

Creativity Within the Lines of Academic Writing: A Literature Review

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Creative writing techniques can help graduate students produce more engaging academic papers (Bump, 1985; Hesse, 2010; McVey, 2008; Merkle, 2020; Moneyhun, 2012; Pawlickzak, 2015; Tailor, 2017). Although academic writing conventions serve rigour, strict adherence to an adopted formality has drawbacks, such as alienating readers through complex language and the decontextualization of the writer from their work (Barter & Tregidga, 2014; Beauchamps, 2021). Academic writing can be challenging as students strive to form an academic identity in the image of the scholars who came before them (Beauchamps, 2021; Limerick, 2015). Although this paper aims to look at how academic writing can be improved through the careful application of creative writing techniques, it is not an attack on academic writing itself, as it plays an important role in acquiring and communicating knowledge (Pawliczak, 2015). By revisiting the purpose of the academic writing oeuvre, examining its utility as well as its dysfunctions, and then reviewing recent literature on how creative writing can be effectively implemented into the writing process to produce a better composition, the graduate student's path to livelier and more stylish scholarly prose can emerge.

Academic Style

In academic writing, the expected style is objective, formal, structured, and composed to display the author's research and subsequent knowledge of a specific topic (The University of Melbourne; Swales & Feak, 2012). Often, the knowledge contained within an academic work is complex and abstract. Hence, the writer strategically deploys a linear framework to aid their readers in understanding the concepts being explored (Swales & Feak, 2012). Academic writing

serves many key functions: to inform and to educate, of course, but also to situate the writer as learned and respected in their field of study (Swales & Feak, 2012; Taylor, 2017). Citations, references, and bibliographies prove that the writer has done their research and give the readers a roadmap of the writer's research journey (Swales & Feak, 2012; Taylor, 2017). The formal register of academic language lends authority and impartiality to the author's words, implying that their work lacks bias, as though the writer were analyzing their research with a composed and distant omniscience (University of Adelaide, 2014; Yoo, 2017).

Author! Authority!

The practical application of academic writing techniques is also the source of its limitations for many scholars who work in disciplines from the sciences to the humanities (Limerick, 2015; Pinker, 2015; Sword, 2012; Taylor, 2017; Yoo, 2017). The same elements that comprise academic style can also lead to unstylish and inelegant writing when the transmutation of knowledge to content is the sole priority of the paper (Sword, 2012; Taylor, 2017). The angst student writers experience while they attempt what some may consider stodgy prose has elicited much scholarly discourse on the topic (Limerick, 2015; Pinker, 2015; Sword, 2012), so these angst-ridden students need not feel isolated in their turmoil over how best to communicate their knowledge (Beauchamps, 2021; Bump, 1985; Hesse, 2010; Limerick, 2015; McVey, 2008; Merkle, 2020; Moneyhun, 2012; Pawlickzak, 2015; Taylor, 2017; Yoo, 2017). Recent literature reviewing the state of academic composition alongside its creative writing counterpart while acknowledging what the formal writing genre offers academic education and discourse also critiques the scholarly genre's death grip on the potential for idea-creation as well as its status quo, authoritative posturing (Beauchamps, 2021; Limerick, 2015; Hesse, 2010; Moneyhun, 2012; Sword, 2012; Pinker, 2015; Taylor, 2017; Yoo, 2017).

There is an inherent, entrenched authority within university walls that academic writing only serves to perpetuate (Beauchamps, 2021; Hamilton & Pitt, 2009; Pinker, 2015; Taylor, 2017; Yoo, 2017). “Not only do academic guidelines erase invaluable sources of knowledge, but they also serve to repress the vital expertise of scholars whose work goes against our habitual canon, infamous for being predominantly white, predominantly male, and predominantly quantitative.... Far from being in the past, these power struggles are still visible today in every single faculty of the academy” (Beauchamps, 2021, pp. 394-395). Since the authoritarian and authoritative stance of academic writing is a continuation of intellectual hegemony, it tends to silence voices that are not typically represented by the academic timbre of entrenched authority, which then limits access to knowledge that, in its enforced absence, is deemed somehow less intellectual, less worthy of being heard, less academic (Beauchamps, 2021; Hamilton & Pitt, 2009; Pinker, 2015; Taylor, 2017). Academic writing risks alienating its readers by emulating authority and using a high language register that sacrifices any hint of emotion for neutrality.

