# Developing Academic Storytelling

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In common with many colleagues I have been dismayed at the poor quality of much of the student writing that I have come across during the twenty or so years that I have worked in higher education, even when it has been obvious, not only that the students in question knew something, but that they had thought about what they knew and had something worthwhile to say about it. But perhaps things are different in Australia, or wherever you come from? Perhaps all your students write excellent, crisp, clear, communicative prose that conveys its meanings in an accessible and engaging style. There again, perhaps not; indeed, I suspect that many of you share my experience

Given that my main intention in this paper is to share my view that academic writing is best when it takes a narrative or storytelling form. I don't intend to enter into a discussion of the full range of possible explanations for the poor writing I have found among students, which incidentally I have found at both undergraduate and postgraduate level. To do so would involve talking, for example, about the possibility that it results from poor teaching in schools, or from the unwillingness of students to put in the effort necessary to write better, and that would take too long. I want simply to draw attention to my belief that perhaps the most significant reason that students write badly, is that in their academic writing they are trying to emulate professional academic authors – people like us - whose work they read as part of their studies, which unfortunately often offers a poor example.

Consider the tendency for academics to use language that is more difficult than it needs to be. Many authors, who in their everyday lives manage to talk in quite ordinary ways seem actively to cultivate a new and less understandable way of speaking, and to adopt a new language when they are writing, at least when they are writing for academic purposes. It is

almost as if (in fact it is exactly as if) academics who come out of this mould believe that the academic enterprise is about confusing rather than illuminating – and aimed at obfuscation, rather than clarity. And many unwary students – persuaded by form rather than content, follow their example, writing gobbledygook about ideas that they barely understand, rather than using simple language to say what they can about ideas that they do understand.

**Professional academic authors as a role model for students**

Academics should be able to write clearly about their work. They may not be able to write beautifully and engagingly, but at the very least it seems reasonable to believe that clarity should be within their grasp. After all, most of them have had the privilege of a number of years of study, during which they will have had lots of practice as writers. Despite this, many academics write prose that is barely readable, and which, were it not for the good will of their readers, and the effort they make to understand, would fail to communicate anything at all. Of course they write in a variety of styles and the criticisms that I want to level are by no means all embracing; how could I be critical of all academic writing when I spend at least some of my time in the attempt to communicate with other academics through the written word? My criticisms are levelled only at those academics (though there are many of them) whose writing lacks clarity, and gives the appearance of scholarly rigour when what is going on is nothing of the kind. Unfortunately, disloyal as it might be to say so, I fear that there are even, some academics in Education, who fit this description.

No doubt the failure of much academic writing to communicate clearly, results partly from a lack of skill in writing clear, coherent and effective prose on the part of authors. But much more worrying is the fact that we are actually expected to do so by a body of individuals who have great power over us, because they can give us access to the means of establishing careers as published authors, and hence, for example, to academic promotion. I am talking, of course, about the editors of many academic journals, along with many of those who referee articles for such journals. Many refereed journals encourage authors to adopt a style that does not lend itself to clarity, writing in a way that clouds rather than clarifies meaning, using a lexicon that often seems designed to impress rather than to communicate. Actually, I entertain a degree of scepticism about whether a significant percentage of what gets published in such journals is motivated primarily or even at all, by the wish to communicate with others. Of course, no journal editor worth her salt would admit as much. Indeed, many would claim that one of the principles on which their selection process is based is that articles should be simply written. In spite of this, many journals are full to the brim of pseudo intellectual gibberish and academics whose bread and

butter depends upon publishing in such journals often end up embracing the myth that such writing is not only what is required, but that it is actually worthwhile.

And so many academics (in some disciplines at least it seems most) seem to take a pride in making their work difficult to the point at which it seems almost devoid of meaning rather than on communicating their own ideas, if that is, they have any to communicate. They write in dense, difficult to decipher prose, surrounding themselves with an aura of intellectual prowess and erudition, choosing their words carefully, using big ones where small ones would do, and difficult words where possible, rather than where necessary.

Of course, obfuscation and a lack of clarity can be useful. For one thing, if you manage to achieve the right degree of tortured difficulty in the prose you adopt as a writer, you can prevent your readers really understanding what you are saying, and thus having the opportunity to criticise you. Not only that, but the more difficult your writing the more chance you have of convincing your readers that what you have to say is worthwhile, and the more clever you will appear to at least some of them. And so if you want to look really clever as an author, you may wish to take note of some of the ways in which you can surround yourself with an aura of intellectual prowess and erudition.

i. First, choose your words carefully. using big words where small ones would do, and difficult words where possible, rather than where necessary.

