

The Good, Bad, and Ugly of Academic Writing

Daniel Brooks
English for Liberal Arts Program
International Christian University

Abstract

Students spend a great deal of time reading, discussing, and analysing articles in the ELA Reader, and these articles likely influence the way students write. For this reason, choosing articles for the ELA Reader is an extremely important task. Since ELA teachers do not primarily teach content, decisions about what articles to publish in the reader should prioritise the quality of the writing rather than its content, but views vary about what constitutes good writing. This short article is an attempt to begin a conversation about the kind of articles that should be given to our students as required reading, by comparing samples placed into three categories: the good, the bad and the ugly.

Writing an article about good writing is a hazardous task. The reader might assume that I consider myself a highly skilled, articulate scribe, well-placed to judge the work of others, but this is not the case. My writing is often awkward, pretentious, and unclear, but ELA instructors have a responsibility to curate quality material that exemplifies principles of good writing, so the ability to discern good writing is an essential skill. Although opinions vary, the following pages are an attempt to find some principles of good writing using the playful spaghetti western motif: the good, the bad and the ugly. Good writers write to be understood, bad writers misuse language to obfuscate or show off, and ugly writers tranquillize the imagination with prose so dull they could put your morning coffee to sleep. Finally, there is a short discussion about academic style.

The Good

I want people to read it; if you make it unreadable, they are not going to read it.
Thomas Sowell, Hoover Institution

Good writers are clear, edifying, sincere and confident. They inform, challenge and entertain their audience. The reader feels respected and respectful of the writer's skill, effort and integrity. Three examples follow; the first is George Orwell.

Orwell is known for his insistence on clarity, honesty, and economy and his preference for Anglo-Saxon words and concrete subjects. Orwell could render complex and sophisticated ideas in highly accessible and engaging prose. He produced the most effective critique of totalitarianism ever written using a fable about barnyard animals, even though his simple analogy was lost on many publishers who missed the opportunity to publish what became the world's most famous political satire. In one rejection letter, a publisher explained, "It is not possible to sell animal stories in the USA, Mr. Orwell." (Meyers, 2002, p. 20).

The Good, Bad, and Ugly of Academic Writing

Orwell had a disdain for jargon and cliché and was a harsh critic of academic writing. In his famous essay “Politics and the English Language” (Orwell, 1946), he chides modern English writers for their ugly and inaccurate prose, stale imagery and pretentious diction. Orwell’s concern is that bad habits are easily spread by imitation, and the decline of language, especially written language, ultimately affects society as a whole: slovenly writing makes it easier for people to have foolish thoughts. To demonstrate what he saw as some of the worst habits of modern academic writing, Orwell translated a well-known verse from Ecclesiastes into modern English.

Original version;

I returned and saw under the sun, that the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, neither yet bread to the wise, nor yet riches to men of understanding, nor yet favour to men of skill; but time and chance happeneth to them all. (as cited in Orwell, 1946, pp. 225-226)

Orwell’s translation into modern English;

Objective consideration of contemporary phenomena compels the conclusion that success or failure in competitive activities exhibits no tendency to be commensurate with innate capacity, but that a considerable element of the unpredictable must invariably be taken into account. (Orwell, 1946, pp. 225-226)

The original version, Orwell explains, is full of concrete phrases and vivid images. It contains more words but fewer syllables, and all the words are of Anglo-Saxon origin from everyday life. On the other hand, the translation is vague and abstract, contains fewer words but more syllables, and eighteen words are of Latin origin, and one is of Greek. Orwell contends that there is a tendency for modern writers to prefer foreign words to Anglo-Saxon ones because they “sound grander” (p. 225).

The second example is a writer Orwell would appreciate, evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins. Below is the opening paragraph from his book, ‘Unweaving the Rainbow’(2006). The book’s title is a nod to a light-hearted criticism John Keats made of Isaac Newton. Keats accused Newton of destroying the poetry of a rainbow by “reducing it to prismatic colours” (as cited in Gigante, 2002, p. 433). According to Dawkins, Keats is wrong; Newton’s scientific explanation makes the rainbow more poetic, not less. In this book, Dawkins calls on the reader to see the beauty of science. In the first chapter, he implores the reader to appreciate the special and extremely rare circumstances that create life.

