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Bokrecension

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Bokrecension

Stylish Academic Writing. Helen Sword, Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2012, ISBN: 978-0-674-06448-5

Like so many who have survived American post-graduate education in philosophy, I entered the academy having neither formal training in teaching nor writing. (Oh, as I see it, taking a few college courses on composition and literature does not count as a means to avoiding dull prose.) I became a teacher by imitating my professors and through trial and error; I developed as a scholar, and only secondarily as a writer, through countless comments given to me during seminars and office visits, as well as in the margins of my papers. Yes, marginalia, the holy grail of insight!

Helping me to become a stylish writer never was part of my education, however. What I was told as an “apprentice” was no doubt repeated time and time again: publish or perish; that is the bottom-line to achieving tenure (which I was told I must attain to be regarded as “successful”). Published I am, but stylish I am not. I know I have come a long way in both my teaching and scholarship, but I fear my academic writing is as unstylish as that of most academics, including philosophers. Like many, I struggle to forge shapely and elegant sentences, hoping not to overwhelm the reader with prose that is too impersonal and jargon-laden, and bristling with syntax that makes my writing ever so impenetrable.

This led me to pick up a copy of Helen Sword’s *Stylish Academic Writing*, which I have found to be a guide to a kind of writing that never resonated from my well-worn copy of *The Elements of Style* or Zachary Seech’s *Writing Philosophy Papers*. Indeed, I was fortunate enough to have stumbled upon a book whose author is embarked on a “stylistic revolution” to improve the “reading conditions of all.” Sword’s words send a simple, yet powerful message to us: Don’t forget the reader! By writing stylishly we can *take care* of the reader, that all important someone for whom we write.

Sword neatly divides her book into two parts, along with an extensive bibliography that runs thirteen pages. Part one is based on analyses of journals and writing guides, as well as surveys of academics, allowing us a glimpse of the gap between what is thought to be good writing and what is actually published. Those first three chapters (and the appendix) are definitely tailored for the empirically minded reader. Scattered throughout these and other chapters are prompts to cross disciplinary boundaries and learn to experiment with other ways of writing. This call for interdisciplinarity – what she calls “undisciplined thinking” – is revisited by Sword in her chapter on creativity (fourteen). Although Sword recognizes that changing course may lead some to fear their work will be regarded as less serious and lacking in intellectual rigor, she argues that stylish academic writing can be entertaining and engaging, as well as serious and rigorous. The choice to turn our backs on obscurantism, with its “impersonal, stodgy, jargon-laden, abstract prose,” can be made by early career and established researchers alike.

Part two consists of eleven chapters, each focusing on a particular aspect of stylish writing, such as the title, the use of jargon, and the abstract. Sword makes clear the problems associated with less than tempting titles, “jargonitis,” incoherent structure, and abstracts that fail to expose the significance of the research and therefore the worthiness of reading the article.

Just as important, she informs the reader about how these problems can be addressed. Again, this is indicative of *Sword*, the revolutionary. Each chapter is interspersed with one-page inserts titled “Spotlight on Style” in which the work of well-known academic writers is used to make various points of stylish writing come alive. Academics such as the philosopher Daniel Dennett, the legal scholar Peter Goodrich, the evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins, and the professor of composition Andrea Lunsford are showcased in this regard. (Not surprisingly, the Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek is nowhere to be found in these inserts! His is the epitome of impenetrable prose; take, for example, his tomes *The Parallax View* [2006] and *In Defense of Lost Causes* [2008].) *Sword*’s transformative project is furthered by ending each chapter with “Things to Try,” making *Stylish Academic Writing* a sort of workbook. She gives readers a multitude of exercises as part of their journey to becoming more stylish writers: from ways to reduce the effects of nominalizations and too many passive constructions, and crafting the all-important “hook,” to exercises with voice, tricks for constructing engaging titles, and suggestions for developing new ideas and perspectives.

My two favorite chapters (four and five) deal with making writing more personal through the use of first-person pronouns, and learning how to use more concrete language and to be mindful of clutter, which, as *Sword* notes, is “the sworn enemy of the stylish academic writer.” Frankly, I too am one of those philosophers who has an “addiction to *it, this, that, and there.*”

Sword makes it clear from the outset that the principal audience she has in mind for *Stylish Academic Writing* is none other than the established researcher. The preponderance of references is to the senior researcher, the established academic, and the like. But why focus on the “old timers”? If there is a major flaw in *Sword*’s approach, it is to have concentrated her attention on the mentors themselves. There are a few passages in which *Sword* is aware of this issue. However, her remarks in this regard are sometimes tongue-in-cheek, as when she asks, “What exactly is going on here? Are academics being explicitly trained to write abstract, convoluted sentences?” In other words, is there a manual for graduate students learning the craft of dull writing? Well, Helen, there is no such guide, but there might as well have been one for the outcome has been the same. The seniors are mentoring the juniors to write dull prose. If she aims to start a “stylistic revolution,” then she should make it as efficacious as possible, which means to change the writing of young and old, of junior and senior. Efficacy demands a double-headed approach, one that includes the masses of students, the wannabes, and the junior faculty as a target population. The up-and-coming researcher can profit just as much from *Stylistic Academic Writing* as the more senior academic. They all can come to enjoy writing well, knowing that some of their readers might be more attentive to and understanding of their work. It may even have something to do with becoming “successful.”

On a more serious note, why allow students to make many of the same mistakes, knowing full well that it is likely that some of them will realize years later that they could have started to write well much sooner? Perhaps there is an ethical issue here, something to do with the suffering of writers enduring their own dull prose and readers having to put up with it. If so, then the double-headed approach is an imperative, leading me to think that *Sword* should begin developing a companion DVD entitled *Stylish Academic Writing for the Un-established*.

But it will take more than knowing the finer points of writing well. As *Sword* rightly points out, it will also require courage, especially by the PhD student and the junior colleague, to experiment. At the same time it will require the mentor to give them space, to let them know that it is admissible to write differently, to take a risk. It is clear to me that all can benefit from a

close reading of *Stylish Academic Writing*, thus averting the plunge off the communication cliff. All things considered, this is an exceptional work. Although I found part one to be occasionally dull due to its statistical focus, and the positioning of the inserts to impede the flow of the text, *Stylish Academic Writing* is a book I enjoyed immensely and one that I hope will help improve my own writing. I suggest you place a copy of Sword's book next to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, Strunk and White's *Elements of Style*, and Mark Tredinnick's *Writing Well: The Essential Guide* in case you choose to make your academic writing more stylish.

PS: I look forward to meeting the author in person, as she is scheduled to visit my university this spring. She will talk about the habits of highly productive writers. Perhaps meeting Helen Sword in person will be impetus enough for my colleagues as well as their students to have the courage to write in ways that they never imagined possible.

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