Stylish Academic Writing

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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.

STYLE AND SUBSTANCE

I

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:

"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):

> 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,

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

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;

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.

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

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.

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.

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

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

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

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

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

	Personal pronouns	Unique or hybrid structure	Engaging title	Engaging opening	>8% common abstract nouns	>4% it, this that, there	>4% be-verbs
Medicine	92	0	1	0	18	0	16
Evolutionary Biology	100	10	11	2	54	6	14
Computer Science	82	92	4	8	36	10	26
Higher Education	54	70	19	10	78	6	2
Psychology	84	58	14	18	60	30	16
Anthropology	88	78	31	28	30	12	12
Law	68	96	16	24	54	20	4
Philosophy	92	74	35	46	32	66	50
History	40	96	53	58	16	18	4
Literary Studies	96	92	77	52	20	14	0

Figure 2.1. Percentage of articles with various stylistic attributes in ten academic disciplines (n = five hundred; fifty articles per discipline). For more details, see the appendix.

that the science journals in my sample would all be highly pre-scriptive, tolerating very little variance in structure, titling, or other points of style. This expectation proved true for medicine, a field in which researchers tend to work in large teams and to publish their findings using a standardized template. In evolu-tionary biology and computer science, however, I found consid-erably more expressive diversity. Ten percent of the evolution-ary biologists in my sample opted for a unique or hybrid structure in a field where the standard Introduction, Method, Results, and Discussion (IMRAD) structure predominates; 8 percent of the computer scientists use the IMRAD structure in a field where hybrid structures predominate; and 11 percent of the evolution-ary biologists and 8 percent of the computer scientists include at least one "engaging" element in their titles, such as a quote, a pun, or a question. These results were fairly evenly spread across journals in both disciplines; that is, roughly 10 percent of the articles *across the board* diverged from any given disciplinary trend.

Another surprising finding was the predominance of first-person pronouns in the sciences. The high percentages in medi-cine, evolutionary biology, and computer science (92, 100, and 82 percent, respectively) confound the commonly held assump-tion that scientists shun the pronouns *I* and *we* in their research writing. By contrast, only 54 percent of the higher education re-searchers in my data sample and only 40 percent of the historians use first-person pronouns, a finding I discuss in further detail in Chapter 4. Overall, I could identify no particularly strong correla-tion between pronoun usage and the number of authors per arti-cle; that is, single-authored articles are neither more nor less likely than multiple-authored articles to contain first-person pronouns. Nor did I find a single discipline in which first-person pronouns are either universally required or universally banned. Even in lit-erary studies, where first-person pronouns predominate, I counted two *I*-less articles among the fifty surveyed.

Higher education researchers topped the table in their enthusi-asm for nominalizations, those multisyllabic abstract nouns formed from verbs or adjectives—*obfuscation, viscosity, fortuitousness*—so beloved by academic writers. In 78 percent of the higher educa-tion articles, at least seven words out of every one hundred, and often many more, ended with one of seven common nominalizing suffixes *(-ion, -ism, -ty, -ment, -ness, -ance, -ence)*. By comparison, only 16 percent of the history articles contained a comparatively high density of nominalizations. Surprisingly, the philosophers in my sample—academics who specialize in abstraction—employ fewer nominalizations on average than their colleagues in evolu-tionary biology, computer science, higher education, psychology, or law. Philosophers do, however, turn to two other clusters of words associated with dense, passive prose—*is, are, was, were, be, been* and *it, this, that, there*—more than twice as often as academics in any of the other disciplines surveyed.

Psychology and anthropology proved the most challenging disciplines to characterize in terms of a "typical" style. Both are vast and varied social sciences with one foot each in the sciences and the humanities; the range and complexity of their subdisci-plines cannot possibly be captured in a single snapshot. The five anthropology journals in my sample, for example, span a wide range of research activities—from the carbon dating of ancient jawbones to the development of new algorithms for explaining how social networks function—and differ starkly in their meth-odology, content, and style:

> Because the orientation of the femur could impact this measurement, the inferior curvature of the femoral necks of the specimens mea-sured in this study were aligned with a photograph of a gorilla femur to standardize the superior-notch-depth measurement. [*Journal of Human Evolution*]
>
> It was shown in Dorogovtsev and Mendes (2000) that if the age-ing function is a power law then the degree distribution has a phase transition from a power-law distribution, when the exponent of the

ageing function is less than one, to an exponential distribution, when the exponent is greater than one. [*Social Networks*]