We are going to die, and that makes us the lucky ones. Most people are never going to die because they are never going to be born. The potential people who could have been here in my place but who will in fact never see the light of day outnumber the sand grains of Sahara. Certainly, those unborn ghosts include greater poets than Keats, scientists greater than Newton. We know this because the set of possible people allowed by our DNA so massively exceeds the set of actual people. In the teeth of these stupefying odds, it is you and I, in our ordinariness, that are here. (Dawkins, 2006, p. 1)

This stirring opening paragraph is written with simple vocabulary, 83% of which can be found on the list of the 1000 most frequently used word families (“Lex Tutor”, n.d.). He avoids

The Good, Bad, and Ugly of Academic Writing

cliché and banality by crafting rich, original imagery. Instead of a bland phrase like ‘an enormous number of’, Dawkins uses ‘outnumber sand grains of Sahara’; rather than the dull ‘possible combination of genes’, he summons ‘unborn ghosts’; and in preference to the drab ‘extremely improbable’, he writes ‘in the teeth of these stupefying odds’. Dawkins's prose has the rigour of a trained scientist and the flourish of a poet; they appeal to both the reader's logic and imagination.

The next example comes from one of the most influential and effective books on environmental conservation ever written: *Silent Spring* by Marine Biologist Rachel Carson. A tireless campaigner against the use of chemicals in agriculture, Carson’s prose is controlled and authoritative; she is passionate and uncompromising but able to restrain her anger and connect to the reader with perfectly judged pathos. The following excerpt is the opening paragraph from chapter 8, *And No Birds Sing*, in which Carson seeks to raise awareness of the effect the use of agricultural chemicals has on the population of birds.

Over increasingly large areas of the United States, spring now comes unheralded by the return of the birds, and the early mornings are strangely silent where once they were filled with the beauty of bird song. This sudden silencing of the song of birds, this obliteration of the color and beauty and interest they lend to our world have come about swiftly, insidiously, and unnoticed by those whose communities are as yet unaffected (Carson, 2002, p. 225).

Birds may be a choice subject for writing vivid imagery, but Carson’s descriptive skills can bring to life even the most mundane of ideas. In a later chapter, Carson describes the bacteria that live in soil as “Ceaselessly toiling creatures,” (p. 140) and pesticides as “As crude a weapon as the caveman's club” (p. 517). Carson’s book is also densely factual, filled with expert opinions and references to empirical research.

Whether one appreciates the economy of Orwell, the flourish of Dawkins or the passion of Carson, all three writers deliver sophisticated ideas in stylish, clear and engaging prose. Reading good writers like these feels like an encounter with an old friend; reading the bad writers described in the following section feels more like being flogged by a snooty aunt.

The Bad

The great enemy of clear language is insincerity. When there is a gap between one’s real and one’s declared aims, one turns as it were instinctively to long words and exhausted idioms, like a cuttlefish spurting out ink.

- George Orwell, *Politics and the English Language*, 1946

Bad writers are insincere, dishonest, pretentious, and sneaky. They glorify unintelligibility and bamboozle readers with highfalutin verbiage. They try to make simple ideas sound more profound than they are to show off or obscure their spurious research. In his essay, “Why Academics Stink at Writing,” Steven Pinker reports being baffled by writing in his own field, giving this example he found in the methods section of a paper, “Participants read assertions whose veracity was either affirmed or denied by the subsequent presentation of an assessment word.” (as cited in Pinker, 2014. p. 2). Pinker determined it meant, “Participants read sentences, each followed by the word true or false” (p. 3).

