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Introduction

The Primal Scene of Academic Writing

All academic writers begin their journeys in the classroom. There they write for an audience of one person: the teacher.

Professors read students' work as evaluators. The evaluator has a specific job: to read their students' writing from beginning to end and assess it. (The job usually includes writing a response, too, but let's put that task aside.)

The central quality of the evaluator's job is thoroughness. She will read your work closely and completely. One of my former teachers, Edward Tayler, described it this way:

With proper allowance for human weakness, you may reasonably hope for an attentive, sympathetic reading of every word you write—a kind of reading you may not reasonably hope for ever again.¹

This kind of careful reading is a gift. As Simone Weil put it: "Attention is the rarest and purest form of generosity."²

But there's another concrete and essential reason why student writers may expect this careful attention: *the reader is getting paid*.

The evaluator's position as a paid reader is the exact opposite of the general reader's. General readers pay for the privilege of reading (by buying books or magazines, or subscribing to websites), and they feel no obligation whatever to be thorough. General readers will quit reading if they don't enjoy what they're

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doing, or if they don't feel they're getting something worthwhile out of the experience.

Every academic writer begins by writing for a captive audience: someone who is literally being paid to pay attention. Long before they set foot in graduate school or venture beyond it, academic writers spend years getting used to a reader who can't be distracted or discouraged, because that reader receives cash to read to the end.³

The main problem with writing for a captive audience is that it teaches us to take the reader's attention for granted. Student writers learn to be long-winded because they know—consciously or not—that their reader won't quit on them. They can begin a mile away from their topic and slowly work their way in. Or they may supply three examples where one will do (usually to fill up pages to reach an assigned word limit—tell me you've never done that), all because they trust that the reader will dutifully trudge through.

When student writers sit down to write for a paid audience of one, they enact the primal scene of academic writing. Like other mythical moments of ordinary consciousness—the fall of Adam and Eve, the Freudian discovery of civilization's discontents, and so on—this primal scene portends disappointment. It points to its own future failures.

But academic writing's primal scene begets far worse than prolixity. Its worst symptom is that it promotes a disconnection from, and disregard for, the reader.

If you know that your readers will stay with you no matter what, you don't have to worry too much about how you treat them. Instead of working to care for the reader, academic writers are taught by their earliest experience that readers are unconditionally invested. They require no consideration because they're already on the hook. That unfortunate lesson invites all kinds of bad writing, and with it the genesis of this book.

Like all primal scenes, the academic writer's beginning ripples forward to affect the future. Academic writers don't leave our primal scene behind. Instead, we re-create and repeat it. (I know I

have. I've made many of the mistakes that I warn against in this book.) After we pass the stage of writing for an audience of one, we go on to make many of the same bad moves when we write for wider audiences, often with the hope of getting published. Unexamined bad habits become enshrined. Care for the reader remains an afterthought—or no thought at all.

The primal scene thus stays with us ever after. Writing a paper for your undergraduate professor, a dissertation for a committee, and an article for publication are really three versions of the same exercise, separated by time and experience. Like the professor who reads a student's work, the evaluators of journal and book submissions are paid readers also.*

I'll have more to say presently about how to create a more generous relation between the academic writer and the academic reader—a lot more. I'll also give unvarnished advice about other writing matters.

In a book full of rules and principles, here's the first one:

Even if the reader is being paid, it is better to write as though he or she were not. Write to earn your reader's attention, and then keep on earning it.

On Rules (and Rule-Breaking)

I wrote this book for two main reasons. The first is that academic writing has a bad public reputation, with painful results that affect us all. Imagine standing up to announce that most scholarly books and articles are boring, impenetrable, or worse. The response

* Wait, I hear you say: article evaluators typically aren't paid. That's technically true (though the readers of submitted book manuscripts usually are compensated). But evaluators who teach at colleges and universities are paid for what is ambiguously called "service," a category that includes this kind of work. There's also an implied quid pro quo that promotes focused attention: I read the work of my peers with care so that they will do the same for me. Whether through the influence of pay or barter, the author of a scholarly submission may expect a careful and complete reading just as the student author of a seminar paper does.

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would be a collective shrug—because that sentiment has become a virtual cliché. Most academic writing is assumed to be bad. Every academic writer starts out in that deep hole.

