

## How to describe trends?



**Dr. Mable Chan** is a lecturer at the Department of English, The Hong Kong Polytechnic University. She was awarded the Faculty Award for Outstanding Teaching in the 2005/06 academic year and has vast experience teaching academic and business English to both undergraduate and postgraduate students. Her book 「職時上位：名人英語全面睇」, which is about business English, is now available. In this column she advocates using simple and concise English for business writing.

**How to describe trends is an important skill which can facilitate business report / proposal writing, presentations, negotiations and many other communicative purposes in the workplace. This issue is about language used in describing different kinds of trends.**

### **(I) Describing Trends**

Trend graphs describe changes over time (e.g. a year, a decade). When describing trends in a report you need to pay careful attention to the use of prepositions:

Sales in the UK increased rapidly **between** 2007 **and** 2010.

There was a sharp decline in sales in Japan **from** 2007 **to** 2010.

As the above examples indicate, we use the **simple past tense** when describing trends in the past:

Sales in the UK **increased** rapidly between 2007 and 2010.

Sales **remained** stable in China between 2007 and 2010.

Please note that the **active voice** is normally used:

Sales in the UK **increased** [not **were increased**] rapidly between 2007 and 2010.

You can use the **present perfect tense** if the trend continues up to the present:

Sales in China **have** steadily **increased** in the past four years.

You will find the following expressions (adjectives / nouns) useful when you have to describe data in trend graphs:

There was a	slight	rise	(in ...)
	small	increase	
	gradual	decrease	
	steady	decline	
	significant	fall	
	dramatic	drop	
	sharp		
	rapid		
	steep		
	sudden		

These verbs and adverbs can be used to describe upward and downward movement:

(Sales)	rose	slightly	(in ...)
	increased	gradually	
	decreased	steadily	
	declined	significantly	
	fell	dramatically	
	dropped	sharply	
		rapidly	

Most verbs also have **noun** forms. They are generally the same, for example:  
*to climb* → *a climb*; *to fall* → *a fall*

However, there are some exceptions:

To flatten out	→ a flattening out;	to stabilize	→ a stabilization
To level off	→ a levelling off;	to fluctuate	→ a fluctuation
To recover	→ a recovery;	to hold steady	→ a steady hold

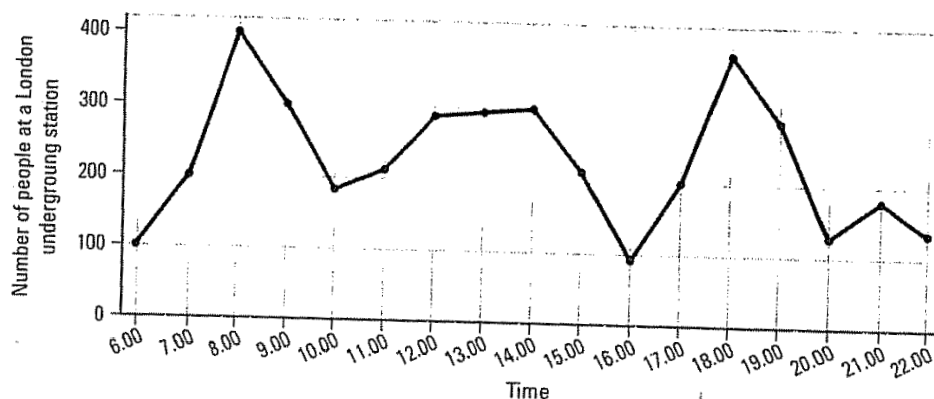
**NOTE: The verb form is more frequently used.**

Sometimes, we need to give more information about a trend, usually about the degree or speed of change.

e.g. The year started with a **steady** decline in sales, which stabilized in September.  
e.g. Sales increased **slowly** during January and then declined **steadily** until the end of the financial year.

