# The trouble with academic writing

A few weeks ago, I received an announcement via the mailing list for UK Media Studies academics about a forthcoming seminar at a leading university. I have omitted the title and the speaker, but the summary of the presentation ran as follows:

> In *Society Must be Defended*, Michel Foucault treats discrete military practice and materialized violence as reducible to the logistics of the "silent war" that underwrites social contract, institutional orders and civil space. Violence is requisitioned as an extra-discursive negativity in order to institute a civitas built on a disavowal of the violence that lies at its core. War disappears as an apparatus capable of autonomously generating perceptual and bodily investments and sovereign signatures of right. However, I contend that political violence is not simply a mechanical reproduction of a static, stabilized and historically completed formation of domination. The issuing forth of violence invariably indexes a constitutive lack, a negative space in the symbolic order of domination, an empty site through which historical completion can be imagined in the damage inflicted on the internal and external Other beyond polity and civitas. My focus lies with *the taking place or scenic affirmation of sovereignty* through *photopolitical* war as an assemblage of material and immaterial effects and affects. How do counterfeit realisms and *a politics of light* instate a sovereign act of violence as material and immaterial, sensible and insensible, tangible and intangible? Empowering visual denegations of sovereignty and death are comparatively mapped across the Red Army Faction photo-paintings of Gerhard Richter and the counterfeit biometrical corpse archive made by American kill teams in Afghanistan.

I'm not familiar with the work of Gerhard Richter, but I have read a good deal of Michel Foucault, and some of Jacques Lacan, who appears to be the other theoretical inspiration for this author's argument. Yet while I can see what the presentation is likely to be *about*, I genuinely cannot understand what the author is actually saying about the topic.

Academic pretentiousness – and the condemnation of it – is nothing new. For more than 50 years, the British satirical magazine *Private Eye* has run a column called 'Pseuds Corner', in which readers are invited to submit examples of particularly pompous and pretentious writing. While most of the examples these days come from corporate marketing and newspaper journalism (especially on food and sports), academics have always provided ample fodder for such public mockery.

In particular, it seems that serious writing about aspects of popular culture, or about the more mundane dimensions of everyday life, runs a higher-than-average risk of inclusion. Of course, much of this mockery is based on ignorance, but some of it undoubtedly hits the mark. Academics in Media and Cultural Studies are routinely derided for 'taking popular culture seriously', but we bring at least some of the criticism on ourselves. Writing in a legitimately scholarly manner about phenomena that many other academics would consider trivial or even vulgar often seems to require an additional insulating layer of pomposity and pretentiousness.

Unfortunately, the example I have quoted is by no means untypical. Back in 1998, leading authorities in the field Professor Judith Butler and Professor Homi Bhabha

were awarded first and second prizes respectively in a Bad Writing Contest organized by the scholarly journal *Philosophy and Literature*. The previous year's winners had included Fredric Jameson, another leading and oft-cited authority in the field.[1] All were held up for ridicule on the basis of particularly ludicrous and incomprehensible samples of their work.

While the Bad Writing Competition has unfortunately ceased – perhaps due to the sheer volume of entries – similar enjoyment may be had from the Academic Sentence Generator run by the University of Chicago Writing Program.[2] This software creates meaningless yet authoritative-sounding academic sentences by randomly combining terminology familiar to most Media and Cultural Studies academics. For example, I have just produced the following profound insight from its drop-down menus: the epistemology of post-capitalist hegemony is virtually coextensive with the engendering of the specular economy. Similar parodies, and a 'postmodernism essay generator', may be found at the *Communications from Elsewhere* site.[3]

Perhaps more serious, and again going back many years, was the so-called Sokal Hoax. In 1996, Alan Sokal, a physics professor at New York University, published a parodic article entitled 'Transgressing the Boundaries: Towards a Transformative Hermeneutics of Quantum Gravity' in the leading Cultural Studies journal *Third Text*. The article, described by Sokal as 'a pastiche of left-wing cant, fawning references, grandiose quotations, and outright nonsense', was designed to test the scientific understanding (or lack of it) and the political biases of the editors. For Sokal and his followers, its publication was taken as proof of the intellectual bankruptcy of postmodernist philosophy – claims that subsequently generated much debate.