It wasn't that I set out to test drive a sports car. Rather, on my way to work, I noticed rows of BMWs underneath a huge sign saying come and drive one, raise money for breast cancer. [*Cultural Anthropology*]

A similarly broad range of styles can be found in psychology, a discipline that ranges across all four quadrants of the "hard/soft," "applied/pure" typology first defined by Anthony Biglan.[9] Such disparities are, however, flattened in Figure 2.1, which represents average results across journals from ten different subdisciplines: applied psychology, biological psychology, clinical psychology, developmental psychology, educational psychology, experimental psychology, mathematical psychology, multidisciplinary psychology, psychoanalysis, and social psychology.

Figure 2.2 shows the average authorship, page length, and citation statistics for the ten disciplines surveyed. Most academics are aware that researchers in some disciplines publish short, multiauthored research reports while those in other fields favor long, single-authored articles. Nevertheless, the statistics for medicine (9.6 authors and 29 citations per 9 pages) versus law (1.4 authors and 152 citations per 43 pages) provide a striking visual contrast. For anyone who has ever sat on a multidisciplinary grant committee or promotion panel, Figure 2.2 offers a useful reminder that academics should never judge their colleagues' productivity or citational practices based solely on their own disciplinary norms.

Overall, my stylistic analysis confirms that most academic writers—except in highly prescriptive disciplines such as medicine—are shaped rather than ruled by convention. For nearly every disciplinary trend I identified, I noted stylistic exceptions: philosophers who opt *not* to employ first-person pronouns (8 percent); higher education researchers who opt *not* to begin every article with a bland, abstract sentence defining the significance of the research topic ("Academic writing is increas-

Discipline	# of authors	# of pages	# of citations
Medicine	9.6	9	29
Evolutionary Biology	3.8	21	54
Computer Science	2.7	27	27
Higher Education	1.8	24	48
Psychology	2.8	21	69
Anthropology	1.9	23	75
Law	1.4	43	152
Philosophy	1.1	24	50
History	1.1	26	78
Literary Studies	1	18	34

Figure 2.2. Average number of authors, page numbers, and citations or footnotes in articles from ten academic disciplines (n = five hundred; fifty articles per discipline). For more details, see the appendix.

ingly acknowledged as an important area of inquiry for higher education research") but instead capture their readers' attention with an opening anecdote, quotation, or question (10 percent). These statistics will, I hope, give courage to academics who want to write more engagingly but fear the consequences of violating disciplinary norms. A convention is not a compulsion; a trend is not a law. The signature research styles of our disciplines influence and define us, but they need not crush and confine us.

CHAPTER 3

A GUIDE TO THE STYLE GUIDES

Academic writing, like university teaching, is what sociologist Paul Trowler calls a "recurrent practice," one of the many routine tasks that most academics perform "habitually and in an unconsidered way," with little thought as to how or why things might be done differently: "It is simply taken for granted that this is what we do around here."[1] In recent years, with the advent of Preparing Future Faculty programs in the United States and faculty teaching certificates elsewhere, pedagogical training for academics has become something less of a novelty than it used to be. However, many early career academics still experience some version of the situation that I faced two decades ago when, freshly minted PhD in hand, I walked into my new department and was immediately presented with a list of the courses I had been assigned to teach in my first year. With no educational training and no explicitly developed pedagogical principles to call upon, I cobbled together courses that looked more or less exactly like the ones I had enrolled in as an undergraduate, and I delivered them in just the same way that they had been delivered to me, right down to the structure of my lectures and the wording of my exams. Occasionally I glanced around my department to see what my colleagues were up to; reassuringly, their practices mostly mirrored my own. Not until many years later did I discover that my university library was

filled with row upon row of books devoted to topics such as student-centered learning and principles of course design—books that could have helped me become a more reflective, informed, and innovative teacher, had I only known that they existed.

