**Stylish Academic Writing - Helen Sword**

HELEN SWORD: Well, thank you, Amy and Judy, for organizing this. And thank you, Steve and Elizabeth, for taking part. Judy mentioned sort of a formative moment as a graduate student. And I'll start with one of mine.

When I was doing my PhD at Princeton in comparative literature, I remember a moment at the end of my first year when somebody in my department was in his second year and was just taking his general exams, PhD qualifying exams. And so we all clustered around him afterwards. And we said, how'd it go? How'd it go? And he said, oh, I think it went really well. I've just spent the last hour writing about the slippage of the signifier.

And I thought, I don't even know what that means. But of course, by a year later when I took my exams, I had made damn sure that I knew what it meant. And also, I'm pretty sure that I managed to get that phrase into my exam, because I could tell that it sounded really impressive.

And so that was one of those moments when I internalized this idea that being an academic writer was primarily about impressing other academics with your erudition. I've come to believe that it is or should be about communicating effectively, whether with colleagues or with people outside of the academy. And I think learning to make that distinction was also an important part of my education. I went on from there, then, to teach in an English department for about 10 years.

I wrote a couple of books of literary criticism. I prided myself that they were well-written. I thought of myself as a good writer. And I think I did manage to avoid the worst temptations of jargon that people in that discipline in particular can fall into. And yet, I would go to academic conferences, and people would come up and say, loved your book. And that was great. There was a real sense of communicating with the colleagues. But I would give a copy to my mother. And she'd flip through the first chapter. And she'd say, my, you know a lot of big words.

So the moment for me when I really started to think about academic writing more broadly outside of my discipline came maybe seven or eight years ago, when I shifted into working in faculty development and higher education research. And so I was charged with developing and teaching on a program that was for faculty at my university who wanted to become more research-informed teachers. So I naturally went out, trying to find readings for them.

I wanted to find people working in higher education research who could kind of summarize the best of that research so that people could benefit from that research in their own teaching. Found plenty of good books that did that, and I could pull chapters out of those books. And I think there's a lesson there that the bar is higher with book publishing. You go through a lot more-- you have to step through a lot more gates.

But when I looked in the top international higher education research journals, what I found were a whole bunch of articles that, by and large, were, at best, wooden and dry, at worst, spongy and soggy, and that really seemed to be communicating-- they seemed to be higher education researchers trying to impress other higher education researchers with their jargon, and with their language, and with their methodology. And most of these articles I couldn't use.

At first, I thought maybe it was just because I came from literary studies. And maybe it was just me. So I did distribute a few of these to my colleagues. So these would be people from law, population health, music, engineering. And they pretty much all said, no, we don't want to read this stuff. Don't understand it. They're taking 20 pages to say something they could say in five pages, et cetera.

And that was when I started to think there's something wrong here if people who are doing research on higher education teaching and learning cannot-- are either not able to or can't be bothered to communicate that research to other people working in higher education teaching and learning-- so educated people with PhDs-- then what are those articles for? What are they doing?

So at that point, I decided to do a little bit of empirical research of my own. I sent out an email basically to everybody I knew and asked them to send it on to everybody they knew. And I asked a couple of questions. I asked, what is your definition of stylish academic writing? And it isn't intentionally oxymoronic and slightly provocative phrase. Not everybody likes the word stylish. If that doesn't ring your bell, you can replace it with engaging, or even just effective academic writing.

So if you ask yourself the same questions, think of who are the writers in your field who really engage you and who, when you read their writing, you think, I would like to write like that. And then think about what is it that they do? What are the characteristics of their writing? That is stylish academic writing.

So I got back responses from more than 70 people from around the world and across the disciplines. And what I found astonishing was how, despite the disciplinary differences, how consistent their responses were. They pretty much all said, in one way or another, that they value people who take complex ideas and communicate them clearly, or if not clearly-- because not every discipline values clarity as much as others. Some actually value opacity. But still, there is the idea that they communicate complex ideas in a way that illuminates those ideas for their reader.

They talked about the importance of communication. They would say, I like authors who tell a story. I like authors who use lots of examples to illustrate whatever it is they're talking about. And this came whether, it was people in the science, or humanities, social sciences. And so from that list and also from looking at examples of some of the writers that they particularly recommended, I made a kind of 10 point, you could call it a grading rubric, 10 things that the stylish academic writers usually do.

