Do You Believe in Good Academic Writing?

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Sword, Helen. *Stylish Academic Writing*. Cambridge MA: Harvard UP, 2012. ($21.95; 219 pp. hardback)

Helen Sword's *Stylish Academic Writing* is committed to a radical proposition: there is such a thing as universally good academic writing. Since the 1990s, the idea of general "good academic writing" has been like a unicorn, elusive because non-existent.

Can (or Should?) Good Academic Writing Exist?

We didn't doubt the existence of enjoyable scholarly articles or academic writers who are consistently able to simultaneously delight and inform. We still found writing that was good in its own context. It's just that we thought it hopelessly naïve to identify and demand a stable, universal style of writing that could apply to any discipline, any purpose, any audience. Led by Susan Peck MacDonald's *Professional Academic Writing*—which proclaims "Blanket condemnations of passive verbs, for instance, or prescriptions for vividly concrete verbs are largely ineffectual because they take no account of either the historical situatedness or the complex of knowledge-making goals and rhetorical situations represented in different kinds of academic writing" (17)—we moved style into the world of specific disciplines and dismissed with a world-weary sigh the departmental traditionalists who believed that the writing principles learned in first-year composition could be blithely applied to any class or project. Catalyzed by research in transfer, genre theory and disciplinary writing, writing across the curriculum was morphing into writing in the disciplines.

We were abandoning the entire enterprise of making certain that students and colleagues had a copy of Strunk and White inscribed in the fleshy tablets of their hearts. We knew better, now, to trust that each discipline knew better than we what good writing looked like, and scholars from Ken Hyland on down turned their attention to describing what disciplinary writing looked like in a variety of discrete fields and genres.

Good academic writing was dead.

Except it never was. Helen Sword's accessible academic-writing handbook, aimed at practicing academics, reminds us that for all of our disciplinary boundaries, we continue to admire those academic writers who "express complex ideas clearly and

precisely; produce elegant, carefully crafted sentences; . . . provide their readers with aesthetic and intellectual pleasure and write with originality, imagination and creative flair" (7–8).

These virtues (reminiscent as they are of Strunk and White or Zinsser's *On Writing Well*) are backed by Sword's corpus, which is as robust as any other discourse analyst's, and her interviews with more than seventy informants across the disciplinary spectrum. *Stylish Academic Writing* provides many of the helpful hints, sample texts and end-of-chapter exercises that stand-alone handbooks have long provided, but in the context of natural language analysis, published by Sword elsewhere as academic articles. Her academic chops are present throughout the text, but she leads with an extensive discussion of her terms, methods and limitations.

Stylish Academic Writing starts with a nearly thirty-page methods section. There is an element, which Sword does not deny, of "curiosity, expertise, ignorance and serendipity" (15) in her choice of which disciplines she investigates: medicine, evolutionary biology, computer science, higher education, psychology, anthropology, law, philosophy, history and literary studies (9). This very human research practice may disincline some readers to accept her conclusions, but Sword is at least up-front about her methods. Together with an appendix and hearty bibliography, this extensive discussion of her methods seeks to root her writing suggestions in language research practices that might sound familiar to devotees of Swales and Hyland and also may provide Sword with some credence for readers in the social sciences. Books on "good style" are plentiful, but rarely are they grounded in anything other than the author's own preference and confidence.

The bulk of the book isolates what Sword cheekily titles *Elements of Stylishness:* eleven chapters on topics as diverse as writing "Tempting Titles" to avoiding "Jargonitis." None of the suggestions are, for writing administrators, particularly revolutionary, but as a resource for writing in the disciplines, the frequent examples from computer science and exercises that encourage scientists to consider the pros and cons of an IMRD structure (135) make this style handbook immediately grounded in academic writing. Every chapter argues that good writing can exist in every discipline and that good writing in each discipline will have some similar characteristics.

Sword doesn't minimize the differences between academic writing in the disciplines *as they are,* but in "encourg[ing] readers to look beyond their disciplinary barricades" (16), she highlights how artificial and how permeable those barricades are. This is crucial to her project and ours for three reasons.

First, our insistence on absolute disciplinary autonomy has been grounded in the assumption that expert discourse communities can speak among themselves however they damn-well please without the English department's input—thank you very much. Traditionally, English departments took control of teaching writing to

undergraduates and set the rules for "good academic writing" throughout the university and the gains we have made in challenging this traditional—and still perniciously prevalent—view are not to be dismissed lightly. What is true in a pedagogical setting is certainly true within expert discourse communities, and I will defend to the day I die the right for discourse communities to set and shape their own generic expectations.

However, recent politics from the international level down to the department have only highlighted the need for experts to learn how to speak not only to each other but also to others. As Sword puts it, while there "will always be a place" for esoteric genres and styles, we still "do need to interact with wider audiences at least occasionally" (10). If style is keeping us from being understood when we talk to administrators, to reporters, and to the parents of our children's friends, then we need to reconsider the disciplinary virtues of generalist writing. Generalist, sometimes journalistic, writing in first-year composition has become anathema in some circles of WID scholarship, as we insisted that specialists aren't generalists. But if generalists are just people who speak to a general public, then maybe it's time to reintroduce specialists back to the public.