The same is true with scholarly writing. For most academics, formal training on how to write "like a historian" or "like a biologist" begins and ends with the PhD, if it happens at all. For the remainder of our careers, we are left to rely on three main sources of guidance: our memories of what, if anything, our dissertation supervisors told us about good writing; occasional peer feedback on our work; and examples of recently published writing in the academic journals where we aspire to publish. All three tend to be forces for conservatism. Supervisors typically preach stylistic caution; they want their students to demonstrate mastery of disciplinary norms, not to push against disciplinary boundaries. Editors and referees, likewise, are often more intent on self-cloning than on genuine innovation or empowerment. Peer-reviewed publications, meanwhile, offer a range of stylistic models that are at best unadventurous and at worst downright damaging. Even the most prestigious international academic journals (as this book amply documents) may contain jargon-ridden, shoddily organized, sloppily argued, and syntactically imprecise prose. Academics who learn to write by imitation will almost inevitably pick up the same bad habits.

Of course, just as some academics become superb teachers despite their lack of formal training in higher education teaching, some researchers beat the odds and develop into superb writers. A few may even be fortunate enough to work with coauthors, mentors, or editors who push their writing in new directions rather than advising them to produce nothing but safe, "publishable" work. Only rarely, however, do advanced researchers turn to published writing guides as a means of developing and improving their writing. How do I know? Of the hundreds of academics I have talked to about their work as scholarly writers, only a few

have mentioned books about writing as a significant source of their learning either during or beyond the PhD.

If academics read and heeded such books, what might the landscape of scholarly writing look like today? Curious to measure the distance between the advice offered in academic style guides and the realities of scholarly publishing, I engaged a research assistant to produce an annotated taxonomy of recently published books aimed at academic writers from across the disciplines. Her initial database search yielded more than five hundred entries; we winnowed this list down to one hundred writing guides, all published or in print in the years 2000–2010 and mostly targeted at advanced academics: that is, at graduate students and faculty. The list also included about a dozen generic style guides that one might expect to find on academics' bookshelves: acknowledged classics of the genre such as Strunk and White's *Elements of Style,* Gowers's *The Complete Plain Words,* Lanham's *Editing Prose,* and Williams's *Style: Lessons in Clarity and Grace.*

Of the one hundred books in our filtered sample, only 17 percent exclusively address university faculty, a significant statistic in its own right—apparently most publishers do not regard post-PhD academics as a viable market for writing guides. The vast majority of the guides (69 percent) target graduate students and/or advanced undergraduates, while a few (8 percent) cater to academically trained professionals such as art and music critics, lawyers, and engineers. The books cover topics ranging from the basics of grammar and usage (*who* vs. *whom, effect* vs. *affect*) to the emotional and psychosocial aspects of writing (how to conquer writer's block, how to get along with one's dissertation advisor, how to establish a writing group). We focused specifically on what their authors had to say about the stylistic principles and techniques explored elsewhere in this book. Only two of these topics—clarity and structure—proved so universally compelling that they were discussed in more than 80 percent of the books examined. Several other key "elements of stylishness" such as
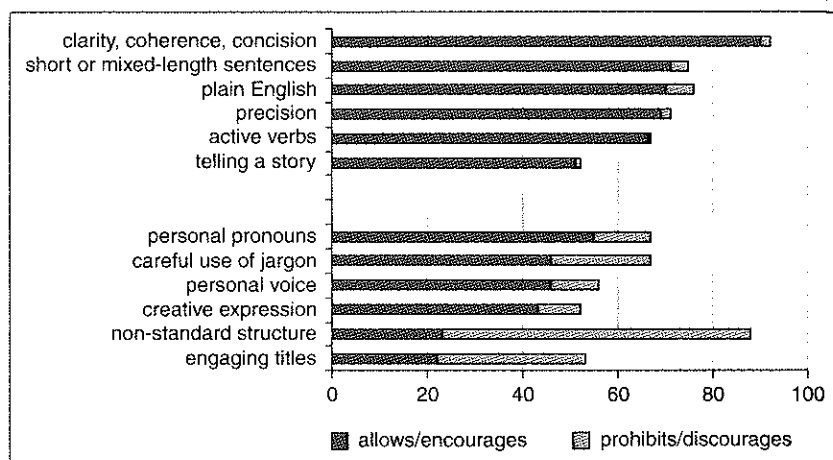
Figure 3.1. Percentage of advanced academic style guides that allow/encourage or prohibit/discourage twelve specific techniques associated with stylish writing (n = one hundred). For more details, see the appendix.

concrete language and opening hooks were mentioned in fewer than half the guides surveyed and therefore are not discussed here.

