or how register varies across mixed topics within a single institutional platform — and it is this gap, the absence of systematic register analyses of mixed-topic institutional journalism blogs within the Systemic Functional Linguistics framework, that motivates the present study, which aims to provide a detailed, principled account of this register and contribute to a broader understanding of how institutional media language is realized in digital contexts by applying Halliday's (1978, 1985) tripartite model of Field, Tenor, and Mode to a corpus of three BBC blog posts drawn from diverse topic areas, a hybrid and topically diverse situational position that, as Eggins (2004) shows, is precisely where register analysis is most productive since such texts foreground the full range of contextual factors shaping language use.

1.3 Research Objectives:

- To identify the linguistic features of register including vocabulary, tone, and sentence structure present in selected BBC blog posts.
- To analyze how field, tenor, and mode operate within BBC blog posts to shape the overall communicative style of the texts.
- To examine whether the register of BBC blog posts reflects a blend of formal journalistic and informal digital writing conventions.

1.4 Research Questions:

1. What linguistic features of register, such as vocabulary, tone, and sentence structure, are present in the selected BBC blog posts?
2. How do field, tenor, and mode operate within BBC blog posts to shape their overall communicative style?
3. To what extent does the register of BBC blog posts reflect a blend of formal journalistic and informal digital writing conventions?

1.5 Significance of the Study:

This study adds to the expanding corpus of research on digital and institutionally situated language registers (Sun & Wang, 2023). Through the application of an integrated theoretical framework combining Hallidayan register theory with Biber and Conrad's (2019) corpus-based approach and Bell's (1984) audience design perspective it provides a systematic account of the linguistic characteristics of a high-profile digital genre that has not previously been the subject of dedicated register analysis. In theory, the study expands the applicability of Halliday's (1978) field-tenor-mode framework to a genre that occupies a contested position between institutional writing and digital informality, thus contributing to ongoing debates on the classification and characterization of online registers (Herring, 2007; Biber & Egbert, 2016). It also addresses the methodological issue raised by Grieve et al. (2010), who warn against considering all blogs as a monolithic register, by showing the analytical benefit of institution-specific inquiry. Methodologically, the study demonstrates the usefulness of a qualitative, framework-driven register analysis as a complement to quantitative corpus approaches. It offers a detailed description of the situational and linguistic parameters of a particular genre rather than broad statistical patterns across a large and heterogeneous corpus. From a practical

point of view, the findings will be of interest to researchers in corpus linguistics, media discourse analysis and digital communication, and may provide insight into the development of professional journalistic language in relation to the affordances and constraints of digital platforms (Biber, 2012; Bednarek & Caple, 2017). The institutional status of the BBC gives this analysis particular significance: as one of the world's most consumed media organisations, its linguistic practices have wide-ranging implications for how institutional authority and public accessibility are negotiated through language.

1.6 Delimitation of the Study:

In this study, we have deliberately limited the scope in order to maintain analytical focus and methodological rigor. The analysis is based on three selected blog posts on the BBC of 2026. The study is limited to the linguistic features of register – vocabulary, tone and sentence structure – as studied through the field, tenor and mode framework. The analysis does not include other elements of multimodal discourse, for example, visual content, hyperlinks, and reader comments. These elements are certainly part of the larger communicative context of BBC blog posts and contribute greatly to meaning-making but a systematic analysis of them would require a separate multimodal framework, i.e. one that goes beyond the linguistic register analysis, which is the object of the present investigation. The exclusion of reader comments also reflects a divide between register analysis and computer-mediated discourse analysis, cognate but methodologically distinct approaches that are best treated separately (Herring, 2007). The delimitation follows the stance of Grieve et al. (2010), who advocate genre- and institution-specific register analyses, rather than general or broad treatments of blog discourse. It is consistent with the established practice within register research to first isolate linguistic features for systematic description, before incorporating other semiotic modes (Biber & Conrad, 2019).

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

The study of register has been a central concern in linguistics since at least the mid-twentieth century, when scholars began to note that language users do not speak or write uniformly across all contexts but systematically adjust their linguistic choices in relation to situation, purpose and audience. This insight has prompted a lively tradition of inquiry into register variation, a tradition that has burgeoned with the advent of digital communication and genres of online media. Thus, the present study positions itself within this tradition by undertaking a register analysis of five selected BBC blog posts from mixed topics and genres. In this process, it employs the theoretical apparatus of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) and draws on empirical work in corpus linguistics, media language studies and digital discourse analysis. In this chapter I review the literature on which the study is based, beginning with the SFL framework and register theory, then lexico-grammatical analysis, corpus and digital discourse approaches, media language and journalistic register, ending with the identification of the gap in the literature that this study fills.

2.2 Systemic Functional Linguistics and Register Theory

The main basis for the present study is the Systemic Functional Linguistics most comprehensively developed by Halliday (1978, 1985, 1994). The fundamental premise of SFL is that language is a social semiotic – a resource for making meaning which is fundamentally shaped by and in turn shapes the social contexts in which it is used. Halliday (1978) argued that language cannot be studied separately from its social context, and that the connection between linguistic form and social function is systematic and predictable. This view presents

register analysis as an important resource for understanding how texts such as BBC blogs construct meaning in specific institutional and communicative contexts. Thompson (2014) also stresses the particular appropriateness of SFL for the analysis of actual texts in actual contexts, precisely because it views linguistic choices as being motivated by the social purposes for which a text is created. Together, these foundational perspectives show that register analysis is not just a descriptive task, but an interpretive one, revealing the social organization of language use.

Register is the functional variety of language that corresponds to a particular type of situation in the SFL framework. According to Halliday and Hasan (1989), register is the configuration of linguistic features that characterize a particular situational context. They argued that all texts are influenced by the situation in which they are produced. The definition implies that different situational contexts will produce different but predictable linguistic configurations, a claim which is central to the analytical approach of the present study. Eggins (2004) built on this, showing that register analysis provides a principled way of linking the linguistic features of a text to the situational variables surrounding it, allowing an explanation of not only what a text looks like linguistically, but why it looks that way. For the purposes of this study, Eggins's (2004) framework for the operationalization of register through the analysis of field, tenor and mode provides a practical analytical guide for the analysis of BBC blog posts.

2.2.1 Field, Tenor, and Mode

The three contextual variables of field, tenor and mode are the bedrock of Hallidayan register theory; they are the main analytical categories used by the present study to investigate the BBC blog posts under examination. Field is the social activity taking place and subject matter under discussion; it determines the ideational content of a text; and influences the vocabulary and thematic structures that occur in it. Tenor refers to the nature of the social relationships between the participants in a communicative event, including their relative status, power and degree of familiarity; it is revealed through the interpersonal features of a text, such as modality, person and evaluative language. Mode is the role language plays in the interaction. This includes the medium of communication and also how far language is constitutive or ancillary to the activity. This is reflected in the textual organisation of a text and the cohesive devices used to achieve coherence. Halliday (1985) argued that these three variables affect the linguistic choices of a writer or speaker independently and together they account for the register of a text.

Martin and Rose (2003) extended the analysis of field, tenor and mode to show how these variables work in conjunction with the genre of a text to create the specific textual configurations that are found in different types of discourse. They claimed that genre and register function on different levels of abstraction: genre offers the conventional communicative purposes that structure a text, and register offers the situational variables that shape its particular linguistic expression. This distinction is particularly pertinent to the current study which is interested not only in establishing the genre of BBC blog posts but also in understanding how the specific situational parameters of field, tenor and mode shape the lexico-grammatical features of these texts across different topics and subject areas. Halliday (1994) brought the ideas together in his seminal work on functional grammar in which he demonstrated through detailed grammatical analysis that the metafunctions of language (the ideational, interpersonal and textual) relate respectively to the contextual variables of field,

tenor and mode, thus providing a direct link between contextual analysis and grammatical description.

2.3 Lexico-Grammatical Features in Register Analysis

The primary vehicles of the realization of register in text are the lexico-grammatical features, linguistic forms that straddle the boundary between the vocabulary and the grammar, and the systematic analysis of them is the methodological core of the present study. Lexis and grammar are not categorical, but a continuum (Halliday, 1994). Lexico-grammatical patterns are the real linguistic forms through which meanings are created and registers are constructed. From this point of view, a complete register analysis must consider not only individual lexical choices but also the grammatical structures within which those choices are embedded – clause types, verb forms, nominal groups, cohesive devices. From a corpus linguistic perspective, Stubbs (1996) supported this argument by stating that meaningful patterns of language use do not come from isolated words or structures but from recurring lexico-grammatical combinations and these are representative of the habitual meaning-making practices of specific communities and contexts.

In register analysis, the study of lexical-grammatical features usually involves a range of particular linguistic phenomena. Sinclair (1991) demonstrated that words are not distributed randomly but tend to collocate with certain words in patterns that are sensitive to the register in which they are used, a finding which has important implications for the analysis of vocabulary in BBC blog posts. Sinclair's idiom principle, which proposes that language users tend to draw on pre-constructed or semi-pre-constructed phrases rather than build utterances one word at a time, means that register analysis must consider phraseological patterns as well as individual lexical items. Eggins (2004) also observes that the study of nominal group structure, verbal group complexity and the level of grammatical metaphor in a text can reveal much about the register the text is functioning within. More formal and technical registers tend to show more nominalization and grammatical complexity than informal or conversational ones. These insights inform the choice and interpretation of the lexico-grammatical features to be explored in the BBC blog posts, such as vocabulary density, clause structure, modality and cohesion, for the present study.

