



## Why So Many Academics are Lousy Writers

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### FIRST PERSON

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When you were in elementary school you probably scored well on standardized reading tests. In high school teachers praised your writing skills. In college you learned to churn out a five-page paper in a few hours. Sure, when you got to graduate school you had some anxious moments, especially when you sat down at a blank screen or piece of paper. Writing isn't necessarily easy, but you know how to do it. No one has ever said to you, after reading the finished product, "You are a lousy writer." If this story describes you, as it does me, then you are a typical academic. The amount you write never seems enough, but there's no "problem" with your style. You're a good writer.

At the same time, academic writing is a stereotyped joke -- a museum of passive voice, obscure jargon, and stilted phrasings. I doubt there is a single discipline, even among those associated with the arts, whose articles are read for the pleasure of the language and the clarity of the rhetoric. How can this be, if our writing styles are not a problem? Is there some mysterious gap between the individual and the collective?

I think our writing suffers precisely because no one ever says to us, this is unsatisfactory, you need to work on your writing. And so we don't. The last time most of us thought explicitly about our style was probably in a college expository-writing course, in which we did well. Since then we've stuck with pretty much whatever style we managed to craft in our first year of college.

After all, are there any incentives to write better? How often do journal editors send us "revise and resubmits" with the proviso that we improve our writing style, much less mention specifics for doing so? Have you ever seen a tenure case turn on a young scholar's ability to express herself forcefully? Have the editors at a university press ever rejected your book manuscript, explaining that they liked the ideas but couldn't accept the convoluted writing? I doubt it.

In a [recent column](#), I described some of the effects of modeling today's research university on the natural sciences, and one of them is bad writing. The point of writing up the results of a scientific experiment is to say what you did in careful detail, what results you obtained, and what they mean for existing theories. Conciseness, even to the point of symbolic notation, is a virtue. Language is an unavoidable tool, probably secondary to good tables and graphs. If you are trying to make a name for yourself in your field, writing is the last thing to worry about. In the humanities, jargon-encrusted writing -- which grad students often mistake for profundity -- may even mimic the specialized symbolic annotation of the hard sciences.

Nonetheless, to the extent that universities and colleges represent a tradition of liberal arts that are the core of human civilization, writing matters. And these values continue to matter to many of us.

But with their attention focused elsewhere, most academics do not even recognize opportunities for improving their writing when these come along. They aren't opportunities if we don't want to improve our writing. But if we do, where do we look for the grown-up equivalent of freshman comp? I want to mention several that have come my way. I hope I've taken good advantage of them. Even more, I hope such chances continue to come my way. Because even though no one tells you your writing is unacceptable, you are likely to encounter people now and then who can nonetheless show you how to improve it. They won't insist on it, so you have to be watchful for the lessons they can provide.

After 19 years of schooling -- in other words, several years into grad school -- I had received nothing but praise for my writing, and I had stopped thinking about it. Like most grad students, I had the undergraduate's approach to writing: You write a draft at one sitting, usually the day before something is due, look it over once for obvious typos, then type it up and hand it in. The approach is like that to a timed test: You give it your best shot in the time you have. But in my fourth year of grad school my attitude changed.

I began to apply for grants to work on my dissertation on the politics of nuclear energy, and my adviser started taking a careful interest in my proposals. An extremely responsible man -- Hal Wilensky, now a professor emeritus at the University of California at Berkeley -- he began editing my drafts. Sometimes he would read several successive drafts of the same proposal. This was the first time anyone had paid this much attention to my writing. Looking at his copious red scribbles, I could see how he thought about every word, eliminated unnecessary ones, asked how each sentence flowed from the one before it, challenged my connecting words. I learned the art of line editing, crucial to all good writing.

