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Stylish Academic Writing

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Helen Sword

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PREFACE

For many academics, "stylish academic writing" is at best an oxymoron and at worst a risky business. Why, they ask, should we accessorize our research with gratuitous stylistic flourishes? Doesn't overt attention to style signal intellectual shallowness, a privileging of form over content? And won't colleagues reject as unserious any academic writing that deliberately seeks to engage and entertain, rather than merely to inform, its readers?

In this book, I argue that elegant ideas deserve elegant expression; that intellectual creativity thrives best in an atmosphere of experimentation rather than conformity; and that, even within the constraints of disciplinary norms, most academics enjoy a far wider range of stylistic choices than they realize. My agenda is, frankly, a transformative one: I aim to start a stylistic revolution that will end in improved reading conditions for all. In particular, I hope to empower colleagues who have come to believe—I have heard this mantra again and again—that they are "not allowed" to write a certain way. This book showcases the work of academic writers from across the disciplines who stretch and break disciplinary molds—and get away with it. Not only do they publish in respected peer-reviewed journals and place their books with prestigious presses, but they are lauded by their colleagues for their intellectual rigor and flair.

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Far from peddling generic, one-size-fits-all advice, this book encourages readers to adopt whatever stylistic strategies best suit their own skin. Stylish academic writing can be serious, entertaining, straightforward, poetic, unpretentious, ornate, intimate, impersonal, and much in between. What the diverse authors profiled here have in common is a commitment to the ideals of *communication, craft,* and *creativity.* They take care to remain intelligible to educated readers both within and beyond their own discipline, they think hard about both *how* and *what* they write, and they resist intellectual conformity. Above all, they never get dressed in the dark.

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I

STYLE AND SUBSTANCE

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CHAPTER 1

RULES OF ENGAGEMENT

Pick up any guide to effective writing and what will you find? Probably some version of the advice that Strunk and White offered more than half a century ago in their classic book *The Elements of Style:* always use clear, precise language, even when expressing complex ideas; engage your reader's attention through examples, illustrations, and anecdotes; avoid opaque jargon; vary your vocabulary, sentence length, and frames of reference; favor active verbs and concrete nouns; write with conviction, passion, and verve.[1]

Pick up a peer-reviewed journal in just about any academic discipline and what will you find? Impersonal, stodgy, jargon-laden, abstract prose that ignores or defies most of the stylistic principles outlined above. There is a massive gap between what most readers consider to be good writing and what academics typically produce and publish. I'm not talking about the kinds of formal strictures necessarily imposed by journal editors—article length, citation style, and the like—but about a deeper, duller kind of disciplinary monotony, a compulsive proclivity for discursive obscurantism and circumambulatory diction (translation: an addiction to big words and soggy syntax). E. B. White, that great master of literary style, lets his character Charlotte the spider explain the fine art of sucking the lifeblood from a fly:

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> "First," said Charlotte, "I dive at him." She plunged headfirst toward the fly. . . . "Next, I wrap him up." She grabbed the fly, threw a few jets of silk around it, and rolled it over and over, wrapping it so that it couldn't move. . . . "Now I knock him out, so he'll be more comfortable." She bit the fly. "He can't feel a thing now."[2]

Substitute "reader" for the fly and "academic prose" for the spider's silk, and you get a fairly accurate picture of how academic writers immobilize their victims.

The seeds for this book were sown when, several years ago, I was invited to teach a course on higher education pedagogy to a group of faculty from across the disciplines. Trawling for relevant reading materials, I soon discovered that higher education research journals were filled with articles written in a style that I, trained as a literary scholar, found almost unreadable. At first I blamed my own ignorance and lack of background in the field. However, the colleagues enrolled in my course—academics from disciplines as varied as computer science, engineering, fine arts, history, law, medicine, music, and population health—were quick to confirm my niggling feeling that most of the available articles on higher education teaching were, to put it bluntly, very badly written. Instead of gleaning new insights, we found ourselves trying to make sense of sentences such as this:

> In this study, I seek to identify and analyze stakeholders' basic beliefs on the topic of membership that can be considered in normative arguments on whether to allocate in-state tuition benefits to undocumented immigrants.

Or this:

> Via a symbolic interactionist lens, the article analyses the "identity work" undertaken in order to assert distinctive identities as specialist academic administrators.

Or this (ironically, from an article on improving academic writing):

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> Rarely is there an effective conceptual link between the current understandings of the centrality of text to knowledge production and student learning and the pragmatic problems of policy imperatives in the name of efficiency and capacity-building.[3]

At every turn, we found our desire to learn thwarted by gratuitous educational jargon and serpentine syntax.

