

## **Unplugged - Book Reviews Special Forum: About Doing Research**

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Helen SWORD (2012), *Stylish Academic Writing*, Harvard, MA: Harvard University Press.

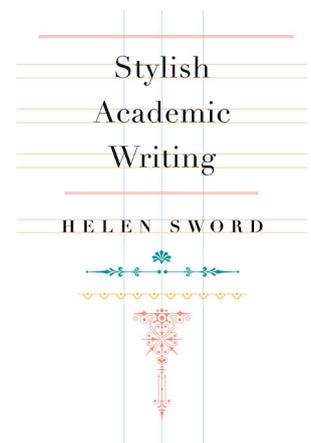
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reviewed by

Viviane SERGI

Ecole des Sciences de la Gestion, Université du Québec à Montréal  
sergi.viviane@uqam.ca

The unplugged section edits some book reviews special forums dedicated to a topic, an author or a theoretical perspective. This first forum considers three very stimulating and rejuvenating volumes for academics in organization and management studies about research methods. They offer some new insights about problematizing, theorizing and academic writing which may contribute to regain scientific imagination.



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You are about to start reading a review of Helen Sword's book *Stylish Academic Writing*. The title of this book has caught your eye, and it is with curiosity that you want to discover to what 'stylish' could mean in academic texts – especially since you have been known, in your academic circles, to criticize journal articles for "boring you to death"; you even made a bit of a dramatic statement, at that conference last summer, that "not only aren't there any big ideas in organization studies any more, but the vast majority of articles have just become desperate attempts at surviving the 'publish or perish' game." Hence, you are a bit dubious about the possibility of mixing style with academic writing. Of course, some scholars do have what you would consider a signature style; but these are the exception, rather than the norm. You expect this review to start like most reviews you have read previously; yet, only a few sentences into this text, you are a bit perplexed: the author seems to have chosen a rather unconventional way to open his book review. You check back to the first page to look at his name, to which you had paid only scant attention in the first place – oh, it's a her, and no, you do not know her. You begin frowning, as you are not here for frivolous writing that evokes a bad imitation of that experimental novel you bought in an airport some years ago (which, as you recall, also slightly annoyed you). You are here to read a proper book review, and to your growing irritation, this expectation is still not being met. With a bit of contempt, you are already starting to judge the author based on the approach she has chosen for the opening paragraph of her review, not convinced that it is the best way to proceed with an academic text, or that it is really making a point, let alone a worthy one.

But at least, by now, you are acutely conscious that what you have in front of you is something made out of words; that it is doing something to you: that it is trying to draw you in. While hoping that the expected review will materialize soon, you minimally give this to the author: you are a tad, just a tad, less bored than usual.

It is with excitement that I accepted, a while ago, to review Helen Sword's book *Stylish Academic Writing*. Given my deep professional and personal interest in writing, I sensed that this book would resonate with the concerns with which I have been grappling since I joined the world of academia some years ago. I thus jumped at the opportunity to write about Sword's book. Yet, I was only on p. 10 – still in the introductory chapter – when a realization struck me: I had accepted a colossal task. Not only did I have to write a proper review of the book, but I also needed to write one that would not succumb to the bland “vanilla pudding” (cf Ashforth, 2005) or wooden prose so rightly condemned by the author. How unfitting and absurd would it be if my review were as unpleasant and devoid of any style as most academic prose, thereby exemplifying Sword's issue with the majority of academic writing? Feeling a tingle of anguish, I took a deep breath, and attacked the task of showcasing a more engaging, lively and captivating style in scientific writing, in a manner of which Sword would – with any luck – approve. There is at least one virtue in feeling such a form of pre-writing anxiety: it makes you very aware of how you are writing – a concern that is not always vividly felt, despite the fact that writing occupies a central place in our daily routine. For most writers, writing is a difficult task; Thomas Mann famously declared that “A writer is someone for whom writing is more difficult than it is for other people.” The vast majority of academics I know would agree that writing is, most of the time, challenging; but for most of them, the difficulties evoked rarely have anything to do with style. They revolve around finding the best way to frame their contributions, the most appropriate manner in which to structure their literature reviews, and the most impactful arguments with which to convince editors, reviewers, and potential readers of their ideas. Over the years, I have attended many academic writing workshops and activities; only a handful have touched upon style per se. Even fewer of these have questioned the rigid adherence to the conventional style in which we write, which I have always found a bit baffling.

