

WAC UPDATE

For Alums of the WAC Faculty Seminar

Stylish Academic Writing by Helen Sword
Harvard UP, 2012

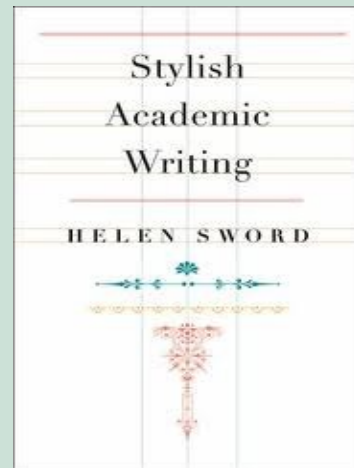
Reviewed by Rory Conces

Like so many who have survived post-graduate education in philosophy, I entered the academy having formal training in neither teaching nor writing. 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. Helping me to become a stylish writer never was part of my education, however. 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 many philosophers.

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*. 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 who we write for.

Sword neatly divides her book into two parts, along with an extensive bibliography. 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. Throughout these and other chapters are prompts to cross disciplinary boundaries, to 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

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Learn more about Helen Sword's research — and see how her suggestions for transforming turgid prose into stylish writing can work for you. Join Rory Conces and Nora Bacon for a discussion of style in academic writing:

Tuesday, March 12

3:00-4:00

MBSC State Room

Helen Sword is traveling from Auckland, NZ for a workshop with UNO faculty:

Habits of Highly Effective Writers

Friday, April 26

10:00-12:00

MBSC Dodge Rooms

Mark your calendar!

Review of *Stylish Academic Writing* from page 1

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,” 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 as to 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, and the evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins 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.) Sword’s transformative project is furthered by ending each chapter with “Things to Try,” making *Stylish Academic Writing* a sort of workbook.

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.” Truth be told, I too am one of those philosophers who has an “addiction to *it, this, that, and there.*”

All in all, 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 Strunk and White’s *Elements of Style* in case you choose to make your academic writing more stylish.

Rory Conces is an associate professor of Philosophy and Religion at UNO. An extended version of this review will appear in Högre utbildning, a Swedish journal about teaching and learning in higher education.

Coming Soon to the Writing Center

Building Better Sentences: A Workshop for Multilingual Writers

Wednesday, March 6, 1:00-2:30

ASH 154

ESL specialist Kathy Radosta will share tips for writing clear, smooth sentences in English. Please help us spread the word to multilingual students.

Preparing for the GRE Analytic Writing Test

Wednesday, March 13, 12:00-1:30

Thursday, March 14, 4:30-6:00

ASH 154

English instructor Courtney Mustoe will tell prospective graduate students what to expect of the GRE Analytic Writing Test, sharing examples of successful essays and discussing strategies for writing under pressure.

Finish-It Fridays

Modeled on Camp Completion, Finish-It Fridays will provide students with quiet time, snacks, and encouragement to make headway on their writing projects. Probable time and place: Friday afternoons in April, Criss Library. Watch e-notes for further information.

Writing Center Adds Sunday Service in Criss Library

Consultants are now available from 1:00 to 4:00 six days per week in the Writing Center’s Criss Library location (right next to the Circulation desk): Monday through Thursday, Saturday and Sunday.

Library consultations are on a walk-in basis only (no appointments).

Making the Most of the Writing Center

Suzanne Withem, Writing Center Program Coordinator

In the nine years since UNO's Writing Center opened, our services have reached an ever-growing number of clients. From January to December of 2012, we met with writers in over 3,500 individual consultations. The center employs a staff of 20 working in three locations.

Still, we sometimes find that students are unaware of the Writing Center's services or that they misunderstand our mission. Faculty members are our most important partners. Here's how you can help us help your students:

Schedule a Writing Center orientation.

- A Writing Center consultant can visit your class to give a 10-15 minute introduction to the Writing Center.
- You can bring your class to the Main Center (ASH 150) for an orientation so that they are familiar with the location as well as the services.

Issue frequent reminders.

- Include information about the Writing Center on your syllabus and assignment sheets. A sample paragraph is available on our website under Faculty Resources.
- Remind students that they should plan ahead. Those who make an appointment early have the best chance of finding a convenient opening.
- Remind students to bring a hard copy of any relevant materials—an assignment sheet, an outline, a draft—when they come to a consultation.
- Let students know that we offer support at any stage of the writing process from brainstorming to editing.

Create incentives.

- Offer your students a few extra credit points for visiting the Writing Center. At students' request, consultants will send an instructor a brief report to verify that the student visited the center and to describe what we worked on.

The Writing Center is an academic support unit, not an editing service. When we work with students, we don't attempt to fix every error or to transform every draft into an A paper. But our consultants are patient, helpful, and perceptive readers who can offer focused feedback. Most writers leave the center with more confidence in their writing and a clear plan for improving work in progress.

We love working with faculty writers, too! If you're looking for a reader with a good ear and a supportive attitude, schedule an appointment.

When it comes to language, nothing is more satisfying than to write a good sentence. It is no fun to write lumpishly, dully, in prose the reader must plod through like wet sand. But it is a pleasure to achieve, if one can, a clear running prose that is simple yet full of surprises.

Barbara Tuchman, Practicing History: Selected Essays, 1981