I would characterize the problem differently. I find that most academic writing is unfriendly and ungenerous. Too many academic writers treat their readers indifferently, or worse. But our readers are the reason that academia—and academic writing—exist in the first place. Poor academic writing contributes to a larger lack of respect for academic work.

That disrespect is everybody's business. If higher education is a public good—and it must be—then it must interact fruitfully with the wider public. Yet the writers working in higher education mistreat various publics, including our closest community of fellow academic readers. Too much academic writing sends an unfortunate message to readers: you don't matter.

Every academic writer—whether student or teacher—represents all the others. Yes, each writer is a free agent. But academic writers also take part in a shared system of inquiry. We matter to each other—and to our readers—as a group. As I will suggest, that's why we must write well: because our work matters to more than just ourselves.

Which brings me to my second reason for this book: because reading most academic writing is work. I mean that in both the literal and the figurative sense. Reading academic writing is literally part of many people's jobs. Figuratively, doing that job can be a slog—it's work to get through the stuff. We (and by "we," I don't mean just professors and students, but anyone engaged in serious intellectual inquiry) may read academic writing as part of our jobs, but that doesn't mean that reading it has to feel like work. Put simply, most academic writing is reader-*unfriendly*.

This unfriendliness problem also affects all of us—and again, I don't mean only people who work at colleges and universities. Academic writing, like the intellectual mission it demonstrates, badly needs renovation, lest it be dismissed and torn down by a public that is increasingly skeptical about it. The public judges us by what we say, starting with how we say it. I hope that this book

will help individual writers. I hope, too, that it will lead to writing that helps readers. And, finally, I hope that it will also aid the larger effort to reinforce the frayed relations between town and gown.

What about AI?

As I was finishing this book, artificial intelligence (AI) abruptly arose as a frightening specter on the writing landscape. Language Learning Models such as ChatGPT are already provoking questions of whether writing will soon turn into the esoteric practice of a small population of specialists. The role of Generative AI will surely shake out in the coming years, and I offer my own early thoughts on that subject in the appendix to this book. The capacities of AI already amaze—but they don't include conscious, connected communication.

The idea of writing as communication lies at the center of this book. A writer who does a good job forges a connection with the reader, and sympathetic understanding flows back and forth. Too much academic writing lacks writerly effort to create that connection. Nor is the problem limited to academic writing. Today's public sphere is filled with too much noise and not enough actual communication.

If academics are to fulfill their role as teachers, then we ought to model communication—a connection between writer and reader—at every level of the academic enterprise. AI can't do that because it lacks sensibility. This must be the job of actual human writers. Any writing that goes beyond “souped-up auto-correct” (as economist Paul Krugman has described AI) requires that the writer seek understanding and connection with other humans.⁴ How to connect is a skill that's not limited to writing—but writing can teach it. And we can use more of it in the world.

All of this brings me to . . . cooking. Perhaps you've read the magazine *Cook's Illustrated*. The format of a typical *CI* article is: “I set

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out to make the perfect version of a potato gratin.” The writer will then continue: “I was looking for that perfect combination of crisp potato crust and mealy interior, the just-right balance of cream and cheesy tang in the sauce. So I cooked 192 versions of the dish in which I fiddled with all the variables (ingredients, temperatures, cooking times, and so forth) until I got each element just right. Let me describe what I did. And finally, let me present the perfect recipe for a potato gratin.”

That’s how *CI* founding editor Christopher Kimball and his epigones cook. You may say that you have your recipe for a dish and I have mine, and to each their own taste. Not Kimball. He’ll inform you with conviction that his recipe is the right one. You might say he’s a fascist cook, but after trying some of his recipes, I can say that his flavors run on time.*

There’s a value to knowing a set of rules. Rules put the struts under the wings of imagination. If you learn the rules that govern a cuisine, you’ll know how to invent a recipe within that cuisine or experiment outside of it. If you learn the rules that govern writing, you can be creative within any set of conventions. ***Of course you can—and sometimes should!—break those rules, but not before you show that you know them.*** Otherwise, you will, in the words of one of my old teachers, be presumed to have made a mistake rather than a point.⁵

For Example

Jazz musicians knew that soulfulness and spontaneity are the product of discipline and responsibility. —LOUIS MENAND

* In 2015 Kimball was forced out of the magazine he founded after more than twenty years, but *Cook’s Illustrated* continues undaunted. So does Kimball, who has started a new venture, *Milk Street*. I mention these things not just because I like to cook tasty food but also because I want to illustrate the proper function of a footnote, which should act something like an extended parenthesis. More on footnotes in chapter 3.