In general it is best always to introduce difficult words without any explanation as to their meaning. That way, readers who do not understand what you are talking about will assume that they are at fault and not you. It is particularly helpful to use jargon where ordinary language would convey meaning better. Doing so can see off potential critics, who may think they can detect flaws in what you say or perhaps a lack of rigour in your thinking, but be afraid to say so, because they do not speak the same language as you, and fear the dreadful consequences of looking ignorant.

Using jargon from your own area of speciality helps to convey a sense of embeddedness in the tradition and values of your discipline. But it can be even more helpful to use jargon from other fields in relation to which you can realistically expect that many of those who will read your work will be a little unsure and thus less likely to challenge you.

ii. Next, it is worth attending to your use of referencing and citation. Cultivate the habit of making liberal use of references with no real reason for doing so - the more obscure the better. Doing so can help to give the impression of scholarship, because it suggests familiarity, not only with work by others that has actually influenced your research, but with a wider range of sources. In a sense, of course, such references have only a decorative purpose, instead of a functional one. In a sense they are rather like a peacock's display when he fans his feathers. The point is, that they make a wonderful show, even though in a strict academic sense, they don't add up to very much.

If you are a junior researcher, 'dropping' the names of significant theorists into your writing, is especially helpful because doing so signals your right to belong to the academic club of which you are a member, or of which you wish to become a member, if you can utter the names of the great and the famous. Notice that in order to achieve this it is not necessary actually to make use of what such authors have said; it is enough to show that you are aware of who they are, and perhaps that you can mention (without saying too much about them, because that could be dangerous) some of the ideas for which they are famous.

Within every academic discipline there are authors that it is worth citing if you want to be taken seriously. I shan't read out a list of those that are currently most fashionable and hence useful in this way within Education, but I guess you know who they are anyway (Any offers?)

Let me say one last thing about many journals and in particular about the way in which many encourage or even expect of potential authors that they should make sufficient use of citation to demonstrate that their work is 'academic enough' for inclusion – as if using a lot of references could demonstrate that. Lest anyone here should develop the idea that I am mistaken in believing this of journal editors, I should say (though I realise that individual examples do not constitute proof) that I once had an article turned down by a prestigious nursing journal, despite the fact that it had received positive reviews, because it was 'not academic enough' for that journal – the rationale being that I had not used enough references. And in case anyone should run away with the idea that although that kind of thing can happen in Nursing, it could not happen in Education, which is an altogether more sensible discipline, I have had

the same experience with more than one educational journal. Not only that, but I know other people who have had similar experiences. Interestingly, many people who argue against my view that the average academic article is annoyingly and unhelpfully over-referenced, do so on the grounds that there is no getting away from the fact that articles have to be heavily referenced, if they are ever to get into print, because that is what journals expect. My point exactly.

iii. Finally, it can be a really good idea if you adopt a style that is as devoid of structure as possible, so that your reader never quite knows where she is or where she is going, as she wanders around looking for something to understand. It is even possible to avoid structure almost entirely, by adopting a style that makes liberal use of apparent structural signposts, which actually mean nothing.

What I call 'virtual structure' can be achieved by claiming to offer arguments, without actually doing so, or by referring back to something that was said earlier, even though it was not actually mentioned, or by referring to something that you will talk about later, even though you do not in fact mention it later. It can also be achieved by making liberal use of words that suggest that the sections of you work are somehow linked together, or even that they add up to an argument in favour of one's position. I am thinking here of words and expressions such as 'It is clear from this, that…' when nothing is at all clear from what has been said, or 'It follows from this that…' even when nothing in fact follows. However, if you adopt this tactic, you must assiduously avoid arguing and you must avoid the temptation to allow logic to enter the picture.

So those are some things you might want to try if you want to look really clever. But perhaps like, me, looking clever doesn't interest you, which is why in a moment I want to talk about academic stories a little.

Some people argue against what they see as the negativity of my critique of much academic writing on the grounds that I have not presented any evidence to support it, almost as if they do not believe that such evidence exists. The truth is that that there are so many examples of awful academic writing that it is difficult to choose which to use in illustrating and supporting my argument. In any event, no matter what examples I chose, those who wish to contest my view, might point out that all I have done is to hunt for awful examples, arguing that everything in the academic garden is in fact rosy. If you feel the urge to disagree with me, I suggest that the next time you are in an academic library you should have a quick browse

through a few journals, asking questions such as these, in relation to the articles they contain:

- Is this as clear as it might be?
- Does it make unnecessary use of jargon and difficult words?
- Is all the citation necessary? (Does it all add something?)