So there are things like they usually have an engaging title, a title that kind of says, come read me. I've gone to some work with this. They usually have an opening paragraph that really pulls you in. They usually use lots and lots of examples. They usually do have a sense of a story they're telling. They always have well-crafted sentences.

So you might prefer concision in your writing. Or you might prefer really long, complex syntax. But either way, the stylish writers are the ones who have really taken the time to make those sentences well-crafted. Pretty much everybody in this room would probably agree on those things.

So I took this 10 point list. And then I checked it against a number of the stylish academic writers who had been recommended. Steve was on the list. And I did my best to find, not just books by these people, but articles where possible, so that I wouldn't be comparing apples with oranges, rated these writers on the 10 point scale. And most of them came out-- I think the average score for 10 people across the disciplines was about 9.1, which isn't too surprising, because I'd constructed the rubric based on what they do. But it was just to make the point that it is possible to write academic articles that do these things and to publish them in a range of journals.

Then I looked at 100 articles from basically the six highest rated higher education research journals. And I rated them on the same 10 point scale. Anyone want to take a guess that at average score out of 10 possible? I heard a four. I saw three. 2.5-- you were all optimists.

[LAUGHTER]

The mean score was 1.1. The median score was zero. More than half did none of these 10 things. And again, you just have to look at that and say, why? What is going on here? Why would the authors of these journal articles not do any of the things that we all know you can do to make your work more engaging and readable?

And I think the reason is, well, there are various institutional reasons. But they kind of boil down to convention and fear, people actually thinking that they have to write that way in order to get published. So I actually wrote an article based on that research , got it published in the top journal, Studies in Higher Education, to prove the point that the editors actually are looking for things that are engaging, as long as the research has to be there. There can't be empty style without the substance.

At that point, I decided to broaden my research and look at academic writing across the disciplines, which has been just absolutely fascinating. I stopped using the grading rubric, because I didn't want to be pitting-- you know, it's not fair. And in some disciplines, if you're looking at a medical journal, where people are writing a seven page, very formulaic [INAUDIBLE] of a five year research project. You're not expecting the snazzy introduction and things. You have readers who want to come in and just sort of mine it for the facts. But those same writers in the sciences also have the moments when they need to communicate with, for instance, the tenure and promotion committees or the grant writing committees, when actually having those more stylish strategies would be very useful for them, the ones that engage and persuade people.

So I started looking. I looked at 1,000 articles, 100 each from 10 different disciplines across the sciences, the social sciences, and the arts and humanities and found that while, in most disciplines, things aren't quite as dire as they are in higher education, still a strikingly high number of disciplines-- of academics in pretty much all disciplines are very much ruled by convention, which I find interesting for academics. Because I think of being an academic as being about pushing the boundaries of knowledge. And yet, a lot of the training that we do with our graduate students is about disciplining them, fitting them within. And so there's a real kind of difficulty there.

So by the time I'd done that research, I also looked at well over probably 150 books and articles by people who had been recommended to me by colleagues in their own fields as stylish academic writers. And I decided in the book not to focus on the negative side, the bad side. Turns out, I'm very good at doing these really snarky close readings of really bad sentences, and I quite enjoy doing it. But it makes people feel bad, you know.

And if you want to change things, you don't do it by criticizing people. You do it by inspiring them. So I tried to find the inspiring examples. And the book is full of these little spotlights on style, where I've taken particular writers and done close readings of their works, their sentences and paragraphs, to try to demystify what stylish writing is.

Yes, some people are more talented and more skillful at writing than others. But they are all using techniques that anybody can learn. And so I tried to really break down what they were doing into the specific techniques that they use.

At the beginning of the book, I talked about three characteristics of stylish writing that I think go across the board, no matter what the discipline. So style can vary. We can all have different stylistic preferences. But stylish academic writers, I think, always, always, always, are concerned with communication. So that's one of the characteristics.

Another is that I think they are always concerned with craft. As I've already said, it could be a short sentence, a long one, but as long as it's a well-crafted sentence. And the point there is that the author is doing the work, not expecting the reader to do the work. And think about that when you're reading something where you're really plowing through it and trying to figure it out. It's probably because the author hasn't actually taken the time to work it and work it and work it.