Fairclough (1995, 2003) introduced a vital critical dimension to the analysis of lexico-grammatical features in media texts, claiming that language use in institutional contexts like journalism is never neutral but always reflects and reproduces social relations, ideological positions and power structures. Fairclough (1995) examined in particular how language in media institutions constructs particular representations of social reality through the systematic selection of certain lexical and grammatical forms rather than others. This critical perspective is relevant to the present study in that it calls not only for attention to the formal properties of BBC blog posts, but also to the social and ideological functions these properties serve. Fairclough's (2003) analytical framework for critical discourse analysis also offers tools for exploring how choices of evaluative language, modality and transitivity in BBC blog posts construct specific representations of events, audiences and institutional authority, thus complementing the register analysis with a critical-interpretive dimension.

2.4 Corpus Linguistics and Digital Discourse

Corpus linguistics has made invaluable contributions to the empirical study of register variation, providing quantitative methods for identifying the linguistic patterns that characterize different situational contexts in large collections of naturally occurring text. Biber (1988) laid the empirical foundation for corpus-based register analysis with his landmark study

of variation in English registers. He identified a set of linguistic features that tend to co-occur across text types, and proposed a multi-dimensional framework for describing register differences in terms of underlying functional dimensions. Building on this work, Biber, Conrad and Reppen (1998) demonstrated how corpus methods can be employed to study register variation in a wide range of text types, including spoken, written and digital genres. Their work set the principle that the analysis of register should be grounded on systematic empirical observation of real language data rather than intuition or prescriptive norms. This is a principle adopted by the present study in its analysis of the selected BBC blog posts.

2.4.1 Biber's Multi-Dimensional Framework

One of the most influential methodological contributions to empirical register analysis is Biber's multi-dimensional framework, which forms an important point of reference for the present study. Biber (1988) identified a set of 67 linguistic features that regularly co-occur across registers and used factor analysis to identify five underlying functional dimensions along which registers can be described and compared. These dimensions include broad functional contrasts such as the degree to which a text is informational versus involved, explicit versus situation-dependent, and narrative versus non-narrative. Biber (1995) then applied this framework to the analysis of register variation across different academic and professional genres, demonstrating that this framework is useful for identifying subtle differences in register that qualitative analysis alone may not reveal. Biber (2012) extended the framework by arguing that register is best understood as a predictor of systematic linguistic variation. That is, knowledge of the situational context of a text can reliably predict the sorts of linguistic features it will contain, and vice versa. This bidirectional relationship between situation and linguistic form lies at the heart of the analytical approach of the present study, and the lexico-grammatical features are employed as evidence for characterizing the registers of the three selected BBC blog posts.

2.4.2 Blogs as a Digital Genre

The rise of blogging as an ordinary digital communicative practice has sparked much scholarly interest in the linguistic and generic properties of blog texts. Crystal (2001, 2006) was among the first to provide comprehensive accounts of the linguistic properties of internet language, identifying a range of features that distinguish digital communication from traditional written and spoken modes including the compression of syntax, the blending of formal and informal registers and the heavy use of evaluative and interactive language. More precisely, Crystal (2006) observed that internet language is a new mode of communication, which does not belong to the existing models of spoken or written language, but rather resides in a new space within the spectrum of communication a space characterized by the co-existence of properties of both modes. This observation is directly relevant to the present study, as we should expect BBC blog posts to demonstrate precisely this kind of modal hybridity.

Herring, Scheidt, Kouper and Wright (2005) conducted an influential genre analysis of weblogs, where they explored a large corpus of blog texts to discover the defining features of the blog as a genre. Their study found blogs to be a highly heterogeneous genre varying considerably in purpose, audience, topic and linguistic style and this internal variation makes it difficult to characterize the blog as a single unified genre. Herring (2007) subsequently developed a multi-faceted classification scheme for computer-mediated discourse that takes into account both medium-specific factors (e.g. the technical properties of the platform) and situational factors (e.g. the purpose, topic and social roles of the participants). The scheme provides a useful tool for positioning BBC blog posts within the larger ecology of digital

communication, while at the same time acknowledging both the generic qualities of blog texts and the situational specificity as products of an established journalistic institution. Swales (1990) has also made a theoretical contribution to genre in suggesting that genres are defined not only by their formal features but by the communicative purposes that they serve in specific discourse communities, which is the main factor defining the register of the BBC blogs in the institutional context of their production.

2.5 Media Language and Register Variation in Different Genres

A rich history of the linguistic analysis of media language provides important contextualisation for understanding BBC blog posts as a form of institutional media discourse. Bell (1991) provides one of the most comprehensive early accounts of the language of the news media, arguing that journalistic language is characterized by a distinctive set of lexical and grammatical features that reflect the institutional constraints, professional norms and audience expectations of news production. Bell (1991) showed that the language of news is not just a neutral channel for transmitting information, but a highly constructed and conventionalized discourse where linguistic choices have specific rhetorical and institutional goals. Bednarek (2006) extended this work by considering the role of evaluation in media discourse, claiming that evaluative language is a pervasive and systematic feature of journalistic texts, which is used to construct particular representations of events and to position readers in particular affective and ideological relationships with the texts they consume. These findings are directly relevant to the present study, insofar as they suggest that BBC blog posts will demonstrate the formal linguistic features of institutional journalism, and the evaluative and relational features of audience-oriented digital writing.

2.5.1 Journalistic Register in Online Contexts

The move of journalism to online platforms has brought about important changes in the register of journalistic writing, because the traditional conventions of formal news language have been reinterpreted to adapt to the needs of digital audiences used to interactive, informal and multimodal communication. Fairclough (1995) described this process as the conversationalization of public discourse – the tendency of institutional language to adopt features of everyday conversational interaction in order to construct a sense of accessibility, authenticity and personal engagement with the audience. Fairclough maintained that this process of conversationalization is particularly noticeable in media discourse, where institutional demands for accessibility and audience appeal have resulted in a systematic intermingling of formal and informal registers. Bell (1991) also noted that the relationship between journalists and their audiences is a major factor in determining journalistic register, and maintained that news writers are always conscious of and anticipating the needs and expectations of their readers when they make their linguistic choices. In online journalistic contexts such as BBC blog posts this audience orientation is likely to be intensified by the interactive and participatory nature of the digital medium, leading to texts that are more conversational, evaluative and reader-directed than traditional print journalism.

Bednarek (2006) examined the language of online news texts and found that they have a unique combination of informational density, evaluative engagement and interactive address, which sets them apart from both traditional print journalism and informal personal blogs. Her analysis identified a range of lexico-grammatical features – such as hedging devices, direct address, evaluative adjectives and rhetorical questions – that contribute to the construction of an online journalistic register which is both authoritative and accessible. Thompson (2014) argues that the theory of functional grammar offers analytical tools to investigate just such

interpersonal features in institutional texts. One such tool is the analysis of modality, the grammatical systems through which writers express degrees of certainty, obligation and inclination with respect to their propositions. These insights suggest that for the current study, analysis of modality, person, evaluation and interactivity will be particularly fruitful in characterising the register of BBC blog posts as a form of online journalism.

2.5.2 Register Variation in Mixed Blog Topics

One of the most important (and least-explored) aspects of blog register research is the degree of register variation not only between blogs of different institutional affiliations, but also within a single blog platform across topic areas and subject domains. The five BBC blog posts selected for the present study cover a range of mixed topics and genres, including news, culture, science and human interest, and it is therefore important to consider how topical and generic diversity can produce register variation within a single institutional framework. Field is one of the most powerful determinants of register variation as a contextual variable. Different subject matters are conventionally correlated with different vocabularies, clause structures, and thematic organizations. This suggests that there will be quantifiable differences between the lexico-grammatical features of BBC blog posts on different topics, even when they are produced within the same institutional context, and using the same platform and audience.

Biber (1988) has supported this claim with empirical evidence, showing that different subject domains within the same broad genre may present considerable register variation over several linguistic dimensions. His analysis showed that texts on technical or scientific topics are generally more nominalized, more informationally dense and less interpersonally engaged than texts on social or human-interest topics, even when they belong to the same generic category. Martin and Rose (2003) similarly argue that field variation causes systematic difference in the lexico-grammatical realization of ideational meaning, especially in the construction of nominal groups, taxonomic relations and technical vocabulary. For BBC blogs this implies that scientific and political topics may be characterized by a more formal, informational and nominalized register than cultural and human-interest topics, which may be expected to show greater use of evaluative language, narrative structure and conversational address. Herring (2007) also endorsed this view by showing that topic and domain are important determinants of register in computer-mediated discourse, affecting not only vocabulary but also syntactic complexity, interactivity, and stance expression. The mixed-topic design of the present study thus offers an important opportunity to study the variation of register across different subject areas within one institutional blog platform, contributing to a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between field and register in digital journalistic writing.

2.6 Gaps in Existing Literature

Indeed, despite the broad spectrum of scholarship on register theory, media language and digital discourse that has been reviewed in the previous sections, there are still a number of significant gaps in the extant literature that the current study is well-placed to address. Most fundamental are questions about the scope of present register analyses of blog texts. Most corpus-based and qualitative research on the blog register (including the influential work of Herring et al., 2005; Biber, 1988, 2012; and Crystal, 2006) has focused either on personal blogs or on single-domain institutional blogs, studying register in a homogeneous topical or generic context. These studies have yielded important findings about the general linguistic characteristics of blog discourse, but because they are based on single-genre or single-domain

corpora, they have not examined the issue of how register varies across different topic domains in a single institutional blog site.