Doing so should persuade you that opaqueness, over-referencing, and stylistic complexity is not only acceptable, but actually favoured by many journals, and that is the claim that I want to put forward. If you can feel the hairs on the back of your neck beginning to stick up, as you wonder whether you are an author whose work I would believe is awful, I suggest that you go and re-read something you have written recently, reading it as if it was written by someone whose views are very different to your own, asking questions of the kind I have suggested. I find, in general, that this is a good way of spotting the mistakes I make in my own writing and I have to confess that I can point to a great deal of awfulness in much of what I have written in the distant and even in the not too distant past.

## Improving standards of academic writing by developing academic storytelling

In drawing to a close I want, finally, to turn to storytelling and my view that if we want to improve the ways that we write and that our students write, we should think of it as a form of storytelling, because that is what it is. All academic writing can benefit from being construed in terms of story, whether you are writing something short like an abstract, or something longer like an article, chapter or even a whole book. Thinking of academic writing as narrative is helpful in facilitating inexperienced and experienced writers alike in developing a style through which, adopting the conventions of their discipline, they can begin effectively to communicate their ideas to others.

Certain features of successful storytelling are found in the best academic writing, but are notably missing from the worst. For example, a good narrative writer engages her audience and holds its attention, both by making her plot and the way she introduces it sufficiently interesting to seduce us into reading further, and by ensuring that the characters who inhabit the world she is creating are sufficiently believable to motivate us to pursue the narrative to find out what happens to them. Good academic writers do similar things, though in general the characters with whom they

populate their texts are not people, but theories, hypotheses, methods, results, conclusions and so on.

All academics have stories to tell. Whatever form their research and scholarship takes - whether, for example it is empirical, or documentary or conceptual in nature, the stories they tell will usually involve sharing information about how they came to their conclusions; about their methods and hypotheses; about the genealogy into which their work slots - its parentage, and its quarrels with other views.

Of course, academics of different kinds not only have different areas of interest but different ways of telling their stories, and in telling your academic tales, it is important that you should adopt the narrative forms that are appropriate to your discipline and to the material you are writing about.. For example, whereas scientists and social scientists will often employ visual means such as charts and tables of results; graphs and diagrams of various kinds, because such devices allow them to show what it is difficult to express in words, others – including philosophers, theologians and historians will be more likely to use detailed examples and carefully constructed arguments. And despite my reservations about jargon, difficult language and the overuse of citation, it is clear that in telling their stories some academics will make extensive use of specialised vocabulary (in some areas indeed, it is no doubt necessary for them to do so), and some will make many references to what others have written. The stories academics tell may thus be told in different languages, or at any rate, in different dialects of the same language. However, all will be stories of a kind.

If an academic book is the equivalent of a novel, then the academic article is the equivalent of a short story. Thinking like this will help you to avoid one of the pitfalls into which authors sometimes fall, especially when they are relatively inexperienced - that of being unclear about the species of writing in which they are engaging. Writing a book, for example, is quite different than writing an article for a journal, because, for one thing, books give us much more room for expansive discussion of examples and illustrations; for another, their length demands that we say more, whether this means covering a bigger area, or covering a small area in greater detail. A short story isn't a novel that has had its wings clipped, or been shortened. It has a life of its own. It is its own genre. Similarly an academic article isn't a kind of cut down version of an book; articles call for a different style than books, one that is more immediate and to the point. A good article knows what it is about and even if it uses illustrations and detailed arguments, it doesn't say more than is necessary to support the conclusion or viewpoint that is being put forward. Like the short story, the academic article is its own genre, though one that has a number of sub genres, including the research

report; the review of previous literature; the critical response to previously published material, and the original argument. The shorter the article, the less room for detail in the descriptions you offer of ideas, methods and results, and in the arguments you offer; and the more need there is for focus and directness.

If they are to be successful in telling their tales academic storytellers need to weave the various elements together in coherent, interesting and easily understandable ways, making clear their relationship to the intellectual landscape that they inhabit, and avoiding as far as they can, the use of a narrative style that obfuscates rather than communicates. Like storytellers of other kinds, *I* think they should strive to make the tales they tell accessible to as wide an audience as possible. If they want people to read and relate to what they write, academic storytellers should tell their tales in ways that engage their audience and hold its attention. They should not expect of readers that they will be willing to engage in intellectual gymnastics, contorting their minds and exerting themselves beyond comprehension, simply to work out what is being said; their responsibility as authors is simply to say it, and to say it simply. It is only by developing the ability to tell your research stories well that you can be sure that you will communicate clearly to your readers what you did, why you did it, and what your results have led you to conclude.

So my view is that whatever your discipline, if you want to write well as an academic and to enable your students to do so, you could do worse that to think of what you are doing as a form of storytelling, avoiding over fanciful ways of expressing yourself, laying aside difficult words and constructions and even jargon wherever possible, and concentrating on developing coherent and engaging stories about your work.