I realized it was necessary to work through draft after draft -- a process suddenly made much easier after I bought my first computer in 1983. I was amazed how many little problems I caught each time. I began to enjoy the craft of writing, the thoughtful attention to each word. I began to feel the pleasure of sitting down with a neatly printed draft and a pen. It gave me a sense of "flow." Now, I thought, I was a good writer.

After several years of research and writing, Princeton University Press agreed to publish my dissertation. I considered it well written, having done all I could by way of line editing. But the only comment on my writing from the press's outside reviewers was one brief mention: The writing was "unobtrusive." I was annoyed at such faint praise, but I soon came to realize the reviewer was right.

I next wrote a book on the animal-rights movement with Dorothy Nelkin, still a professor at New York University. She had written almost 20 books of journalism, several of them trade books known outside the academy. After one of us wrote a first draft for a chapter, the other would edit it. Then we would sit down together and discuss the other person's suggested changes. We'd go through several drafts of each chapter this way. Again, I got to see an energetic writer tearing apart my own prose to put it back together in a smoother way. She was ruthless when it came to clarity. I had to fight to present every theoretical idea -- some of which I had not thought through very well -- in straightforward words.

We apparently went too far in making our sentences direct and clear. They were all short, leading someone who commented on the manuscript to call it "breathless." Every sentence, I realized, cannot be urgent. Good writing normally requires a combination of longer and shorter sentences, carefully orchestrated in each paragraph. Although it was too late for that book, I learned how to punctuate paragraphs with a pithy opening sentence or a wry closing one. And I learned that sentence variety keeps the reader's attention.

My next lessons came from a wonderful copy editor, Nick Murray, who worked on two books I

published with the University of Chicago Press. He had the normal virtues of good copy editors, knowing where accents go in foreign names, the correct form of idiomatic expressions in other languages, and so on, without being too rigid in applying normal grammatical rules, such as not splitting infinitives (most copy editors are obsessed with applying petty rules like "between" for two and "among" for more than two -- a good general principle but with many exceptions). He had a sense of how language sounded and felt, the poetry of language; how words used in one sentence resonate across several following it; how a verb subtly conjures an underlying metaphor, which not only demands certain prepositions but requires that you not use verbs with clashing metaphors in the same paragraph; how a striking image can be amplified or undermined by what follows. He taught me to think about the hidden life of language. I began reading drafts aloud to check the sound of my prose, its rhythms and alliterations.

I'm currently struggling to learn the art of the trade book: how to flatter and captivate an audience that's intelligent but knows nothing about your subject; how to get information to them in the right order; how to put aside concern for the scholarly literature, or how to bring it in on the sly without marring the story for those who don't give a fig about footnotes. Again, I had a good teacher in Joyce Seltzer, then at the Free Press. I learned that trade editors publish around 10 books a year, compared with 50 or more for university-press editors. Trade editors really edit your work, asking for examples when needed, questioning the emotional impact of your tone, and attending to other such details. As I edit my own work now, I try to imagine what Joyce would say.

In addition to major lessons like these, I find I am continually discovering little rules and meanings for the first time. I was 35 before I learned the different spellings of waiver, 40 before I stopped saying flounder when I meant founder. Just the other day I discovered that pompom is a dubious replacement for pompon. This is simply a matter of taking note when something surprises me. It is easy, but not everyone notices. Writers pay attention to words, scholars usually do not. (I confess: I enjoy an occasional glance at a usage dictionary, even just thumbing through it.)

Perhaps I have been lucky in my relationships with such people. No, I certainly have. But I think there is also an attitude necessary to continue to learn about writing (and probably about anything else). You first have to realize that your writing is not perfect, that it can be improved. You have to care about it for its own sake. You have to want it to be more than adequate, to create something more like art than like an unobtrusive report. This is a lifetime challenge. Learning to write is not like learning to ride a bicycle. You've got to keep at it.

*James M. Jasper's most recent book is *Passionate Politics: Emotions and Social Movements* (University of Chicago Press), edited with Jeff Goodwin and Francesca Polletta.*