Do higher education journals hold a monopoly on dismal writing, I began to wonder, or are these articles just the tip of a huge pan-disciplinary iceberg? It didn't take me long to confirm that similarly turgid sentences can be found in leading peer-reviewed journals in just about any academic field—not only in the social sciences but also in humanities disciplines such as history, philosophy, and even my home discipline of literary studies, where scholars pride themselves on their facility with words. I asked myself: What exactly is going on here? Are academics being explicitly trained to write abstract, convoluted sentences? Is there a guidebook for graduate students learning the trade that says, "Thou must not write clearly or concisely" or "Thou must project neither personality nor pleasure in thy writing" or "Thou must display no originality of thought or expression"? Do my colleagues actually enjoy reading this stuff?

Much has already been written—mostly *by* academics—about academic discourse in all its disciplinary variety.[4] Notably, however, most of these studies replicate rather than challenge the status quo. For example, in his groundbreaking book *Disciplinary Discourses: Social Interactions in Academic Writing,* Ken Hyland examines 1,400 texts from five genres in eight disciplines, providing fascinating insights into how various academic genres (the footnote, the research letter, the book review, the abstract, and so forth) construct and communicate disciplinary knowledge. Hyland's own prose style reflects his training as a social scientist, and specifically as a linguist:

> Such practices cannot, of course, be seen as entirely determined; as language users are not simply passive recipients of textual effects,

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> but the impact of citation choices clearly lies in their cognitive and cultural value to a community, and each repetition helps to instantiate and reproduce these conventions.[5]

Note the passive verb construction *(be seen),* the disciplinary jargon *(instantiate),* the preposition-laden phrases (*of* textual effects, *of* citation, *in* their value, *to* a community), the multiple abstract nouns *(practices, recipients, effects, impact, value, community, repetition, convention),* and the near erasure of human agency. Hyland's discourse *about* disciplinary discourse has itself been shaped by disciplinary conventions that insist academic prose must be bland, impersonal, and laden with abstract language.

Yet common sense tells us otherwise. So, indeed, do the authors of the many excellent academic writing guides already on the market, some of which have been in print for decades. William Zinsser, for instance, identifies "humanity and warmth" as the two most important qualities of effective nonfiction; Joseph M. Williams argues that "we owe readers an ethical duty to write precise and nuanced prose"; Peter Elbow urges academic writers to construct persuasive arguments by weaving together the creative and critical strands of their thinking; Richard A. Lanham offers strategies for trimming lard-laden sentences; Howard S. Becker advises apprentice academics to avoid the temptations of so-called classy (that is, intellectually pretentious) writing; and Strunk and White remind us to think of our reader as "a man floundering in a swamp" who will thank us for hoisting him onto solid ground as quickly as possible.[6] Many academics routinely assign these books to students but ignore their advice themselves, perhaps because such commonsense principles strike them as too generic or journalistic to apply to their own work.

So why do universities—institutions dedicated to creativity, research innovation, collegial interchange, high standards of excellence, and the education of a diverse and ever-changing population of students—churn out so much uninspiring, cookie-cutter prose? In a now classic 1993 *New York Times Book Review* article

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titled "Dancing with Professors," Patricia Nelson Limerick compares academics to buzzards that have been wired to a branch and conditioned to believe they cannot fly freely even when the wire is finally pulled (an extended metaphor that has to be read in its original context to be fully appreciated). She concludes:

> I do not believe that professors enforce a standard of dull writing on graduate students in order to be cruel. They demand dreariness because they think that dreariness is in the students' best interests. Professors believe that a dull writing style is an academic survival skill because they think that is what editors want, both editors of academic journals and editors of university presses. What we have here is a chain of misinformation and misunderstanding, where everyone thinks that the other guy is the one who demands dull, impersonal prose.[7]

Other explanations range from the sympathetic (stylistic conformity offers a measure of comfort and security in an otherwise cutthroat academic universe) to the sociopolitical (the social organization we work in demands high productivity, which in turn encourages sloppy writing) to the practical (we have to learn appropriate disciplinary discourses somehow, and imitation is the easiest way) to the conspiratory (jargon functions like a secret handshake, a signal to our peers that we belong to the same elite insiders' club) to the flat-out uncharitable (Limerick reminds us that today's professors are the people "nobody wanted to dance with in high school").[8]

The question I want to address here, however, is not so much *why* academics write the way they do but *how* the situation might be improved. Four strands of research inform this book. As a starting point, I asked more than seventy academics from across the disciplines to describe the characteristics of "stylish academic writing" in their respective fields. Their responses were detailed, opinionated, and surprisingly consistent. Stylish scholars, my colleagues told me, express complex ideas clearly and precisely; produce elegant, carefully crafted sentences; convey a sense of energy, intellectual commitment, and even passion;

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engage and hold their readers' attention; tell a compelling story; avoid jargon, except where specialized terminology is essential to the argument; provide their readers with aesthetic and intellectual pleasure; and write with originality, imagination, and creative flair.

