

CHAPTER 11

STRUCTURAL DESIGNS

Essayist Annie Dillard describes writing as an architectural endeavor, a continuous cycle of design, demolition, and rebuilding. Sentences are the bricks; paragraphs are the walls and windows:

Some of the walls are bearing walls; they have to stay, or everything will fall down. Other walls can go with impunity. . . . Unfortunately, it is often a bearing wall that has to go. It cannot be helped. There is only one solution, which appalls you, but there it is. Knock it out. Duck.¹

Dillard's metaphor strikes at the emotional heart of the writing process, which involves destruction as well as production, short-term losses as well as long-term gains. Stylish academic writers are craftspeople who regard their texts as intricate, labor-intensive structures that must be carefully planned and meticulously built, from the pouring of the foundation and the sourcing of the materials to the final polishing of the banisters—not to mention those rare but wrenching occasions when the wrecking ball must be called in.

A well-structured article or book, like a well-built house, requires careful thought and planning. Most academics enjoy a wider range of structural choices than they may realize, starting with the most basic decision of all: will their overall structure be conventional, unique, or something in between? As a general

rule, disciplinary cultures that value creative expression (such as literary studies) encourage and reward creatively structured scholarship, whereas disciplinary cultures that privilege scientific rigor (such as biology) encourage and reward structural rigor. However, of the ten disciplines in my data sample, medicine was the only field in which 100 percent of the articles employed a conventional Introduction, Method, Results, and Discussion (IMRAD) structure or something very similar, with absolutely no variations. In every other discipline surveyed, I observed a range of structural approaches. Significant percentages of academics in computer science (90 percent), higher education (70 percent), psychology (56 percent), anthropology (50 percent), and even evolutionary biology (10 percent) adopted unique or hybrid rather than purely conventional structures. In the humanities, meanwhile, I noted a fairly even mix of articles with unique structures (that is, their section titles follow no recognizable pattern or convention), hybrid structures (whereby uniquely titled sections cohabit with conventionally titled sections), and sequential structures (sections that are numbered but not titled). More than one-third of the history and literature articles in my survey sample—36 percent and 38 percent, respectively—contained no section headings at all (see Figure 2.1 in Chapter 2).

For scientists and social scientists, the advantages of adhering to a conventional structure are many. Authors who follow the IMRAD model always open their articles with an introductory section that clearly states the purpose and scope of the current research, sums up previous work in the field, and probes gaps and flaws in the existing literature. Next, in sections with titles such as "Data," "Methodology," and "Results" (the exact labels vary from field to field), they describe the data collection and results. Finally, in the "Analysis," "Discussion," and/or "Conclusion" sections, they review their main findings, explore the wider implications of their work, and offer suggestions for further research. This paint-by-numbers approach prompts researchers to plan their research methodically, conduct it rigorously, and present it

SPOTLIGHT ON STYLE

DONALD SHANKWEILER

At the beginning of our long collaboration, Isabelle Liberman and I were concerned with testing explanations of reading problems that were current at the end of the 1960s. At that time, ideas about causation regularly invoked neuropsychological concepts such as poorly established cerebral dominance. Reversals of letters and words were still considered to be the hallmark of dyslexia. . . . As for treatment, that was the heyday of motor patterning, balance beams, and eye exercises. Our early work was devoted more to showing what reading disability was not than to explaining what it was.

In an article that pays tribute to his recently deceased colleague Isabelle Liberman, linguist Donald Shankweiler explains how the concept of phonological awareness can help teachers help children with reading problems. Despite a plethora of *be* verbs and some sloppy locutions that demonstrate the pitfalls of abstraction (for example, "ideas about causation regularly invoked neuropsychological concepts"—can an idea invoke a concept?), Shankweiler's writing style is for the most part lucid, personable, and example-driven. He structures his article as a series of seven numbered assertions about "the development of reading and its difficulties," with each "assertion" constituting a section heading, for example:

1. Emergence of Phonological Awareness Follows a Developmental Pattern
2. Early Instruction Designed to Promote Phonological Awareness and Letter Knowledge Confers an Advantage in Reading and Spelling That Is Measurable Years Later

Readers come away from Shankweiler's article with a clear understanding of his seven arguments and of the evidence he musters to support each one. Rather than wrapping up with a standard conclusion, he ends with a "promissory note" that describes new research advances. Such news, he notes, would have given great pleasure to the friend and colleague whose work his article memorializes.

coherently, without leaving out any crucial information. Moreover, a conventional structure is relatively easy for new academics to learn; all they have to do is follow models established by others before them. Readers, meanwhile, know exactly where to look for key findings. They can skim the abstract, mine the literature review, scan the data, and grab the conclusions without wasting valuable time actually *reading*.

However, conventional structures also have some significant drawbacks. Generic section titles such as "Method" and "Conclusion" provide very little real information about an article's content, a handicap for skimmers as well as for readers. In the following outline excerpted from a higher education journal, only the title tells us anything specific about the topic being addressed:

Title	Relationships among Structural Diversity, Informal Peer Interactions and Perceptions of the Campus Environment
Section Headings	Background Research Questions Research Method Conceptual Model Data Sources Measures Data Analysis Results

Another disadvantage of identically structured articles is that they all end up looking and sounding more or less alike, thus offering the subliminal impression that they all say more or less the same thing. Even more worryingly, academics who always plan, research, and write to a template risk thinking to a template as well.

Hybrid structures offer an alternative for scientists and social scientists who want to add some unique architectural features to work that is otherwise safely grounded in disciplinary norms. In a research article with a hybrid structure, sections with conventional titles such as "Introduction," "Method," or "Conclusion"

sit side by side with uniquely titled sections such as “Gender and Developmental Issues Relative to Interest Structure” (psychology), “Pre-Classic Settlement, Ceramics, and Social Conflict in the Rio Grande del Rancho Drainage” (anthropology), or “Legalism in East Asian Regional Economic Integration” (law). The following outline of an article from a computer science journal offers a fairly typical example of a hybrid structure:

Title	Solving #SAT Using Vertex Covers
Section Titles	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Introduction 2. Sequential Recursive Petri Nets <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 2.1 Definitions 2.2 Expressivity of SRPNs 2.3 Analysis of SRPNs 3. Recursive Petri Nets <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 3.1 Definitions 3.2 An Illustrative Example 3.3 Expressivity of RPNs 3.4 Analysis of RPNs 4. Conclusion

Note the parallel sequencing of the two main sections (Definitions, Expressivity, Analysis) and the numbered outline indicating structural hierarchies (a mandatory feature in many science and engineering journals). The authors of this article are not trying to impress anyone with their inventive structure and clever section titles. Nor, however, have they followed a predetermined template dictating how they must present their research.