Similarly, although the language of news media has been extensively studied by scholars such as Bednarek (2006), Bell (1991) and Fairclough (1995, 2003), their discussions have been largely focused on conventional print journalism, broadcast news or general online news texts, rather than on the particular hybrid genre of the institutional blog post. The BBC is among the largest and most popular media organizations in the world and produces blog content on a wide range of topics and genres which has received relatively little systematic linguistic attention. Previous research on BBC discourse has not focused specifically on BBC blog posts as a distinct register and has not examined the lexico-grammatical characteristics of these texts across mixed topic areas using the SFL framework. This is a significant and important gap in the literature, given that BBC blog posts are an increasingly common and influential form of digital institutional discourse, and occupy a distinct place at the nexus of journalism, digital communication and public information.

This study addresses this issue by performing a systematic register analysis on three BBC blog posts of various topics of a single genre, employing the theoretical framework of SFL and the analytical tools of lexico-grammatical analysis, to investigate the linguistic realization of field, tenor and mode in different subject areas. The literature is enriched in two important ways: first, by offering a detailed empirical account of the register of BBC blog posts as a specific and underexplored digital genre; and second, by showing how register varies across mixed topic areas within one institutional blog platform, a dimension of register variation not sufficiently explored in existing studies.

2.7 Summary

In this chapter a thorough review of the academic literature pertinent to the register analysis of selected BBC blog posts carried out in the present study has been presented. It started by setting the theoretical foundations of the study in Systemic Functional Linguistics. The SFL framework and the three contextual variables of field, tenor and mode through which register is analyzed were described using the work of Halliday (1978, 1985, 1994), Halliday and Hasan (1989), Eggins (2004) and Thompson (2014). It then explored the role of lexico-grammatical features in register analysis, drawing on the work of Halliday (1994), Stubbs (1996), Sinclair (1991), Martin and Rose (2003) and Fairclough (1995, 2003) to establish the analytical tools and critical perspectives that will underpin the examination of BBC blog texts. The following sections looked at corpus-linguistic approaches to register, such as the multi-dimensional framework of Biber (1988, 1995, 2012) and Biber, Conrad and Reppen (1998). The discourse of digital blogs was also looked at by the likes of Crystal (2001, 2006), Herring et al. (2005), Herring (2007) and Swales (1990). Then the review moved to media language and journalistic register, with the work of Bell (1991), Bednarek (2006) and Fairclough (1995, 2003) helping to position BBC blog posts within the institutional setting of the news media, and investigated the issue of register variation between mixed blog topics using the work of Halliday (1985), Biber (1988), Martin and Rose (2003) and Herring (2007).

The literature reviewed in this chapter, in combination, provides a robust, multi-dimensional theoretical and empirical basis for the present study. It shows that register analysis, within the SFL framework, is a well validated and productive approach to the study of media and digital texts and that lexico-grammatical analysis offers a principled methodology for the identification and interpretation of the linguistic patterns that characterize different registers. The review also identified a clear and significant gap in the existing literature, namely the lack

of systematic register analyses of mixed-topic BBC blog posts as a particular and distinct form of digital institutional discourse. The gap represents the primary academic motivation for the present study, which aims to contribute to the study of media linguistics and digital discourse analysis through a detailed SFL-based account of register variation in three selected BBC blog posts from different topic areas. The results of this analysis are presented and discussed in the following chapters.

METHODOLOGY

3.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the methodological framework adopted in the present study which carries out a register analysis of three chosen BBC digital articles. This chapter outlines the research design, the criteria which govern the selection of data, the characteristics of the selected texts and the analytical procedures through which the data were analysed. The study is based on Halliday's (1978) Systemic Functional Linguistics framework where the tripartite model of field, tenor and mode is the only analytical tool to analyze the register variation in the selected texts. The Chapter ends with a summary of the methodological approach and its adequacy to answer the research objectives and questions outlined in Chapter One.

3.2 Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative, descriptive research design, with close textual analysis as its primary method of inquiry. Qualitative research has been described by Creswell (2014) as an interpretive study of texts, contexts and meanings, and is particularly appropriate for linguistic studies aiming to understand how language functions in particular social and institutional settings. Rather than measuring linguistic phenomena across a large corpus, this study conducts a detailed qualitative analysis of a small, purposefully selected sample of texts, investigating the lexico-grammatical features by which register is constructed and varied across different topics and genres. This approach exemplifies the interpretative and descriptive nature of SFL-based register analysis that aims to explain the systematic relationship between linguistic choices and the situational contexts in which they are made, in line with the analytical priorities established by Halliday (1978) and elaborated by Eggins (2004).

The descriptive design is suitable for the aims of this study, as the research objectives are related to the characterization and understanding of the register of BBC digital articles rather than to testing hypotheses or establishing causal relationships. Descriptive analyses within SFL are useful because they make visible the systematic functional organization of texts that may otherwise appear naturalized or self-evident, and thus reveal the social and institutional processes through which meaning is constructed in institutional discourse (Thompson 2014). Thus, the qualitative and descriptive character of the present study is consistent with the theoretical framework and the analytical objectives that guide the research.

3.3 Data Collection and Selection Criteria

The data for this study is three BBC digital articles, selected from freely available online sources. Articles were selected on the basis of a set of explicit criteria designed to ensure the data are suitable for register analysis within the SFL framework and sufficiently variable to allow for the study of register variation across mixed topic areas. The selection process was based on the following criteria: firstly, all the selected articles had to be published on the digital platform of the BBC, so that the data come from a single, coherent institutional source with a recognizable and established communicative identity. Secondly, each article had to be an example of long-form analytical writing, (i.e. extended, substantive prose which goes beyond the brief factual reporting characteristic of conventional hard news) in order to provide

sufficient lexico-grammatical material for detailed register analysis. Third, the articles had to have had named authorship, so that the texts were presented as intentionally constructed, individually voiced texts and not anonymous institutional statements. Then, the articles chosen had to contain genres with topical diversity, i.e. different subject areas such as technology, science, art, travel, history etc. in order to facilitate the investigation of register variation across different field configurations. Lastly, all selected articles had to show clear audience-directed language, i.e. linguistic evidence of orientation to a particular readership, according to Bell's (1984) foundational concept of audience design in media writing.

It is acknowledged that the BBC digital articles selected for this study are not blogs in the informal or personal sense of the term, but they are treated in the present study as blog-style institutional texts in the broader academic sense of the term. Herring, Scheidt, Bonus and Wright (2004) provide a broad definition of blogs as web-based publications that are regularly updated and that include entries with dates and organized in reverse chronological order. This definition includes a broad spectrum of institutional and professional forms of digital writing. In the broader academic definition, BBC digital articles are a form of institution blog style writing. Myers (2010) found in a similar vein that institutional digital writing produced by established organizations displays many of the discursive and generic characteristics of blog discourse, including the juxtaposition of informational and conversational registers and the establishment of an engaged, interactive relationship with the reader. On such grounds, the present study acknowledges the selected BBC digital articles as a valid object of analysis within the framework of the SFL blog register.

3.4 Description of Selected Texts

Table 3.3 presents the three articles selected for the analysis. Articles are long-form analytical or feature writing pieces published in June 2026. Each article demonstrates the characteristics of audience-directed institutional digital writing identified in the selection criteria outlined in section

Table 3.3

Selected BBC Digital blogs for Register Analysis

o.	Title	Topic / Genre	Date	URL
	Why the tech industry wants to take away your screen	Technology / AI	24 June 2026	https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20260624-why-tech-companies-want-to-take-away-your-screen
	'We had to get out of the way': The backlash over	Technology / AI	18 June 2026	https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c0rygpp005wjo

	delivery robots			
	"Think outside the bots": How to stop AI from turning your brain to mush	Technology / AI	6 May 2026	https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20260505-how-to-use-ai-without-turning-your-brain-to-mush

Note. All articles were retrieved from the BBC's publicly accessible digital platform in June 2026.

The three articles together cover technology/AI so that the field variable of the SFL register framework is represented in a wide variety of subject matter configurations. This range of topics is crucial to the study's goal of examining how register varies in relation to different field conditions within the consistent institutional setting of the BBC digital platform.

3.5 An analytical Framework

The analytical framework of the present study is Halliday's (1978) tripartite model of field, tenor and mode, operationalised through the categories of lexico-grammatical analysis developed within the SFL tradition. The first contextual variable, field, concerns the subject matter and social activity of the text; in this analysis the field is examined through the vocabulary of the selected articles, that is, the presence of technical or specialized terminology, the lexical choices specific to the domain that build the subject matter of each text, and the thematic organization of clauses and sentences around topic-relevant content. Halliday (1985) argues that the field is most directly realized by the ideational metafunction of language, which is realized through transitivity structures, the choices writers make about the kinds of processes, participants, and circumstances represented in clauses. Thus, the analysis of field in the present study considers the process types and participant roles which are most prominent in each article, as well as the density and specificity of subject-domain vocabulary.

The second contextual variable is tenor, which relates to the relationship between writer and reader socially, in terms of their relative roles, power and degree of familiarity. In SFL, tenor is realized by the interpersonal metafunction of language which comprises the systems of mood, modality, person and evaluation. According to Halliday and Hasan (1989), the tenor is indicated by the level of formality or informality of a text, the presence of the first and second person pronouns, modal auxiliary verbs for expressing degrees of certainty or obligation and the use of evaluative or affective language that places the reader in a definite relationship with the writer and the topic. The present analysis investigates tenor in terms of the modality choices, person use, evaluative lexis and degree of interpersonal engagement present in each of the five selected articles. (2004) Eggins provided detailed guidance on how to operationalize tenor through these grammatical categories and her framework is followed in the analytical procedure of this study.

