

## **“ASK THE PROFESSOR” about ... ACADEMIC STYLE**

**Pātai:** (Question)

***Why is so much academic writing stodgy and unreadable?  
To be taken seriously, do I have to write like that too?***

**Dr Helen Sword replies:**

Whenever I ask colleagues to describe the academic writing they most enjoy reading, they respond with surprisingly consistent answers, whatever their disciplinary backgrounds. Stylish academic writers, they typically tell me, are those who:

- express complex ideas clearly and succinctly;
- write with originality, imagination and creative flair;
- engage and hold their reader’s attention through relevant examples and anecdotes;
- convey a sense of energy, intellectual commitment and even passion;
- produce elegant, carefully crafted sentences, using language appropriate to the audience, discipline and subject matter;
- tell a story;
- provide their readers with aesthetic and/or intellectual pleasure;
- avoid jargon, except where specialised terminology is essential to the argument.

Yet all too many peer-reviewed academic journals are filled with impersonal, jargon-laden prose. Why this massive gap between what we know good writing *is* and what academics actually produce and publish?

The reasons are as wide-ranging as scholarship itself. Some academics write as they do out of pure convention or habit, imitating those who have come before. (We teach as we have been taught and write as we have been written to). Some of us have been told by editors or supervisors that ‘serious’ academic research must always be presented in an impersonal voice – despite the fact that many leading scientists today freely use first-person pronouns in their publications. Some writers genuinely believe that unwieldy, ‘difficult’ language serves their subject matter better than more transparent forms of communication. And some academics can’t afford, or simply can’t be bothered, to devote more time to writing. Every extra hour we spend editing and polishing a piece of academic prose is a bow to our readers, a blow to our own overtaxed schedule.

And yet ‘academic style’ need not be an oxymoron. Scattered amongst the stodgy sentences and lackluster paragraphs that make up so much academic discourse, we can find many inspiring examples of stylish writing: that is, language crafted to convey complex ideas across the chasm between writer and reader. If you take time to analyse the writing styles of academic authors whose work you particularly admire, you will probably find that, rather than donning standard academic uniforms – passive verb constructions, abstract nouns, convoluted syntax, undefined

terminology – they write confidently and individualistically, with their readers’ pleasure and interest in mind. They all dress differently, but none of them gets dressed in the dark.

Here are some questions to ask yourself before you send your next writing project out into the world:

**1. The Basics**

- **A strong thesis:** Do you have a compelling central argument that you can express in a sentence or two? (Often, though not always, your thesis will be the answer to your *research question*).
- **A clear structure:** Do your paragraphs and sections flow in a logical order? Does your paper have a clear beginning, middle and end?
- **A defined audience:** Who are you writing for? (Try naming 5 specific people who are likely to read your article; keep them in mind as you write).
- **‘Complex ideas clearly expressed’:** Which grid does your work fall into? (Aim for the X; avoid the O!)

	Simple Ideas	Complex Ideas
Convolutd Language	O	
Clear Language		X

**2. Voice and Identity**

Are you and/or your research team present in your writing? That is, do you use the first-person pronouns ‘I/we’ or otherwise write in a personal voice? If not, why not?

**3. Titles**

Is your title eye-catching? Informative? Memorable? Concrete? Do your subsections have titles more interesting and informative than ‘Methodology’, ‘Results’ and ‘Conclusion’?

**4. Opening Hooks**

Does your opening paragraph catch and hold the reader’s attention? (Examples of effective opening hooks include quotations, questions, anecdotes, interesting facts, real-life examples).

**5. The Story Net**

Does your article tell a story? (As a general rule, a story requires *characters* and a *plot* – i.e., a sequence of events or actions that involve the characters. For example, rather than presenting a dry list of research outcomes, you could explain the motivations behind your research project and trace the sequence whereby it unfolded).

**6. Show and Tell**

Do you use plenty of examples and illustrations? Is every *abstract* statement you make illustrated using a *concrete* example?

**7. Verbal Fitness**

Do you write active sentences filled with *strong verbs* and *concrete nouns*? Do you avoid overusing prepositions, adjectives/adverbs and ‘waste words’: *it, this, that, there*?

(To find out, try putting several 1000-word chunks of your prose through the Wasteline Test at [www.writersdiet.ac.nz](http://www.writersdiet.ac.nz). Ideally, your Verbal Fitness Ratings should consistently fall into the 'lean' or 'fit and trim' range, with no score below 'needs toning').

#### **8. Crafted Vessels**

Are your sentences carefully crafted? Have you spent time honing and polishing your prose? (If you don't know where to start, try reading your article out loud and circling any sentences that sound wordy, wobbly or unclear. Alternatively, ask a friend or colleague to go through and highlight all the sentences that need fine-tuning).

#### **9. Interdisciplinarity**

Do you read widely and refer to ideas and thinkers outside your discipline? (The most effective and engaging academic writers are often those whose reading and writing transcends disciplinary boundaries).

#### **10. Smart Referencing**

When you cite other researchers, do you always make sure the citation is relevant and useful? Do you cluster parenthetical citations at the ends of paragraphs wherever possible, so they don't disrupt the flow of your sentences? If you use long, discursive footnotes, could you possibly incorporate them into the main text and/or omit them instead?

#### **11. Jargonitis**

Do you avoid disciplinary jargon and undefined acronyms? When you do employ specialist terminology, do you make sure you explain what it means the first time you use it? Why are you using such terminology – because it helps you communicate your ideas most effectively, or because you're unconsciously trying to impress someone?

#### **12. That 'je ne sais quoi' (essential qualities that can't easily be named)**

Does your writing convey any or all of the following qualities: Creativity? Imagination? Passion? Personal engagement? A sense of humour? (These qualities are strikingly absent from many peer-reviewed journals; yet the most engaging academic writers exhibit them in spades).

Whatever you do, please don't let yourself feel pressured to write dull, impenetrable prose just because everyone around you writes that way. Stylish academic writing can range from the straight-laced to the extravagant; but it always conveys a sense of craft, confidence and care.

For more on academic style, see the video of my recent lecture to Māori staff and students at Massey University (go to the MAI Review Resources section, click on [MAI Central](#)). Also see my forthcoming article (Sword, 2009).

Good luck strutting your style!

### **References**

Sword, H. (2009). Writing higher education differently: A manifesto on style. *Studies in Higher Education*, 34 (4), in press.

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