Stylish Academic Writing

HELEN SWORD

Contents

Part I: Style and Substance
1. Rules of Engagement 3
2. On Being Disciplined 12
3. A Guide to the Style Guides 23

Part II: The Elements of Stylishness
4. Voice and Echo 35
5. Smart Sentencing 48
6. Tempting Titles 63
7. Hooks and Sinkers 76
8. The Story Net 87
9. Show and Tell 99
10. Jargonitis 112
11. Structural Designs 122
12. Points of Reference 135
13. The Big Picture 147
14. The Creative Touch 159

Afterword: Becoming a Stylish Writer 173

Harvard UP, 2012
A carefully crafted sentence welcomes its reader like a comfortable rocking chair, bears its reader across chasms like a suspension bridge, and helps its reader navigate tricky terrain like a well-hewn walking stick. A poorly crafted or uncrafred sentence, on the other hand, functions more like a shapeless log tossed into a river: it might or might not help you get to the other side, depending on how strong the current is and how hard you are willing to kick. And sometimes the reader of an academic text has to kick very hard indeed:

These deconstructive and theorising inputs to the conversation are less about finding out how to better (i.e. more effectively) succumb to neo-liberal or economic rationalist discourses of effectiveness and completion, and more about critically exploring, for example, how those discourses may be operative and regulatory, what they make possible and impossible, and how they compete with other available discourses about the course and purpose of postgraduate research and supervision. [Higher Education]

So what's wrong with this sentence, as bumpy a log as one is likely to find floating in the waters of academe? For a start, the sentence has no clearly defined agent or action; its grammatical subject is an abstract noun (inputs) modified by a weak, spineless verb (are). When we pose Richard Lanham's classic question, "Who's kicking whom?" we can deduce, with difficulty, that the sentence describes how academics in higher education use language. Yet human beings remain mysteriously absent; the "neo-liberal or economic rationalist discourses" that "compete with other available discourses" undertake their battle in a kind of agentless void. The many nouns scattered throughout the sentence (inputs, conversation, discourses, effectiveness, completion, course, purpose, research, supervision) are all relentlessly abstract, lumbered with equally abstract adjectives (deconstructive, theorizing, neo-liberal, economic rationalist) and strung together by prepositions (to, about, to, of, about, for, with, about, of) that send the reader's attention scudding off in one direction after the next. Thankfully, the sentence contains a few active verbs (compete, find out, succumb, explore); however, the author neglects to tell us who will be doing the succumbing and exploring. Can such a waterlogged sentence be salvaged? Probably not. The author would be better off starting over again from scratch and building a stronger, leaner sentence with real people (postgraduate supervisors, discourse analysts) rather than "deconstructive and theorising inputs" at its core.

Academics identified by their peers as stylish writers for other reasons— their intelligence, humor, personal voice, or descriptive power—are invariably sticklers for well-crafted prose. Their sentences may vary in length, subject matter, and style; however, their writing is nearly always governed by three key principles that any writer can learn. First, they employ plenty of concrete nouns and vivid verbs, especially when discussing abstract concepts. Second, they keep nouns and verbs close together, so that readers can easily identify "who's kicking whom." Third, they avoid weighing down their sentences with extraneous words and phrases, or "clutter." Far from eschewing theoretical intricacy or syntactical nuance, stylish academic writers deploy these three core principles in the service of eloquent expression and complex ideas.
Concrete language is arguably the single most valuable tool in the stylish writer’s toolbox. When readers encounter a sentence composed largely of concrete nouns, they can immediately visualize its objects, actions, and relationships, as when philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah illuminates the universality of the human condition by describing a time-traveling baby:

If a normal baby girl born forty thousand years ago were kidnapped by a time traveler and raised in a normal family in New York, she would be ready for college in eighteen years. She would learn English (along with—who knows?—Spanish or Chinese), understand trigonometry, follow baseball and pop music; she would probably want a pierced tongue and a couple of tattoos.¹

A sentence composed mostly of abstract nouns, by contrast, offers us nothing tangible to hang on to, no person or thing that we can mentally situate in physical space:

Replicating the post-Mendel application of Lamarck’s apparently superseded scientific theory by non-empirical social scientists, Vernon Lee’s fervent and intellectually original use of scientific paradigms across different fields in order to further a specific literary and creative heuristic offers an exemplary narrative trace, replete with hybridized methodologies and the rhetorical deployment of scientific language in non-scientific discourses. [Literary Studies]

This sentence suffers from other ailments as well, including a paralyzing glut of adjectives and adverbs (fervent, intellectually original, scientific, different, specific, literary, creative, exemplary, hybridized, rhetorical, scientific, non-scientific) and a shocking case of jargonitis (paradigms, heuristic, trace, hybridized). But even with its adjectives eliminated and its vocabulary toned down, so many abstract nouns compete here for the reader’s attention—application, theory, use, paradigms, fields, heuristic, trace, methodologies, deployment, language, discourses—that we lose sight of the sentence’s fundamental message: Vernon Lee’s writing deserves