The third contextual variable is mode which refers to the role language plays in the communicative event and the medium by which it is transmitted. In the SFL framework, mode is realized by the textual metafunction of language and comprises the cohesive devices,

thematic structures and information organisation that provide a text with its internal coherence and communicative logic. Halliday (1994) suggests that mode is indicated in the degree to which a text is structured for reading or listening, the use of cohesive devices such as reference, conjunction and lexical repetition, and the organization of information into theme and rheme structures. As Thompson (2014) notes, mode analysis is especially relevant in digital contexts, where the norms of online writing engage with the formal characteristics of written language in complex and variable ways.

3.6 Procedure of Analysis

The analysis of the three chosen BBC digital articles was performed in four successive phases. In the first stage, each article was read in its entirety in order to develop a comprehensive understanding of its content, communicative purpose, intended audience, and general register. The first reading was undertaken without specific analytical categories, with the purpose of identifying the general situational and communicative features of each text prior to the application of the SFL framework. This stage also included making preliminary observations about the tone, vocabulary and structural organization of each article. These observations informed the more systematic analysis carried out in subsequent stages.

In the second stage, the lexico-grammatical features of each article were identified and then catalogued in a systematic manner. This consisted of examining the texts for patterns of vocabulary choice such as the density and specificity of technical or domain-related terminology, the use of evaluative or affective lexis and the presence of colloquial or conversational expressions. It also involved determining dominant clause and sentence structures, the types of grammatical processes realized through transitivity choices, the use of modal auxiliary verbs and hedging devices, and the use of cohesive mechanisms such as reference chains, conjunctive relations and lexical repetition. These features were coded individually for each article, in order to allow for comparison between the texts in the subsequent phases of the analysis.

In the third stage, the lexico-grammatical features were interpreted through the analytical categories of field, tenor and mode, after the operationalization of the variables of these categories as described in section 3.5. Each set of lexico-grammatical observations was assigned to the relevant contextual variable: vocabulary and transitivity to field, modality and interpersonal features to tenor, cohesion and thematic organisation to mode and the implications of these patterns for the overall register of each article were considered. This phase was an iterative process of moving between the textual evidence and the theoretical framework following the interpretive logic of qualitative SFL analysis as described in Eggins (2004) and Thompson (2014).

The fourth and final stage consisted of comparing and synthesising the findings from the individual article analyses in order to answer the third research question about the extent to which the register of BBC digital articles is a mixture of formal journalistic and informal digital writing conventions. In this comparative phase, the observations from the preceding phases were used to identify the patterns of register consistency and variation across the five articles, and to situate these patterns in the broader scholarly context outlined in Chapters One and Two. The results of this analytical procedure are presented and discussed in Chapter 4.

3.7 Summary

This chapter has presented the methodology of the present study. The present study is a qualitative descriptive study, with SFL-based register analysis as the main method. This chapter outlined the criteria for the selection of five BBC digital articles, from a range of topics

and genres, published in June 2026, justified the treatment of these articles as institutional blog-style texts within the broader academic definition as provided by Herring et al. (2004) and Myers (2010), and presented the selected texts in tabular form.

Then, the analytical framework was described as the operationalization of Halliday's (1978) tripartite model of field, tenor and mode, through SFL categories developed by Halliday (1985, 1994), Halliday and Hasan (1989), Eggins (2004) and Thompson (2014). Finally, it described the four-stage process by which the analysis was undertaken, from initial reading and the identification of features, to the application of the framework and comparative synthesis. The results of this analysis are discussed in chapter four.

ANALYSIS

4.1 Introduction

This chapter offers a register analysis of three purposively selected BBC blog posts introduced in Chapter Three: 'Why the Tech Industry Wants to Take Away Your Screen', 'We Had to Get Out of the Way': The Backlash Over Delivery Robots, and 'Think Outside the Bots': How to Stop AI From Turning Your Brain to Mush. The analysis is carried out on a text-by-text basis, using Halliday's (1978) model of register, in which context of situation is theorised in terms of the interacting variables of Field, Tenor and Mode. The findings for each blog post are divided into four sections: the linguistic features of register (vocabulary, tone and sentence structure); a Field-Tenor-Mode analysis; a discussion of the interplay between the three variables in shaping the communicative style of the text; and an analysis of the mixture of formal journalistic and informal digital-writing conventions. Findings are directly embedded in the discussion and are supported throughout by brief textual examples taken from the three posts. The chapter ends with a cross-textual synthesis that links the three research objectives. A short preamble to Chapter Five follows.

4.2 Text One: "Why the Tech Industry Wants to Take Away Your Screen" (BBC Future)

4.2.1 Linguistic Features of Register

The vocabulary of this text is a mixture of industry-specific terms and every day, often playful lexis. Alongside colloquial description, as in the opening line that promises readers "your ears" could "have eyes," sit AI pendants, references to processing visual information "on your phone" rather than "sending it to the cloud," and named products (AirPods, Specs, Meta). This kind of combination of technical subject matter with informal wording is typical of the popular-science register described by Biber and Conrad (2019) in which specialized content is conveyed through highly accessible lexis.

Tone is playful, personally inflected and partially hedged. Unconfirmed product details reflect the modal caution of responsible tech journalism (Fairclough, 1995) in epistemic caution ("Apple hasn't confirmed or denied the news," "reportedly," "rumoured"). But this caution is offset by humour and direct evaluative comment from the writer, who starts with a joking hypothetical ("If you've ever wanted your ears to have eyes, then I've got great news") and goes on to editorialise directly on the privacy concerns ("to be clear I'm not saying we should"). Evaluative colour also comes from quoting a company spokesperson saying the Specs glasses are 'comfortable enough to be worn for hours' and from named-expert commentary from Ben Wood, chief analyst at the market research firm FDM CSS Insight, who is quoted assessing Apple's likely design rationale.

Sentence structure varies from short punchy declaratives ("This may or may not be a rosy picture") to longer sentences composed through coordination and subordination explaining product mechanics. The use of direct questions is quite prominent to structure the

argument and engage the reader, especially the questions of 'does anybody actually want this?' and 'what might this new world look like?' The use of such rhetorical devices is a way to invite the reader into the writer's own uncertainty, rather than to present conclusions as settled facts. There is also the direct address to the reader ("you and millions of others will answer a more fundamental question").

4.2.2 Field, Tenor, and Mode Analysis

Field The focus is an emerging shift in personal computing hardware away from screens and toward wearable devices smart glasses, camera-equipped Air Pods and AI pendants. Ideational content is a bit technical, involving notions like on-device data processing, environmental sensing via camera, and voice-assistant integration, but is always expressed in tangible, everyday scenarios (asking a fridge for recipe ideas, getting navigational directions without looking at a phone). In terms of transitivity, technology companies are often construed as Actor in material processes ("Apple is gearing up to release," "Snap...unveiled a new pair of AI-powered smart glasses"), positioning the tech industry as the driving agentive force behind the changes described, while the reader/user is positioned primarily as a prospective Sensor or Beneficiary, someone who will "ask questions," "get recipe ideas," or "get navigational directions." This asymmetry is consistent with the pattern identified in Halliday and Matthiessen's (2014) account of transitivity as a systematic realisation of field.

Soprano. The tenor constructed here is largely personal and dialogic, rather than institutionally distanced. The writer speaks in the first person throughout, articulating a personal stance and even mentioning personal media work ("I spoke to CNBC reporter Brandy Zadrozny on The Interface, the podcast I host for the BBC"), and addresses the reader directly, with humour and rhetorical questions. This authorial stance is overtly evaluative: rather than mediating evaluation solely through the quoted sources, the writer weighs up a 'positive' reading of the technology against a 'grimmer vision'. This first-person, opinion-forward tone is closer to a companionable columnist relationship than the distanced expert-to-generalist relationship that is typical of hard technology reporting and is reinforced by direct, informal address such as "Don't throw away your phone just yet."

Mode . The channel is authored and digitally published. For multimodal support, it features a captioned image (Getty Images, caption: "Wearable AI tools could replace most of your phone's functionality without a screen") and embedded links to related BBC Future coverage under the heading "More like this." The textual organisation is essayistic as opposed to strictly inverted-pyramid. The piece opens with a personal, humorous hook, passes through named product detail and expert commentary, poses open rhetorical questions at structurally important points, and closes with the writer's own reflective assessment. Cohesion is achieved through a repeating lexical chain based on screens, glasses and wearables, and a first-person narrative thread, linking quoted experts in the field to the writer's evaluative position. Some features are designed to be read aloud: short rhetorical questions, conversational subheadings ("A farewell to screens?", "Don't throw away your phone just yet"), and direct address to "you."

Interaction between field, tenor and mode. Here, a mildly technical field is filtered through a highly personalized, first-person voice and delivered in an essayistic, orally patterned mode. Together, these create a communicative style that reads less like conventional technology reporting and more like a companionable, opinion-inflected column. The personal voice and humor make an otherwise industry-driven subject feel approachable and immediate to the general reader.