Stylish academic writers often adapt conventional and hybrid structures to suit their own needs, as when psychologist Bob Altemeyer offers two brief Method-Results-Discussion studies within a single article, or when management researchers David Guest and Neil Conway set up a study based on five “Hypotheses,” each of which is explained in the opening section, reported on in the “Results” section, and further analyzed in the

“Discussion” section.² Some authors use unique subsection headings to enliven and individualize conventionally titled main sections (a common ploy in evolutionary biology, among other fields). At the opposite end of the stylishness spectrum are articles so carelessly assembled that their structure exposes cracks and fissures in their authors’ thinking. One of the higher education articles in my data sample, for instance, contains a section promisingly titled “Findings and Interpretations,” which opens with the following sentence: “Four dominant discourses shaping images of leadership emerged from our analysis: *autonomy*, *relatedness*, *masculinity*, and *professionalism*” [my italics]. The reader therefore anticipates that the section will consist of four subsections arranged in the following sequence:

- Autonomy
- Relatedness
- Masculinity
- Professionalism

Instead, however, when we skim through the section, we discover that the authors have broken it into five subsections:

- Autonomy
- Gender and Masculinity
- Professionalism
- Masculinity
- Relatedness

Not only do the subsections occur in a different order than the opening sentence has led us to expect, but the “Masculinity” subsection has suddenly spawned a semi-redundant offshoot, “Gender and Masculinity.” This lack of attention to structural detail—indeed, to structural fundamentals—leaves readers feeling rather as though we followed signs marked “Auditorium” and found ourselves in a broom closet. Worse, the structural inconsistencies make us doubt the validity of the authors’ analysis; how could

ROBERT J. CONNORS AND ANDREA LUNSFORD

As we worked on this error research together, . . . we started somewhere along the line to feel less and less like the white-coated Researchers of our dreams and more and more like characters we called Ma and Pa Kettle—good-hearted bumblerstriving to understand a world whose complexity was more than a little daunting. Being fans of classical rhetoric, *proso-popoeia*, *letteraturizzazione*, and the like, as well as enthusiasts for intertextuality, *plaisir de texte*, *différence*, etc., we offer this account of our travails.

In a now classic 1988 article titled “Frequency of Formal Errors in Current College Writing, or Ma and Pa Kettle Do Research,” professors of composition Robert J. Connors and Andrea Lunsford report on a large-scale study of how composition instructors mark formal errors in student writing. Humorously describing their own awkward attempts to negotiate a research paradigm to which they brought plenty of naïve enthusiasm but no real disciplinary training or experience, they write with a stylistic audacity that matches their interdisciplinary chutzpah. Each section title pairs a weighty label drawn from classical rhetoric with a wry summary of “Ma and Pa Kettle’s” shambolic progress:

- *Proem*: In Which the Characters Are Introduced
- *Exordium*: The Kettles Smell a Problem
- *Narratio*: Ma and Pa Visit the Library
- *Confirmatio I*: The Kettles Get Cracking
- *Confutatio*: Ma and Pa Suck Eggs
- *Confirmatio II*: Ma and Pa Hit the Road
- *Amplificatio*: Ma and Pa Hunker Down
- *Peroratio*: The Kettles Say, “Aw, Shucks”

Working collaboratively in a field where single authorship is a disciplinary norm, Connors and Lunsford push against every stylistic and structural boundary they can think of, playfully reflecting on both the processes and the products of their own research.

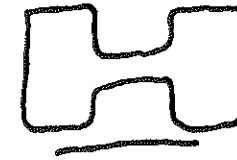


Figure 11.1. Virginia Woolf’s sketch of the structure of *To the Lighthouse*.

such shoddy construction techniques possibly result in a watertight building?

A seemingly unstructured but in fact well-crafted article provides a more satisfying reading experience—and certainly a more persuasive demonstration of authorial skill—than a conventionally structured one with weak supporting walls and confusing signposting. Virginia Woolf famously described her experimental 1927 novel *To the Lighthouse* as “two blocks joined by a corridor,” sketching two large rectangles to represent the bulk of the novel, in which time moves very slowly, connected by a narrow band depicting the “Time Passes” section, in which years fly by in the blink of an eye (see Figure 11.1).³

As Woolf’s example reminds us, structure becomes more rather than less important when an author deviates from generic norms and expectations. Unique and experimental structures can open up new ways of approaching familiar issues, a form of intellectual displacement that parallels the physical displacement we feel when we traverse an unfamiliar landscape or enter a room where the walls sit at unusual angles. Only if the route is well signposted and the rooms are well lit will readers be able to take such displacement in their stride.

In a conventionally structured academic article, section headings function like centrally positioned, neatly labeled doorways that lead us from one well-proportioned room to the next. In a uniquely structured article, by contrast, we never quite know where we are going or why, unless the author makes a special

effort to keep us on track. In some humanities articles, the section headings feel more like partitions randomly inserted to break up a cavernous space than like the coherent components of an architectural plan:

Title	Godard Counts
Section Headings	1. Ordering Evidence 2. Dirty Hands 3. Counting on Your Fingers, Thinking with Your Hands 4. The History of Oneself 5. Public Aesthetics 6. "Envoi 1" 7. The Art of Living 8. The Stakes of Style 9. Perfectibility and Debasement

The author of this article from a prominent cultural studies journal, for example, has missed a golden opportunity to use his punning title as a structuring device: "Godard Counts" suggests not only that the filmmaker Jean-Luc Godard is important ("counts") but also that his aesthetics is bound up with tropes of numbering, ordering, and counting. The article's first three section titles ("Ordering Evidence," "Dirty Hands," "Counting on Your Fingers") echo the counting pun; but then the author drops the ball. The remaining six section titles have nothing much to do either with the main title or with one another, and the numbers impose a sequential flow that is not reflected in the titles. For a reader skimming the article in search of information and direction, the cryptic section titles prove more mystifying than helpful.

To be sure, not all humanities scholars want to provide their readers with clearly marked entry and exit points. Some compose playful section titles that mimic the brightly painted doors of a fun house, deliberately enticing us into halls of mirrors or other surprising spaces. Others eschew section titles altogether,

calling on more subtle structuring techniques—the gradually unfolding argument, the controlling metaphor—to direct their readers' attention, as when literary scholar Linda Brodkey stitches together her childhood memories of reading, writing, and sewing in an article whose title, "Writing on the Bias," puns on the relationship between textile and text.⁴ Peter Elbow's influential book *Writing with Power* contains many intriguing suggestions for variations on conventional structures (for example, the collage essay, the dialogic essay, or the critical-creative essay).⁵ Elsewhere, in an essay titled "The Music of Form," Elbow notes that, while section headings help readers get a quick visual overview of an article, there is still something to be said for the linear, time-bound experience of moving through a piece of writing one word at a time:

I'm not arguing against the usefulness of traditional organizational techniques like signposting, mapping, and thesis statements—which can powerfully compensate for how texts are trapped in the glue of time. But . . . the traditional techniques are not the only way to give readers a sense that an essay hangs together and is well organized.⁶

Authors of scholarly books—the mansions of academe—have the luxury of constructing architectural features that would not easily fit within the confined footprint of an individual research article: staircases and turrets, fountains and follies. Some build whole volumes around a unifying theme or metaphor, as when literary scholar Robert Pogue Harrison, in a book about forests in the Western literary imagination, invokes different forms and uses of forests in chapters with titles such as "Shadows of Law," "Forests of Nostalgia," "Dwelling," and "The Ecology of Finitude."⁷ Some authors focus on the reader's journey, as when classicist David Ulansey structures his book on Mithraic religious rituals "as a gradual unveiling of a mystery . . . allowing the story to unfold step by step, slowly adding separate pieces to a puzzle whose final image does not become clear until the end."⁸

SPOTLIGHT ON STYLE

VICTORIA ROSNER

"Yes? No?" No. The opening lines of *Good Morning, Midnight* capture what seemed so wrong with the forms of private life in the first part of the twentieth century. Rootless and solitary, protagonist Sasha Jensen passes her time in a fruitless search for rooms. Rooms speak to her, tell her in suggestive tones what they're about. . . . Sasha warns the reader later of the latent power in the rooms she inspects: "Never tell the truth about this business of rooms, because it would bust the roof off everything and undermine the whole social system." ↗

