

Thinking Well and Writing Well:

How Smart Academics Write for Publication

Rachel Toor

Text and Academic Authors Association

Inland Northwest Center for Writers

Eastern Washington University

Spokane, Washington

racheltoor@gmail.com

The problem with this talk



What you want to hear

What I want to tell you



Question:



- ✦ Who are the excellent stylists in your field?
- ✦ What makes them good?

What it's like to read as an editor



I must need glasses.

I stayed out too late last night.

My head hurts.

I think I'll get another cup of coffee.

Why do I keep reading the same page 13 times?

Maybe I'm just getting stupider.

What it's like to read as a friend



I don't understand the meaning of this sentence.

This word doesn't exist in English.

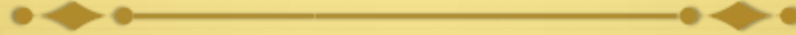
This is a bunch of random information with no organizational structure.

Why is this whole article one paragraph?

Commas are your friends.

Were you raised by wolves?

Why is academic prose so bad?



Lack of attention to fundamentals

The specialization of academe

Elegance seems facile

The academic pose

Know the basics



“If you have any young friends who aspire to become writers, the second greatest favor you can do them is to present them with copies of *The Elements of Style*. The first greatest, of course, is to shoot them now, while they're happy.”

Dorothy Parker

Specialization



“When the individual scientist can take a paradigm for granted, he need no longer, in his major works, attempt to build his field anew, starting from first principles and justifying the use of each concept introduced....And as he does this, his research communiqúés will begin to change in ways whose evolution has been too little studied but whose modern end products are obvious to all and oppressive to many.”

Thomas Kuhn

“You write too well”



“The idea that histories which are delightful to read must be the work of superficial temperaments, and that a crabbed style betokens a deep thinker or conscientious worker, is the reverse of the truth. What is easy to read has been difficult to write. The labor of writing and rewriting, correcting and recorrecting, is the due exacted by every good **book from its author.**”

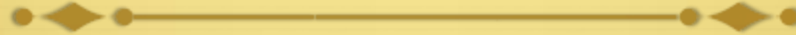
George M. Trevelyan

The academic pose



“Such a ready lack of intelligibility, I believe, usually has little to do with the complexity of the subject matter, and nothing at all to do with profundity of thought. It has almost entirely to do with certain confusions of the academic writer about his own status....Desire for status is one reason why academic men slip so readily into unintelligibility....To overcome the academic prose, you have first to overcome the academic pose.” C. Wright Mills

Professors are the people no one wanted to dance with in high school



“In ordinary life, when a listener cannot understand what someone has said, this is the usual exchange:

Listener: I cannot understand what you are saying.

Speaker: Let me try to say it more clearly.

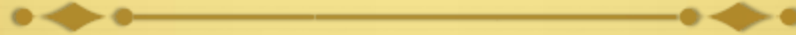
But in scholarly writing in the late 20th century, other rules apply. This is the implicit exchange:

Reader: I cannot understand what you are saying.

Academic Writer: Too bad. The problem is that you are an unsophisticated and untrained reader. If you were smarter, you would **understand me.**”

Patricia Nelson Limerick, “Dancing with Professors,” *NY Times*, 1993

What is to be done?



Read like a writer

Care about your sentences

Read like a writer



Who are the excellent writers in your field?

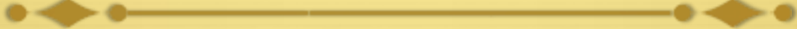
What makes their writing good?

Study form as well as content

Steal, steal, steal

Know your own bad habits

Care about your sentences



Don't be afraid

Am I smart enough?

Do I have anything to say?

Can I be a member of your club?

Pretension by Latin



✦ Demonstrate→

✦ Endeavor→

✦ Utilization→

✦ Apprise→

✦ Initiate→

✦ Cognizant of→

✦ Facilitate→

✦ Deem→

“Omit needless words”



Junk phrases (on the grounds that; in the event that; under circumstances which; there is a need for)

Redundancies (completely finish; final outcome; consensus of opinion; first and foremost)

Defaulting to the negative (not many; did not allow; not certain)

Word packages (to all intents and purposes; tried and true)

Nominalization



“The committee has no expectation that it will meet the deadline.”