4.2.3 Formal vs Informal Blend

This text mixes formal and informal conventions extensively rather than conservatively. Credibility anchoring is still in play with claims attributed to a named market analyst (Ben Wood of FDM CSS Insight), a named journalist (Brandy Zadrozny of CNBC) and the unconfirmed nature of Apple's plans flagged explicitly, and specific figures cited (Meta's "seven million pairs" of smart glasses sold). They are markers which identify journalistic credibility (Bell, 1991). At the same time, informal and digital-native conventions are embedded in the writer's own prose, rather than being confined to quotation or headline alone: contractions recur throughout ("hasn't," "I've got," "it's"), humour is used as an organising device from the opening sentence onwards, and the writer directly addresses and jokes with the reader, rather than keeping a reportorial distance. Conversational subheadings and open-ended rhetorical questions continue to blur the line between structured reporting and informal reflection. This pattern suggests that Text One is much closer to Text Three on the formality continuum than a purely institutional reading would suggest, complicating any strict association between BBC Future feature writing and journalistic distance. Here the blend of formal sourcing with an informal, personally voiced register is thorough and sustained throughout the piece (Myers, 2010).

4.3 Text Two: "'We Had to Get Out of the Way': The Backlash Over Delivery Robots" (BBC News)

4.3.1 Linguistic Features of Register

The vocabulary here shifts between institutional or technical terms autonomous urban delivery vehicles, regulatory framework, accessibility standards and vernacular, affect-laden description by ordinary residents, as when the robots are said to be "zipping around" with "lights and cameras." This seesaw reflects the article's double-barreled sourcing structure, which pulls from officials and companies on the one hand, and ordinary citizens on the other.

Tone is built up almost entirely through direct quotation rather than through explicit evaluation by the author. Residents' language is affect-laden, as in their admission that a robot "felt a little off," while corporate spokespersons employ reassuring, positive-affect lexis, describing the machines as "friendly," "polite," and "programmed to be careful." The contrast between the two evaluative registers sets up an implicit critical tension without the writer ever stating a personal opinion, a classic technique of 'objectivity through quotation' in hard news writing (Bell, 1991).

The sentence structure contrasts long, subordinated narrative sentences in passages setting the scene, such as the account of how one resident's initial fascination with the robots ("I actually thought they were kind of neat – it felt futuristic") gave way to unease on a family walk, with shorter, quotation-embedded sentences elsewhere. The article is full of reported speech; there is no direct address to the reader, and the passive voice reappears in administrative and regulatory content, as in the statement that robots "have now been banned" from parts of a city, a construction that foregrounds the regulatory outcome but background the responsible authority.

4.3.2 Field, Tenor, and Mode Analysis

Field. The issue is the social and regulatory controversy over the use of autonomous delivery robots on public pavements. The ideational content is somewhat technical, with references to navigation technologies (cameras, sensors, GPS) and a market projection of 2.1 million such robots in operation by 2034, but based on everyday urban experience. A remarkable transitivity pattern is revealed in the construction of the robots themselves as Actor in material processes the robots are described as "trundling", "zipping around", even "blocking

emergency vehicles” which bestows upon the machines a quasi-animate agency that heightens the sense of intrusion reported by residents. By contrast, human actors are often cast as Sensor or Sayer (“he was impressed,” “Robertson says”), a field configuration that foregrounds perception and testimony rather than physical action, and so centers the article on public reaction rather than the technical operation of the robots.

Tenor. The tone of a BBC News reporter addressing a general audience, employing a formal to neutral register. There are several named social actors, a resident turned campaigner, a city councillor, a union representative and a company spokesperson, quoted with authenticating titles, a device that increases credibility in the way that Bednarek and Caple (2017) describe. There is no first-person authorial voice and no direct address to the reader; instead interpersonal meaning is expressed through the selection, sequencing and juxtaposition of quoted stances. This allows the writer to imply critical distance from the promoters of robots while maintaining a guise of institutional impartiality.

Mode. The channel is written and published on BBC News online. It is clearly multimodal because there is photographic material credited to John Robertson, Coco, IWGB that act as evidence for the narrative. The textual organisation is scene-led, beginning with a personal anecdote before broadening into regulatory context and statistical detail, and concluding with a reflective quotation about an inevitable but negotiable future. This structure marries the inverted pyramid conventions of hard news to the narrative arc of feature writing. There is cohesion in the text with the frequent mention of robots and pavements and the use of named recurring participants. Features of written-to-be-spoken language, such as contractions and direct address, are all but confined to the quoted material, thus a conversational register is brought into the article only by the voices of its sources, not by the reporter’s own prose.

Interaction of Mode, Tenor and Field. A field of contested urban technology, a tenor comprising many authenticated but non-authorial voices, and a mode that places personal anecdote within an edited hard-news structure, combine to create a communicative style that seems evidentially balanced but subtly steers reader sympathy through the emotional colouring and ordering of the quoted testimony.

4.3.3 Formal versus Informal Blend

The conventions of formal journalism are demonstrated in the attribution of statistics to a named research firm, the use of official titles such as ‘Coun Ardy Kassakhian’, the use of multiple corroborating sources and the consistent absence of authorial opinion all of which are known credibility markers of hard news (Bell, 1991). The conventions of informal, digital-native language show up almost entirely in embedded quotation, which includes contractions (“it’s,” “they’re,” “we’ve”) and colloquial idiom (“kind of neat,” “get out of the way”) that would be unlikely in the reporter’s own unmarked prose. This produces a text that is formally structured at the macro-organisation level, but conversational at the embedded voice level, a hybridity that Myers (2010) associates with digital news writing, where informal reported speech is licensed within a general formal reporting frame.

4.4 Text Three: “Think Outside the Bots’: How to Stop AI From Turning Your Brain to Mush” (BBC Future)

4.4.1 Linguistic Features of Register

The text mixes technical cognitive science terms such as cognitive friction, meta-analysis, and prospective memory with a surprisingly informal, idiomatic voice that starts with the title itself, a play on the idiom “think outside the box” and the colloquialism “brain to mush.”

The wordplay is a deliberately casual headline strategy designed to grab attention, applied over content that is itself quite technical at the level of the proposition.

I am writing this in a very cautious way, in a confessional way. The writer explicitly expresses personal anxiety ("am I harming my brain in the process?") and frames the article through personal narrative ("Years ago, I forced myself to start using AI as often as possible"), a stark departure from the third-person objectivity of Text Two. Hedging is common, and epistemically genuine, rather than merely institutional, as when it is acknowledged that "the science on this is brand new, and we don't have the answers."

The sentence structure has a noticeable number of short, punchy declaratives for rhetorical effect, as in the sequence "GPS ruined our sense of direction. "Search engines weaken our memory" sets the reader up before the article's central worry is explored. The argument is structured by the use of direct questions, which also engage the reader. Most clearly this is evident in the rhetorical question 'should we be worried?', a hallmark of the written-to-be-read-as-if-spoken quality that Herring (2013) associates with blog-style science writing.

4.4.2 Field, Tenor, and Mode Analysis

Field. The problem is posed in terms of memory, attention, and creativity research, and cognitive risks and possible protections from habitual AI use. The ideational content is moderately technical and draws on a specific meta-analysis of 57 studies including over 411,000 adults and cited academic sources, but is consistently translated into lay terms through analogy – most notably by comparing the potential effects of AI on memory to the well-documented effects of GPS and search engines. With respect to transitivity, AI and associated technologies are repeatedly constructed as Actor carrying out processes on the human mind, such as the claim that AI 'could do the same to everything from creativity to critical thinking', with technology positioned as an agentive force acting upon a comparatively passive human Goal. This pattern of transitivity makes the cautionary orientation of the field more explicit than either of the previous texts.

Tenore. The tone is a distinctly close, dialogic one for a research-based feature. The writer is presented as a fellow AI user reflecting on personal experience, not as a distant reporter. This is made clear through the use of first-person disclosure and by directly questioning the reader. Formality is reduced compared to Texts One and Two: hedges are authentic epistemic humility, not institutional caution; the authorial stance is overtly evaluative and personally invested, not neutral mediation through sourcing quotation alone. This produces an interpersonally involved tenor that is in line with the 'expert companion' persona that is recurrent in BBC Future's first-person science features (Myers, 2010).

Mode. The channel is written and published digitally, again presumably multimodal with images and hyperlinks to the studies cited. The textual organisation is essayistic and quasi-narrative. The piece starts with personal anecdote, moves through rhetorical questioning and expert interview, and ends with practical advice. This structure draws more from oral storytelling conventions than the inverted-pyramid structure of hard news. The lexical chain of mind-and-brain metaphors (mush, atrophy, cognitive workout) is repeated for cohesion, as is the first-person thread linking the different expert voices back to the writer's own experience. Several features here are written in a conversational style: short sentences, rhetorical questions, and direct address to an implied "you" who "might want to rethink how you use these tools."

Interaction of Field, Tenor and Mode. Cognitive risk is a field, filtered through a very personal and dialogic tenor, and delivered in a mode that draws heavily on oral storytelling

conventions, together produce the most markedly informal and reader-involving communicative style of the three texts, despite being firmly rooted in cited scientific research.

4.4.3 Formal versus Informal Blend

The explicit citation of named researchers, their institutional affiliations, and a stated sample size for the central meta-analysis maintain formal, credibility-establishing conventions, situating the piece as science journalism rather than personal opinion (Bell, 1991). But the informal digital-native conventions are much more pervasive here than in Texts One and Two: first-person narration, contractions (“it’s,” “don’t,” “isn’t”), rhetorical questions directed at an implied reader, colloquial idiom in the title and in the body text. This text thus represents the most intense merging of formal and informal conventions of the three, blending evidence-based science reporting with a distinctly informal, blog-native voice (Myers, 2010; Herring, 2013).

