

Expert's Advice to a New Academic Writer

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“It’s Just So Different”

Ask any prospective college students about their fears and concerns about starting their new program and they’ll gladly provide a list: moving to a new city, living with roommates, student loans, and insecurities about the choice of institution and program of study. By far, the biggest fear in most surveys, both formal and informal, is “becoming an academic writer.”

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When asked for clarification, numerous variations of the same axiom are offered: “It’s just so different!”

Whether that perceived difference comes from their high school teachers or their own reactions to a particularly dry time they were forced to read in preparing for their first college course, anxiety about this strange world of [academic writing](#) can often equate to poor performance. Students literally abandon everything they know about writing in order to learn this entirely new language of “[writing in an academic style.](#)”

A Preponderance of Gibberish!

Treating academic writing as a foreign language may qualify as an extreme response, but when you look at the instructions in an average course syllabus, students can be forgiven for wondering what the heck they have let themselves in for. Written assignments must be presented in a specified format that is so weird it has to be accompanied by its own manual, and when you start doing the assigned reading, you come across wonderful verbiage such as this notation found by Steven Pinker in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* in 2014:

“Participants read assertions whose veracity was either affirmed or denied by the subsequent presentation of an assessment word.”

After some thought and investigation, Pinker finally figured out that the above phrase actually meant: “Participants read sentences, each followed by the word *true* or *false*.”

Remember the Story of Emperor’s New Clothes

The short tale by Hans Christian Anderson about a couple of devious tailors who convince their client, the Emperor, that his new clothes are invisible, is a wonderful parable of the power of peer pressure. Many new academic writers will make the same choice as the villagers who loudly praised the beauty of the Emperor’s new clothes. They will throw out all of the writing skills they have developed thus far in their lives and go out of their way to make their first written assignments as verbose and byzantine as possible, losing all sense of structure and audience awareness, to deliver what they assume will qualify as an “academic” paper.

There’s definitely some curiosity there as to whether your professor will call you out for your verbosity or welcome you as an academic prodigy, but the greater concern is that you’re starting your journey to proficiency as an academic writer on completely the wrong foot. We may be able to condemn the inherent egoism of academic writing as a delineator, give some credit to the innate complexity of the subject matter, and even hold the academic community in general in reproach for perpetuating the stereotype of academic journals delivering ponderous and mind-numbingly serious content, but success as an academic writer requires a different perspective.

A Promise to Your Audience

Instead of focusing on [how to write](#), take a deep breath and simply think in terms of *what* you are doing here. Your job is to transfer information to an audience using an appropriate template that allows your reader to absorb that information in a manner that best suits him or her. The need for information represents the *practical* component of the transaction. However, where things fall apart is in the *style* of delivery. Since academic rank is built around perceived expertise, the most common interpretation of a delivery style is extremely self-conscious, as professors and authors eagerly demonstrate their extensive knowledge of the subject matter.

As a new academic writer, you will not have the benefit of that depth of knowledge yet, so any attempt to portray yourself otherwise in your writing will either expose you as a novice or lead you down the [path of plagiarism](#), that will not end well for you. Academic

writing is a craft, and even the most experienced writers continue to approach it as such. In the early stages, success will come from proactive solicitation of feedback from colleagues and peers, and incorporation of that feedback in each subsequent iteration of your work.

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