*Stylish Academic Writing* is organized in two major sections. The first one introduces us to the topic of academic writing and looks into the trends, in terms of style, which can be observed in a variety of disciplines. It also covers what a number of style guides prescribe as ‘good’ writing, especially of the academic kind. The second section, composed of eleven chapters, dissects various elements of style selected by Sword. Let's consider the content of these two sections first, and then reflect more generally on the idea of stylish academic writing.

## **FIRST SECTION: THE GENRE OF ACADEMIC WRITING**

The book opens with the proposition that most academic writing simply lacks style. As Sword highlights, there is a “massive gap” (p. 3) between what can be considered well written and what is generally published in academia. Bluntly put, most academic writers' output is bland, impersonal, and abstract, creating the effect of “immobiliz[ing] their victims” (p. 4). This judgment may be severe, but Sword is not the only one voicing it: in recent years, we have seen some prominent scholars in management and organization studies come to a similar conclusion. For these scholars, much of the research in our field is stifled by a dominant format which does not encourage diversity, bold thinking, or experimentation (see the various arguments expressed by Alvesson & Gabriel,

2013, Alvesson & Sandberg, 2013, and Willmott, 2011, among others). Thus, there seems to be something problematic with current academic writing. Yet, “[w]e want writing to be taken seriously, as powerful and evocative performance, able to change peoples’ experiences of the world, rather than as a shriven, cowed and cowering path towards routinized, professionalised ‘publication.’ We wonder if it is possible to write differently.” muse Grey and Sinclair (2006: 452) in one of the few articles taken from management studies which Sword includes in her book. Sword would definitively maintain that it is indeed possible to write differently, and she offers her book as proof. Indeed, if she evokes some of the reasons why academic writing is so bad, her main goal with her book is to discuss how things could be different. This sets the tone for the book: *Stylish Academic Writing* is fundamentally a practical book, based on the idea that such stylish writing can be studied and practiced – and therefore improved and cultivated. The book is also based on extensive research on this topic, since Sword conducted interviews with scholars, studied articles and books identified as exemplary, and analyzed numerous articles from various disciplines and style guides.

The first section of the book considers style in academic writing in general terms. First of all, in the introductory chapter, Sword considers what ‘stylish’ means in the context of academic writing: “Stylish scholars, my colleagues told me, express complex ideas clearly and precisely; produce elegant, carefully crafted sentences; convey a sense of energy, intellectual commitment, and even passion; engage and hold their readers’ attention; tell a compelling story; avoid jargon, except where specialized terminology is essential to the argument; provide their readers with aesthetic and intellectual pleasure; and write with originality, imagination, and creative flair.” (pp. 7-8). She then moves, in Chapter 2, to the “disciplinary” aspect of academic writing – a form into which we are socialized through our disciplines, although Sword goes on to claim that “the signature research styles of our disciplines influence and define us, but they need not crush and confine us.” (p. 22). While we could choose to do otherwise, then, as academics we are surrounded with what Sword terms “forces for conservatism” (p. 24) that can tame our impulses to break out of the dominant style in our fields. This is especially true since many of us think that adopting an abstract and impersonal style is what is expected of us. In Chapter 2, she considers the dominant style in ten disciplines, a list that does not include management and organization studies. It would be interesting to look at our field to see what is the conventional style – and also what writers diverging from this template do.