4.5 Cross-Textual Synthesis and Discussion

In sum, the three texts show that the surface linguistic features analysed in Objective 1 – vocabulary, tone and sentence structure – are not random stylistic choices, but systematic realisations of the underlying Field–Tenor–Mode configuration analysed in Objective 2. Lexical density and technicality are in line with the field of each text: the corporate-technological field of Text One and the cognitive-scientific field of Text All three produce specialized terminology, glossed for a general reader, while the socially grounded field of Text Two produces a vocabulary split between institutional jargon and vernacular testimony. Tenor governs the use of first-person and direct-address. The distanced, expert-mediated tenor of Text One and the multiply sourced, non-authorial tenor of Text Two both eliminate direct authorial address, while the personally invested tenor of Text Three permits first-person narration and rhetorical questioning throughout. Mode dictates textual organisation and cohesion strategy, from the topic-led explainer structure of Text One, through the anecdote-framed hard-news structure of Text Two, to the essayistic, orally patterned structure of Text Three. The results support Halliday and Matthiessen’s (2014) argument that register variables are realized through mutually reinforcing lexicogrammatical choices, not independently of each other.

Objective 3 shows that all three texts blend formal conventions of journalism with informal conventions of digital writing. Yet they do so at different points of a continuum of formality and in different ways. In spite of its hard-news framing, Text Two imports informality principally through embedded quotation, preserving a formal reporting voice at the macro level, but allowing colloquial speech to emerge within quoted testimony. Text One, meanwhile, shows a similar but more conservative pattern, with the informality largely confined to headline phrasing rather than the body text. By contrast, Text Three blends the two conventions more thoroughly, embedding first-person informality directly into the reporter’s own prose, along with conventional credibility markers such as named sources and stated sample sizes. Such a graded pattern suggests that the BBC’s online output is not a single homogeneous register, but a family of related registers whose formality is influenced by section (News vs. Future), authorial persona and communicative purpose – a finding consistent with wider accounts of the erosion of clear-cut formal/informal boundaries in digital journalism (Biber & Conrad, 2019; Myers, 2010).

4.6 Chapter Summary

In this chapter I analyse three BBC blog posts using Halliday’s Field–Tenor–Mode model, and show how the vocabulary, tone and sentence structure of each text are systematically related to its underlying register configuration. All three texts use a combination of formal journalistic conventions and informal features of digital writing, but the extent and

manner of blending differ greatly between the BBC News and BBC Future texts. The results suggest that register in BBC's digital publishing is best conceptualized as a graded continuum rather than a fixed formal/informal binary. Chapter Five now considers the wider implications, limitations and conclusions that can be drawn from these findings.

CONCLUSION

5.1 Introduction

This study explored the register of three purposively selected BBC blog posts, using the Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics framework to investigate the interaction of Field, Tenor and Mode and the degree to which formal journalistic and informal digital-writing conventions co-exist within these texts. After detailed textual analysis of the novel in Chapter Four, this chapter is the last part of the study. It summarises the key findings in relation to the three research objectives, synthesises these findings into an integrated answer to the study's central research problem, discusses the theoretical and practical implications of the analysis, acknowledges the limitations of the present study, offers recommendations for future research and closes with a brief reflective statement.

5.2 Summary of Findings

All three blog posts mixed specialist or institutional vocabulary with accessible, glossed lexis for a general readership, whether the topic was wearable technology, urban robotics policy or cognitive science, though tone varied more sharply: the two news-oriented pieces constructed evaluation mainly through attributed quotation rather than direct authorial comment; the essayistic piece allowed first-person evaluation and confessional hedging into the writer's own voice. Sentence structure ranged from long, subordinated expository prose to short, punctuated declaratives and direct questions together suggesting that register variation across the texts is not constant but shifts with communicative purpose and section, despite a shared underlying orientation to accessibility (Biber & Conrad, 2019). The Field-Tenor-Mode analysis accounted for this variation in a systematic way, showing the three variables working together, not separately: Field found technicality and transitivity patterns in which technology and in one instance the phenomenon itself were often constructed as Actor acting upon a relatively passive human participant; Tenor captured the degree of interpersonal involvement between writer and reader, from impersonal and expert-mediated to more intimate and first-person; and Mode determined textual organisation, from topic-led explainer structures and anecdote-framed news structures to essayistic, orally patterned structures resembling spoken storytelling confirming Halliday and Matthiessen's (2004) claim that register variables are realised through mutually reinforcing lexicogrammatical choices, even within a single, narrow genre category. This interplay also underpinned the formal-informal blend found across all three posts, which combined formal journalistic conventions attributed sourcing, credibility-anchoring statistics, structured paragraphing, cautious modality with informal digital-native features such as contractions, colloquial idiom, rhetorical questions, and, in one case, sustained first-person narration; crucially, the extent of this blending differed by text, with informality largely confined to embedded quotation or headline phrasing in the news-oriented posts, while it was folded directly into the authorial voice in the essayistic post, indicating that the formal/informal mix in BBC blog posts is not fixed or binary but a graded continuum shaped by section, authorial persona, and communicative purpose (Myers, 2010).

5.3 Overall Conclusion

Synthesising these three sets of findings, this study concludes that BBC blog posts form a hybrid register that systematically combines the evidential, source-attributed conventions of traditional journalism with the interpersonal, reader-involving conventions of digital and blog-native writing. This hybridity is not arbitrary or random, but a patterned outcome of the interaction of Field, Tenor and Mode, so that texts with a more institutional field and a more distanced tenor combine formal and informal conventions conservatively, and texts with a more personal field and a more dialogic tenor combine them extensively. The findings of the study in response to the study's main research problem indicate that the BBC blog post should be understood not as a homogeneous genre but rather as a flexible register space where the balance of formality and informality is reset according to each communicative context, while still abiding by recognisable journalistic norms of evidence and attribution.

5.4 Theoretical and Practical Implications

In theory, this study contributes to register analysis by providing a concrete demonstration of how Halliday's Field-Tenor-Mode model can be systematically applied to contemporary digital journalistic texts. It thus extends a framework originally developed with reference to more traditional written and spoken genres (Halliday, 1978) to the domain of online news and feature writing. Furthermore, the study provides empirical evidence for existing accounts of digital journalism as a hybrid discourse form, drawing on both print-journalistic and computer-mediated conventions (Herring, 2013; Myers, 2010), by demonstrating precisely how this hybridity is realized in terms of vocabulary, transitivity and cohesion in specific texts. In practical terms, the findings may be of interest to digital content writers, journalism students and media literacy educators interested in understanding how register choices are calibrated to construct credibility and reader engagement simultaneously, and they offer a replicable analytical procedure that could be applied to other online publications seeking to audit or develop their own house style.

5.5 Limitations of the Study

There are some limitations of this study that should be considered when interpreting the findings. Firstly, the analysis was restricted to three blog posts, a small sample size that while sufficient for the purposively selected qualitative and descriptive objectives of the study, does not allow for statistical generalisation to the entirety of BBC's digital output. Second, the texts selected were from only two sections of the BBC (BBC Future), and therefore, other sections, such as BBC Culture or BBC Travel, were not represented in the final sample, limiting the range of registers that were captured. Third, the analysis was based on the texts themselves and did not include reader-response or reception data, such as comments or engagement metrics, which might reveal how audiences actually interpret the formal/informal blend identified in the analysis. Finally, there was no direct comparison with equivalent print journalism and so claims about the distinctiveness of the digital register in BBC relative to print conventions cannot but be inferential rather than empirically demonstrated.

5.6 Recommendations for Future Research

Based on the findings and limitations of this study, there are several directions that future research may explore. A larger, more systematically sampled corpus of BBC blog posts, perhaps analysed with corpus-linguistic tools, would allow the patterns identified here to be tested for frequency and statistical significance over a wider range of texts. Further comparative analysis across other sections of the BBC, e.g. Culture, Travel and Sport, would help to establish whether the graded formal-informal continuum found in this study holds over the full range of the BBC's digital output, or whether it is particular to the sections investigated here.

Future work might also explore multimodal analysis of the images, embedded video, and hyperlink structures that accompany these texts, given the partial capture of Mode by written text alone demonstrated in this study, as well as reader-comment or engagement analysis to explore how audiences respond to and co-construct the interpersonal meanings identified in the Tenor analysis.

5.7 Closing Statement

This study ultimately demonstrates that the apparently informal and easily digestible surface of a BBC blog post masks a meticulously organized register in which each lexical and grammatical choice is accountable to the interacting demands of Field, Tenor and Mode. As digital platforms continue to reshape the conventions of journalistic writing, sustained attention to register in this way provides a valuable lens to understand the negotiation of credibility and accessibility in the evolving landscape of online media discourse.

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Annex

1. Text One: Why the tech industry wants to take away your screen

<https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20260624-why-tech-companies-want-to-take-away-your-screen>

24 June 2026

Thomas Germain



Some tech leaders have a vision for a world where you spend a lot less time looking at your phone. Is it the solution to screen time, or just a new dystopia?

If you've ever wanted your ears to have eyes, then I've got great news. It seems Apple is gearing up to release AirPods with cameras in them as soon as next year.

Apparently, these cameras aren't for taking pictures. According to Bloomberg, they'll feed information about your surroundings to its virtual assistant Siri, unlocking a whole set of new possibilities for how you might interact with your devices without looking at them.