**Adverbs** and **adjectives** can be used to modify verbs and nouns describing change.

Adverbs can modify the verbs describing change and usually end in 'ly' (e.g. to a substantial increase).



- Read the following description of the graph above.

At 6 a.m. the station had 100 people. At 8 a.m. it had a big increase to 400 people. Not many people were there at 10 a.m. The same thing happened after 8 p.m. It declined a lot to 120 and 180 people at 9 p.m. and 10 p.m. respectively. Between 12 noon and 2 p.m. the number of people was stabilised at 300.

**The hand-written description given below the graph is not effective for several reasons:**

- (a) Unclear / general information given (e.g. the same thing; not many people, etc).
- (b) Lack of description for some periods of time in the course of the day (e.g. 3:00pm-6:00pm)
- (c) Information not presented in order (e.g. 8am, 10am, 8pm, 9pm and then 12:00pm-2:00pm)
- (d) Lack of a clear topic sentence telling what the graph is about

From: Jakeman, V. & Mcdowell, C. (2001). *Insight into IELTS student's book: The Cambridge IELTS course* (Updated ed.). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

### Read the following revised version of the text:

The graph shows the fluctuation in the number of people at a London underground station over the course of a day. According to the graph there is a sharp increase between 6:00am and 8:00am in the morning, with 400 people using the station at 8am. After this, the numbers fall dramatically to fewer than 200 at 10am. Between 11:00am and 3:00pm the number of people rises and falls within a plateau around lunchtime of just under 300 people using the station. Numbers then decline with the lowest number being recorded at 4:00pm in the afternoon. There is then a rapid rise between 4:00pm and 6:00pm in the evening rush hour with a peak of 380 people at 6:00pm. After 7pm numbers fall significantly, with only a slight increase again just after 8pm, tailing off after 9pm. The graph shows that the station is most crowded in the early morning and early evening rush-hour periods.

### Why is the revised version effective?

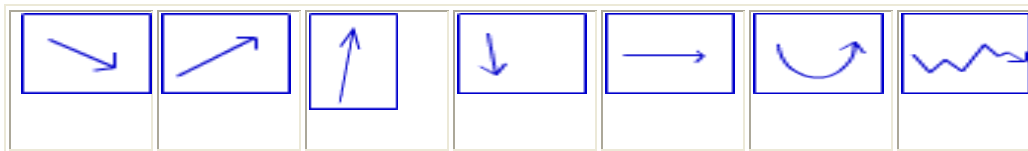
- (a) Specific and clear information provided (e.g. the specific number of people using the station) for different time periods over the course of the day
- (b) Clear description of the trend over the course of the day (e.g. sharp increase, fall dramatically, rises and falls within a plateau, tailing off).
- (c) Clear introductory sentence (i.e. The graph shows the fluctuation in the number of people at a London underground station over the course of a day) and concluding remark (i.e. The graph shows that the station is most crowded in the early morning and early evening rush-hour periods).

### Quiz:

Do you know other expressions describing a trend? Fill in the blanks with a suitable word.

When describing movements on a graph, we can use **verbs** to talk about upward, downward or horizontal movements.

d_____	c_____	s_____	cr_____	f_____	b_____	fluctuate
decrease	rise	r_____	co_____	out	back	s_____
d_____	increase	climb	pl_____	hold steady	ra____	
f_____		rise	p_____ e	l_____ off	recover	
s_____		increase		stabilize		



**Key:**

decline	climb	soar	crash	flatten out	bounce back	fluctuate
decrease	rise	rocket	collapse	hold steady	rally	seesaw
drop	increase	climb	plummet	level off	recover	
fall		rise	plunge	stabilize		
slide		increase				

**References:**

Hughes, J. (2008). *Success with BEC: The new business English certificates course. Vantage: Student's book*. Oxford: Summertown Pub.

Jakeman, V. & Mcdowell, C. (2001). *Insight into IELTS student's book: The Cambridge IELTS course* (Updated ed.). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.