Chapter 3 is devoted to the prescriptions given by style guides, in which Sword identifies “nonnegotiable principles,” like clarity, coherence, precision, using active verbs, and storytelling. Other aspects are less consensual, like the use of pronouns and non-traditional structures or titles. But, as she clearly highlights, the central message of all these books is simple: writing is about choosing. And in this process, we have the choice to imitate the main style used in our discipline, or to work on finding, and expressing, our own voice:

*“We can continue to ‘imitate the common type’ of academic writing, endlessly replicating the status quo. We can ‘imitate the successful,’ adopting the stylistic strategies of eminent colleagues. Or we can undertake ‘forms of learning’ – reading, reflection, experimentation – that will take our own work in new directions, so that we, in turn, can become the pathbreakers whose writing others will emulate.” (p. 31)*

On this note, she then turns to what makes up stylish academic writing as she sees it.

## SECOND SECTION: STYLE, BROKEN DOWN

The core of *Stylish Academic Writing* is composed of a succession of chapters organized under the title “Elements of stylishness.” Sword tackles eleven of these elements, and each of these chapters is structured in a similar way. First, the theme of the chapter is introduced, often by pointing out the common problems related to that theme in mainstream academic writing. Then the theme is described in general terms by means of a discussion that includes reasons why academic writers should be concerned with improving each specific element of writing. Here and there in this discussion, boxes labeled “spotlight on style” appear. Sword uses these boxes to present detailed examples of academic writing, originating in various fields, which she finds particularly well executed with regard to the chapter’s theme. These boxes are devoted to examples taken from specific authors’ works; in them, Sword shows how the authors succeed in the chapter’s theme, and discusses why they do. Shorter examples are also used elsewhere in the chapters, often preceded by counter-examples, illustrations of academic writing that really succeed in not being stylish. This approach ensures that by the time he reaches the end of the chapter, the reader has not only been sensitized to a specific element of style that can be improved; he has also seen numerous examples (some shorter, some longer) of what to do and what not to do. The final pages of each chapter are devoted to a list of “things to try” which take the form of questions one can ask oneself, or short exercises that can be undertaken to improve the element in question. All of these chapters are short, and can be read in any order; readers can even skip chapters in which they are less interested and still make sense of the book as a whole. Here are the eleven aspects of style that Sword covers in this second part of her book.

1. **Voice and echo:** In this chapter, Sword discusses the choice of pronouns. Should an academic writer be confined to using an impersonal style, or can she make her voice clearly heard in her texts by using “I”? Sword links this choice to the attention we pay to our readers and how we choose to address them with our writing.
2. **Smart sentencing:** This chapters deals with the variety Sword thinks academic writers should introduce in their texts with their language. For her, smart sentencing rests on three principles: using active verbs and concrete nouns; keeping verbs and nouns close inside sentences; and avoiding what she calls “clutter,” unnecessary words which overcomplicate sentences. Smart sentencing is also about limiting abstract language, which should not dominate the texts.
3. **Tempting title:** Titles are key elements, Sword contends; scholars should think more about how they construct them. They are there to “engage the reader, inform the reader, or do both at once” (p. 67). She argues that the most engaging titles often resemble journalistic ones, a suggestion which is not always warmly welcomed by the academic community.
4. **Hooks and sinkers:** In this chapter, the author covers the opening of the text, explaining that some academic texts grip our attention through the use of a quote, an anecdote or a direct question, while others burden us right from the first paragraph with their heavy style, their name-dropping or their banality.
5. **The story net:** What happens with the remainder of the text? Here, Sword addresses the importance of “sustaining a compelling story” (p.

87; her italics). As she reminds us, since research endeavors overflow with stories (that of the project, the researcher throughout the project, the participants, etc.), the challenge becomes that of selecting the central story that will organize the text, and to focus on its main characters. We should pay better attention to the narratives we weave with our texts.