This may seem really obvious to most of you sitting here, but I don't think it's obvious always to our students. I've heard a lot of graduate students say, you know, I'm not a very good writer. And it's so frustrating. It's the same story of getting all the red pen back. And this is a bad thing.

My supervisor is a really good writer. And then I write these things, and it's just mush. And I have to work on it and work on it and work on it to make it any better. And it's so hard. And it's so frustrating. And I'm just not really very good.

Then you go, and you talk to the supervisor. And this is some of the research I'm doing now, interviewing academics about their writing. And they'll say, oh, when I write the first draft, it's just mush. It's a big mess. But then I work on it, and I work on it, and I work on it. And I craft it. And I'm an artisan of words.

And I work on it. And it's hard, but it's so satisfying, getting it to where it gets better and better and better. Right, same story from those two different people. But one of them is seeing it as this horrible frustration, because they don't understand that that's actually what it takes to write the stylish prose.

And so I've come to believe that one of the qualities of-- one of the sort of human qualities that goes with stylish writing is a pleasure in the craft. Until you acquire that pleasure in the craft, you won't necessarily want to put in the hard yards to get there. So communication craft, and the third C that I write about in the introduction is creativity, by which I don't mean necessarily that academics are or should be bringing techniques from creative writing into their academic writing, although some people do that very deliberately and effectively.

I mean that what I noticed amongst the stylish writers I looked at is that they don't adhere to convention if the convention doesn't suit them. And they are constantly pulling in ideas from other disciplines. Again, if you think of the top people in your own field, think of what they do, either stylistically or in terms of the research. And you'll find that most of them are quite intradisciplinary thinkers. I've seen this again and again.

They're reading widely. They're bringing in ideas from outside the discipline. And that's precisely how they're pushing the discipline forward. So for teaching our students that being an academic is about adhering to convention, we're actually teaching them not to be in that kind of top tier, I think.

By the time I finished the book, I'd come up with three more C's. Helps me remember them-- good mnemonic. And so these were things that I wasn't necessarily looking for at the beginning. But by the time I had finished, I had really noticed them. One of them is actually more a technique than an overall principle, which is concreteness.

I saw this again and again, whether in the science writing or the humanities or anywhere in between, that the writers that most of us find the most engaging are the ones who use concrete language and concrete examples, particularly when they're talking about abstract ideas. Now, being an academic is all about abstraction. That's the whole point. The definition of research is the advancement of knowledge or the creation of new generalizable knowledge. That act of generalizing is, in essence, an act of abstraction.

So it's not a matter of saying you won't be abstract. It's a matter of communicating those abstract ideas through concrete language. And I just, I notice it again and again. Sometimes it's just through the use, the choice of verbs and nouns. And that's why we have so much language in academe. Some of it kind of turns into dead metaphors at some point. But that's why we talk about exploring ideas and about constructing theoretical frameworks. Those are concrete terms that we're using to just kind of give us something we can visualize.

And my favorite example of how this works comes, not from a piece of academic writing, although you could find many examples of it again. I'm sure you think about this, Steve, when you're writing. Because you certainly do it. But it's from a political speech. Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" speech is about abstract concepts, right? It's about freedom and injustice and all these things.

But the way that he communicates those ideas is relentlessly concrete. So he'll say, "I have a dream that one day in the red hills of Georgia, the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood." He ends with the abstract noun. But by the time he gets you to the brotherhood, he's taken you to a place, the red hills of Georgia, giving you this visual.

He's given you these people, the sons of the slaves and the sons of the slave owners. He's given you an action. They sit down together at a place, at the table of brotherhood.

"I have a dream that my four little children will one day be able to be judged, not by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character." Same thing-- he gives you the particulars. He gives you the visual image. And then he gives the abstraction, the content of your character. So if this is something that you don't normally think about, and I'm sure some of you do, but if it's not something you've thought about much before, pay attention to it when you're reading or when you're listening.

I particularly like the genre of the school graduation speech. You know, so the principal will be talking about striving for the attainment of excellence and all this sort of thing. And everybody is kind of nodding off. And then at some point, they'll go, let me tell you a story. And they tell you a story of a former student who has attained excellence. And suddenly, you perk up again, because you're back in the concrete world. You're in the world of bodies that we live in.

So concreteness-- that was, as a technique, that would be, for me, the number one that really came out of that book. Telling stories goes with that. But that's of forming, of making things concrete.