In a citation announcing the Modernist Studies Association's 2006 Book Prize for a "significant contribution to modernist studies," the selection committee drily noted, "It is a rare thing to be seduced by a table of contents." Victoria Rosner's multidisciplinary book *Modernism and the Architecture of Private Life* explores the domestic interiors of early twentieth-century art, literature, and thought by inviting us to wander through a series of beautifully composed chapters appropriately titled "Kitchen Table Modernism," "Frames," "Thresholds," "Studies," and "Interiors." Architecture provides Rosner not only with the structural design for her book but also with a treasure trove of evocative metaphors, from the literal "impasse" where novelist Jean Rhys's protagonist Sasha Jensen conducts her fruitless search for a room of her own—"a narrow alley that arcs and cuts off in a dead end"—to the complex web of relationships that shaped modernist culture:

This book proposes that the spaces of private life are a generative site for literary modernism. These spaces compose a kind of grid of social relations that shifts and slips, often upending the individuals who traverse it.

Rosner's highly spatial vocabulary—*space*, *site*, *grid*, *shift*, *slip*, *traverse*—illuminates abstract ideas about society and selfhood. Her book takes us from the laundry room to the library, from the closet to the study, and to many other places in between.

Some even set their readers loose in conceptual mazes deliberately designed to disorient and amuse, as when cognitive scientist and jack-of-all-disciplines Douglas Hofstadter, in books with titles like *I Am a Strange Loop* and *The Mind's I*, foregrounds the self-referential intricacies of his own writing.⁹ Bold structural choices such as these are available not only to book authors but to dissertation writers as well, provided they have the necessary personal confidence and institutional support. As with any other aspect of academic writing, the key to producing a well-structured book, article, or thesis is neither slavish imitation nor willful anarchy but carefully considered craftsmanship.

THINGS TO TRY

- If you are a scientist or social scientist, decide in advance whether you want your journal article to have a conventional, hybrid, or unique structure. Pros and cons: a conventional IMRAD structure (Intro, Method, Results, and Discussion) encourages scientific rigor but discourages independent thinking; a unique structure promotes creativity but risks disorienting readers; a hybrid structure offers flexibility but is neither fish nor fowl.
- Consider using a metaphor, theme, or series of sequential steps as a structuring device.
- If you have never before strayed from IMRAD and its cousins, consider developing a hybrid structure or, at the very least, introducing some unique subsection titles. Look in journals from both within and beyond your discipline for examples.
- Make an outline of your article or book based *only* on its chapter titles or section headings. How well does that outline, on its own, communicate what your work is about? Are you using section headings to inform, engage, and direct your readers, or merely to carve up space?

- To fine-tune your structure, make a paragraph outline. First, identify the topic sentence of each paragraph (that is, the sentence that most clearly states its overall argument); next, arrange those sentences in a numbered sequence. This process can help you identify structural weaknesses both within and between paragraphs: for example, a paragraph that has no clearly stated argument or one that does not logically build on the one before.

CHAPTER 12

POINTS OF REFERENCE

What do citation styles have to do with stylishness? Everything. How we cite influences how we write, from the minutiae of bibliographic forms to the big picture of how we respond to and acknowledge other people's work. Academic authors do no favors to themselves or their readers if they neglect to give credit where credit is due. At the same time, however, a book or article weighed down by awkwardly placed parenthetical citations and ponderous footnotes will probably be less readable, less engaging, and ultimately less persuasive than a piece of writing that wears its scholarly apparatus lightly.

Many commentators have noted the powerful role of citation styles in reinforcing disciplinary epistemologies. All kinds of methodological prejudices lurk just below the surface of any academic text; when we disrupt normative elements such as citation styles, we send those unspoken assumptions scurrying out into the light. Frances Kelly, a literary scholar turned educational researcher, recalls the challenges she faced when she first had to write a paper using APA style (sanctioned by the American Psychological Association) rather than MLA style (sanctioned by the Modern Language Association):

The first real difficulty arose when I attempted to discuss an article produced by a team of researchers working in collaboration. . . .

- If the style allows footnotes or endnotes, do you want your notes to be long and discursive or brief and informative? Can you justify your choice? (The fact that other scholars in your field favor one option or the other is not, on its own, a sufficiently compelling reason.)
- If you are using an in-text citation style such as MLA, do you need footnotes at all? (Just because they are conventional in your field does not necessarily mean they are *required*; many editors in fact discourage discursive notes.)
- Will your list of sources function as a full bibliography, naming every book or article ever published on your research topic, or as a “Works Cited” section, listing only those works that you actually mention in the main text? (Your response will no doubt be influenced by disciplinary conventions, but need not be ruled by them.)
- Whenever possible, compose your book or article from the outset in the citation style you plan to use for final publication. For peer-reviewed articles, use the house style of the journal to which you intend to submit the article first.
- Read all of your discursive notes and/or parenthetical citations aloud. Can you trim them, polish them, move them into the main text, or position them less obtrusively?

CHAPTER 13

THE BIG PICTURE

If you ask a roomful of academics to characterize stylish academic writing, at least a few will inevitably reply that the authors they most admire are those who “express complex ideas clearly.” Some might embellish the point, noting that stylish academic writers express complex ideas clearly and *succinctly*, clearly and *elegantly*, clearly and *engagingly*, or clearly and *persuasively*. Others will propose variations, stating that stylish academic writers express complex ideas in language that *aids* the reader’s understanding or *challenges* the reader’s understanding or *extends* the reader’s understanding. Central to all these definitions, despite their differing nuances, is the elusive art of abstraction; that is, the stylish academic writer’s ability to paint a big picture on a small canvas, sketching the contours of an intricate argument in just a few broad strokes.

Paradoxically, the most effective academic *abstracts*—a noun I use in this chapter to designate any summary statement of academic purpose, such as a grant proposal, article synopsis, or book prospectus—are often highly *concrete*, harnessing the language of the senses as well as the language of the mind. Performance scholar Sally Banes, for example, uses the sensual word “stink” to communicate the physical and symbolic importance of odor in Western theater:

For a century at least, in Western cultures, strong odors were mostly regarded as “bad,” stinks to be done away with. Banes finds that performing artists are attempting to restore the sense of smell to the theatrical experience. She anatomizes the rhetoric and practice of “aroma design” in theatrical representation and looks at smell as a paradigm of “liveness.”¹

Similarly, psychologists Thomas Carnahan and Sam McFarland invoke real people and places (students, guards, Abu Ghraib) in their study of the psychological dispositions that underlie abusive behavior:

The authors investigated whether students who selectively volunteer for a study of prison life possess dispositions associated with behaving abusively. Students were recruited for a psychological study of prison life using a virtually identical newspaper ad as used in the Stanford Prison Experiment (SPE; Haney, Banks & Zimbardo, 1973) or for a psychological study, an identical ad minus the words of prison life. Volunteers for the prison study scored significantly higher on measures of the abuse-related dispositions of aggressiveness, authoritarianism, Machiavellianism, narcissism, and social dominance and lower on empathy and altruism, two qualities inversely related to aggressive abuse. . . . Implications for interpreting the abusiveness of American military guards at Abu Ghraib Prison also are discussed.²

These two otherwise very different abstracts are clear, direct, and to the point, albeit rather impersonal (“Banes finds,” “the authors investigated”) and passively phrased (“strong odors were mostly regarded,” “implications . . . are discussed”). Nouns and verbs sit close together so we know exactly who is doing what: “*performing artists are attempting*,” “*the authors investigated*,” “*volunteers for the prison study scored*.” Both abstracts contain vocabulary that might challenge a nonacademic reader (*anatomizes*, *paradigm*, *Machiavellianism*, *narcissism*). However, the authors steer clear of the kind of arcane, opaque, discipline-specific jargon that demands highly specialized subject knowledge.