6. **Show and tell:** This element of style refers to the variety of examples and illustrations that scholars can bring into their texts, such as anecdotes, cases, scenarios, metaphors, analogies, and visual illustrations. Sword's opinion is that abstract concepts need a form of anchoring in the material world, a grounding that acts as a stepladder towards these concepts.
7. **Jargonitis:** As expected, Stylish Academic Writing touches upon the topic of jargon. Again, Sword advocates for a balance between precision and exaggeration, and also for a form of respect for the readers, who can easily overdose on jargon. "These authors [those she deems stylish] hand their readers complex tools – but always with instruction attached" (p. 120).
8. **Structural designs:** This chapter revolves around the question of structure, questioning the 'standardizing' effect of the traditional approach (as applied to our field, introduction, literature review, results, discussion, and conclusion). Stylish writers, on the other hand, will experiment with structure – and especially with the headers of these sections, playing with more expressive names than "introduction" or "results."
9. **Points of reference:** As with any other element of a text, how we cite and how we use footnotes should be carefully considered, again to avoid creating unnecessary obstacles to the reading experience.
10. **The big picture:** With this element, Sword points to the importance of abstracts – strong ones being those that privilege the author's thesis or arguments, and avoid formulaic, impersonal style, or difficult language. She also reminds us that skilful academic writers "[...] master the art of abstraction – the ability to express complex ideas clearly" (p. 157), in abstracts as in any other part of their texts.
11. **The creative touch:** Coming full circle, with this last element Sword discusses the qualities displayed by skilful writers. "These include passion, commitment, pleasure, playfulness, humour, elegance, lyricism, originality, imagination, creativity, and 'undisciplined thinking' – attributes that are easy to enough to recognize (perhaps because they occur so rarely in academic writing) but difficult to define or emulate" (p. 159). These writers defy the conventional style of their discipline; they instil "joy and wonder", and they are not afraid of showing their passion for their work, producing "passionate prose" (p. 162). This last element is in fact a synthesis of all the previous ones, alluding to the harmonious and stimulating reading experience that a skilful writer can create with his prose.

## STYLE, RECONSIDERED

*Car le mot, qu'on le sache, est un être vivant.*  
Victor Hugo

*Stylish Academic Writing* is first and foremost a call to empower researchers to work on their writing to make it livelier and punchier, but it is also a guide showing how it can be done. As such, it might appear to belong to the category of 'style guides,' one which the author duly considers in Chapter 3. As one can ascertain from reading this review, this book will appeal primarily to scholars who are looking for examples to inspire them to write in different ways. Of course, the main premise of the book – that stylish academic writing can be studied and learned – while being empowering, is also open to criticism. A 'how-to' guide like this one runs the risk of turning style – something that should be deeply personal – into a recipe, and reducing, rather than inspiring, creativity. However, although the book does offer advice and a few techniques to experiment with, this is not done in a heavy-handed way. In my opinion, Sword does a good job of illustrating the infinite ways in which an academic text can be stylish, and she does so stylishly; I would thus characterize this book as a hybrid, something between a style guide which investigates the practice of writing in academia, and also itself an elegant example of academic writing.

Indeed, there are a few things about this book that make it more interesting than some of the style guides that are widely used and mentioned. One of them is, in my opinion, Helen Sword's voice itself. Her book conveys its message through limpid and simple (but not simplistic) language; when reading it, one can feel the care Sword took in writing it, and also her empathy for the researchers questioning their own writing practices, struggling with their writing, or trying to break out of the shackles of the abstract and impersonal style which dominates academic texts. The book can be read quickly, and it offers a number of possibilities, illustrations, and exercises for those looking, in a very pragmatic way, at areas which they can focus on. All of the elements described and discussed in the second section of the book merit consideration, and it would be difficult to add further elements without diluting the core message of the book. For example, although I would have liked to read more about the role which journals and editors can play in improving the quality of academic writing, this topic is only tangential to Sword's main point and is really beyond the scope of her text. Unlike many other style guides, Sword succeeds in stimulating many lines of reflection on academic writing through her text, which makes it a thought-provoking read.

*Stylish Academic Writing* shows researchers that they are by no means condemned to write in a dull and disengaged way... if they care. Those who care do not have to wash the colors out of their prose; they do not have to disguise their voices; they can, and should – for their sake and their readers' – enjoy this inescapable part of academic work more. The book does not state it very explicitly, but it is concerned with freedom – a freedom that we all have as academic writers, but that we have learned to leave to others, such as journalists, novelists, and other 'non-academic' writers. Realizing that style is, by definition, a choice and a statement – and not a constraint imposed on us (or self-imposed) – leads us to reflect more broadly on the place of writing in academia. Sword does not address the place of writing in academia in depth, but her call for better writing sheds light on a few crude realities of academia: that writing is not given enough thought, except when it comes to the rational aspects of structure, rhetoric, and rigor; that style seems limited to a few select academics, most of them senior professors who can 'allow' themselves touches of 'originality'; that style can be polished up, but that it requires time to do so – time which most of us

do not have on our hands. In other words, the reader willing and eager to think about his own relationship to, and command of, academic writing will find ample material in this book to ask himself tough questions, and maybe to reconsider his choices.