Using words that are evocative of emotion is discouraged in academic writing (Bump, 1985; Taylor, 2017). “Much of the academic writing process relies on a sort of academic sprezzatura, a practiced performance of direct and linear progression of thought, often cool, collected and somewhat emotionally distant from the ideas being presented” (Taylor, 2017, p. 39). Emotions in academic writing are seen as irrational and overly personal and serve only to prevent the author from viewing their subject fairly and objectively (Bump, 1985). The academy’s antidote to feelings is the use of the impartial voice in scholarly work, a voice intended to emphasize an objective stance that implies non-bias, non-judgement, and detachment from results (Barter & Tregidga, 2015). Of course, objectivity is essential when delivering research findings that need to be displayed without sentimentality, euphemism, opinion, or

judgment. Still, excessive impartiality is often not always required (Bump, 1985). Nor is complete neutrality reflective of reality. Neutrality in academic writing is a myth if it does not acknowledge the power structures behind it (Barter & Tregidga, 2015; Beauchamps, 2021). Scholars conduct their research through their perspectives (Yoo, 2017), and by denying their biases through personally detached prose, academics may posture as transparent while writing behind an opaque veil of authority while stifling their creative transgressions. “Unfortunately, as ‘academic’ readers and writers, we have become accustomed to passively engaging in texts that espouse scientific ‘truths’ by accepting meaning at ‘face value’” (Yoo, 2017, p. 447).

When academic writers shed the homogenized voice of academia, they assist readers in comprehending the complex material they are visually consuming. Connecting emotion to meaning helps the dense material within academic writing “land” and make sense, and the images left behind in readers’ minds create lasting impressions, signifying that profound learning has taken place (Beauchamps, 2021; Taylor, 2017; Yoo, 2017).

It might seem as though scholars write in excessively convoluted prose to intentionally ostracize readers who they believe are not of their intellectual calibre (Limerick, 2015). Some academic writing critics believe this exclusiveness results from “academese” (Pinker, 2015, n.p.). Academese is the deployment of overly complicated vocabulary, nominalization, and excessive use of jargon in a scholarly text (Pinker, 2015). Assuming university professors are not malicious connivers, they may suffer from “the curse of knowledge” (Pinker, 2015, n.p.). This “curse” renders scholars blind to the understanding that their audience possibly might not know all the things they know (Pinker, 2015). Because scholars live and breathe their work and most likely travel in circles of peers of a similar ilk, they may lose sight of other people who do not share the same knowledge (Pinker, 2015). It is important to understand, however, that academics

and scholars tend to write for their colleagues, who, of course, would be fluent in the language of their own disciplines, and not for a broader audience in general (Limerick, 2015; Pinker, 2015; Tailor, 2017; Sword, 2012), although new media exposes scholarly work to wider audiences (Hesse, 2010). Yet, scholars are often faced with the threat of “publish or perish,” and this perpetuates a conventional academic style as they seek to conform to the publishing expectations of academic journals and their readership, which is typically made up of people within the same field of study (Limerick, 2015; Pinker, 2015; Tailor, 2017; Sword, 2012). As a result, graduate students are compelled to conform to their instructors’ expectations, especially instructors who are higher ranking in the academic hierarchy and may face the threat of publishing or perishing. As such, the feedback loop reiterating the academic canon continues, demanding that academics perpetuate a particular conformist writing style (Limerick, 2015; Hamilton & Pitt, 2009). In sum, academics are writing for other academics, and they use the same language, format, authority, obfuscating vocabulary, formal register, and hegemonic canon in an endless cycle of academic cynicism (Beauchamps, 2021; Hamilton & Pitt, 2009; Limerick, 2015; Pinker, 2015; Tailor, 2017; Yoo, 2017).

Creativity Within the Lines

Perhaps it would be fine enough for academic writing to rattle around within its own ivory-towered echo chamber if it were not potentially counterproductive to the essence of higher learning: originality, critical thinking, innovation... in other words, creativity. Although academic composition and creative composition both depend on the written word for expression and communication, they are often seen as binary opposites (Hesse, 2012; McVey, 2008; Tailor, 2017), rival siblings, each sitting on either end of the either/or teeter-totter. However, when creativity is prohibited in the academic writing process, writing disallows the creativity that

spawns the compulsion to seek knowledge and call forth new ideas in the first place (Beauchamps, 2021; Taylor, 2017; Yoo, 2017).

While graduate students work to carve out an academic identity within their realm of study, the academic paper serves as a conduit for recognition (Hamilton & Pitt, 2009; Limerick, 2015; Swales & Feak, 2012). The decontextualized position of authority a writer adopts for their work exudes confidence, and the linear organization of their work suggests effortless labour that disguises the messy, non-linear process behind it: a process full of the diversions and tangents representative of the creative effort (Beauchamps, 2021; Taylor, 2017). Writing an academic paper is like wandering lost in the epistemological woods, tripping through the tangled undergrowth of research in the thicket of information, hacking away a path with a dull machete. This clumsy, trail-clearing effort ultimately leaves some ideas on the forest floor. This is not to say that academic papers should not be refined or organized. The art of editing and revision is an essential skill for any student enrolled in higher learning. Only when writers become too decontextualized from their work do they risk sacrificing creativity in exchange for the safe harbour of the forest clearing (Beauchamps, 2021; Taylor, 2017). Sometimes, unfortunately, the most straightforward way out is to follow the pre-forged paths.