The Good, Bad, and Ugly of Academic Writing

The Bad Writing Contest

Professor Dennis Dutton, founder and editor of the journal *Philosophy and Literature*, started the Bad Writing Contest, an attempt to draw attention to what he saw as awkward, pompous, jargon-riddled academic writing. Dutton distinguishes between great scientists and philosophers whose writing is complex because they genuinely struggle with deeply challenging questions and bad writers who try to convince the reader that they, too, are profound thinkers by deceiving readers with superfluous jargon and overcomplicated language. The rules were simple, anyone could nominate a sentence or two from a published scholarly book or journal article, and Dutton and his co-editors would judge the winner. The first year they ran the contest, the 'winning' entry was a sentence written by Yale English Professor Paul H Fry, taken from his book *A Defense of Poetry* (1995):

It is the moment of non-construction, disclosing the absention of actuality from the concept in part through its invitation to emphasise, in reading, the helplessness — rather than the will to power — of its fall into conceptuality (Fry, 1995, p. 23).

Dutton (n.d.) commented, "The writing is intended to look as though Mr Fry is a physicist struggling to make clear the Copenhagen interpretation of Quantum Mechanics. Of course, he's just an English professor showing off." Perhaps the most famous winner of the award was Berkeley Professor Judith Butler, once described as perhaps, "one of the ten smartest people on the planet" (as cited in Dutton, n.d.). Below is a single sentence taken from her article published in the journal *Diacritics*:

The move from a structuralist account in which capital is understood to structure social relations in relatively homologous ways to a view of hegemony in which power relations are subject to repetition, convergence, and rearticulation brought the question of temporality into the thinking of structure, and marked a shift from a form of Althusserian theory that takes structural totalities as theoretical objects to one in which the insights into the contingent possibility of structure inaugurate a renewed conception of hegemony as bound up with the contingent sites and strategies of the rearticulation of power. (Butler, 1997, p. 13)

Comprende? Dutton states, "To ask what this means is to miss the point. This sentence beats readers into submission and instructs them that they are in the presence of a great and deep mind. Actual communication has nothing to do with it." Dutton's eponymous website cites many examples of 'winners' of the Bad Writing Contest alongside his biting commentary. Generally, his criticism is that winners of the competition are narcissists trying to impress rather than communicate with their audience. Perhaps many professors who work in the humanities or social sciences are determined to prove their intellect is the equal of those who work in the sciences, but without subject matter of the complexity of quantum physics or molecular biology, they rely on verbiage to present their intellect.

Critics of the Bad Writing Contest argue that complex, abstract writing is necessary because of the nature of the topic and the ideas expressed. Butler wrote in response to her 'award' that complex language is sometimes required "...to provoke new ways of looking at a familiar world." (Butler, 1999). Whether Fry and Butler are pioneers of original thought or whether they are simply trying to hoodwink their audience is a matter for the reader to decide, but neither provide a good example for students.

The Sokal Affair

In 1996, Alan Sokal, a physics professor at New York University and University College London, was troubled by research in the humanities about the social construction of scientific knowledge and postmodern claims about objective truth. He was sceptical about the level of intellectual rigour applied in some areas of the humanities, so he devised a test that has become known as the Sokal affair. Sokal wanted to see if *Social Text*, a leading Journal on Cultural Studies, would "publish an article liberally salted with nonsense if (a) it sounded good and (b) it flattered the editor's ideological preconceptions." (Sokal, 1996a, p. 63).

The article "Transgressing the Boundaries: Towards a Transformative Hermeneutics of Quantum Gravity" (Sokal, 1996a) proposed that quantum gravity is a social and linguistic construct. The article contained many scientific and mathematical concepts that Sokal claimed no competent scientist could take seriously, and they would quickly recognise the article as fake. However, no scientists were on the review board, and the paper was accepted and published. Three weeks later, Sokal revealed in the magazine *Lingua Franca* that it was a hoax (1996b). Some criticised Sokal for deceiving the editors of *Social Text*, and others praised him for drawing attention to the lack of rigour applied by some journals and suggesting that those in the humanities do not always have the requisite competence to comment on scientific matters.