Sword is clear on this point: stylish academic writers do care, deeply. They are driven by three ideals: those of communication, dedication to the craft of writing, and creativity. In the concluding chapter of her book, Sword adds three other key principles motivating these writers: concrete language (style as helping the readers get into the article or book, and staying with it), choice (style as decisions) and courage (style as requiring a dose of audacity). Together, these six Cs define stylish academic writing for Sword; together, they remind us that our texts can be living things – both living on the page and through the traces they leave on their readers. However, as Sword shows, such liveliness has to be crafted and sustained, and this requires work (see Helin, forthcoming, for a detailed reflection on such work). That texts can be full of life, gripping and striking, is an important reminder: language constitutes what we do, what we say, and who we are. As Van Maanen (1995) stresses, style has much to do with the theories we build. Then why, as Sword asks us, are we not investing time and effort in polishing up this aspect as much as the other facets of our scholarship?

If readers are uncomfortable with the style guide format of Sword's book, simply musing on these six Cs will be enough to remember that style can be developed in any direction – and that it is about experimenting. "I am suggesting only that you should try to write well – and that means bringing to the table all of your alertness, your fears, and your desires. And every once in a while – say, every third paper – tell yourself that you will take a risk" (p. 83). Ultimately, *Stylish Academic Writing* seeks to show that writing is an integral part of academic work, not a neutral and inconsequential tool; that maybe we should care more about how we write (and, I would also add, about why we do so – but that is another topic altogether), as caring about our writing is caring about our ideas and our readers; and that risks, albeit measured ones, should be taken with our texts. What risks have you taken with your academic writing recently? If your answer is "none," maybe reading Helen Sword's book could spark something in you – but only if you are prepared to acknowledge how crucial writing is to what you do, and to change your conception of style from an ornamental feature of texts to an indispensable component of thought itself.

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### Post scriptum

Inspired by the format of the book, and by what its ideas prompted in me, I have decided to include here a few questions that scholars who feel concerned by their own writing might find it worthwhile to consider along with those regarding their style. Are these the ‘tough’ questions I alluded to in my review? I will let you be the judge of this. When thinking about your own writing, ask yourself...

- What is stylish academic writing for me? Whom would I include in this category?
  - Looking at my writing, is it alive? Does it paralyze the reader or keep the reader moving?
  - What do my texts say about me as a writer? Do I show who I am with my writing? Or is my style verging on blandness?
  - Why have I opted for this style? By adopting this style, what am I performing? Do I think that such style embodies better ‘science’ and ‘objectivity’? What do I contribute in reproducing by choosing this style?
  - Do I enjoy writing in the style I have adopted? Do I feel constrained in any way? If so, could I allow myself more freedom in my texts? Where could I start?
  - Do I make the reader feel that every word has been chosen carefully?
  - How do I view catchy titles? The use of personal anecdotes? And what about humour? How do I see these devices in the context of academic writing? How do I judge those who put them to use?
  - How do I construct authority in my texts?
  - How do I transcribe my passion for my studies and inquiries in my manuscripts? Where am I in my own texts?
  - What is distracting me from engaging seriously with my texts? Lack of time, pressure to publish, lack of interest?
  - When I write with colleagues, do we talk about style? How quickly do we turn to the conventional structure of academic papers? Do we even consider doing things differently? Why not?
  - Could thinking about, and taking the time to work on, my writing help me communicate my ideas in a better way and lead me to engage with my readers – who are also my peers – in a more compelling way? Could my writing, combined with my ideas, contribute to enlivening the conversation in which I am participating (Huff, 1998) with these texts?
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