

Writing about Learning and Teaching in Higher Education

Creating and Contributing to Scholarly Conversations
across a Range of Genres

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CHAPTER 25

BECOMING AN ENGAGING WRITER

How to Compel and Inspire

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 [I have] outlined. (Sword 2012, 3)

Becoming an engaging writer requires working against what Helen Sword describes in the quote above. It is a combination of asserting your own voice and ensuring that you write in ways that are accessible and compelling to your intended audience. How you achieve this depends in part on which genre you choose, but we suggest that accessibility should be a goal across genres. Among the three of us, we have different levels of comfort and confidence regarding our writing capacities, but we agree in principle, as we argue in this chapter, that writing should be clear, have a strong voice, and strive to be stylish.

Engaging Writing Is Clear to the Reader

Think about what the word “clear” means. Its primary definitions focus on the experience people have if something is clear: it is easy to perceive, understand, or interpret; it is comprehensible and coherent. A secondary and equally important definition refers to the thing itself, the substance: it is transparent, unclouded—one can see through it. It’s worth thinking about these definitions in relation to writing, which strives to create an experience for people, and which uses the medium, the substance, of words.

William Zinnser (1998) has argued that the secret of good writing is clarity—stripping every sentence to its cleanest components. Robert Harris (2017) concurs, as the title of his book, *Writing with Clarity and Style*, suggests. The words, sentences, and paragraphs should not only be comprehensible, they should also compel and provoke in productive ways rather than hinder understanding or distract from or obscure what you as a writer are addressing. A mistake many writers make is to try to sound fancy, to mistake unnecessary complexity for sophistication, but such efforts usually obfuscate rather than clarify. Simple, direct language is typically most effective and certainly most accessible to a wide range of readers. And sentences and paragraphs should not be too long, a tendency in some writing that reveals lack of clarity in the argument.

Consider the following excerpt from Alise de Bie's (2019) article on how "Mad students" come to be abandoned as knowers and learners, and practice loneliness as a form of Mad knowing:

When I politicize and spend time with loneliness, rather than attempt to contain or resolve it, it has a lot to teach me about what I want from "justice," and I have come to consider it an essential quality of how I approach knowing Madly and creating Mad knowledge (de Bie 2019). Fricker (2007) argues that epistemic injustices lead to a literal loss and erosion of knowledge, and prevent knowledge from coming into existence, and I confirm and grieve that this occurs in the ways already described and a host of other ways. At the same time, so much of my knowledge has been developed in the presence of, in desperation over, and in reaction and contrast to the loneliness that I experience as a Mad knower and learner; many Mad experiences (especially those related to abandonment and loneliness) and ways of knowing are sharply tied to oppression, although oppression is not all that we are (Nicolazzo 2017). To consider getting rid of loneliness or sending it away breaks my heart, as this only sustains the treatment of loneliness (and myself

as someone living loneliness) as a problem, and further facilitates hermeneutical injustice by failing to recognize this emergent loneliness as a form of Mad knowledge.

In this excerpt Alise de Bie employs a style that is clear—writing in direct ways—and that contrasts with what Helen Sword (2012) critiques in the opening quotation: de Bie’s writing is personal rather than impersonal; compelling rather than stodgy; and concrete rather than abstract. Note, too, that they come into conversation with other scholars while clearly holding their own voice and sharing their lived experience. This example of de Bie’s writing seeks to change the conversation in learning and teaching scholarship through inviting a different way of understanding the process and experience of knowledge creation and legitimating them. Their writing illustrates how the style of writing and the substance of what they are communicating through words work together.

One way of checking your writing to make sure it is clear is to ask yourself the simple question: Have I written this in the most direct way possible? Try writing a sentence several different ways and see which one is clearest. Try reading sentences, paragraphs, and even whole papers out loud. You might be surprised to find how hearing words spoken can quickly reveal lack of clarity and coherence. Also, as Ronald Barnett (personal communication, July 28, 2019) recommends, “Try to imagine yourself in a café with 3–4 other people, representative of different groups and interests, and imagine yourself speaking to them, and trying to take each of them with you, all at the same time.”