Sokal

In 2017, a group of academics; Peter Boghossian, James Lindsey and Helen Pluckrose, became concerned that some extreme ideologies exploit academic publications by passing off ideas as established facts to gain respectability and esteem: a process referred to as 'ideas laundering' (Boghossian, 2019). Inspired by the Sokal affair, the group set about trying to demonstrate how easy it is to get phoney ideas published. Their experiment has become known as 'Sokal squared'. The group's technique was to target a particular journal, begin with an absurd conclusion that mirrored the journal's ideological narrative, master the jargon of that specific field, and build an argument using fake evidence. They submitted twenty hoax articles to various peer-reviewed journals. By the time they were discovered, seven articles had been accepted, seven were under consideration, and six had been rejected. One of the accepted papers entitled, "Human Reactions to Rape Culture and Queer Performativity at Urban Dog Parks in Portland, Oregon," claims that incidences of 'dog-humping' can be taken as an indication of rape culture. The paper was published in the highly respected journal, *Gender, Place and Culture* and won special praise as one of 12 exemplary pieces of research in the field of Feminist Geography. Here is a snippet from the now-retracted article written by Helen Pluckrose under the pseudonym Helen Wilson: "Dog parks are microcosms where hegemonic masculinist norms governing queering behavior and compulsory heterosexuality can be observed in a cross-species environment." (Wilson, 2017).

The proliferation of academic journals provides plenty of cover for papers of questionable quality to get published, causing an erosion of confidence in some academic fields. One estimate puts the number of academic articles published each year at 5.14 million (Curcic, 2023), and the number is growing. Unfortunately, publication in an academic journal is not a guarantee of good writing or high-calibre research. Any reasonably intelligent person who cannot understand something they have read in a journal should not immediately assume they are not smart enough; they should consider the possibility that they have encountered Orwell's cuttlefish spurting out ink.

The Good, Bad, and Ugly of Academic Writing

The Ugly

The book is a curiosity to me, it is such a pretentious affair, and yet so "slow," so sleepy; such an insipid mess of inspiration. It is chloroform in print.

Mark Twain, *Roughing It*, 1913

Ugly writing is bloated, awkward, cowardly, and boring. Reading ugly writing is like trying to eat a bowl of thin soup with a fork: a lot of effort for little nourishment. Writers of ugly prose are self-conscious; desperate to fit in with what they see as the norms of the academy. They often write with unnecessary abstraction, needless complexity, and absurd levels of caution. They tend to use noun strings and have a predilection for cliché and pretentious word choice. The following example is taken from an article in the ELA Reader.

The construction of Japanese as Asians tends to occur when juxtaposing "Asia" against "the West" in international economic or political contexts. In this configuration, Japanese are grouped together with other people in the geographic area known as Asia. Domestically within Japanese society, the construction of Japanese as its own race is more common, as the focus is on the majority Japanese juxtaposed against people who are indigenous (such as Ainu), or migrants (such as resident Koreans, Chinese, or more recent foreign workers). In this perspective, Japanese are distinct from other Asians; other Asians are seen as different races (the Japanese race versus the Chinese race, the Korean race, etc.). (Yamashiro, 2013, p. 147)

In this example, simple concepts are buried under layers of abstraction. The words: 'construction', 'configuration' and 'perspective' turn straightforward ideas into a waffling ramble. The words 'juxtaposing' and 'juxtaposed' are more pretentious ornament than aids to effective communication; the far simpler words, 'comparing' and 'compared', would do a better job. Also, there is a strange use of parentheses, the contents of which are superfluous; no reasonably intelligent reader would need such examples. Furthermore, the tone is cautious and noncommittal, which makes the writing sound timid and patronizing. The hedge 'tends to occur' is unnecessary; far better to credit the reader with the intelligence to know the idea is generally true, but there may be exceptions. The noncommittal tone continues with the strange use of scare quotes around "Asia" and "the West". Scare quotes are a wink to the reader to indicate that a word or phrase is used in an unusual, ironic or abstract sense. Academic writers use scare quotes to distance themselves from a word or phrase they do not want to commit to fully. In the Bad Writing Contest section of this article, the word 'winner' is in scare quotes to indicate irony.

Another feature is the redundant and bloated language, which creates confusion. In the example above, the first sentence is inflated with the unnecessary phrase, 'in international economic or political contexts,' which distracts the reader by implying that there must be other contexts in which the Japanese are not 'constructed' as Asians. Which contexts are these? historical, cultural, religious, linguistic or culinary? Then there is the phrase "in the geographic area," which is redundant unless, of course, the reader is confused about what the word Asia means in this sentence. Also, there is the pleonasm "Domestically within Japanese society". To rewrite this example, removing the unnecessary abstractions, scare quotes, pretentious vocabulary, superfluous language, strange parentheses, redundancy, and crediting the reader with some common sense and charity, the result would look something like this:

The Good, Bad, and Ugly of Academic Writing

The Japanese are categorized as Asians when comparing Asia with the West. However, within Japan, the Japanese are considered a unique race, distinct from other Asians.