Next, I analyzed books and articles by more than one hundred exemplary authors recommended to me by their discipline–based peers. Most of these stylish academic writers indeed exemplify the criteria described above. However, I found that they achieve abstract ends such as *engagement, pleasure,* and *elegance* not through mystical displays of brilliance and eloquence (although they are undeniably brilliant and eloquent scholars) but by deploying some very concrete, specific, and transferable techniques. For example, I noted their frequent use of the following:

- interesting, eye-catching titles and subtitles;
- first-person anecdotes or asides that humanize the author and give the text an individual flavor;
- catchy opening paragraphs that recount an interesting story, ask a challenging question, dissect a problem, or otherwise hook and hold the reader;
- concrete nouns (as opposed to nominalized abstractions such as "nominalization" or "abstraction") and active, energetic verbs (as opposed to forms of *be* and bland standbys such as *make, find,* or *show*);
- numerous examples, especially when explaining abstract concepts;
- visual illustrations beyond the usual Excel-generated pie charts and bar graphs (for example, photographs, manuscript facsimiles, drawings, diagrams, and reproductions);
- references to a broad range of academic, literary, and historical sources indicative of wide reading and collegial conversations both within and outside their own fields;
- humor, whether explicit or understated.

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Significantly, I confirmed that stylish academic writers employ these techniques not only in their books, which are often targeted at nonspecialist audiences, but also in peer-reviewed articles aimed at disciplinary colleagues.

For the third stage of my research, I assembled a data set of one thousand academic articles from across the sciences, social sciences, and humanities: one hundred articles each from international journals in the fields of medicine, evolutionary biology, computer science, higher education, psychology, anthropology, law, philosophy, history, and literary studies. (For a full account of my sources and research methodology, see the appendix.) This corpus barely scratches the surface of academic discourse in all its rich disciplinary variety. Nevertheless, the articles in my data set provide a compelling snapshot of contemporary scholarship at work. I used them not only to locate real-life examples of both engaging and appalling academic prose but also to drill down into specific questions about style and the status quo. For example, how many articles in each discipline contain personal pronouns (*I* or *we*)? How many open with a story, anecdote, question, quotation, or other narrative hook? How many include unusually high or low percentages of abstract nouns? The answers to these and other questions are summarized in Chapter 2 and elsewhere throughout this book.

Finally, to determine whether the realities of scholarly writing match the advice being given to early career academics, I analyzed one hundred recently published writing guides, most of which address PhD-level researchers or above. The results of that study are described in detail in Chapter 3. In a nutshell, I found that the writing guides offer virtually unanimous advice on some points of style (such as the need for clarity and concision) but conflicting recommendations on others (such as pronoun usage and structure). Academics who aspire to write more engagingly and adventurously will find in these guides no shortage of useful advice and moral support. They will also discover, however, that stylish academic writing is a complex and often

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contradictory business. As Strunk and White remind us in a passage that is dated in its gendered pronoun usage but timeless in its sentiment:

> There is no satisfactory explanation of style, no infallible guide to good writing, no assurance that a person who thinks clearly will be able to write clearly, no key that unlocks the door, no inflexible rule by which the young writer may shape his course. He will often find himself steering by stars that are disturbingly in motion.[9]

Only by becoming aware of these shifting constellations can academics begin to make informed, independent decisions about their own writing.

Overall, my research maps a scholarly universe in which wordy, wooden, weak-verbed academic prose finds few if any explicit advocates but vast armies of practitioners. The good news is that we all have the power to change the contours of that map, one publication at a time—*if we choose to*. The chapters that follow serve two types of scholarly writers: those who want to produce engaging, accessible prose all the time and those who opt to cross that bridge only occasionally. There will always be a place in the world for the technical reports of the research scientist, the esoteric debates of the analytical philosopher, and the labyrinthine musings of the poststructuralist theorist; each of these genres serves a valuable intellectual purpose and reaches appreciative, albeit restricted, audiences. All academics, however, do need to interact with wider audiences at least occasionally: for example, when describing their work to grant-making bodies, university promotion committees, departmental colleagues, undergraduate students, or members of the nonacademic public. In Part 2, "The Elements of Stylishness," I outline strategies and techniques that can help even the most highly specialized researchers communicate with readers who do not understand their peculiar disciplinary dialect. Although the focus of this book is on stylish academic *writing*, these techniques can be applied with equally good effect to the realm of public speaking.