SPOTLIGHT ON STYLE

MALCOLM COULTHARD

For forty years linguists have talked about idiolect and the uniqueness of individual utterances. This article explores how far these two concepts can be used to answer certain questions about the authorship of written documents—for instance how similar can two student essays be before one begins to suspect plagiarism? The article examines two ways of measuring similarity: the proportion of shared vocabulary and the number and length of shared phrases, and illustrates with examples drawn from both actual criminal court cases and incidents of student plagiarism. The article ends by engaging with Solan and Tiersma’s contribution to this volume and considering whether such forensic linguistic evidence would be acceptable in American courts as well as how it might successfully be presented to a lay audience.

In his abstract for an article titled “Author Identification, Idiolect, and Linguistic Uniqueness,” linguist Malcolm Coulthard eschews the complex syntax and specialized vocabulary beloved by so many other researchers in his field. Aside from some sloppy punctuation, his sentences are clear and well structured, laying out the various questions that his article attempts to answer and foreshadowing his use of concrete examples from both the college classroom and the criminal court. Coulthard’s article opens with an anecdote about a man accused of murder based on incriminating statements that forensic analysts later proved to have been forged by police. Fittingly, Coulthard structures his own work something like a mystery story or courtroom drama; rather than delivering his thesis up front, he waits until the final paragraph to deliver his verdict. Yes, he eventually concludes, the concepts of *idiolect* and *linguistic uniqueness* (phrases that he carefully defines at the beginning of the article) are indeed robust, providing a basis for answering “with a high degree of confidence” important forensic questions about authorship.

Compare the above examples with the following abstract, which appeared in a leading higher education research journal:

Policy in higher education suggests that curriculum should be more responsive to economist arguments than was the case in the past. Although some guidance has been given to how to develop more work-integrated curricula, little attention has been given to interactions in meetings between workplace and academic representatives in which issues of curriculum development are discussed. As such there appears to be a gap in current curriculum theory. The author suggests that such interactions may be fruitfully examined using concepts derived from studies in the sociology of science and organizational dynamics. Such analyses may contribute to understanding what conditions enable productive interactions, which may be the development of hybrid objects and languages which speak to both groupings.

The article addresses a topic that could presumably be of interest to academics from many different disciplines: how can faculty, especially those in professionally oriented fields, engage in more productive conversations about course and curriculum design with the people who will eventually hire their students? The author, however, makes no attempt to invite such readers to the table. The abstract is dry, impersonal, wordy, and vague, filled with agency-free claims (“some guidance has been given”—by whom?), hedging maneuvers (“*appears to be*,” “*may be*,” “*may contribute*”), and syntactically fuzzy sentences (“Such analyses may contribute to understanding what conditions enable productive interactions, which may be the development of hybrid objects and languages which speak to both groupings”—the first *which* has no clear referent, and the second *which* should be *that*). Aside from “the author,” no human beings appear anywhere in the abstract, unless we count the shadowy “workplace and academic representatives” whose interactions “*may be fruitfully examined*”—but *will* they be examined here, or will the article merely circle around them, as the abstract does? Rather than rendering complex ideas clear and comprehensible, the author

has taken a rather simple idea—sociological concepts can teach us how to run better meetings—and twisted it into a discursive pretzel.

The purpose of a scholarly abstract is not merely to *summarize* an article's content but to *persuade* one's discipline-based peers that the research is important and the article is therefore worth reading.³ In the higher education abstract quoted above, the author makes plenty of insider moves, including the obligatory claim that his article, like a thumb artfully inserted into a leaky dike, will plug a “gap” in the existing scholarship. Yet the abstract lacks persuasive power—not in spite of, but precisely because of, its adherence to disciplinary conventions. The art of persuasion necessarily involves human conversation; indeed, the *Oxford English Dictionary* defines persuasion as “the addressing of arguments or appeals to a *person* [my emphasis] in order to induce cooperation, submission, or agreement.”⁴ Authors who adopt an impersonal, “academic” tone are neglecting one of the most powerfully persuasive tools at the stylish writer's disposal: the human touch.

In the social sciences and humanities, researchers can draw readers into their argument by giving a voice and presence to human subjects: for example, the performance artists discussed by Banes or the students involved in Carnahan and McFarland's psychology experiments. Scientists who study nonhuman subjects can make their research accessible in other ways, such as by using first-person pronouns (“*we* approached”) to signal the researchers' presence in the work:

All birds dropping hard-bodied prey face a trade-off. It is likely that the impact damage to the prey increases as drop height increases, as this will influence the speed at which the prey hits the ground, and so the energy it experiences on impact. However, the time and energy costs of flight also increase with increasing drop heights. Furthermore, if a bird drops a prey item more than once, it incurs additional time and energy costs while landing, retrieving the prey item and

taking off again. The main aim of this paper, therefore, is to examine how this trade-off influences decisions taken by birds dropping hard-bodied prey. We approached this problem in two ways.⁵

Note the many ways in which the authors of this article—titled “The Economics of Getting High: Decisions Made by Common Gulls Dropping their Cockles to Open Them”—engage and inform their readers. They begin by clearly defining the problem that motivates their research: “All birds dropping hard-bodied prey face a trade-off.” In verb-driven sentences filled with concrete nouns, they vividly describe the gulls in flight and the hard-bodied objects they drop from on high. If we are persuaded to read beyond the abstract, it is because the authors have conveyed not only the arc of their research but its essence. Rather than taking elementary concepts and spinning them out in complex language, they have achieved the stylish writer’s nirvana: “complex ideas clearly expressed.”

The following grid, adapted from one developed by higher education researcher David Green, offers one way to visualize the various registers into which academic writing typically falls:⁶

	Simple Ideas	Complex Ideas
Clear Language		
Difficult Language		

While some academics may stray between two or more sections of the grid—for example, writing a simple and clear abstract followed by a complex and difficult opening paragraph—the stylish academic writers quoted throughout this book mostly gravitate toward the top right-hand corner: complex ideas communicated in clear, comprehensible language. There is, of course, a

SPOTLIGHT ON STYLE

STEPHEN K. DONOVAN

The libraries of universities and other research institutions are home to an abundance of academic journals, published in multifarious sizes, thicknesses, languages, and formats, with covers varying from black to psychedelic and covering every subject imaginable. More uniformity of format would favour the author, who would no longer have to tailor style to wherever the latest contribution is being submitted, but the current diversity of formats is aimed at the reader. Long may it so remain.

Paleontologist Stephen K. Donovan—whose publications include books with titles like *Jamaican Rock Stars, 1823–1971: The Geologists Who Explored Jamaica*—brings both a scientist’s clarity and a stylish writer’s panache to this compact yet engaging three-sentence abstract, the teaser for an article in the *Journal of Scholarly Publishing*.