Engaging Writing Has a Strong Voice

“Voice” is a contested term in virtually every arena. It certainly references sound, typically in relation to speaking, but it has been used more metaphorically to mean opinion or, as Alison has argued, to signal presence and power (Cook-Sather 2006). The excerpt from Alise de Bie (2019) above shows a form of power and presence in their writing, one example of a strong voice. bell hooks (1994, 12) suggests that the feminist focus on “coming to voice” emphasizes “moving

from silence into speech as a revolutionary gesture.” She notes that African American women in particular “must work against speaking as ‘other’” (hooks 1994, 16) and embrace coming to voice “as a gesture of resistance, an affirmation of struggle” (hooks 1994, 18). hooks’ points link to our contention in [chapter 3](#) that not everyone has the same standing, the same voice, in any given context or discourse community, and speaking and writing carries different stakes for different people.

“Voice” has been debated as a term in writing since at least the 1980s, first in the grammatical sense of whether to use passive or active voice, although most scholars agree that active voice “makes your meaning clear for readers” (Purdue Online Writing Lab n.d.). The more important debate is over how an author establishes an authentic voice. While the “sound” or quality of a writer’s voice is mediated by identity, context, and intended readers, ideally voice conveys a writer’s identity, experiences, values, and perspectives. Through developing voice rather than using jargon and stock phrases, you can achieve an authenticity in your writing and be committed to what you are saying. It is your own voice and no one else’s.

Writing scholar Peter Elbow (2007) argues that there are good reasons to attend to voice in writing and good reasons to ignore it, and over the last ten years, while the concept of voice continues to be debated among writing scholars, it has been taken up by linguists, particularly in relation to constructing an identity in academic discourse (Flowerdew and Wang 2015). We suggest that it is a useful concept both for what it signals regarding the human being behind the words (not necessarily that the person is knowable through their words) and what it signals regarding the intentional construction of an identity in any given piece of writing.

The voice in which you present your ideas will have a powerful impact on how people “hear” them. As we note in relation to the excerpt from Alise de Bie’s article above, clearly locating authority both in theory and in lived experiences can often make an argument more “hearable.” The following sentences from the abstract of Tara Yosso’s (2005, 69) highly influential article “Whose Culture Has

Capital? A Critical Race Theory Discussion of Community Cultural Wealth” calls for a profound shift in how we understand culture and the cultural capital of learners:

This article conceptualizes community cultural wealth as a critical race theory (CRT) challenge to traditional interpretations of cultural capital. CRT shifts the research lens away from a deficit view of Communities of Color as places full of cultural poverty disadvantages, and instead focuses on and learns from the array of cultural knowledge, skills, abilities and contacts possessed by socially marginalized groups that often go unrecognized and unacknowledged.

Through use of clear assertions such as “shifts the research lens away from a deficit view” and through modelling the alternative, recognizing and valuing “the array of cultural knowledge, skills, abilities and contacts possessed by socially marginalized groups,” Yosso’s voice positions her as authoritative and allows her to make a compelling argument for a profound change of mindset and values. The shift for which she argues has informed the work Alison and colleagues have done in SoTL, specifically in recognizing students, particularly underrepresented students, as partners in explorations and co-creation of learning and teaching (Cook-Sather and Agu 2013; de Bie et al. 2019).

The voice a writer uses for each different genre can be equally strong but sound different. Consider, for instance, this student’s voice in the opening lines of “Leaping and Landing in Brave Spaces,” a reflective essay:

It is hard to describe in words the feeling of deciding to speak or raise my hand in a classroom. It is a crucial moment, the moment between silence and sound, closed and open. It can happen in many different ways: I can feel it as I write, as I make any kind of art, tell a story, or do something that breaks the boundary between myself and the world around me. This feeling of exposure to

others can lead to hurt or rejection or great joy and growth. (Abbott 2016, 1)

Clara Abbott's voice is strong because she is so present in it; there is an immediacy, a vividness, an honesty to her words, and they create a multi-sensory experience for readers, drawing us in and making us feel that Abbott is in an informal, even intimate, conversation with us about the experience of learning.

While voice in publications is typically in the form of written words, it can be very helpful to read your written words out loud to make sure that they will be both readable and compelling to others. Linking our emphasis on voice (in this section) and style (in the next), Pat Hutchings (personal communication, June 10, 2019) notes: "For me, voice, and style too, have a lot to do with rhythm. I always find it useful to read what I've written out loud. And if I'm writing with someone, we read it back and forth to each other. Takes a while, but [it's] worth it."

We do recognize though that the ingredients of becoming an engaged writer vary culturally, as Nadya Yakovchuk states clearly in Reflection 25.1.