On six key points of style, the guides were virtually unanimous in their advice to academic authors (see Figure 3.1):

- *Clarity, Coherence, Concision:* Strive to produce sentences that are clear, coherent, and concise. (The "three Cs" are mentioned in some form in most of the style guides; only two guides out of one hundred explicitly argue *against* these values.)
- *Short or Mixed-Length Sentences:* Keep sentences short and simple, or vary your rhythm by alternating longer sentences with shorter ones.
- *Plain English:* Avoid ornate, pompous, Latinate, or waffly prose.

- *Precision:* Avoid vagueness and imprecision.
- *Active Verbs:* Avoid passive verb constructions or use them sparingly; active verbs should predominate.
- *Telling a Story:* Create a compelling narrative.

On six further questions, however, the guides offer inconsistent or conflicting recommendations:

- *Personal Pronouns:* Should academic authors use *I* and *we,* or not?
- *Careful Use of Jargon:* Should authors use specialist terminology when appropriate, or avoid disciplinary jargon altogether?
- *Personal Voice:* Should the writer be present in the writing (for example, via personal anecdotes, emotive responses, self-reflective commentary, and the development of a distinctive voice), or not?
- *Creative Expression:* Should academic authors use figurative language and other "creative" stylistic techniques, or should creative expression be avoided?
- *Nonstandard Structure:* Should articles and theses always follow a conventional structure, or are unique and experimental structures permitted?
- *Engaging Titles:* Should academic titles be playful and engaging, or should they be strictly informative?

From these mixed results, I draw two complementary conclusions. On the one hand, the guides' near unanimity on the first six items suggests that there are certain nonnegotiable principles that *all* academic writers would be well advised to follow. (One of the most damning findings of my research is that these principles are so often preached yet so seldom practiced.) On the other hand, the contradictory nature of the guides' advice on matters such as pronoun usage, structure, and titling reminds us just how complex and fraught the task of academic writing can

be, especially for early career researchers who are still struggling to define a coherent academic identity.

Occasionally the writing guides' advice diverges along predictable disciplinary lines, as when 84 percent of the science guides but only 52 percent of the humanities guides recommend a standard structure for articles and theses. On most stylistic questions, however, the disciplines themselves are divided. For example, a majority of the guides (55 percent) advocate the use of personal pronouns, yet at least a few books in every disciplinary category (sciences, social sciences, humanities, and generic) caution against using *I* or *we*. Likewise, 43 percent of the guides commend creative forms of expression such as figurative or nonacademic language, but 9 percent (one or more from each major disciplinary category) warn *against* creativity in academic writing. How, then, are we to decide whose advice to follow?

To make matters even more confusing, the style guides themselves vary widely in academic register and style. About one-third (38 percent) employ an academic register characterized by complex syntax, sophisticated language, and abstract or theoretical ideas; nearly half (44 percent) maintain a generally formal but "plain English" tone; and the remainder (18 percent) introduce a more creative/colloquial style. Each of these three registers is fairly evenly distributed across the disciplines, suggesting that neither conventionality nor creativity holds a monopoly in any academic field. At the "creative/colloquial" end of the scale, authors use metaphor, wordplay, humor, personal anecdotes, experimental formal structures, and a raft of other stylish techniques to engage and inform their readers:

> A good first paragraph is all about striking the right note, or, to switch metaphors, giving your reader a firm handshake.[2]
>
> If you are more fastidious and you think things like, "I'll start writing just as soon as I've polished the underside of my Venetian blinds, alphabetized my CDs, and organised my rubber bands by size," steps must be taken.[3]
>
> Using theory is a tactic to cover the author's ass.[4]

At the "academic" end of the scale, by contrast, the writing in the style guides tends to sound much more, well, academic:

> The reason it is so difficult to make any progress in deciding how much support a premise *must* offer a conclusion in order for "[premise], therefore [conclusion]" to qualify as an argument is that it does not make a lot of sense to talk about what is a justification for what in the abstract.[5]
>
> Research nearly always requires the participation of many collaborators and an operational support structure, plus the professional institutions that enable individuals to acquire training (at a university for example) and to pursue research in a laboratory or in the field.[6]
>
> Such post hoc or retrospective theorizing reverses the directionality of the theory-research relationship.[7]