In the first sentence, Donovan teleports us into the physical space of the university library and invites us to picture what we will find there: academic journals of various sizes and thicknesses, with covers ranging from “black to psychedelic.” Despite its concrete imagery, however, this opening line also conveys an abstract argument: the diversity of the journal covers, Donovan implies, mirrors the diversity of their intellectual coverage.

In the second sentence, Donovan sets up the conflict that his article will explore at length: uniformity of format favors the author, he argues, while diversity of format favors the reader. He ends by forthrightly declaring his own allegiance to the diversity camp. A less-confident author might have spun out a laborious, jargon-studded thesis sentence: “This article analyzes the conflicting claims of both the writerly and readerly paradigms, concluding that the readerly benefits of material and epistemological variety should be given precedence over the writerly convenience afforded by stylistic standardization.” Instead, Donovan ends by summing up in just five words his argument that diversity should be defended: “Long may it so remain.”

place in the world for simple ideas expressed in simple language—for example, in a primary school textbook or a government-issued voting manual—and academics in fields such as literary studies or philosophy may argue for the educational and intellectual value of complex ideas expressed in rich, challenging language. But can anyone justify expressing simple ideas in difficult language? Green's grid offers a useful starting point not only for evaluating other academics' writing, but for honestly assessing one's own.

Condensing a complex research project into a pithy abstract is no simple task, to be sure. An even greater challenge is to boil that abstract down into an "elevator statement": the seemingly off-the-cuff but in fact brilliantly polished single-sentence summary that you offer to the colleague who turns to you in the elevator at an academic conference and asks, "So what are you working on?" You have just a minute or two to respond: the time that it takes for the elevator to arrive at its destination floor. Stylish academic writers often offer an elevator statement of sorts at the start of their scholarly books or articles, as a means of engaging their readers' attention and inspiring them to continue reading:

This is a book about plots and plotting, about how stories come to be ordered in significant form, and also about our desire and need for such orderings.⁷

This book is about the impact of trauma both on individuals and on entire cultures or nations and about the need to share and "translate" such traumatic impact.⁸

As I shall try to show in this book, human language has a complexity and creativity that is unmatched by any other form of animal communication, and probably depends on completely different principles.⁹

Note that each of these opening statements describes not only the book's subject but its argument, not only its *what* but its *why*. Literary scholar Peter Brooks promises to explain *why* we

SPOTLIGHT ON STYLE

JONATHAN CULLER

I began work on this topic for a conference at the University of London on style in philosophy. The organizers suggested that I address the question of what it is for a piece of philosophy to be badly written—no doubt thinking that as a reader of French philosophers, I would have special expertise on this question or at least a lot of relevant experience. In fact, I was happy to take up this question because I have been intrigued of late by claims made in the world of Anglophone philosophy about bad writing. The journal *Philosophy and Literature* . . . had for several years announced a Bad Writing Award, and since this award had recently been conferred on a sentence by Judith Butler that appeared in *Diacritics* during my stint as editor, I had a personal interest in the concept of bad writing in philosophy and the criteria of selection.

Literary scholar Jonathan Culler is a study in paradox: an apologist for "difficult" writing who himself is a master of determinedly lucid prose. Here, in the opening paragraph of an essay titled "Bad Writing and Good Philosophy," he engages his readers' attention and sympathy by establishing both his personal interest and his professional stake in the topic of "bad writing." Next, he provides an extended gloss of cultural theorist Judith Butler's prizewinning ninety-three-word sentence, which contains twenty-eight abstract nouns but no concrete language whatsoever, aside from invocations of "structure" and "structural totalities." Culler generously concludes that Butler's sentence is in fact "quite pedagogic writing. Key points are rephrased and repeated so that if you don't catch on the first time around, you have another chance when they come by again." In Culler's evocative phrasing, Butler's disorienting syntax becomes a spinning merry-go-round with a gold ring held out to the persistent reader.

tell stories; cultural theorist E. Ann Kaplan investigates *why* we feel compelled to share and transform traumatic events through literature and art; and psycholinguist Michael Corballis explores *why* human language has evolved to be so complex and creative.

The secret ingredient of an effective elevator statement—or, for that matter, of a persuasive abstract, article, or book—is a strong *thesis* or *argument*. Both words are frequently heard in the freshman composition classroom but seldom in the research laboratory. However, identical principles apply in both venues: writers who put forth a bold, defensible claim are much more likely to generate engaging, persuasive prose than those who offer bland statements of fact with which no one could possibly disagree. In the sciences and social sciences, a strong thesis follows naturally from a compelling *research question*, as when a group of behavioralists asks how seagulls solve the height versus energy problem when dropping cockles onto the rocks below. Some academics may resist the notion that a complex argument can always be reduced to a single sentence; with poet and literary critic Charles Bernstein, they might even decry the “epistemological positivism” of an academic environment in which “one’s work is supposed to be easily summed up, definable, packaged, polished, wrinkles and contradictions eliminated, digressions booted” and in which “dissertations must not violate stylistic norms because that might jeopardize our young scholar’s future.”¹⁰ Yet it is worth noting that even Bernstein’s polemic against academic conformism (which contains plenty of wrinkles, contradictions, and digressions of its own) can be summed up, elevator-style, in a persuasive thesis statement: Prevailing stylistic conventions, Bernstein argues, inhibit scholarly inquiry and stifle innovation.

For stylish academic writers, clarity and complexity are bedfellows, not rivals. Evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins, who for more than a decade held the post of Professor for Public

Understanding of Science at Oxford University, offers the following advice to scientists:

Do not talk down. Try to inspire everybody with the poetry of science and make your explanations as easy as honesty allows, but at the same time do not neglect the difficult. Put extra effort into explaining to those readers prepared to put matching effort into understanding.¹¹

Dawkins’s formula can be adapted by academics in any field. Researchers who master the art of abstraction—the ability to express complex ideas clearly—will enlighten and persuade not only nonspecialist audiences but their discipline-based colleagues well.

THINGS TO TRY

- Use David Green’s grid to rate examples of academic writing that you particularly admire or dislike. (For “clear” and “difficult,” you can substitute “easy to read” and “hard to read,” “lucid” and “opaque,” “illuminating” and “bewildering,” or any other oppositional adjectives that you find helpful). Most likely you will find that the best writers in your field inhabit the “complex but clear” box, whereas those whose work you find hard to digest employ convoluted language either to express complex concepts or, more problematically, to obfuscate simple ideas. Be honest with yourself: Which grid does your own work fall into?
- Answer the following questions in simple, conversational language, avoiding disciplinary jargon:
 - What is the *main point* of your article, dissertation, or book? (Why is it important, whether to you or to anyone else?)
 - Who is your intended *audience*?
 - What *research question(s)* do you aim to answer?

- What new *contribution(s)* does your research make to theory? to practice?
- What is your overarching *thesis* or *argument*?
- What *evidence* do you offer in support?

Keep your responses close at hand as you construct your summary statement, which should answer most if not all of these questions, especially the first one (“What’s the point?”).

- Make sure your abstract contains the following:
 - Clear, well-structured sentences in which nouns and their modifying verbs sit close together.
 - At least a few concrete nouns and/or verbs.
 - A touch of humanity: for example, first-person pronouns (*I/we*), real people (research subjects, other researchers), or language that grounds abstract ideas in human experience.
 - A contestable thesis or argument.
- Show your abstract to a few trusted friends or colleagues, both from within and outside your discipline. Ask them to give you candid answers to the following questions:
 - Do you understand what my research is about and why it’s important?
 - Does my abstract make you want to keep reading?