Such examples may appear a little extreme, but they are not untypical. And in my view, things are getting worse. Today – and perhaps particularly in our field – bad writing of this kind is not just an occupational hazard, but an occupational requirement. We all know the basic rules of such writing: make your sentences as long and convoluted as possible; never use one word where ten will do; employ jargon and abstractions rather than everyday terminology; and support everything you say with extensive reference to other academic authorities. This is writing that seems intended to exclude – or least, whose obvious consequence is one of exclusion. In a field that is often keen to proclaim its own democratic, inclusive approach, this is at the very least a contradiction.

Of course, academics are right to insist that specialized research requires a certain level of specialized language – although that argument is surely rather different when it comes to the social sciences and humanities, as compared (for example) with particle physics or advanced calculus. All fields of social life depend upon shared communicative rituals and conventions, and upon forms of linguistic shorthand. It would not be realistic or desirable for all academic writing to be instantly accessible to the average 'lay' reader.

Even so, there is a problem here. When I came to undergraduate teaching, relatively late in my career, one of the first activities I was asked to do with incoming students was a diagnostic writing exercise. They were required to read and then summarize an academic journal article, and briefly present their own views on the topic. The

articles chosen (by the course team) were not, in my view, especially difficult: they were nowhere near as impenetrable as the example I have quoted above. And yet the students often struggled to identify and understand the key points. These were by no means weak students: most had achieved A and B grades at A-level, and were probably in the top 5% of their age cohort.

When I looked again at the assigned articles, I began to understand why the students were struggling. This wasn't just about specialized terminology: there was very little 'extra-discursive negativity' or 'empowering visual denegations of sovereignty' – let alone any 'engendering of the specular economy' – in these pieces. Rather, the problem was that the articles were primarily written *for other academics*: they assumed a high level of familiarity with long-running debates and theoretical paradigms, within which their specific concerns were then (quite briefly) located.

Of course, we hope that students will eventually learn to understand this kind of stuff, even if they don't immediately get it. An undergraduate education is a kind of apprenticeship, in which students gradually learn the rituals and conventions of the trade. In this respect, it's similar to being an apprentice electrician or plumber – although there are some important differences. Ideally, students will come out at the end of their courses being much more able to understand this kind of writing, and to produce it themselves. However, *very few of them will ever need to do so again*. Many of them will have jobs (and lives) that require them to write, but very little of the writing they will do is likely to resemble academic writing. Indeed, they will probably have to 'unlearn' the rules of academic writing in order to succeed.

By contrast, most academics never do any other kind of writing, at least in a public context. Despite the emerging emphasis on 'impact', there is little status attached to non-academic writing, or even to writing in an accessible way. To call a fellow academic's prose 'insufficiently scholarly' or 'journalistic' is one of the ultimate professional put-downs.

Mick Billig's book *Learn to Write Badly: How to Succeed in the Social Sciences* (Cambridge University Press, 2013) provides an exceptionally sharp and amusing account of what's currently going on in academic writing. Billig uses discourse analysis to identify characteristics that make academic writing more abstract and obscure than it really needs to be. These include things like excessive jargon, neologisms and acronyms; nominalization (making processes into objects) and reification (making people into things); the use of the passive voice; and grammatical complexity, in the form of endless sub-clauses and qualifications. I'm sure I have committed almost all of these sins many times, and have quite possibly continued to do so in this piece.

However, this isn't just a linguistic issue. Billig recognizes that the problem is systemic rather than individual. He argues that bad writing is a result of self-promotion, fuelled by the increasing competitiveness of contemporary academic life.