But what about the danger that rules can restrict and exclude? In a 2015 review of Umberto Eco's *How to Write a Thesis*, literary critic Hua Hsu talked about the relevance of rules to scholarly conversation. The "protocols and standards" that feature in research and writing guides like Eco's (and also the one you're reading), says Hsu, "offer a vision of our best selves." Hsu channels Eco's belief that following these rules "allows the average person entry into a veritable universe of argument and discussion."

A common criticism of rulebooks these days is that they exclude members of disadvantaged groups. Many members of these groups are first-generation entrants to colleges, universities, and other intellectual collectives. The concern is that too many rules oppose the learning needs of an increasingly diverse community of scholars. Much good pedagogy is directed at meeting such students "where they are." I try to do that in my own classrooms.

But rules need not discourage community or isolate its would-be members. Rules can also build communities. They can bring readers and writers together. Hsu suggests that the changing demographics of the academy make Eco's call for rules all the more vital, because rules ensure clarity and unity within an ever more diverse conversation. The more voices engaged, the more valuable the rules of engagement.⁶

This book presents a lot of rules, so before I go further, I want to make my rationale clear.

The first and most important test of a writing rule is whether it produces good writing. But "good writing" is a subjective term, you may say. That's true, so let's keep it simple: good writing is writing that meets the needs of its audience. These needs will, of course, differ by case. The reader of a user's manual for a television set and the reader of a scholarly history of the Balkans aren't seeking the same experience. I'll address the specific needs of the academic reader in chapter 1.

Consider the vexing case of the first-person pronoun. Most writers have been taught never to say "I" in their expository writing. Judging from what my students tell me, the ban has invariably

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been presented as a rule with no explanation other than “because it’s not proper,” which is really no explanation at all. *The blanket rule against “I” is a bad rule* because it produces bad results. Lots of serious writing benefits when the writer steps forward. You’re the one doing the talking, after all, not an anonymous and impersonal voice intoning, “It is interesting to note that.”

Of course, certain kinds of writing may benefit when you don’t say “I.” In much lab science writing, the procedure matters more than the person carrying it out, so it can be useful to efface the experimenter to highlight the experiment. But my point is that the absolute prohibition of the first-person pronoun reflects unexamined dogmatism rather than a concern for good writing. Good rules must come with good reasons.

Tip

Don’t avoid contractions.

The rule against contractions is another bad one. True, contractions tend to be informal and academic writing tends toward the formal, but it’s also valuable to sound like a person, not a stuffed shirt. Moreover, contractions often provide the smoothest passage through a sentence. If I had used “it is” instead of “it’s” earlier in this paragraph, it wouldn’t have sounded right to me.

You needn’t use contractions as often as I do, but you shouldn’t avoid them just because someone warned you against them. The proof lies in the result.

When you lay down rules, you also have to allow for changes—and that’s another reason to know the “why” behind the rule. I’ll supply reasons in this book, and I’ll acknowledge changes. Language evolves. Here are a few quick examples. The word “nauseous” originally meant “causing nausea” (as in, “The smell of that sour milk is nauseous”). But the word’s usage has changed over time. Now it

also means “nauseated”—that is, about to vomit (“That sour milk made me nauseous”). In fact, the “nauseated” definition has largely displaced the older meaning of “causing nausea.” Likewise, “data” used to be a plural noun (with “datum” as the singular). Now it’s mostly used in the singular, a usage I follow here. The word “hopefully” used to mean “with hope” (“‘May I have a cookie?’ she asked hopefully”). Now it also means “it is to be hoped” (“Hopefully the cookie jar has been left unattended”). In this case, too, the newer definition has elbowed the older one aside.