CHAPTER 14

THE CREATIVE TOUCH

Take a gamine teenager, dress her in a sheath frock and elbow-length gloves, thrust a cigarette holder into her hand, and still she will not look like Audrey Hepburn. Some elements of stylishness defy definition or imitation, no matter how hard we try. As novelist Willa Cather puts it:

The qualities of a first-rate writer cannot be defined, but only experienced. It is just the thing in him which escapes analysis that makes him first-rate. One can catalogue all the qualities that he shares with other writers, but the thing that is his very own, his timbre, this cannot be defined any more than the quality of a beautiful speaking voice can be.¹

Nonetheless, this chapter investigates that elusive *je ne sais quoi* of stylish writing: the cluster of special qualities that make certain writers stand out from the crowd. These include passion, commitment, pleasure, playfulness, humor, elegance, lyricism, originality, imagination, creativity, and “undisciplined thinking”—attributes that are easy enough to recognize (perhaps because they occur so rarely in academic writing) but difficult to define or emulate.

Passion and commitment are stylistic qualities that academic writers often praise in other people’s writing but suppress in their own. Most academics would describe themselves as passionate, committed researchers; they love what they do and undertake

SPOTLIGHT ON STYLE

CHRISTOPHER GREY AND AMANDA SINCLAIR

The speaker begins. His topic is "managerial regimes of truth," a subject I am very interested in. We are five minutes in and I'm beginning to feel dizzy. . . . Foucault and Derrida have been dismissed as old hat, Zizek as a suspect popularist, Deleuze—no I haven't been paying attention, I am not sure whether he is in favour or out. Hardt and Negri show promise but have essentialist "tendencies." It's rather like a show trial in those more literal regimes of truth, where the accused have been drugged and the witnesses given a script to follow. . . . The words are coming more quickly now, as the Chair has indicated that time is short and I notice that the speaker is only on his first slide and has—can it be eight?—eight more to get through. What is the point of this, I wonder, what are you really trying to say? And then I realize what the speaker is saying. He is saying that he has read a great deal more than anyone else.

In a withering, often hilarious critique of the "pompous, impenetrable" prose that dominates their discipline, Christopher Grey (professor of organizational theory at Cambridge University) and Amanda Sinclair (professor of management at Melbourne Business School) call for their colleagues in critical management studies to imagine writing differently. What's more, they demonstrate how it can be done. Through an artful blend of satire, polemic, personal reflection, and fantasy, their article "Writing Differently" expresses their aesthetic, moral, and political concerns about "pretentious, obscurantist" writing. Both authors acknowledge the risks involved in writing differently, especially for academics "in more marginalized positions or at the start of their careers." But they insist on the importance of trying:

We want writing to be taken seriously, as powerful and evocative performance, able to change people's experiences of the world, rather than as a shriven, cowed and cowering path towards routinized, professionalized "publication."

their work with a strong sense of personal engagement. Many actively desire to make a difference in the world, whether by finding a cure for a deadly disease, by enlarging our understanding of natural and cultural phenomena, or by changing the way people think. Yet these same researchers have typically been trained, either implicitly or explicitly, to strip all emotion from their academic writing. What would happen if they allowed even a modicum of the passion they feel to color their prose?

Openly impassioned writing is most frequently found in disciplines that favor a personal voice and a partisan viewpoint: for example, in fields where queer, feminist, and postcolonial perspectives (among others) have encouraged academics to integrate identity politics into their scholarship. In an article on indigenous epistemologies in the Pacific Islands, anthropologist David Gegeo candidly confesses to have been "taken somewhat off-guard" by the comments of a reviewer who perceived Gegeo's anticolonialist scholarship as intellectually passé:

The individualistic, careerist approach of Anglo-European scholarship means that after publishing a few articles or maybe a book on the topic, the scholar moves on to something else. . . . The perspective of a growing number of us Pacific Islands scholars, however, is to approach research from a *communitarian perspective*: that is, research that is not only applied (targeted to making positive changes) but is firmly anchored in Indigenous or Native epistemologies and methodologies.²

In a similar vein, Bronwyn Davies, a feminist educational scholar, offers a personal anecdote to frame her critical analysis of neoliberal discourse in contemporary academic institutions:

At the beginning of my academic life my Head of Department prevaricated about promoting me from tutor to temporary lecturer. After weeks of waiting I asked him had he made up his mind, and he told me it was a difficult decision to make, since in his view women should remain in service positions. . . . My point here is not to sneer at his old fashioned narrow mindedness, but to comprehend how it

is that discourses colonize us—gifting us with our existence and shaping our desires, our beliefs in what is right—the things we are prepared to die for.³

These scholars are frankly passionate about their work, but not in a sloppily emotive way. Quite the opposite; the intensity of their emotions motivates them to theorize, criticize, and methodically subvert the epistemological paradigms within which their research operates.

Passionate prose is, however, by no means exclusively the purview of politically engaged humanists and social sciences who write in the first person. Academics in any field can express passion for their subject matter, drawing on a range of rhetorical techniques that need not necessarily include a personal voice. In a heartfelt plea for their colleagues in the health sector to resist “magical thinking” about the benefits of computerization, information technologists Carol Diamond and Clay Shirky build up emotional intensity through repetition (“Success is”), alliteration (“days instead of decades”), and metaphors (*tool, goal*):

IT [information technology] is a tool, not a goal. Success should not be measured by the number of hospitals with computerized order entry systems or patients with electronic personal health records. Success is when clinical outcomes improve. Success is when everyone can learn which methods and treatments work, and which don't, in days instead of decades.⁴

Similarly, in a 2002 article written entirely in the third person and filled with typically academic hedging words (*may, seem*), cognitive biologist Ladislav Kováč injects a strong sense of personal engagement into his analysis of the scientific aftermath of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001:

Does the terrorism of the twenty-first century have common roots with the totalitarianism of the twentieth century? Is not one of the reasons of its upsurge the fact that humankind has not achieved a proper understanding of the very nature of Nazism and Communism and has not drawn consequential conclusions? Should not science,

the paragon of rationality, take up this state of the world affairs as a warning and as a challenge?⁵

Through a series of rhetorical questions that gradually increase in interrogative force (from *does* and *is* to *should*), Kováč conveys his passionate conviction that the science community has not responded appropriately to the threat of global terrorism.