In my view, there are two key aspects to this. The process whereby academics achieve advancement and status – for example in the form of promotion, publication and research funding – is that of peer review. Academics read other academics' work and assess it. The UK's Research Excellence Framework, for instance, ranks

the quality of individual academics' work (and hence of their departments) on the basis of ratings by other academics in their field. The same process operates in assessing applications for research funding or submissions to academic journals. This is generally a 'blind' (or anonymized) process, but it clearly encourages academics to write for other academics: they write not for the general public, or for students like their own, but *for each other*. As academic life has become more competitive, the process of peer review seems to have become significantly more brutal; and this in turn produces a kind of defensive reaction. Academics inflate the self-importance and obscurity of their writing – they big themselves up – in order to pre-empt criticism from their peers.

A second related aspect of the problem is to do with academic publishing. The research academics undertake is assessed primarily on the basis of their publications, particularly in the form of journal articles. Academics submitting under the REF are generally urged to submit only scholarly journal articles: books are considered to be of lower status, and books aimed at students ('textbooks') or at the general reader will not generally be entered at all. In a sense, this is understandable: most highly ranked journals will operate a rigorous and challenging system of peer review. Yet these publications are produced and owned almost exclusively by commercial companies, which have their own constraints and imperatives that are primarily to do with financial profit. So here we have a system whereby the value of public institutions – universities – is assessed in terms of outputs or commodities that are created and owned by private companies.

Academics do the vast bulk of the work that is entailed in producing these commodities – they write, review and edit the articles – for no remuneration whatsoever (either personally or to their employers). Yet universities are then required to pay for them – in effect, to buy back the goods they have produced. The latest innovation in academic publishing is so-called 'open access': research articles will be freely available, although academics or their employers (and hence the public purse) will now be required to pay in the region of a few thousand pounds per article for the privilege of making them accessible to the general public.

The publishers have effectively been granted a licence to print money. There has been a massive proliferation of academic journal titles in recent years, which points to the significant potential for profit in this market. This has led to intensified competition; and one index of the 'quality' of a journal is the percentage of submitted articles that it rejects. Articles that make it past the peer review process and are accepted for publication can then face a long wait until they finally appear, although it is possible to pay (again, in the low thousands of pounds) for one's article to be 'bumped up' in the queue.

Both these developments encourage academics to write primarily for other academics, and to play up the scholarly legitimacy and credentials of their writing. In the process, academic writing inevitably becomes more abstract, more self-regarding, and less accessible to those who are not already professional academics themselves. Our key motivation is to impress each other with our own self-importance, rather than to communicate with the wider world.

Ultimately, this becomes a self-perpetuating process. At least in the UK, undergraduate students are not generally taught to write: it is assumed that they can do that already. They have few good role models in terms of academic writing, and plenty of bad ones. They struggle to read material that is poorly written; and in response, they often look to more accessible online sources that may well prove less reliable and authoritative. Some do learn to write well, albeit largely by trial and error; but many do not – and in the process, they fail to acquire a key skill that remains enormously important, even in an age of digital communications.

I have yet to meet an academic who does not want their work to be widely read; and there is an increasing emphasis on 'public engagement' in universities. Yet this engagement often has low status, and is regarded as something external to the real business of scholarship and research. We do the actual work, and then we are obliged to communicate it; and our efficiency in doing so is again subject to bureaucratic procedures designed to assess 'impact'.

The issues I'm raising here are by no means original or new, although they are becoming steadily more urgent. In the conclusion of his book, Mick Billig returns to George Orwell's classic essay 'Politics and the English Language', first published in 1946. While Orwell's approach is much less technically linguistic than Billig's, it identifies many of the same phenomena, and makes similar recommendations for clearer and simpler writing.

Orwell uses some examples from academic texts, but his main target is a particularly propagandist style of political writing that now seems quaintly old-fashioned. Yet there is a more general political dimension to writing style, which is to do with the relationships that it seeks to establish between readers and writers. The politics of writing are about power; and in the case of contemporary academic writing, they are about competition for resources, the management of academic labour, the generation of profit by commercial publishers, and ultimately about exclusion. There has to be another way.


David Buckingham
June 2014

---

[1] http://denisdutton.com/bad_writing.htm
[2] http://writing-program.uchicago.edu/toys/randomsentence/write-sentence.htm
[3] http://www.elsewhere.org