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Of course, no one can ever fully quantify style. Like stylish dressing, stylish writing will always remain a matter of individual talent and taste. Moreover, writing styles vary considerably according to content, purpose, and intended audience; you would not expect to wear the same outfit to Alaska in winter and to Spain in summer, or to a black-tie ball and to a sporting competition. All the same, this book reflects my belief—one based on a substantial body of research evidence—that the fundamental principles of stylish academic writing can indeed be described, emulated, and taught. Perhaps the most important of those principles is self-determination: the stylish writer's deeply held belief that academic writing, like academic thought, should not be constrained by the boundaries of convention. Like Limerick's buzzards, afraid to fly free even though the wires that once held them back had long since been severed, many writers lack the confidence to break away from what they perceive—often mistakenly—as the ironclad rules of their disciplinary discourses. This book empowers academics to write as the most effective teachers teach: with passion, with courage, with craft, and with style.

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CHAPTER 2

ON BEING DISCIPLINED

discipline *(n.)*

- A branch of instruction or education; a department of learning or knowledge; a science or art in its educational aspect.
- The order maintained and observed among pupils, or other persons under control or command, such as soldiers, sailors, the inmates of a religious house, a prison, etc.
- Correction; chastisement; punishment inflicted by way of correction and training; in religious use, the mortification of the flesh by penance; also, in a more general sense, a beating or other infliction (humorously) assumed to be salutary to the recipient.[1]

To enter an academic discipline is to *become* disciplined: trained to habits of order through corrections and chastisements that are "assumed to be salutary" by one's teachers. Scholarly commentators have variously alluded to the academic disciplines as "silos," "barricades," "ghettos," and "black boxes," using metaphors of containment that implicitly critique the intellectual constraints imposed by disciplinary structures.[2] Yet disciplinarity remains a robust and even sacred concept. University of California chancellor Clark Kerr is said to have described the mid-twentieth-century research university as "a series of individual faculty entrepreneurs held together by a common grievance over parking," and his censure still rings true six decades later: academics often seem more intent on fencing off and tending their own patches of disciplinary turf than on seeking common ground.[3] Even within disciplines that appear relatively homogeneous to an outsider, scholars may belong to warring subdisciplinary clans that have

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established and entrenched separate identities marked by distinctive ideologies and idiolects. Sociologist Andrew Abbott compares the "fractal distinctions" between subdisciplines to segmental kinship systems: "A lineage starts, then splits, then splits again. Such systems have a number of important characteristics. For one thing, people know only their near kin well."[4]

Recently, a colleague from my own university's medical school told me that she had decided not to enroll in an interdisciplinary faculty development course because it would be "a waste of time" for her to learn about academic writing from anyone outside the medical profession. Her comment reminded me of a news story that I came across a few years ago involving an unlikely but productive collaboration between medical and nonmedical experts. In 2006, surgeons from the Great Ormond Street Children's Hospital invited a team of Ferrari Formula One pit stop mechanics to observe them at work. The mechanics noted a number of inefficiencies in the surgeons' procedures and recommended some key changes, particularly in the areas of synchronization, communication, and patient relocation. The doctors consequently developed new surgical protocols, forged new lines of communication with nurses and technicians, and even designed a new operating gurney to smooth their young patients' transition between the operating room and intensive care. According to one of the participating surgeons, the surgical unit has been transformed into "a centre of silent precision" where "the complications of operations have been substantially reduced."[5] Academic writing is not brain surgery, of course. However, like surgeons and Formula One mechanics, academics do engage daily in a number of complex and highly specialized operations, and our ability to write effectively about our work requires not only training, commitment, and skill but also a willingness to change, grow, and learn from others.