The next example is also taken from the ELA reader;

The societal English value is the discourse favoured by governments, the media and, apparently, English teaching professionals in English as a foreign language (EFL) contexts in which the value of English is believed to be equally distributed to every citizen and salient enough to defy the implementation of academic needs analysis. Indeed, unlike English as a second language (ESL) contexts, where English use has been inherited from their colonized period, and the stratified appropriation of the economic, social and cultural capital of English decisively impact on school children's future prospects, EFL contexts can have many citizens developing "favourable attitudes toward what English symbolizes", i.e., international posture. (Kobayashi, 2010, p. 232)

In this example, there are 107 words separated into two extremely long sentences of 51 and 56 words, making it a torturous read. It is also full of long noun strings, which adds to the overall density and complexity of the passage. Noun strings turn active verbs into lifeless nouns and create a deadly tone. Instead of 'society values English', the writer uses 'societal English value'; instead of 'analyse academic needs', she uses 'implementation of academic needs analysis'.

Furthermore, it is bloated by the unnecessary repetition of very similar pieces of information; for example, "English teaching professionals in English as a foreign language (EFL) contexts" could be easily simplified to "teachers of English as a foreign language". Also, if lubricating the reader's comprehension is a priority, better word choices could be made than, 'discourse', 'salient', 'stratified' and 'appropriation'. This is not to say that writers should never use jargon or exotic vocabulary, only that they should be judicious when doing so. If a difficult word adds precision, energy, or humour to a piece of writing, then, it should be used, but shoehorning an impressive-sounding word just to dazzle the reader is a bad habit and can make writing sound affected and lumpy.

A simple rewrite, breaking up long sentences and noun strings, omitting repetitious language and replacing unnecessarily complex words with simpler ones would be a good start. The result might look something like this;

In EFL contexts, English is valued by governments, the media and teachers. English is believed to be equally important to all citizens, so there is no need to analyse academic requirements. EFL contexts can foster positive attitudes among citizens towards the international significance of English; in other words, promote 'international posture'. This differs from ESL contexts, where English is inherited from the colonial period and significantly impacts students' future prospects.

Academic Style

The examples of good writing given in this article are written by intellectuals writing on academic topics published in books intended for a wide audience. On the other hand, examples of bad and ugly writing are excerpts from articles published in academic journals and written

The Good, Bad, and Ugly of Academic Writing

for a narrow academic audience. This comparison may be unfair, or perhaps the problem is with academic style conventions themselves. Steven Pinker, in his book *A Sense of Style*, 2014, argues that many rules of academic writing are just superstitions, many of which have strange origins. Pinker explains that many rules come from a historical admiration of Latin. During the late 18th and early 19th century, when rules for written English were first codified, there was a strong inclination to model English after Latin, which was considered a prestigious and classical language. For example, rules about avoiding contractions, splitting infinitives, and not ending a sentence with a preposition can all be traced back to Latin grammar (Pinker, 2014, pp. 195-196).

Other rules may appear more practical and justifiable on the grounds that they improve academic writing in some way. For example, to maintain a formal, academic tone, rhetorical questions are discouraged because they are thought too casual. However, a well-judged rhetorical question can be an effective way to engage with the audience and add cohesion or humour. Excessively formal writing can alienate readers and seem disconnected from the real world and a bore to read; a lighter, more relaxed tone may work better for some purposes. Also, many academic writers insist on avoiding personal pronouns to ensure objectivity, but there are occasions when writing in the first person can help add texture and allow a more nuanced exploration of a subject. Finally, there is the insistence of hedging to add caution and precision, but excessively hedged writing can seem bloated and cowardly; it is often better to credit the reader with the intelligence and charity to know that a general point is being made than to shoehorn in unnecessary hedges to comply with a rule.