Another of the sort of overall principles is choice. And what I found from my research is that in most disciplines, at any given time, you actually have choices about style. And again, I hear a lot of early career academics, grad students, say that they can't do things because they're not allowed to.

So a classic example of that that I investigated a bit in the book is pronoun usage, right? Can you or can you not use first person pronouns, I and we? The number of times people have said to me, particularly social scientists, we're not allowed to use the first person, and then I go and I look at the journals in their discipline. And it may not be conventional to use the first person, but there will always be one article where somebody does, one out of 10 or something like that.

The social scientists will say, well, we're not allowed to use the first person, because we have to sound like scientists. I looked at three scientific disciplines. I looked at evolutionary biology, computer science, and medicine. And I found that in all of them, 80% or more of the authors used we. And all of the style guides in every discipline say, go ahead and use first person pronouns. I couldn't find a single one, including APA, used by most people in social sciences, that says, use the passive voice and don't include yourself. And yet, it's persisted as this kind of myth.

The most surprising finding for me was that, of the 10 disciplines I looked at, the one where first person pronouns were used least was not in the sciences. It wasn't in the social sciences. It was in history. So in history, I found that of the sample I looked at, 100 articles, about 40% used first person pronouns and about 60% did not.

In contrast to literary studies, a neighboring genre, very similar in many ways-- and there is something like 98% used first person pronouns. So I went, and I talked to the history department at my university. And I showed them these statistics. And I said, explain this to me. Why don't you use-- you write in a very personal style, generally. It's not-- most historians are not pretending to be completely objective. But they're doing that through other means, not through the first person.

And so the chair of the department stuck up his hand. And he said, well, I don't use first person pronouns because Professor So-and-So at Oxford told me in 1978 that I must never do so. And he had never since then actually questioned that.

Now, if 60% are not using personal pronouns and 40% are, that suggests to me that if you're a historian, you have a choice. It is your choice. It is not the convention that is choosing things for you. So I would encourage academics, and particularly again early career academics who are learning the genres, to learn them in terms of choices they make, rather than in terms of conventions they have to follow.

But that brings me to the final C, which is courage. I think it takes courage to be a stylish academic writer, to push on that oxymoron. And it can be difficult to be courageous, particularly if you're early in your career. So another one of the stories I hear a lot from the graduate students and pre-tenured academics is, well, so-and-so who's a really great writer-- Steve Pinker, yeah, he writes in a more personal style. But he's allowed to, because he's famous. And he's got tenure and all this.

So I've been interviewing. The project I'm doing now, I've kind of shifted from looking at academic style to talking to the people who write the books. So I'm looking at people. And by the time I finish this trip, I will have interviewed more than 100 academics from all across the disciplines and from about 15 different countries, all people who have been recommended by colleagues, not necessarily as stylish writers, just as people who are interesting writers or interested in writing or seem to just be able to be productive writers and also to raise a family, or have a normal life, or whatever.

So I'm just talking to them and asking them lots of questions about how they learned to write, what their daily habits are, what their emotions are. And then I've been asking some of the same questions on a questionnaire, too. By the end, I'll have about 1,000 people who will have-- so academics from grad students through to emeriti professors who will have answered those questions.

And one of the things that I've been asking particularly the successful, the well-known writers is, is this true that you waited until after you had tenure to start kind of pushing the envelope on style? So I interviewed Douglas Hofstadter, the author of Godel, Escher, Bach, which he started writing when he was 28 years old. He won the Pulitzer Prize for it. And it made his academic career.

And he, of course, said, this is complete nonsense. I made my academic career by having written a book that was unusual and that didn't adhere to any academic genre. So I do hear the stories of people who submit things to journals. And they get pushed back. They get told to chop out all the interesting bits, or to take out the first person, or whatever.

But I've also heard a lot of wonderful stories of resistance, of going back to the editor and negotiating, or of sending the paper to another journal and then winning the prize for the best article for doing precisely the things that somebody else told them they couldn't do. That takes confidence. That takes courage.

But I think it's something that it's worth it for all of us to push on ourselves, but in particular, to encourage our students to do, so to encourage them to be the courageous writers, rather than the frightened, conventional ones. So I'll end there and see what these two have to say.

[APPLAUSE]