In an article on "signature pedagogies," education researcher Lee Shulman urges university faculty to look beyond the conventional teaching styles of their own disciplines—the demonstration

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lab (science), the discussion seminar (humanities), the Socratic dialogue (law), the studio session (fine arts), the clinical round (medicine)—and to borrow ideas from elsewhere: for example, an English professor might encourage students to undertake a "live critique" of each other's work (the fine arts studio model) or a mathematics professor might engage students in a structured discussion of key conceptual issues (the humanities seminar model).[6] Similarly, academic writers can make a conscious effort to question, vary, and augment the signature research styles of their own disciplines—which often embody deeply entrenched but unexamined ways of thinking—by appropriating ideas and techniques from elsewhere. Looking around my university, I can't help noting how many of my most eminent colleagues have earned their academic reputations through interdisciplinary endeavors of one kind or another: the evolutionary psychologist who imports into the domain of comparative linguistics classification methods that he learned from studying zoology; the professor of education whose training as a statistician underpins his meta-analysis of educational research from around the world; the anthropology professor who deliberately weaves together historiographic and anthropological methodologies; the literature professor whose groundbreaking work on the origin of stories draws on extensive readings in the fields of evolutionary biology and psychology.[7] All of these distinguished academics have been well schooled in the norms and expectations of their own disciplines, yet none of them toes a predictable party line.

When I first embarked on the research that underpins this book, I harbored a fantasy that I could map a coherent landscape of disciplinary styles, zooming in on specific regions and making informed pronouncements about their inhabitants: "Anthropologists write like this; computer scientists write like that." By the time I had assembled my initial data set, however—one thousand peer-reviewed articles from sixty-six different journals in ten disciplines across the arts, sciences, and social sciences—I realized

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that a panoptic overview of signature writing styles across the disciplines would be an impossible task. In the 2003 edition of their book *Academic Tribes and Territories,* Tony Becher and Paul Trowler note that "there are now over 1000 maths journals covering 62 major topic areas with 4500 subtopics," and a similarly daunting set of statistics could be generated for most other major academic fields.[8] Casting my porous nets into various disciplinary waters, I felt less like a mapmaker or surveyor than like a lone fisherman at the edge of a vast and seething ocean.

My choice of disciplines for the study was prompted by a mixture of curiosity, expertise, ignorance, and serendipity. In the sciences, I chose medicine because I wondered whether leading medical journals allow for any variation in writing style, evolutionary biology because the field has produced some dazzlingly engaging popular science writers, and computer science because a colleague in that discipline had pointed me to some examples of intriguingly playful peer-reviewed articles. In the social sciences, I included higher education because I was already familiar with research journals in the field, psychology because of its diversity, and anthropology because of the discipline's long tradition of self-reflective writing about writing. In the humanities, I picked philosophy for the distinctiveness of its style, history because colleagues often claim that "historians are good writers," and literary studies, my own home field. To round the number of disciplines up to ten, I tossed in law, which sits somewhere between the social sciences and humanities and has many unique stylistic features of its own.

In most of the disciplines surveyed, I selected five representative journals—another researcher might well have chosen differently—and downloaded the twenty most recent articles from each journal. After the entire data set had been cataloged by a diligent research assistant, I undertook a detailed analysis of five hundred articles (fifty from each discipline). For the most part, I posed quantitative questions designed to yield unambiguously objective

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answers, for example: How many authors does each article have? What is the average page length per discipline? How many of the articles use first-person pronouns? What percentage of certain types of words can be found in each article? At times, however, I also ventured into more subjective terrain, as when, working from a detailed rubric, my research assistant and I rated the title and opening sentence of each article as "engaging," "informative," or both. (For more details on my sources, selection criteria, and methodology, see the appendix.)

Predictably, as soon as I started presenting the results of my analysis to colleagues from the ten disciplines surveyed, they noted that if I had chosen articles from *this* anthropology journal or *that* computer science journal, my findings would look very different. I also heard grumbles from academics in fields ranging from nursing, fine arts, and engineering to management studies and tourism, whose disciplinary journals had not been part of my survey sample. Both groups of colleagues—those whose disciplines were represented and those whose disciplines were not—felt that I had somehow neglected *them*, whether by failing to grasp the nuances of their particular field or subfield or by ignoring their discipline altogether. Such responses, of course, miss the point of the exercise. The purpose of this book is not to hold a mirror up to academics and show them what they already know about themselves. Instead, I want to encourage readers to look beyond their disciplinary barricades and find out what colleagues in other fields are up to. Like surgeons who believe they have nothing to learn from pit stop mechanics, academics who think they have nothing to learn from researchers outside their own discipline risk missing out on one of the greatest pleasures of scholarly life: the opportunity to engage in stimulating conversations, forge intellectual alliances, and share ideas with people whose knowledge will nurture and stimulate our own.

My data analysis confirmed some disciplinary stereotypes and upended others (see Figure 2.1). For example, I had anticipated

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