

Book review: Stylish academic writing. By Helen Sword (2012). Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England: Harvard University Press, 240 pages, ISBN 9780674064485, Paper, \$23.00

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Stylish academic writing by Helen Sword

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During the long, and sometimes very exhausting process of writing a master thesis, I encountered more than 500 different texts on the topic of higher education (HE) governance. I could not help but think why most of the authors of these articles and books tried to make me not enjoy the reading? Impersonal writing with no or very little connection with the reader was widely present. On the other hand, I learned from my supervisors and older colleagues that structuring short, clear sentences is a must in academia. You should engage the reader, start with an exciting opening or a phrase and so on, I was told. I knew that students often sacrifice style while aiming to sound more objective. But is this the right way to go? I started to search for some previous research on this topic (if I realized that lack of style is a problem in HE literature, then someone else must have done the same thing). And that is how I discovered a book written by Professor Helen Sword titled *Stylish Academic Writing*. She conducted research on the ways scholars write in academia, and, more importantly, why exactly they write like that. This excellent book is worth reading, and it deserves a good review. This review sets two aims: firstly, I would like to present the main findings of the book. And secondly, I hope to connect the author's central message with the current state of academic writing in higher education and to make her voice heard. Let's start with a few words about the author.

Helen Sword holds a Ph.D. in Comparative Literature from Princeton University, and she taught for ten years in the English Department at Indiana University. In 2004, she joined the University of Auckland, where she works as a Professor and Director of the Centre for Learning and Research in Higher Education. As her personal website states, Professor Sword is “A passionate advocate of creativity and craftsmanship in scholarship, teaching, and the arts.” She received the University of Auckland's 2007 Teaching Excellence Award for Innovation in Teaching and the 2013 HERDSA-TERNZ Medal, awarded by the Higher Education Research and Development Society of Australasia to a scholar who has made a significant impact on the tertiary research environment of New Zealand. Her academic writing workshops for faculty and doctoral students have taken her to universities in North America, Europe, Africa, Asia,

Australia, and New Zealand. Finally, in addition to *Stylish Academic Writing*, Helen Sword has written four other books, numerous scholarly articles and invited commentaries in international publications.

Turning to *Stylish Academic Writing*, the book has two main parts. The first part introduces the reader to the rationale behind the book, its structure and main ideas. In the section named *Rules of Engagement*, Professor Sword explains that she decided to write this book after searching for such literature for her course on HE pedagogy. She lamented: “I soon discovered that higher education research journals are filled with articles that I, trained as a literary scholar, found almost unreadable.” Soon, she learned that other disciplines such as humanities, medicine, law and many others, also suffer from the same issues. So, she posed the questions: why is that so and how can the situation be improved? She thus embarked on a journey to find answers to these issues. First, she analysed a large number of guides to effective writing. She then examined more than one hundred books and articles considered by her colleagues to be well written and entertaining for readers. Sword found that the authors of these articles use a set of techniques (usually recommended by writing guides) to achieve what is considered to be stylish academic writing: interesting titles and subtitles, first-person anecdotes, catchy opening paragraphs, concrete nouns, numerous examples, a broad range of references and, finally, humour. In the third stage, she assembled a data set of one thousand academic articles from across disciplines: one hundred from each discipline. Then she counted how many articles in each discipline, for example, use personal pronouns (I or we) or how many of them opened with a story or anecdote. Finally, she looked at how many included a high or a low number of abstract nouns.

The second and third chapters, titled *On Being Disciplined* and *A Guide to Style Guides*, provide us with the results of Sword’s research. What is most interesting for people reading this journal is probably the situation with HE. Sword’s research found that HE researchers used personal pronouns less than, for example, scientists in the field of medicine or computer science (surprisingly, first person pronouns are dominant in other disciplines). 70 of the 100 HE articles had a unique structure, which is good news, while only 19 out of 100 had an engaging title and only 10 had an engaging opening. Also, HE scholars lead the way with the usage of abstract nouns (78 articles). Finally, 6 out of 100 HE articles had a high usage of “it”, “this”, “that” and “there”, and two articles had

a high usage of be-verbs - an average score compared to other disciplines. Looking at the number of authors per article, medicine leads the way with 9.6 authors per article, while this number for HE was 1.8. At the other end of the scale, philosophy and history had 1.1 authors per article. The average number of pages for HE articles was 24 (law leads with 43 pages on average), and the mean number of citations was 48 (again, law leads with 152 citations on average).