About three-quarters of the guides surveyed present their advice through indirect suggestion and examples rather than through direct imperatives such as *you must* or *you should*. Only a handful, however, explicitly foreground the principle of *choice*. Stephen Pyne documents the many stylistic options available to the confident stylist in the humanities, noting, for instance, that "colloquial language will grate against, even mock, a scholarly argument; so will exalted language in the service of the mundane. . . . Still for everything there is a time and place. A small dose of the vernacular can work like double washers on a machine bolt, allowing the parts to rotate without locking up."[8] Pat Francis superimposes art making with writing, incorporating creative materials into her own work—sketches, photos, collages, postcards, unusual uses of white space, diary entries, poetry, wordplay—and suggesting exercises designed to help researchers in arts disciplines flex their creative muscles.[9] Lynn Nygaard discusses epistemological issues such as objectivity, expressivism, personality, and transparency, bringing together science and humanities perspectives in a way that is rare in books aimed mainly at scientists.[10] Robert Goldbort offers a clear, readable account of science writing, including its history and public attitudes toward

science writers; rather than demanding adherence to a rigid set of rules, Goldbort recognizes and encourages variety.[11] Angela Thody covers the basics of data collection, publication, and presentation, but also puts in a plug for alternative, even radically experimental, research modes.[12] Howard Becker dissects the writing culture of academia, corrects popular misconceptions about the writing process, catalogs common writing neuroses, and suggests practical strategies for negotiating the perils of publishing.[13] Finally, Stephen Brown analyzes the work of five leading marketing writers through the critical lenses of reader-response theory, Marxist literary theory, deconstruction, biopoetics, and psychoanalysis, respectively. Through his own novel approach to writing about academic writing, Brown actively resists what he calls the "identikit imperative" of most scholarly discourse.[14]

These authors make explicit what all of the writing guides in my sample, taken together, implicitly affirm through their many contradictions: academic writing is a process of making intelligent choices, not of following rigid rules. Yes, scholars in some fields have more freedom than others to make stylistic decisions that go against the disciplinary grain. Yes, convention remains a powerful force. Even in the most seemingly inflexible situations, however—for example, in journals where all research reports must conform to a rigid structural template—authors can still decide whether to write clear, concise, energetic sentences or opaque, complex, passive ones. Scientists can *choose* to use active verbs. Social scientists can *choose* to introduce a personal voice. Humanities scholars can *choose* to eschew disciplinary jargon. Informed choice is the stylish writer's best weapon against the numbing forces of conformity and inertia.

Cultural evolutionists Peter Richerson and Robert Boyd have observed that human beings tend to "imitate the common type" of any given cultural behavior: we do as others around us do, without stopping to wonder why. Occasionally, however, we can be persuaded to "imitate the successful" instead—for example, adapting our cooking style based on advice from a famous chef.

Cultures evolve, note Richerson and Boyd, only when "individuals modify their own behavior by some form of learning, and other people acquire their modified behavior by imitation."[15] For academic writers, the implications of this argument are clear: We can continue to "imitate the common type" of academic writing, endlessly replicating the status quo. We can "imitate the successful," adopting the stylistic strategies of eminent colleagues. Or we can undertake "forms of learning"—reading, reflection, experimentation—that will take our own work in new directions, so that we, in turn, can become the pathbreakers whose writing others will emulate.

In the chapters that follow, I discuss an array of techniques employed by scholars from across the disciplines to engage and inform their readers. Scattered throughout are callouts titled "Spotlight on Style," which gloss passages by exemplary writers whose work has been recommended to me by their discipline-based peers. In selecting from an initial list of more than one hundred suggested authors, I have sought to include examples from a wide range of academic fields and genres: from journal articles as well as from books, from highly specialized publications as well as from those aimed at a broader readership, and from conventional as well as deliberately creative academic prose. Readers will inevitably be able to name many other authors equally deserving of attention and emulation: colleagues whose writing they particularly admire, whether for its clarity or for its daring. I urge you to look to your own personal favorites for ideas and inspiration, as well as to the stylish authors profiled here. By "imitating the successful" and making their skills our own, we can collectively evolve the common type of academic writing into something truly worth reading.