I don’t love all these changes, but I accept them. (Well, most of them. I choose to use “hopefully” only the old way.) Personal pronoun usage is undergoing rapid change right now, so rapid that I won’t suggest any rules to govern pronouns in this book. At the time of this writing, the singular *they* is being used by the *New York Times*, but the *Chicago Manual of Style* approves of it only in “informal” writing.

Like all writers, I prefer certain changes over others, but I try to stay open to possibility. That is, I don’t fancy myself a “prescriptive grammarian” in all ways. I want rules only when they make sense.

Perhaps, then, I’m not quite the dictator that Christopher Kimball is when he enters the kitchen. Surely there’s more than one way to cook something. The proof, you might say, is in the pudding. Moreover, tastes change. Yet Kimball’s chocolate chip cookie is pretty damned good. If you want to depart from the established standard, you should have a reason.⁷

The usage of the word “unique” shows the need for rules. The word means “one of a kind,” and therefore it accepts no comparisons. One thing cannot be “more unique” than another. That’s a good rule, and I correct writers when they break it, because “somewhat unique” has no meaning, and “relatively unique” is like saying “sort of pregnant.”

While I’m wearing my grammarian’s hat, I will offer the Grammarian’s Most Important Rule: ***Don’t look like an idiot if you can avoid it.*** You can qualify “unique” in a small number of sensible ways (“nearly unique” is okay, for instance, because it’s logical). Stray from those and you’ll find that it’s not a good

look—and a bad look hurts your credibility, and with it your writerly fortunes.

I have focused so far on the smallest possible examples—single words—but rules likewise apply to sentences, paragraphs, and whole arguments. Usage, like scholarship, changes “by methodological consent”—which is to say, gradually.⁸ I’ll work through the rules from the large to the small in this book. After an opening chapter on the special needs of the academic reader, I’ll present some rules in chapter 2 for the construction of arguments, paragraphs, and sentences. Chapter 3 will look at words, with a particular focus on jargon. Chapter 4 concludes the book with an argument that academic writing must change—for the sake of academics and academic work, and for the sake of readers. All of this guidance points toward an overarching goal: We need to value and respect our audiences better.

If you want to bestow that respect on your reader, then one priority should prevail: clarity. Writers make decisions all the time. How long should this sentence be? How much detail should I go into to explain a concept? Should the ending look back toward what I have already done or forward to the new ideas I’ve brought into view? The answers are judgment calls, shaped by experience—and rules.

The answers also arise from practical common sense: what will work best. Should I use the first person? Should I tell an illustrative story? Should I start with a scene or a thesis statement? The overarching question that governs all of these cases and many others is, “Will doing this help me make my point clearly, and in a way likely to grab and keep my reader’s attention?”

As the writer, you are the first judge of your work. The basis for your judgment should be what is clearest and, more broadly, what will best meet the reader’s needs.

In the end, it comes down to that. We make judgment calls to persuade the reader, so the reader is our second judge. Groups

of readers make up audiences—and I’ll be considering how to address more- and less-specialized audiences in the second half of this book. But it all starts with the relation between writer and reader. If we make moves that make us less persuasive to the reader, those moves must be mistakes. The most important rule is to avoid mistakes, and this book will help you do that.

But don’t be afraid to break the rules—if it advances your cause.

The best sentence I’ve ever seen breaks lots of them. The following extract is from Martin Luther King, Jr.’s 1963 “Letter from Birmingham Jail.” In the second sentence, King’s rage against “white moderates” takes the form of a slow burn:

I guess it is easy for those who have never felt the stinging darts of segregation to say “wait.” But when you have seen vicious mobs lynch your mothers and fathers at will and drown your sisters and brothers at whim; when you have seen hate-filled policemen curse, kick, brutalize, and even kill your black brothers and sisters with impunity; when you see the vast majority of your twenty million Negro brothers smothering in an airtight cage of poverty in the midst of an affluent society; when you suddenly find your tongue twisted and your speech stammering as you seek to explain to your six-year-old daughter why she cannot go to the public amusement park that has just been advertised on television, and see tears welling up in her little eyes when she is told that Funtown is closed to colored children, and see the depressing clouds of inferiority begin to form in her little mental sky, and see her begin to distort her little personality by unconsciously developing a bitterness toward white people; when you have to concoct an answer for a five-year-old son asking in agonizing pathos, “Daddy, why do white people treat colored people so mean?”; when you take a cross-country drive and find it necessary to sleep night after night in the uncomfortable corners of your