When it comes to writing guides, Sword emphasized two core group of findings. First, what most guides opt for is precision, clarity, coherence, concision, short or mixed length sentences, plain English, active verbs and compelling narrative. On the other hand, what these guides cannot agree on is the usage of personal pronouns, jargon, creative expression, nonstandard structure and engaging titles. Sword concludes that academics can easily understand and apply the “rules” from the first group. However, when it comes to the second group, the situation gets confusing, and researchers (especially in the early stages of their academic careers) are struggling to develop their unique style. Sword concludes that they will have to choose, and she opts for using all the things outlined in the second group.

The second part of Sword’s book, *Element of Stylishness*, goes deeper into each and every element of what Sword considered to be part of stylish academic writing. In the section titled *Voice and Echo*, she explains that academics often have a dilemma whether to use the first-person voice in their writing. Despite the fact that by doing so they can better engage the reader and make him/her feel passion and commitment to what they are reading, academics were taught not to use a personal voice, because personality should not intrude scholarly writing. Those scholars who use first-person voice were told that they risk not being taken seriously. Sword, however, is in favor of using first-person voice and explains why impersonal writing can be boring, hard to understand or even sometimes sounds hilarious.

In the fifth chapter named *Smart Sentencing*, Sword claims that: “A carefully crafted sentence welcomes its reader like a comfortable chair, bears its reader across chasms like a suspension bridge and helps its reader navigate tricky terrain like a well-hewn walking stick.” There are three essential principles that any writer can and should learn. First, to employ concrete and vivid verbs. Second, to keep nouns and verbs close

together. And finally, they should avoid weighing down their sentences with extraneous words and phrases, or “clutter.”

In chapter six, titled *Tempting Titles*, Professor Sword provides numerous examples of articles with engaging and exciting titles. She claims that interesting titles are crucial and invite the reader to read the chapter, providing a powerful first impression. In that respect, she urges writers to be creative and think about how are they going to name chapters in their written works. In addition to interesting titles, she also recommends academic writers be careful with the first few lines of their work. She claims, in the section named *Hooks and Sinkers*, that the first paragraph of the book/article/chapter should be engaging, creative and inviting.

In the next three chapters, Sword provides some more tips on how to become a stylish writer. Firstly, she advocates something that is identified in many writing guides - the careful drafting of the story. Creating a compelling story, and apparently moving from A to B can be as effective as a good thriller. Then, in the chapter *Show and Tell*, Sword encourages scholars to use examples, anecdotes, case studies, scenarios, metaphors and allusions to paint pictures in the readers' mind. Finally, in the chapter *Jargonist*, she explores the possibilities of using jargon in academic writing.

In the final four chapters, Sword deals with the structure of academic papers and books (*Structural Design*), usage of references (*Point of Reference*), writing abstracts (*The Bigger Picture*) and adding some final creativity to your writing (*The Creative Touch*). First, she provides some examples of papers with unusual structures and urges authors to be creative in this respect as well. Then, she discusses the effects of different citation styles on stylishness. Thirdly, she explains the importance of well-crafted abstracts, because they do not merely summarize the research, but have to persuade peers that the paper is worth reading. Finally, she offers some techniques to try to learn how to develop some extra creativity in your writing.

There are two more questions for us left to answer. First, what is the central message of the book and, second, why does it matter for us? Helen Sword believes in change. She argues that each academic can slowly change her or his style of writing. The necessary thing for this transition is courage. Getting out of one's disciplinary frames of writing is

not an easy task and requires a lot of dedication and even some sacrifice. However, the results can be thrilling. Scholars do not always have to write in a stylish manner, but if they want to try, this book can be an excellent guide. She also reminds us that styles are always evolving, and in that respect, there is no right or wrong way to write. However, some basic principles remain and scholars should be aware of them. Thus, whatever kind of academic writer you chose to be, this book offers a helpful hand.

We finally come to the question of the importance of this book. In a world where everyone calls for more interdisciplinary research and cooperation, writing in a way that everyone (not only those from your discipline) can understand is of immense importance. Young academics can use the advice offered by Professor Sword and build their writing style in a way that can impress everyone, leading to better prospects in their academic careers. They just have to be brave, challenge traditional beliefs and experiment more – something that is supposed to be part of their everyday work as academics anyways.