“Our discussion concerned a tax cut.”

“The police conducted an investigation.”

Words that end in –tion, -ism, -ty, -ment, -ness, -ance, -ence

This, That, There



- ✦ An easy trick to energize your prose
- ✦ These words are not your friends

To Be or Not To Be (Not)



- ✦ Historian John Morton Blum made students write essays with no adverbs, no adjectives, no form of the verb “**to be.**” **He** taught them to loathe the passive voice, to understand the difference between “compose” and “comprise,” and never to forget that “data” is a plural noun and “privilege” not a verb.”

What's wrong with this?



“In the last sentence of the Gettysburg Address there is a rallying cry for the continuation of the struggle.”

Agency



Sentences need characters and actions

- ✦ X DOES Y TO Z
- ✦ **“In the last sentence of the Gettysburg Address, Lincoln rallies his audience to continue the struggle against the South.”**

Commonly misused words



- ✦ Accommodate (spelling)
- ✦ Precede (spelling)
- ✦ All right (not alright)
- ✦ Already
- ✦ A lot (not alot)
- ✦ Between/among
- ✦ Famous/notorious
- ✦ Farther/further
- ✦ Imply/infer
- ✦ Lay/lie
- ✦ **Whether (doesn't need "or not")**

Rachel, edit thyself



- ✦ A graceful explanation is something that even the most astute readers can appreciate.
- ✦ Even the most astute reader will appreciate a graceful explanation.

Rules to ignore



- ✦ Never begin a sentence with However, But, or And
- ✦ Never use contractions
- ✦ Never refer to the reader as you
- ✦ Never use the first-**person pronoun “I”**
- ✦ Never end a sentence with a preposition
- ✦ Never split an infinitive
- ✦ Never write a paragraph consisting of a single sentence

Stylish Academic Writing

Helen Sword



- ✦ Catchy openings
- ✦ First person anecdotes
- ✦ Concrete nouns
- ✦ Active verbs
- ✦ Good illustrations
- ✦ Broad references
- ✦ Sense of humor

General tips and tricks



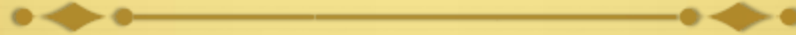
- ✦ What does the appearance of your manuscript tell the reader before she starts reading?
- ✦ Write in a way that comes naturally, even if it means unlearning what you learned in grad school
- ✦ Write with strong nouns and verbs (watch out for *is, are, was, were, be, been and it, this, that, there*)
- ✦ Beware of adverbs (ly words)
- ✦ Read every sentence out loud
- ✦ Re-read manuscript in a different format or font
- ✦ Cut your first draft by at least 25%

Resources



- ✦ Strunk and White, *The Elements of Style*
- ✦ Joseph Williams, *Style: Toward Clarity and Grace*
- ✦ Stanley Fish, *How To Read A Sentence*
- ✦ Deirdre McClosky, *Economical Writing*
- ✦ Helen Sword, *Stylish Academic Writing*
- ✦ Susan Rabiner, *Thinking Like Your Editor*
- ✦ William Zinsser, *On Writing Well*
- ✦ William Germano, *Getting it Published*
- ✦ William Germano, *Dissertation into Book*

More...



- ✦ Gerald Graff and Cathy Birkenstein, *They Say/I Say*
- ✦ Anne Lamott, *Bird by Bird*
- ✦ Stephen King, *On Writing*
- ✦ Betsy Lerner, *The Forest for the Trees*
- ✦ Patricia T. O'Connor, *Woe Is I*
- ✦ George Orwell, "Politics and the English Language"
- ✦ Lewis Thomas, "Notes on Punctuation"
- ✦ Patricia Limerick, "Dancing with Professors"
- ✦ Michael Munger, "Ten Tips on How to Write Less Badly"

Write like a
person

Your readers will
thank you

Email me if you want a photo of Helen
(or a copy of this presentation)

racheltoor@gmail.com

