

Academic Writing, and How to Learn How to Write

I read with great interest the editorial by Yarris and colleagues on academic writing,¹ and I fully agree that academic writing is going to change. It must change, to be true—not only because it should align with technological development, but also because far too often academic texts are unclear, clumsy, and inefficient. We need articles like Yarris et al's and similar initiatives to change this for the better.

A man of the written word, I see academic writing mainly through the prism of actual writing—which does not mean I do not agree with everything else Yarris and colleagues wrote about, because I do. But let me focus on academic writing as an actual *writing* process. Even if the written word is to be partly replaced with other means, such as visualization, we will continue to write, at least because this is likely the best means of showing what we *think*. Most visualizations, be it a graph or a table, also show what we think, because they show how we interpret the data: For a given data set, we can often present various charts, offering quite different interpretations. But to show what you think, it's best to write it, even if other measures can help.

The authors emphasize, and I fully agree, that academic writers will have to change their approach to writing, switching from an incomprehensible language full of jargon to an understandable one—and even, I would say, to pleasurable writing.² Sad but true, more often than not academic texts are difficult to understand, and the future of academic writing should change that.

To this end, we not only need to put more emphasis on teaching young researchers how to write, but also on convincing not so young ones to further develop their writing skills. While many among the former can be taught, most of the latter would prefer to self-learn. For this, they need to practice, and they need good resources—Yarris and colleagues proposed at least a couple of them.¹

While I really like Stephen King's *On Writing*³ and Anne Lamott's *Bird by Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life*,⁴ and I love Helen Sword's *Air & Light & Time & Space: How Successful Academics Write*,⁵ these are by no means writing resources. I am afraid that beginning writers starting off with these books would learn what the life of a writer is like, not

how to write. Explaining how to organize your work in order to write more, Paul J. Silva also does not offer advice on how to write well.⁶

There are quite a few books that do not tell stories about writers and writing, but that show what good writing is and how to write well. Yarris and colleagues provided a perfect example: Helen Sword's *Stylish Academic Writing*—but unlike the authors stated, it deals with academic, not general, writing. I think academic authors would learn a lot from Thomas S. Kane's *The Oxford Essential Guide to Writing*⁷ and Joseph M. Williams's *Style: Ten Lessons in Charity and Grace*,⁸ both being general writing books; and from Anne E. Greene's *Writing Science in Plain English*, focused on academic writing, particularly on biology.⁹ Let's not forget William Zinsser's *On Writing Well: The Classic Guide to Writing Nonfiction*, another general writing book of useful advice, very well-known among nonfiction writers.¹⁰ Michael Swan's *Practical English Usage*¹¹ might not offer the most pleasant read, since it's a usage guide—but it's known of great usefulness for anyone writing in English.

Of course, these are just my choices. I have enjoyed 20 or 30 other books (by such authors as Roy Peter Clark, Patricia T. O'Conner, Lynne Truss, Constance Hale, June Casagrande, and Mark Forsyth), but the brevity of this letter does not enable me to provide that long a list. If you wish and have the time, find your own favorites, but I would advise beginning with the ones described above.

I have always treated general writing books as more useful than most academic writing ones, for the simple reason that often the latter are too . . . academic. There are exceptions, though, like the above-mentioned Sword's and Greene's books. I am afraid that too few academics and educators have time to spend on reading about writing. So, unless you are, like me, a rare specimen of a minority population finding pleasure in reading about writing, and do so not only to learn how to write, but also to enjoy your scarce free time—start off with Greene and Sword, and then, if you can, follow with Williams, Zinsser, and Kane.

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