

POINTS FOR DEBATE

On academic writing: a personal note

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I once returned a student-essay ungraded to its author with the comment, ‘You can write your essay in English, German, French, Italian, Ancient Greek or Latin, but not in *this*.’ *This* referred to the unreadable prose in which the essay was written, an overly technical style, full of jargon and big words. Luckily, the student did not take offence. Rather, he took my comment as it was intended: with some humour but seriously enough to revise and resubmit. A much more polished product emerged in my mailbox a little later. That I am not myself a native speaker of English probably helped me to get away with my request.

Unfortunately, this encounter has not remained a singular experience. Over the years, I have received numerous beautifully argued and well-written essays that completely blew my mind. Yet, at the same time, I am still occasionally surprised just how poorly written the work of even quite advanced students can be. And, of course, bad writing is by no means confined to student essays: it can be found in academic writing at all levels.

For some time now, I have been wondering: why is it that a profession so fundamentally involved in the business of writing – and as academics and students of the arts, humanities and social sciences we are *all* professional writers – pays so little attention to this aspect of its work? There is no simple answer. But we are probably not far off the mark if we assume that how we view writing has something to do with it.

Part of the answer probably has to do with what Judith Brett, in her provocative article, has called ‘the bureaucratization of writing’: the way in which a certain writing style is encouraged, perhaps even rewarded in the academy (Brett, 1991). There is also still a tendency to look at writing as a mere formality. The underlying assumption here seems to be that the real content of one’s research exists prior to and independent from its written form.

Not only would I object to this view on philosophical grounds: Wittgenstein – not himself a master of lucid prose, but never mind that – pointed to the ways in which language shapes the world we inhabit. More fundamentally, cognitive research has shown that writing is, essentially, exactly that: thinking (see, e.g., Badley (2009a). See also Bradley (2009b): on writing as a ‘form of researching in itself’ (p. 104)).

It is at this point that the traditionalists come in and argue that there is, after all, a direct correlation between form and content: one of more or less complexity. The more complicated one’s prose, so the argument goes, the more sophisticated the ideas expressed in it. A more simple writing style, it follows, may be appropriate in other contexts, for leisurely reading for example. The complexity of academic language, by contrast, is said to reflect the complexity of academic debate.

Studies of language development in children, teenagers and young adults suggest that there is indeed a direct link between complexity of thought and complexity in writing. These studies show a direct correlation between maturity in thinking, which is advancing with age, and maturity in writing, measurable for example in the range of vocabulary used and in increasingly complex sentence structures (Hudson, 2009; Odell, 1979).

A likely effect of this research on the teaching of children and students is that they are encouraged to adopt an ever more complex writing style. There is, in principle, nothing wrong with this. Yet we may wonder: does this correlation also apply to professional writing? Should our writing become ever more complex as we move into graduate programs and on into academic employment?

I think not. And the reason for this is that, as those involved in the business of selling ideas, we should aim to present them in a way that ensures their greatest possible success. Unfortunately, there is very little research on the further evolution of writing, in particular professional writing, later in life. Yet, a number of scholarly books and articles have recently advocated a simpler, more accessible writing style, in particular for professional prose (see, e.g., Pinker, 2014; Thomas & Turner, 2011).

This research frequently also draws on cognitive studies. Yet it focuses on the product, rather than process, of writing and uses this research to illustrate what works best in terms of retaining the reader's attention and getting the point across. This research suggests that adult professional prose should evolve, but in different ways than the writing of children and adolescents. It should take into account the reader's point of view and work towards a writing style that clarifies one's argument on the level of words, sentences and paragraph structure. This point seems to be particularly relevant for academic writing which, as Graham Badley has argued, is by its very nature, a space of contestation, critique and debate, a space in which the researcher-writer and his or her reading interlocutors meet (Badley, 2009b).

At this stage, I should say that my own writing has evolved fundamentally over time and that it has done so in entirely unexpected ways: it has become more simple. The main reason for this is that I started to write academic prose in another than my native language (German).

When I moved to the UK in 2000 to pursue a PhD in Classics and Ancient History at Cambridge I was excited and, of course, daunted by the prospect of writing in a foreign language. Little did I know that my style would change forever as a result. At first, my English simply was not good enough to be able to carry on in the same style that I used to write in my native tongue. Indeed, at first I suffered greatly because what had so far come naturally – language – proved such a great challenge. In the end, however, this rather painful experience did have a positive effect: writing, language, the way in which ideas take shape, suddenly emerged on my radar as something to think about.

After a few years, my English had become advanced enough to be able to complicate my prose again. Yet I no longer felt the desire to do so. Somewhere on the way, I had picked up enough of a sense of style not to revert to my old ways again. That I had been forced to put things more simply in English was certainly one reason for this; another was that I started to think about academic writing again – this time, however, as a teacher rather than a student.

In 2003, I had moved to the US to take up my first academic employment. Two writing interns supported my work as a young Collegiate Assistant Professor teaching in the

Humanities Core program at the University of Chicago. They were trained to provide my students with feedback and instructions on the conventions of expository writing. Together with my Chicago students, I again thought about the nuts and bolts of academic writing.

Today if I pick up a copy of my master's thesis, written many years ago in German, I cringe. It is full of exactly the same jargon that I found fault with in my student's essay. *Revise and resubmit!* I would say to myself today. I am lucky that I had the opportunity to pick up this important skill somewhere on the way. Not that I think that I am fully there yet myself. Nor do I ever expect to be. Good writing is a process that warrants constant refinement.

There is, however, one more twist to the story. A little while ago, when I started to write academic German again, I was surprised to find that in the meantime, my written German had also changed. It has also become simpler and more accessible. A sense of style, it seems, is not confined to a particular language.

So what am I proposing here? That we all start writing in another language? Hardly. That we all revise and resubmit? Perhaps. At the very least I think we should try harder to inspire in our students a sense for this essential dimension of our work (see Sword (2009) for some practical ideas on teaching better academic writers).

Good academic writing is not a mere formality; nor is it a matter of dumbing down one's thoughts. It is a skill worth learning. After all, the power of good writing is one of the most universally applicable assets a university education can, and should, provide – no matter whether it is in English, German, French, Italian, Ancient Greek or Latin.

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