Yet, academic and creative composition do not have to arm wrestle for relevancy, and perhaps viewing both kinds of writing from a “two-sides-of-the-same-coin” perspective better represents their shared relationship with the textual communication of ideas through language. After all, creativity is not a phenomenon reserved only for poets and artists; it is a force that drives any student to learn, any scholar to research, and any scientist to invent (Bump, 1985; McVey, 2008; Merkle, 2020). When an idea is concretized through the written word, the creation of any writing can be regarded as a form of creative writing (McVey, 2008).

Furthermore, any genre of composition that demands that a learner transform their ideas into text, whether those ideas stem from scientific inquiry or literary analysis, is a creative act of communication through writing, “and when they finally, slowly, laboriously, perhaps haltingly begin to produce written work—their work in their words—they are, in any true meaning of the words, involved in *creative writing*” (McVey, 2008, p. 291).

Academic writing can be perceived as a close relative to formal poetic forms, such as the sonnet or the ode, whereby poets must adhere to meter, rhyme scheme, and even thematic rules to express their creativity within the boundaries of structure (Hesse, 2012; Taylor, 2017).

Likewise, abiding by the restrictions of academic writing guidelines can challenge a student writer to apply creative writing techniques to help them express their ideas in fresh and novel ways while establishing their unique scholarly identity... without breaking too many rules (Hesse, 2010; Swales & Feak, 2012).

Creative Writing Strategies for Academic Writers

Students can include creativity in their written work without stripping themselves of academic style, plunging themselves into the bottomless depths of stream-of-consciousness free verse. “In academic writing, simultaneity and humanization do not need to produce full-on collages or the textual equivalents of Jackson Pollock paintings, nor should they produce pure autobiography” (Taylor, 2017, p.41). Students can make several stylistic choices to improve their writing “within the lines,” crafting their academic identity (McVey, 2010; Swales & Feak, 2010).

Student writers may begin the creative process in the pre-writing stage by seeking research that provides impact rather than simply reiterating source knowledge (Yoo, 2017).

Other pre-writing creative practices include self-reflective activities, such as brainstorming and keeping an informal journal or blog (Hesse, 2010).

Once the composing begins, students can remember that, even in science and technical writing, sensory detail and the use of metaphor, anecdote, and even thoughtfully applied humour can create memorable content for readers and that these creative devices can facilitate the comprehension of more complex, discipline-specific concepts (Bump, 1985; Merkle, Yoo, 2012).

Rather than pinning knowledge down like a beetle in a shadow box, metaphors and similes make it possible for a writer to pen it into an ever-closing circle, one that allows knowledge to remain intact but also allows readers the vantage point from which to observe and interpret (Tailor, 2017, p. 42).

Metaphors allow writers to transform overly complicated prose into visceral communication between reader and author, and extended metaphors have the potential to connect discursive threads within an academic work.

Narrative is key in any written work (Barter & Tregidga, 2005; Beauchamps, 2021; Merkle, 2020; Tailor, 2017; Sword, 2012) and when academic writers view their ideas as protagonists in a story rather than as a linear summary of other people's knowledge, student writers can abide by organizational guidelines while explaining critical information along a readable, storytelling arc (Beauchamps, 2021; Bump, 1985; Hesse, 2010; Merkle, 2020). Every field of study comes equipped with its own terminology. Still, by avoiding excessive jargon and "highfalutin gobbledygook" (Pinker, 2014, n.p.), the academic writer supports reader comprehension while encouraging student readers to engage with scholarly texts (McVey, 293).

Imbuing academic work with the kind of emotions that reflect the excitement of discovery, the pause of contemplation, and the fullness of wonder can also make the writing more relatable and, therefore, memorable (Beauchamp, 2021; Bump, 1985; Taylor, 2017). In this era of digital new media, open access databases, and diverse critical frameworks, scholarly knowledge is increasingly exceeding campus boundaries, and there is a desire to extend the reach of expertise to include the public at large; as a result, it is important that scholars adjust their written language to be more inclusive of different cultures and educational backgrounds (Beauchamp, 2021; Hesse, 2010).

Finally, academic writers can borrow from creative writing and infuse interest into their work by diversifying their sentence length and structure to lend a rhythm to their written words and highlight important themes and insights (Hesse, 2010).

Academic composition is challenging to write and, often, challenging to read. Graduate students striving to express their learning in a style that behooves their educational status while simultaneously establishing themselves as trustworthy scholars may find the rigorous task challenging and exciting. Upon reviewing scholarly discourse about academic writing, it is clear that its conventions can be problematic by, for example, perpetuating societal hierarchies of power and authority while suppressing new or divergent ideas and innovation. However, the most successful academic writers can write more clearly, more powerfully, and, yes, more stylishly when they incorporate some creative writing techniques into their work. Thoughtfully placed creative techniques such as metaphor can explain complex research findings, analogies may translate abstract ideas more effectively, and a storytelling structure can make a paper more readable. Undoubtedly, academic style serves a specific purpose in higher education, but carefully applying creative writing strategies can help make academic writing even better.

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