Passion's partner is *pleasure*: the sense of pure enjoyment that a researcher feels upon making a new discovery; that a writer feels upon producing a well-turned phrase; and that a reader feels upon encountering an innovative idea, a perfect sentence, or, ideally, the former couched within the latter. As Roland Barthes observes in *The Pleasure of the Text*, “If I read this sentence, this story, or this word with pleasure, it is because they were written in pleasure.”⁶ Some stylish academics—Barthes himself is a prime example—communicate such an intense, almost giddy pleasure in and through their writing that only the most curmudgeonly of readers could fail to be carried along by it. Cognitive scientist Douglas Hofstadter, in his book *Gödel, Escher, Bach*, expresses his “enthusiasm and reverence for certain ideas” in language suffused with intellectual delight, even awe:

One of the most remarkable and difficult-to-describe qualities of consciousness is visual imagery. How do we create a visual image out of our living room? Of a roaring mountain brook? Of an orange? Even more mysterious, how do we manufacture images unconsciously, images which guide our thoughts, giving them power and color and depth? From what store are they fetched? What magic allows us to mesh two or three images, hardly giving a thought as to how we should do it?⁷

Likewise, mathematician Martin Gardner opens his book *The Ambidextrous Universe* by inviting readers to see the world through the eyes of an innocent:

There is no better way to begin this book than by trying to see your image in the mirror with something like the wonder and curiosity of a chimpanzee.⁸

SPOTLIGHT ON STYLE

DOUGLAS HOFSTADTER

Only at [the typesetting] stage did the book's unusual stylistic hallmarks really emerge—the sometimes-silly playing with words, the concocting of novel verbal structures that imitate musical forms, the wallowing in analogies of every sort, the spinning of stories whose very structures exemplify the points they are talking about, the mixing of oddball personalities in fantastic scenarios. As I was writing, I certainly knew that my book would be quite different from other books on related topics, and that I was violating quite a number of conventions. Nonetheless I blithely continued, because I felt confident that what I was doing simply had to be done, and that it had an intrinsic rightness to it.

In 1973, as a twenty-eight-year-old PhD student in physics, Douglas Hofstadter started writing the manuscript that would eventually become *Gödel, Escher, Bach: An Eternal Golden Braid*. Published in 1979, Hofstadter's 777-page treatise on "fugues and canons, logic and truth, geometry, recursion, syntactic structures, the nature of meaning, Zen Buddhism, paradoxes, brain and mind, reductionism and holism, ant colonies, concepts and mental representations, translation, computers and their languages, DNA, proteins, the genetic code, artificial intelligence, creativity, consciousness and free will [and] sometimes even art and music" won the 1980 Pulitzer Prize for general nonfiction and has since been translated into numerous languages. Hofstadter typeset the entire volume himself, cramming it full of examples, anecdotes, visual images, theorems, proofs, jokes, puns, and "strange loops" of various kinds. From its highly inventive chapter and section titles ("BlooP and FlooP and GlooP," "Birthday Cantatatata") and its unusual structure (a counterpoint between Dialogues and Chapters), right down to its wry acknowledgments ("Thanks to Marsha Meredith for being the meta-author of a droll kōan"), the entire book—like Hofstadter's subsequent research on artificial intelligence, translation, recursive language, and other topics—is an exercise in creative thinking and academic nonconformity.

Not everyone will be charmed by such flights of enthusiasm; some academics might even feel condescended to by a writer who asks them to think like a monkey. All the same, for most readers, there is something appealingly engaging about an academic writer who unabashedly seeks to give and receive pleasure through language and ideas.

That pleasure might or might not manifest itself through humor—amusing anecdotes, clever puns—and other forms of verbal playfulness (dare I say *fun?*). Stylish writers who spice up their work with humor generally do so with a light touch; any good teacher knows how efficiently humor can energize a classroom but also how easily a half-cocked joke can misfire. At its best, humor engages our bodies in the robustly physical ceremony of laughter. At its worst, a poorly executed witticism exposes the author's own folly. The safest forms of academic humor (examples of which can be found in many of the "Spotlight on Style" callouts scattered throughout this book) are also the most subtle: the wry aside, the satirical riff, the unexpected turn of phrase.

And then there is *elegance*, a stylistic attribute that can coexist with passion and humor or flourish on its own. In the world of fashion and design, elegance suggests a "refined grace of form and movement, tastefulness of adornment, refined luxury." In science, elegance aligns with precision, concision, and "ingenious simplicity": an elegant solution is the one that maps the most efficient route through complex terrain. Humanities scholars often use the word "elegant" as an ill-defined synonym for "well written." More helpfully, the *Oxford English Dictionary* defines literary elegance as "tasteful correctness, harmonious simplicity, in the choice and arrangement of words."⁹ An elegant writer, then, is one who makes us feel that every word has been perfectly chosen, as when James D. Watson and Francis Crick first described the double-helical structure of DNA:

We wish to put forward a radically different structure for the salt of dioxynucleic acid. This structure has two helical chains each

coiled round the same axis (see diagram). . . . The two chains (but not their bases) are related by a dyad perpendicular to the fibre axis. Both chains follow right-handed helixes, but owing to the dyad the sequences of the atoms in the two chains run in opposite directions.

Toward the end of their famously economical 985-word paper in the journal *Nature*, Watson and Crick drily note: "It has not escaped our notice that the specific pairing we have postulated immediately suggests a possible copying mechanism for the genetic material."¹⁰ Rather than crowing about having cracked the code of life, they opt for the rhetorical trope of *litotes*, or elegant understatement.

In some cases, elegance manifests itself through clarity and concision; in others, it is achieved through lyricism, an author's use of unabashedly expressive language to build up the kind of emotional intensity and semantic density more commonly associated with poetry than with academic prose. Lyricism flowers most freely in the work of academics who are themselves poets, such as literary scholar Selina Tusitala Marsh or educational researcher Cynthia Dillard, both of whom strategically incorporate their own poetry into their scholarly writing: "Beginning with my own voice has become a political act," declares Marsh, "as I straddle the border between theory and creativity."¹¹ However, poetic interludes can be found in the research publications of nearly every academic discipline, as when biologist Julian Vincent, in an otherwise highly technical article on phenolic tanning, waxes eloquent about the fossilized forewings of beetles—"Bits of beetle elytron can be found, pristine, in drift deposits of a million or more years old"—or when historian of science John Heilbron layers a thick slathering of purple prose onto his otherwise restrained description of solar observatories in medieval churches.¹²

The lighting up of a special place by a flash from heaven at a preset time can make an impression even on ordinary minds. The tourists who happen to be in San Petronio when the sun plays like a searchlight

across the rosy pavement tarry for longer than the five minutes they had allotted to the cathedral to watch a display of whose purpose and author they have not an inkling.¹³

Heilbron's uncharacteristically extravagant language—the heaven-sent flash of light, the sun playing like a searchlight, the rosy pavement, the tarrying tourists—communicates not only his own passion for his subject but also his desire to instill a similar sense of joy and wonder in his readers. Every word has been carefully chosen, like the words of a poem, for its weight, sound, and resonance.

Stylish authors such as Vincent and Heilbron borrow many verbal techniques—assonance, alliteration, onomatopoeia—from the literary mode we label "creative writing." And why shouldn't they? Few academics would disagree that innovative research requires creativity, originality, and imagination as well as hard work and skill: "one per cent inspiration, ninety-nine per cent perspiration," to borrow Thomas Edison's famous description of genius.¹⁴ Yet academics in most disciplines have been trained to be critical rather than creative thinkers, with little opportunity for merging the two modes. Fortunately, numerous resources and strategies are available—some playful and unconventional, others rational and self-reflexive—for writers who want to shift outside their comfort zone and develop the creative side of their intellect.¹⁵

"Be creative!" is not, to be sure, an easy command to obey at will. It is made even more challenging when the words "Be disciplined!" are expelled in the very same breath. Interdisciplinarity—or what we might call "undisciplined thinking"—turns out to be the surprise ingredient in the stylish writer's repertoire: a trait I was not looking for when I started researching this book but have noticed over again in the work of academic authors whose writing is praised by their peers. Evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins opens his book *Climbing Mount Impossible* with an account of a literary lecture on figs; psychologist Robert

SPOTLIGHT ON STYLE

DANIEL DENNETT

Cognitive scientists themselves are often just as much in the grip of the sorts of misapprehensions and confusions as outsiders succumb to. . . . All of these experiments rely on subjects making a most unnatural judgment of simultaneity the import of which is not carefully analyzed, because of the presumption that the right question to ask is, *When does the subject become aware of the intention to act?* . . . This creates the illusion of an ominous temporal bottleneck, with the Conscious Agent impatiently waiting (in the Cartesian Theater) for news from the rest of the brain about what projects are underway. I must add that the literature on the topic by philosophers includes some that is equally ill considered. However, since better work is on the way, there is no need to dwell on past confusions.