Second, the descriptions that we have given to disciplinary writing are sometimes too static and monolithic. We tend to speak about "the way" that biologists or engineers or psychologists write as if disciplines weren't subject to the same changes that everything is. In describing disciplinary writing in static ways, we have sometimes committed the same sins of essentialization that MacDonald justly condemns, except instead of saying "never use passive voice," we have said "scientists use the passive voice." Indeed, Sword's corpus challenges some of our received knowledge of disciplinary style, finding that philosophers eschew nominalizations, biologists embrace first-person pronouns and IMRD doesn't seem to be requisite in *every* published science article (18–19). Even when her research supports what we tell ourselves about a discipline, she finds exceptions. The existence of these exceptions among successfully-published articles implies that disciplinary writing is not rigid: being readable and engaging will not necessarily preclude your work from publication.

Third, we may have embraced a "you do you" attitude towards disciplinary academic writing since the rise of WID, but Sword isn't content to stay in a descriptive vein. If disciplinary writing is not static, if it can change, then there's no particular reason that it can't change towards a public, generalist, journalistic style. "We all have the power to change the contours" of disciplinary writing, Sword says, "*if we choose to*" (10 emphasis in original). Indeed if "convention is not a compulsion; a trend is not a law" (22), then perhaps there is something that disciplinary writers can be taught about good academic writing.

If Good Academic Writing Exists, What Does It Look Like? How Do We Write It?

Each chapter in the *Elements of Stylishness* section explores a different "element" ranging from abstracts and overall organization to the niceties of concrete language. Even citation formats get their own style chapter. But within this diverse range of topics, Sword includes similar patterns, all drawn from genre and literacy studies. She acculturates us to "good academic writing" slowly and by building on our own experience.

Each chapter begins with some data-driven generalizations drawn out from her own research. For instance, when discussing voice, Sword backs her defense of first-person pronouns with the finding that "of the sixty-six peer-reviewed journals in my cross-disciplinary study, I found only one—a prominent history journal—that apparently forbids personal pronouns" (36). Similarly, the long-taught lore of "party in the front: business in the back" colon-divided titles falls on its face when Sword notes that only twenty-two percent of titles in her sample were categorized as both engaging and informative—even though forty-eight percent contained colons and those groups did not necessarily correlate (68). She buttresses her somewhat counterintuitive stance on disciplinary writing style with the type of research that WID scholars find convincing. It's not just that she uses the raw aggregate, though.

Each chapter also contains at least one "Spotlight on Style" profile, where Sword gives models for emulation and commentary. Some of the models are well-known writer-scholars, like Oliver Sacks and Stephen Greenblatt, but Sword also includes lesser-known writers like Mike Crang and Shanthi Ameratunga because public health researchers and geographers, as we know, are also writers. The samples are long enough to put the illustrated principle in context without being cumbersome, and neither is Sword unfailingly hortatory: "Despite a plethora of *be* verbs and some sloppy locutions that demonstrated the pitfalls of abstractions," she starts out one sentence that will end with a paean to the model's overall structure (124). Providing both quantitative data and a more qualitative analysis creates a data-backed starting point before moving into her prescriptive suggestions.

The chapters are full of examples and counter-examples and—fittingly—some very engaging academic prose, but, like a good educator in disciplinary writing, Sword doesn't finish a chapter without suggesting introspective, exploratory, low-risk homework. One exercise suggests collecting a commonplace book of anecdotes relating to your field (109), while another recommends analyzing the introduction of an article you admire (85). These exercises feel as descriptive as any work John Swales might do. It's not all applied linguistics, though—there are plenty of descriptive exercises that encourage writers to identity passive verb constructions because although "a few passive phrases can provide welcome syntactical variety," too many "will add up to lifeless, agentless prose" (61).

Sword is, ultimately, writing a handbook. It's a text that can be assigned in introductory graduate-level courses and one that writing centers can keep on-hand. It's one on which deans, dissertation advisors, and others can slap a "read this" post-it note and give to whomever they see as a "struggling writer." In the course of my own practice working with graduate students across the disciplines, I find myself often referring to dog-eared sections of *Stylish Academic Writing* when someone asks about abstracts or introductions or another mystifying aspect of academic writing. I'm not embarrassed to show an economics or chemical engineering student Sword's book because she has incorporated some of the best practices of research and teaching to come out of writing in the disciplines, using a fairly robust data-set derived from practitioner informants. It's not that I believe there are easy answers to the questions of what makes good writing, but if there are going to be handbooks written about academic style, they ought to at least be research-based.

Stylish Academic Writing isn't enough on its own, of course. The students I work with deserve to see writing as multi-faceted, multi-stage and, often, multi-authored, and that has never been the strength of a single handbook. The handbook genre notoriously downplays the role of co-authors and editors, of peer-review and the continual give-and-take of editorial standards in shaping disciplinary writing. Handbooks, by their nature, are about "quick-and-easy" tips, often for self-taught writers, who are often bootstrapping in isolation. The best academic writing, the writing by the exemplary authors referenced here, happens in the context of vision and revision, of commentary and compromise. Furthermore, the conventions of disciplines, sub-disciplines and individual journals are hardly static; fresh academic writing today may be cliché tomorrow. Despite all of these caveats, Stylish Academic Writing is destined to be one of the classics of academic style handbooks for its focus on advanced academic writing (as opposed to literary or journalistic writing), for its foundation in empirical analysis (as opposed to the lore of the English department), and for its audacious project of discovering good academic writing. Perhaps Sword knows that she's suggesting the existence of unicorns. Perhaps we may just believe her.