Academic style conventions do have value. They promote precision, clarity, consistency, and rigour, but strict adherence to academic rules may stifle creativity and hinder the development of the writer's own unique voice. Better to take a more relaxed approach and treat rules more like guidelines or suggestions than holy writ. Most of all, it is important to give students a variety of styles to read, including rule-breakers with their own quirks and idiosyncrasies. Teachers and students should consider academic rules on merit, in other words, whether sounding academic is an inherently desirable goal or whether it is just an entrenched dogma, deeply rooted and firmly established over time.

Conclusion

Writing in an ambiguous, abstract style full of impressive words and long sentences is easy, but writing with simple clarity takes skill. Mark Twain, George Orwell, Rachel Carson, Steven Pinker and Thomas Sowell are examples of towering intellects who do not make the reader feel as if they are being towered over. They all describe sophisticated ideas in clear, engaging, stylish prose and would provide excellent examples and models for our students. On the other hand, there are writers who render simple ideas in needlessly complex, sometimes impenetrable prose. Reading the works of these bad and ugly writers is likely to induce bad habits in students who are learning how to write. Opinions vary about what constitutes good writing, but this question should be central to discussions about which articles we should give to our students to read. Following a list of rules is not the most effective path to good writing, but following good writers might be, it is also more inviting.

References

- Boghossian, P. (2019, November 24). 'Idea Laundering' in Academia - WSJ. *The Wall Street Journal*. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/idea-laundering-in-academia-11574634492>
- Butler, J. (1997). Further reflections on conversations of our time. *Diacritics*, 27(1),13-15.
- Butler, J. (1999, March 20). A 'Bad Writer' Bites Back - Op-Ed - NYTimes.com. *The New York Times*.
- Carson, R. (2002). *Silent spring* (40th Anniversary Edition ed.). Houghton Mifflin.
- Curcic, D. (2023, June 1). *Number of Academic Papers Published Per Year – WordsRated*. Retrieved August 26, 2023, from <https://wordsrated.com/number-of-academic-papers-published-per-year/>
- Dawkins, R. (2006). *Unweaving the Rainbow: Science, Delusion and the Appetite for Wonder*. Penguin Adult.
- Dutton, D. (n.d.). *The Bad Writing Contest*. Denis Dutton. Retrieved August 2, 2023, from http://www.denisdutton.com/bad_writing.htm.
- Fry, P. H. (1995). *A Defense of Poetry: Reflections on the Occasion of Writing*. Stanford University Press.
- Gigante, D. (2002). The Monster in the Rainbow: Keats and the Science of Life. *PMLA*, 117(3), 433-448. doi:10.1632/003081202X60396
- Kobayashi, Y. (2010). Discriminatory Attitudes Towards Intercultural Communication in Domestic and Overseas Contexts. In the *ELA reader* (pp. 119-131) ICU (reprinted from *Higher Education* 2024)
- “LexTutor”. (n.d.). Retrieved 6 4, 2023, from <https://www.lextutor.ca/cgi-bin/vp/eng/output.pl>
- Meyers, J. (Ed.). (2002). *George Orwell*. Routledge.
- Orwell, G. (1946). Politics and the English Language. *London: Horizon*.
- Pinker, S. (2014). *The Sense of Style: The Thinking Person's Guide to Writing in the 21st Century*. Viking.
- Pinker, S. (2014). Why academics stink at writing. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 61(5).
- Sokal, A. (1996a). Transgressing the boundaries: Toward a transformative hermeneutics of quantum gravity. *Social Text*, (46/47), 217-252.
- Soka, A. (1996b). Sokal, A. (1996). A physicist experiments with cultural studies. *Lingua Franca*, 6(4), 62-64.
- Twain, M. (1913). *Roughing It* (Vol. 1). Harper & Row.
- Wilson, H. (2017). Human reactions to rape culture and queer performativity at urban dog parks in Portland, Oregon. *Gender, Place & Culture*, 2918.
- Yamashiro, J. (2013). The Social Construction of Race in Japan. *ELA reader*. (pp. 149-168) ICU (reprinted from *Sociology Compass* 2024)