In an interdisciplinary article titled "The Part of Cognitive Science That Is Philosophy," philosopher Daniel Dennett dives headfirst into the conceptual chasm that divides the sciences and the humanities. Arguing that "there is much good work for philosophers to do in cognitive science if they adopt the constructive attitude that prevails in science," he strokes the egos of his audience (mainly cognitive scientists) before going on to critique their "misapprehensions and confusions" about the relationship between conscious intentionality and action. Like many philosophers, Dennett writes in a first-person, informal voice, using rhetorical questions, conversational asides, and concrete imagery ("temporal bottleneck," "Cartesian Theater") to keep his readers on track. Sometimes, to be sure, his mixed metaphors get out of hand:

I once dismissed any theory that "replaced the little man in the brain with a committee" as conceptually bankrupt—until I realized that this was indeed a path, perhaps the royal road, to getting rid of the little man altogether. So live by the sword, die by the sword.

But perhaps it is better to die by the sword, a little man bankrupt on the royal road to excess, than to fade away from stylistic boredom.

Sternberg opens *Cupid's Arrow: The Course of Love through Time* with a Greek myth; cultural theorist Marjorie Garber opens *Academic Instincts* with an anecdote about the election of Jesse "The Body" Ventura as governor of Minnesota; psycholinguist Michael Corballis opens *Hand to Mouth: The Origins of Language* with a Dennis Glover poem about magpies; anthropologist Ruth Behar opens *The Vulnerable Observer: Anthropology That Breaks Your Heart* with a meditation on a short story by Isabel Allende.¹⁶ These stylish academics read widely across disciplinary lines, and it shows. Equally important, they also *think* across disciplinary lines, as evidenced in the wide-ranging nature of their work. Chicken and egg are difficult to distinguish here: do these authors read widely because they are inherently interested in a variety of disciplines, or do they think across disciplines because they read so widely? Either way, their stylistic and conceptual elasticity is evident everywhere in their scholarly prose.

Stylish academics do not write "outside the box" merely for the sake of showing off their intellectual audacity and skill. Their aim is to communicate ideas and arguments to readers in the most effective and engaging way possible—even when doing so means defying disciplinary norms. Numerous studies have documented the crucial role of lateral thinking in the creative process: that is, the ability of pathbreaking researchers to "think sideways" rather than always plodding forward in a straight conceptual trajectory.¹⁷ Academics who rigidly adhere to disciplinary conventions, never glancing to the right or left, risk repeating the fate of Dr. Seuss's North-Going Zax and South-Going Zax, who refused to move either a step to the east or a step to the west when they met, so that the two of them ended up stubbornly facing each other for years, unbudging, while cities and motorways sprang up around them and the rest of history moved forward.¹⁸

THINGS TO TRY

- “Read like a butterfly, write like a bee.”¹⁹ Novelist Philip Pullman exhorts writers to read widely and voraciously, without necessarily worrying about whether a given book or article will be useful to their current research. Later, you can make a conscious effort to integrate ideas drawn from your outside reading into your academic writing.
- *Freewriting* is a generative technique advocated by Peter Elbow and others as a quick and easy way to get your creative juices flowing:²⁰
 - Grab a pen and paper (I favor high-quality fountain pens and attractively bound notebooks, but many writers are not so fussy), settle yourself someplace where you will not be disturbed (a park bench or café would be ideal, but an office with the door closed works just fine too), and resolve to write without interruption for a predetermined amount of time.
 - As you write, don’t allow your pen to leave the paper for more than a few seconds at a time. Your goal is to keep writing continuously until your time is up, without stopping to correct errors, read over what you have just written, or polish your prose.
 - You may feel emotional barriers rising or falling and unexpected thoughts surging through your head. Whatever happens, keep writing. Afterward, you can shape your words into something more coherent—or not. The process, not the product, is the point of the exercise.
- *Free drawing, mind mapping, and verbal brainstorming* (for example, talking into a voice recorder) offer visual and oral alternatives to freewriting.
- Other suggestions for generating new ideas and perspectives:
 - Make a list of all the ways your research arouses your passion, stokes your commitments, and gives you pleasure.

- Write about the funny side, the absurd side, or even the dark side of your research project.
- Write a poem about your research—anything from a confessional poem about your own scholarly struggles to a series of haiku about your research subject.
- Choose a text, picture, or news item from outside your discipline—for example, a literary quotation, historical vignette, cartoon, scientific phenomenon, or movie plot—and freewrite for ten minutes about how you could incorporate that item into a presentation or publication about your research. What connections, however tenuous, can you draw?
- Ask a friend, relative, or small child to write down the name of a randomly chosen object—something specific enough that you can actually picture it: a fat dachshund, a red tulip. Freewrite for ten minutes about all the ways that object resembles your research project.
- Draw a picture of your research.
- Make a mind map of your research, starting with your central thesis or research question and working outward from there. (For more detailed instructions on mind mapping, see Tony Buzan’s *Mind Map Book* or any of the many computer programs that include mind-mapping software).²¹
- Color code your research: for example, by using colored highlighters to signal connections between themes or ideas.
- For a new perspective on your research, try looking at your work while wearing each of Edward de Bono’s six “thinking hats”: the white hat (facts and figures), the red hat (emotions and feelings), the black hat (cautious and careful), the yellow hat (speculative-positive), the green hat (creative thinking), and the blue hat (control of thinking).²²
- Ask colleagues from other disciplines to recommend work by the best and most accessible writers in their

field. As you read, consider form as well as content: What strategies do these authors use to engage and inform their readers? Are those strategies different from the ones commonly used in your discipline? Can you spot any new techniques worth borrowing?

AFTERWORD

BECOMING A STYLISH WRITER

Disciplinary styles constantly shift and evolve: half a century from now, perhaps historians will have embraced personal pronouns and evolutionary biologists will have rejected them, rather than vice versa. Yet some principles of good writing remain timeless. In the preface, I note that all stylish academic writers hold three ideals in common: communication, craft, and creativity. *Communication* implies respect for one's audience; *craft*, respect for language; *creativity*, respect for academic endeavor. In closing, I would like to add three further Cs: concreteness, choice, and courage. *Concreteness* is a verbal technique; *choice*, an intellectual right; *courage*, a frame of mind. Together, these principles offer a flexible framework on which writers from different disciplines can drape a rich variety of words and texts.

Concrete language is the stylish writer's magic bullet, a verbal strategy so simple and powerful that I am amazed it is so seldom mentioned in academic writing handbooks. (Only 27 percent of the advanced guides in my one hundred-book sample even mention concrete language as a stylistic principle.) Whether in the title, summary statement, opening paragraph, or anywhere else in an academic article or book, just a few visual images or concrete examples—words that engage the senses and anchor your ideas in physical space—can combat the numbing sense of disorientation