Apple hasn't confirmed or denied the news, but the Bloomberg report comes from a journalist with a stellar reputation for leaking the company's secrets. And it's part of a broader trend.

For the past 60 years or so, screens have been the predominant way we have interacted with computers. Now it's possible they could fade further into the background.

Together with smart glasses and other wearable products like AI pendants you hang around your neck, some of the biggest tech companies are building a suite of devices that could let you spend far less time with screens. If this vision comes to pass, it might revolutionise the way we interact with computers.

This may or may not be a rosy picture. It would usher in either a softer and more humane relationship with the technology we use every day, or a future where tech invades even more of our lives.

But before we get there, you and millions of others will answer a more fundamental question: does anybody actually want this?

A farewell to screens?

Last week, Snap, the company behind Snapchat, unveiled a new pair of AI-powered smart glasses called Specs. They come with a spectacular price tag: £1,995 in the UK and \$2,195 in the US.

And the biggest news about Specs was a TV appearance where the glasses seemed to be crushing chief executive Evan Spiegel's ears in a way that looked decidedly uncomfortable. (He later said his ears just look like that.) The Specs are significantly larger and heavier than most competing smart glasses – though a spokesperson tells the BBC they're comfortable enough to be worn for hours.

But Specs may have unprecedented features. Most importantly, the company says you can use them independently of other devices. Smart glasses usually need to be paired with your phone. "For decades, computers have asked us to look down, sit still or step out of the moment," said Spiegel in a press release. "Specs are the beginning of a new era in computing."



Wearable AI tools could replace most of your phone's functionality without a screen. But would you use your phone less, or just add a new device to the mix? (Credit: Getty Images)

To be clear, the specs have a display in the lenses, as do some models of Meta's smart glasses, but they're not designed to replace your field of vision or even be a constant presence. Instead, the glasses will temporarily overlay a display on top of the world as you see it through your glasses.

There may not be a large group of people with the wallet and ear strength to bear a product like this. But for those who fit this unusual demographic, Specs offer something that really is new. The market for smart glasses and other computers you wear on your body, meanwhile, is booming. Meta's smart glasses are the most popular with a reported seven million pairs sold, and just this week the company just announced a new line of cheaper models. However, these devices raise serious privacy concerns.

Smart glasses are controversial, to say the least. There's an entire genre of people on the internet who make money using the Meta smart glasses' built-in camera to harass strangers and surreptitiously record them. It can often be difficult to tell whether they're filming. (Meta and Snap's glasses have a little light that turns on that's supposed to alert people. Many argue this isn't enough.)

I talked to CNBC reporter Brandy Zadrozny on The Interface, the podcast I host for the BBC, about the privacy concerns.

"I was on my morning run and I asked a parks department worker when the water fountains were turning on, and he had the Meta glasses on," said Zadrozny. "Even for me, a tech reporter, it was so jarring. There's going to be so much backlash."

"You could move through the world, doing things with your devices, without taking your eyes off the things around you"

But Meta is reportedly considering audio-only smart glasses that don't use cameras. And if anyone can navigate this privacy minefield, it might be Apple. Privacy is core to Apple's marketing. And it's easy to imagine how its rumoured new product could skate around the privacy concerns.

Assuming the reporting is correct, the AirPods cameras won't let you take pictures or video like a regular camera. And Apple could – theoretically – process all of the camera's visual information on your on your phone without sending it to the cloud or saving it afterward.

So if we set the privacy concerns aside for a moment (and to be clear I'm not saying we should) what might this new world look like?

I see two ways to look at it. One is positive. Cameras in your AirPods could let you interact with all kinds of information about your physical environment without ever touching or looking at a screen.

You could ask questions about things you're looking at, open your fridge and get recipe ideas based on the ingredients you have without typing them in, or get navigational directions based on what's in your field of vision. And it would unlock new, far less intrusive ways to control devices, like hand gestures.

Maybe you don't want to do any of that stuff, but think of it this way. Right now, there's an extremely limited number of computing tasks you can accomplish without staring at a big glass rectangle.

Don't throw away your phone just yet

"Apple would not embed technology like this unless they had very credible use cases in mind," says Ben Wood, chief analyst at the tech industry market research firm FDM CSS Insight, and a noted expert on wearable tech. "It's almost limited by our imagination – what people will be able to do with these devices."

This surrounds what I think is one of the more interesting promises about AI. At its most successful, AI would let us talk to computers the way you would talk to a person who can operate your device on your behalf.

More like this:

- The unsettling world of the 'TikTok Farlands'
- The spy in your driveway: How cars sell your data
- Wired headphone sales are booming. What's with the Bluetooth backlash?

And Apple is already launching a revamped, AI version of Siri which takes baby steps in that direction.

It all means you could move through the world, doing things with your devices, without taking your eyes off what is around you. In an era where screen time continues to be a persistent worry for some, this could be a very welcome change.

But here's a potentially grimmer vision of what may come. The tech industry is heavily invested in screens. Apple, for example, is a company that makes almost all its money selling products with screens on them.

If screenless devices go mainstream, there it could just be another way to get us to interact with technology more often. We'll could start at screens just as much as we do now, and then have new screen-free technology for those moments when need your eyes for something else, like when you're walking around.

"I'm a firm believer that the smartphone is going absolutely nowhere, it's part of the fabric of society," says Wood. "But I think there is a desire, by the tech industry and by some users, to lift our heads."

2. Text Two: 'We had to get out of the way': The backlash over delivery robots

<https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c0rygp005wj0>

18 June 2026

Emma Woollacott

Technology reporter



The first time Chicago resident Josh Robertson saw a delivery robot trundling down the sidewalk on his street he was impressed.

"I actually thought they were kind of neat – it felt futuristic," he says.

But his attitude started to change when, soon after, he was out for a walk with his family. As another robot approached, they found themselves having to dodge it.

"To us it felt a little off - the fact that we were on the one strip reserved for walking, and we were having to get out of the way," says Robertson. "I started thinking about what it would be like for us to go for a walk as a family if there were dozens of robots with lights and cameras zipping around."

The robots, more formally known as autonomous urban delivery vehicles, have started to appear on pavements in a number of cities across the US, plus in the UK, Japan, South Korea and Germany, transporting groceries and fast food, using cameras, sensors and GPS to navigate.



John Robertson Josh Robertson, wearing a pink top on a Chicago street, with two delivery robots in the background

Chicagoan Josh Robertson has launched a campaign against delivery robots

According to the companies operating them, they can reliably identify and avoid objects in the path, cross streets safely and react to their environment. The robots provide a useful service and help cut down on traffic and emissions, they claim.

However, some local authorities in the US and Canada, and members of the public, are less than enthusiastic. Bans have been put in place, and protests have been launched.

San Francisco has limited the access of the vehicles to less busy parts of the city, and Toronto has since 2021 prohibited the robots from using sidewalks.

Meanwhile, in Chicago the machines have now been banned from two small areas of the city.

Robertson wants the robots to be suspended across all of Chicago until safety tests are carried out, and clear rules are set on their usage. He has launched a petition calling for this, and so far, it has around 4,400 signatures.

People frequently find themselves having to step into the street in order to get out of the machines' way, says Robertson.

"There have been reports of collisions and injuries. I saw one a few days ago where somebody had been struck by one of the robots' safety flags, which is a little ironic," he says. "We've got reports of robots causing issues with traffic, blocking emergency vehicles because they're acting erratically at crosswalks."

Uber Eats delivery robots vandalised in Sheffield

Self-driving delivery robots rolled out

Similar concerns have emerged in Glendale, California, where the local council is considering a temporary ban on the use of the vehicles. Councillors say the robots appeared without warning, and at first they didn't even know which company was supplying them.

"What triggered the concern and the discussion was a number of factors," says Coun Ardy Kassakhian. "The increased visibility of the robots in the downtown, and the question about accessibility and pedestrian movement on our public sidewalks.

"Plus, uncertainty regarding the regulatory authority - because no-one asked us for permission to use the sidewalks for this business enterprise - and then the broader concern was about the impact on workers and public places."

Sidewalks in Glendale aren't particularly wide, adds Kassakhian, and he personally has witnessed a "stand-off" between a delivery robot and an elderly person, as well as broken-down robots causing obstructions.

Kassakhian says the council is seeking a regulated approach for the longer term. "We need a regulatory framework, we need to designate operating rules, insurance requirements, accessibility standards, possibly permitting fees, operational limits in high pedestrian areas, and to have accountability for the operators."



Coco A delivery robot in front of a car on a street in Los Angeles

Rules governing delivery robots differ around the world

In the UK, where delivery robots are being piloted in a number of cities, some locals have taken matters into their own hands. There have been reports of Uber Eats vehicles being vandalised in Sheffield.

The supplier of these machines, Starship Technologies, says they are perfectly safe and that perceptions need to change.

"We know it's a new experience for a lot of people to share a pavement with a robot," says the company's European operations director Danny Pass.

"But the robots are friendly, they're polite and they're programmed to be careful. They've slotted into everyday life in loads of communities since we started out in the UK back in 2018."

Uber Eats delivery robots vandalised in Sheffield

Not all concerns, though, are centred around pedestrian safety. The Independent Workers Union of Great Britain (IWGB), whose members include delivery drivers, is worried about the impact on jobs. It says it is keeping a watchful eye, and it has already expressed its concerns to the government.