automobile because no motel will accept you; when you are humiliated day in and day out by nagging signs reading “white” and “colored”; when your first name becomes “nigger” and your middle name becomes “boy” (however old you are) and your last name becomes “John,” and when your wife and mother are never given the respected title “Mrs.”; when you are harried by day and haunted by night by the fact that you are a Negro, living constantly at tiptoe stance, never knowing what to expect next, and plagued with inner fears and outer resentments; when you are forever fighting a degenerating sense of “nobodyness”—then you will understand why we find it difficult to wait.

You might say that King’s sentence runs on. (It’s 318 words long.) I think you would also say that it works. And it works precisely *because* it runs on, because its long windup creates pressure that parallels the pressure that King is writing about.

Try This

Practice creative rule-breaking. You can only do so if you already know the rules. Be thankful someone bothered to teach you these rules, or be angry that no one felt it was worth the trouble to teach you—angry enough that you go off and learn them yourself.

—MIN HYOUNG SONG

Furthermore

There is no moral or ethical reason to spell a word in the way that intelligent readers expect to see it spelled. But if you don’t spell the word in the conventional way, intelligent readers will assume that you are merely ignorant, and they will be right.

—EDWARD MENDELSON

On the other hand, here's a case where breaking the rules does *not* make sense: on a *curriculum vitae* (cv), or academic résumé. Readers of cv's have definite habits. When you write yours, you should typically lead with your school credentials, because cv readers (including potential employers and grant and scholarship givers) almost always look for that information right away. It does not behoove you to annoy them by burying it.

Similarly, when you lay out your cv, you should follow the conventions of your discipline. If scientists expect your publications to be presented in chronological order and in a specific bibliographic format, then why not meet their expectations? If you don't, you'll distract them from their most important task, which is to assess your credentials. A cv is not the place to challenge your reader's assumptions or expectations. It's an arena where you should typically follow the rules.

Rules help because they ease communication. Breaking them makes sense when the exceptions ease communication. So learn the rules—and after you do, be alert to where they may not apply. If you want to be persuasive, *flout convention when you need to, but only if you can show your reader—at the same time—that you know what you're doing*. Be chatty in an academic essay, write in the second person, quote Wikipedia, mix footnotes and endnotes, or add a surprise ending—as long as it makes you understandable and convincing to your reader. Sometimes it will. But let's be realistic here: you won't want to make these risky moves very often.

One rule supersedes all the others: *You can do anything as long as it works*.

How to Read This Book

You should read this book any way you want. At one point while writing it, I was calling it *How to Take Care of the Academic Reader*. You're the reader, and I want to take care of you, not order you around. My central point is that good academic writing depends

on that care—which most academic writers don’t learn how to give. For that reason, I devote chapter 1 to that idea alone. There, I explain the relation between academic writer and academic reader in a series of metaphors. (In the process, I make a case for the use of metaphor in academic writing—and for having some fun where and when you can.)

Then come the rules, advice, and tips on how to make good academic arguments in good academic prose. (The rules and tips appear in *italic* or **boldface** type, the most important ones in *both*.) The two middle chapters form a sequence that starts globally and gradually works down to the local details: Chapter 2 focuses on the argument, first on the whole and then its parts: introductions and conclusions, transitions, signposts, paragraphs, sentences. Chapter 3 centers on words and phrases, with a spotlight on the use and misuse of jargon. The final chapter, “Why We Must,” moves outward again. There, I discuss what is at stake for all of us, and why good academic writing ought to matter to all academic writers, separately and together.

In other words, this book is a sandwich. The hefty helping of tips and techniques is the filling. Surrounding the filling and holding it all together is my larger argument about why the link between academic writer and reader is so important.

No one should tell you how to eat a sandwich, and I’m not going to try. You can skip right to the specifics in the middle if you want—I won’t be offended. Please read this book however you like; I’m grateful that you’re reading it at all. But that first chapter is there because the later specifics balance atop its foundational idea that good academic writing is about a relationship, a connection with your reader. And the first step is to look more closely at that reader.

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