Reflection 25.1

Engaging writing and cultural context

For me, authorial voice is inextricably linked to authorial identity—how you see yourself as a writer and where you position yourself within your academic community on a spectrum from novice to expert. It is also influenced by the disciplinary and cultural context you come from. I remember writing my first assignment on a Masters course in the UK back in 2000 and using "we" throughout (as in "we suggest" or "our approach") to indicate my position on the topic and signal my presence as an author. This was a common way of writing in Belarus, the post-Soviet country I come from, even for single-authored papers and coursework. I'd imagine this was because of the reluctance to emphasize the individual "I" in a still predominantly collectivist society and perhaps

also to acknowledge the “behind the scenes” work of supervisors or academic advisors that may have gone into the final product. My UK tutor queried me good-naturedly at the time—“Who are ‘we’? Is this the royal we?”—and we discussed the conventions of academic writing in the UK context. This memory stayed with me because the approach to and the underlying assumptions around expressing oneself in academic writing were so different in the two contexts I was operating in at the time.

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Engaging Writing Is Stylish Writing

While the word “stylish” might evoke the realm of fashion rather than academe, Helen Sword (2012) uses the term in a particular way (see chapters 2 and 6 of this book for further reference to her work). In the afterword to her book, *Stylish Academic Writing*, she argues that all stylish writers hold three ideals in common. The first is *communication*, which implies respect for your audience. The second is *craft*, which requires respect for language. The third is *creativity* or respect for the academic endeavor.

To these ideals, Sword adds three more. The first is *concreteness*, which she defines as a verbal technique: the use of “words that engage the senses and anchor your ideas in physical space” (2012, 173). The second is *choice*, which she asserts as an intellectual right: the intellectual right to choose which words you use and what effect they will have. She suggests that writers need to be what Donald Schön (1987) calls reflective practitioners in the realm of writing—always engaged in monitoring and adjusting methods. Finally, she adds *courage*, which she proposes is a frame of mind. While it is possible to always play safe and write in ways that conform to expectations out of fear that you might fail or disappoint, Sword (2012, 174) asks, “Why always assume the worst rather than aim for the best?”

Sword ends her book with an exhortation to writers to produce writing that “engages, impresses, and inspires” (2012, 175) through

embracing the six ideals she discusses in her afterword. These ideals are consistent with some of the other points we have made in this chapter about engaging writing and with the threads we weave throughout this book: engaging in conversation with fellow learning and teaching scholars, fostering your identities through a values-based approach to writing, and using writing to learn. In *Our Perspectives 25.1*, we share our own development in relation to clarity, voice, and style.

Our Perspectives 25.1

Clarity, voice, and style in our writing

Alison: I am heavily influenced by all the fiction and poetry I read as a college undergraduate and taught as an instructor of high school English. I chose to major in English literature and then teach it because I love language—how beautiful it can sound and how powerfully it can capture human experience and insight. So when I write, I try to keep in mind the clear prose, the strong voices, and the elegant arguments and stories that make up so much of what I have read, and I try to bring some version of those to my writing about learning and teaching.

Mick: This is the area of the book I feel least comfortable with. Although I strive to be clear in my writing, and I have become more used to writing in the first person, style is not something I would ever claim. One of the many benefits of working with Alison is that she has done much to turn my turgid text into something more presentable. This is an area I need to learn more about.

Kelly: Yeah, no. Of course I want to communicate through writing in ways that make sense to my audience. I don't want my terrible execution of English grammar to diminish the content of what I am communicating. Perhaps because I know I am not a wordsmith, I tend to write in simple, direct ways without fancy words. When I try to be more than I am as a writer, I fail, and am then reminded to write like Kelly Matthews. Writing is a journey of communication

and if readers understand what I am communicating, then I feel successful as a writer.

Your perspective: What is your sense of clarity, voice, and style in your writing?

Over to You

Striving for clarity, strong voice, and stylishness will not only make your writing engaging to others but can also make it more engaging to you. If you feel you are writing in ways that are clear, true to yourself, and dynamic, you will feel energized rather than depleted by writing. This, we suggest, is because you are experiencing a connection with yourself as a person with meaningful experiences and insights, and you are experiencing the potential of connecting with other people. It is an area, though, that many of us find challenging. Pause and reflect on your answers to these questions:

- Is your writing clear? Have you selected precise, accurate, clear, accessible words and arranged them in an order that conveys your intended meaning?
- Is the voice you have constructed for your writing true to your identity? Does it seek to connect with readers who share dimensions of your identity as well as those who may have different identities?
- Does your writing achieve the six ideals—communication, craft, creativity, concreteness, choice, and courage—as well as rigor, insight, imagination, and largeness of vision?