Signposting, synonymous with metatext (Dahl 2004), textual metadiscourse (Hempel and Degand 2008) and interactive metadiscourse (Hyland 2005), refers to the linguistic devices that authors use in guiding readers through the content of their texts. Studies have shown signposting to be a central feature of academic genres (Cao and Hu 2014), professional genres (Dafouz-Milne 2008), and tertiary-level writing (Ädel 2006). Furthermore, studies have highlighted how marking textual links contributes to building writer-reader relations (Hyland 2005). However, although calls have been made for signposting to be taught prior to tertiary-level education, little research has investigated school-based writing (e.g. Ucceli, Dobbs and Scott 2013). This study aims to address this gap by quantifying signposts in texts written by upper-secondary pupils attending Norwegian, Swedish and British upper-secondary schools. In total, 135 English essays from six Norwegian schools (40 essays), four British schools (55 essays) and three Swedish schools (40 essays) were collected. A taxonomy of signposting has been specifically adapted for analysing the material in question by combining elements from numerous previous studies (e.g. Hyland 2005; Ädel 2010). In total, the taxonomy is comprised of 11 linguistic categories, which were compiled based on a close reading of a sample of roughly 50 essays. The 160,000-word corpus was scanned electronically using 288 search terms. These results were then manually analysed to ensure that each instance functioned as a signpost (and not as part of a quote, for example) before appropriate statistical tests were carried out. Geographical location and genre were treated as independent variables to gain insight into how these factors affected the pupils’ signposting choices. Additionally, data from interviews with 19 teachers were used to aid the interpretation of the results. Preliminary findings indicate that the geographical location of a school had little effect on the pupils’ signposting choices. Instead, the results imply that signposting in the corpus varied according to the genres in which pupils were asked to write and according to the individual views of their English teachers. The tentative pedagogical implications of the study are that pupils may benefit from being exposed to writing in a broad range of genres and that teachers should strive to base their compositional advice on research findings rather than on personal experience.

References