"I think if it became more of a [permanent, countrywide] reality, we'd definitely have to be thinking about where we put on pressure - whether that's government, TfL [Transport for London], or local authorities - to ensure that these things are banned, because the human impact would be massive," says president Alex Marshall.

"This would mean whole communities in London, where a lot of people are precarious workers, would really suffer. People would be fighting for their lives against these pointless robots."



IWGB UK trade union boss Alex Marshall, left, holding a megaphone at a street protest

IWGB UK trade union boss Alex Marshall, left, is worried that delivery robots will mean job cuts

While the use of autonomous delivery robots is still limited, analysts believe they're set for a major boom. A report last summer from research firm Transforma Insight, indeed, concluded that by 2034, there will be 2.1 million in operation around the world.

Currently, there's a hotchpotch of regulation worldwide. Some countries, such as South Korea and Japan, have taken a liberal approach.

Back in Chicago, Robertson says he is fighting for the best possible outcome for pedestrians city-wide.

"There's a sense that change like this, even when it's unwanted is inevitable. But even if none of us can stop the future, we can at least choose which future we move into."

3. Text Three: Think outside the bots': How to stop AI from turning your brain to mush

<https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20260505-how-to-use-ai-without-turning-your-brain-to-mush>

6 May 2026

Thomas Germain



GPS ruined our sense of direction. Search engines weaken our memory. AI, scientists warn, could do the same to everything from creativity to critical thinking.

Years ago, I forced myself to start using AI as often as possible. If I was going to be writing about it, I also had to use the technology. But an emerging crop of studies over the last year or so have me worried – am I harming my brain in the process?

These studies suggest people who lean too much on tools like ChatGPT could have problems with creativity, attention span, critical thinking, memory and more. Others raise concerns that AI users could be surrendering the cognitive friction that makes thinking sharp, and that as a society we may have fewer original ideas. But the science on this is brand new, and we don't have the answers. So should we be worried?

"On a high level, yes," says Adam Green, a professor of neuroscience and director of the Laboratory for Relational Cognition at Georgetown University in the US. There's a lot of nuance here, but AI will do work that used to require mental labour. "There's plenty of evidence that if you are not doing as much of the actual thinking, then your capability to do that kind of thinking is going to atrophy."

Even if you don't seek to use ChatGPT or Claude, there are AI responses at the top of Google and tech giants are rushing to shove more of it onto our phones. The technology is getting hard to avoid, but there are steps you can take to avoid the biggest potential risks.

This isn't all or nothing though, according to Jared Benge, a professor and clinical neuropsychologist at Dell Medical School at the University of Texas at Austin. Using AI doesn't automatically mean it's going to be bad for you. For example, if AI frees up your brain space for other more important things, that might be great for your cognition.

"Why do we think AI is going to be that different from other things that our brain has already adapted to?" Benge says. "It's not inherent to the tool to be good or bad."

As with any other technology, how we use AI will determine whether it helps us or harms us. But the concerns are serious enough that you might want to rethink how you use these tools – before it's too late.

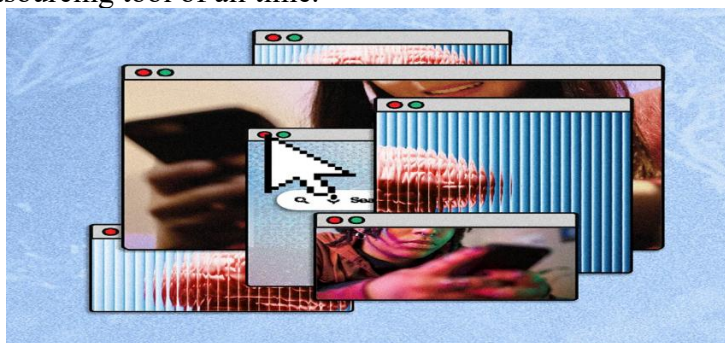
With this in mind, I spoke with some leading experts in this field to find out how they think we should use AI to ensure it doesn't dull our minds.

What are we worried about?

Twenty years ago, an idea cropped up that overreliance on technology might cause some kind of "digital dementia" resulting in the deterioration of short-term memory and other cognitive processes. Benge recently co-authored a meta-analysis that looked at 57 studies covering more than 411,000 adults. All told, he and his co-author found no evidence for digital dementia. Technology use actually seemed to reduce the risk of cognitive impairment.

But that doesn't mean there's nothing to fear.

Studies have found that people who rely on satellite navigation like GPS stop building mental maps of their surroundings and their spatial memory continues to decline over time. A similar phenomenon called the "Google Effect" emerged when search engines took over. Apparently, we're less likely to remember information that we find using a search engine because it takes so little effort. It seems the brain gets worse at tasks when we outsource them. And AI is the most powerful outsourcing tool of all time.



Serenity Strull/ BBC/ Getty Images AI could be making you less creative, less analytical and worse at remembering things; but experts say there's plenty you can do now (Credit: Serenity Strull/ BBC/ Getty Images)

AI could be making you less creative, less analytical and worse at remembering things; but experts say there's plenty you can do now (Credit: Serenity Strull/ BBC/ Getty Images)

"What's happening with AI is that it's giving us, for the first time, an easy way to trade process for product," Green says. The essay can sound better. The presentation can look sharper. The retirement party joke can land perfectly. But the mental work, the struggle, the false starts and that moment when something finally clicks is exactly what your brain needs. "It's like you're at the gym and a robot lifts the barbell for you," he says. "You get nothing."

So how can you use AI and still give your brain a work out?

Don't take AI's word for it

One recent study found heavier users of AI scored significantly worse on a standard critical thinking test, apparently because they're used to offloading their thought processes to robots. People even trust AI over their own thinking and intuition – even when the AI is wrong – something researchers at the University of Pennsylvania in the US call "cognitive surrender". The problem gets worse the less you know. A study by Microsoft Research found you're most at risk when you're less familiar with a subject. "If the user doesn't have the expertise to judge whether the output is great or not," says Hank Lee, a PhD candidate at Carnegie Mellon University who co-authored the study. "That's the danger."

The fix starts before you open the app. If you wouldn't trust a random stranger's answer to a question, you shouldn't trust AI either, says Lee. Those are exactly the topics where you need to bring your own judgment first. Try forming a rough view on the subject and using AI to challenge your perspective before you get the robot's opinion. That way AI is pressure-testing your thinking, rather than replacing it.

Add friction to your research

"If you look at something, it is in front of you and your vision sees it, you often think it's in long-term memory when it is not," says Barbara Oakley, an emeritus professor of engineering at the University of Oakland in the US who studies how the brain learns.



There is some early research to suggest that AI can mess with your ability to retain information. A survey of 494 students also found who used ChatGPT more often were more likely to report memory loss. Self-reported assessments aren't hard science, but other research, such as an unpublished 2024 study, reveals that priming your brain with some light problem solving before using an AI chatbot can improve what you learn from the AI.

When you're asking AI for your information you need to remember, it's also worth slowing down to engage with it. Take notes – ideally by hand, but typing them out works too. You can even ask the AI to quiz you, or to come up with flashcards. The work makes it stick. It sounds fussy, but friction is the point.

Leave the blank page blank a little longer

AI is remarkably good at coming up with ideas. That's the problem. Research suggests that people who use AI for creative tasks produce ideas that are more predictable and less original than people who don't. This could be weakening your ability to be creative.

Your brain builds creative capacity by making unexpected connections, Green says. Hand that job to AI, and you skip the workout. "We're worried about losing your creative muscle," says Green. "AI is tricking us in a number of ways to make us think that it is actually making us more creative."

One approach to overcome this is to put your own ideas down on paper first, even if they're rough. Spend more time with a blank page and write whatever comes. The quality doesn't matter. What matters is that your brain is making the connections, and reaching across your own experiences, memories and knowledge to produce something only you could have come up with. That's the workout. Then use AI to develop, poke holes in or refine what you've got.

Pay attention

You've made it this far into the article. Well done. But if your attention is starting to wander, you're not alone. It could be that my writing is boring you. Some research, however, also suggests the onslaught of technology is making it harder for us to focus. AI could compound the problem: answers are at your fingertips and with plenty of opportunities to skip difficulty and discomfort.

But you can apply a similar logic to the other tips here: do things the slow way on purpose. Don't make ChatGPT summarise that long article. Sit with a hard problem before you ask a robot. Let yourself get bored. Unpleasant is the goal. That's your brain learning to tolerate, and eventually enjoy, the friction that deeper thinking requires.

Human brains matter

I'm not here to tell you to stop using AI chatbots like ChatGPT, Claude or Gemini. But I'm forcing myself to be more thoughtful when I reach for them to try and keep my brain in the driver's seat.

More like this:

- Why AI companies want you to be afraid of them
- Can we predict when the next global crisis will hit?
- This monkey selfie will protect you from AI slop

And that could leave me – and you – in a better position in the future. Green says human brains are structurally different from AI in ways that really matter: we make connections that are personal, unexpected and genuinely novel in ways that digital probability machines simply can't replicate.



"The distinctness and diversity of human ideas is going to be the great value add in the coming years," he says. Green predicts that forcing ourselves to "think outside the bots" will become a natural survival impulse to make it in society.

And, as Benge points out, we've been down this road before. "Our brains have always adapted to technology. We adapt all the time. It is our strength as a species," he says. "Have we lost the ability to run marathons because we have cars? No. It becomes something that humans do because we want to do it."

The tools change. But apparently, the desire to think, create and figure things out for ourselves is harder to automate.