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The Elements of Sterile

Referencing the classic *Elements of Style*, Dan Li takes a satirical look at academic writing.

By Dan Li



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In 1919, when American writer E. B. White was a college student, he took a course with English professor William Strunk Jr. The textbook was a slim volume called *The Elements of Style*, whose author was the professor himself. In 1957, Macmillan commissioned White to revise the little book, which later became a magnum opus in English writing, a must-read guide for every writer who wishes to wrangle the tangled web of English rhetoric and write with style.

We sometimes forget that academic writing is still writing. All writing is communication. Just as with face-to-face communication, writing with style not only conveys the message but also reveals the spirit of the writer. Academic writers will learn a great deal from Strunk and White's suggestions in *The Elements of Style*. Or at least they could try to avoid some common pitfalls I've outlined below, tongue in cheek.

1. Always use a passive voice; otherwise, the reader will not know that your work is objective, the golden standard of scholarship. Consider the following example:

Three research assistants interviewed the participants.	The participants were interviewed.
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The left-hand sentence suggests that your research assistants may bring their personalities, values and idiosyncratic behaviors into the interviews. The reader will be alarmed by the lack of absolute objectivity. How could one's research *not* be detached from human investigators! On the contrary, the right-hand sentence shows that your standardized interviews were performed on all participants.

2. Use symbols. Whenever possible, mathematical symbols and equations are your best friends because they deliver the rigor of your research that everyday English does not. They are formal.

If a hypothesis leads to a result, then the result is its direct evidence.	Evidence E is direct with respect to a hypothesis H if E is a consequence, C, of H.
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Humanities scholars and soft social scientists particularly benefit from using symbols because this makes their argument concise, precise and rigorous. The left-hand sentence uses the word "result" twice, whereas the right-hand sentence only refers to symbols such as E and H. The left-hand sentence also confuses the reader: *its* direct evidence? Whose evidence? An elegant letter H eliminates such confusion.

3. Always use adjectives or adverbs such as “objective,” “robust” or, our favorite, “interesting.” Avoid elaborating.

[say the question]	An interesting question is ...
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Readers cannot share your enthusiasm without such adjectives. Keep them.

4. Use abbreviations to save on your word count. We all know the tight word limit that the editorial office imposes on us, although they publish everything online without harming any trees—or maybe it’s because our reviewers are the TV generation with short attention spans. I recommend abbreviating at least the top 10 most frequent phrases in your paper, especially jargon, regardless of whether they are common phrases in your subfields. Some examples include SWC (surveys that we collected), IIC (institution and infrastructure complex), ROI (regions of interest).
5. Make sure to specify everything parenthetically that you anticipate will alarm your reviewers.

<p>There are exceptions to these correspondence rules. One may think of these exceptions as examples of irregularities in structure-sensual modeling. Since biological systems are full of irregularities, these exceptions are also inherent to the sensual system.</p>	<p>Exceptions to these algorithmic (chemical) correspondence rules may be seen to exemplify the known issue of irregularities in structure-sensual modeling, and are presented almost as a built-in feature of the sensual system (i.e., it’s not a regular system anyway because biology messes with ideas of lawful regularity).</p>
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The left-hand paragraph proceeds linearly, which is boring. In the right-hand paragraph, the writer clarifies two points: first, correspondence rules are both algorithmic and chemical; second, with the second parenthesis, the writer emphasizes that “i.e., it is not a regular system anyway because biology messes with

ideas of lawful regularity.” Specifications (i.e., especially those in parentheses) demonstrate that a writer can process complex information and also help avoid attacks from reviewers because the argument will appear clearer and stronger.

6. Use filler phrases such as “in so far as,” “with respect to,” “in terms of,” “is going to,” “as far as ... is concerned.” Most academics only skim papers. Filler words put space in your sentences, making it easier on the reader’s eyes.

<p>The extension of grid power is not economical for the 18,000 remote villages.</p>	<p>In so far as the 18,000 villages in remote and inaccessible areas are concerned, the extension of grid power is not going to be economical.</p>
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7. Repeat. Repeat. Like drumbeat in music, repetition propels your writing forward.

<p>In sum, according to these accounts, scientists are justified to use idealized models to explain the explanandum because only irrelevant features are idealized.</p>	<p>In sum, according to these influential accounts, the use of idealized models to explain is justified (or warranted) by showing that they only distort causes, mechanisms or features that are irrelevant to the explanandum or research program; that is, their distortions do not get in the way of the accurate representation of the relevant mechanisms, difference makers or significant causes. Indeed, the general goal of these accounts is to show that the “factors distorted by idealized models are details that do not matter to the explanatory target—they are explanatory irrelevancies. The distortions of the idealized model are thus mitigated.”</p>
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8. Your summary must always extend to at least one paragraph consisting of multiple sentences. This structure captivates a reader’s attention so that your reviewer will never miss it. See the example from rule No. 7.

- 9.** Be as general as possible. Use qualifying phrases such as “in some general way,” “in some sense,” “in a broad sense.” You rarely gain anything from being specific. Writing with general ideas is not vague or wishy-washy. General phrases make your argument bulletproof and demonstrate your ability for abstract thinking. After all, an intellectual must engage in big-picture and high-level thinking.

<p>If we think that a scientific model is confirmed when we find its results fit with observations, then users can trust its other results. Yet, due to the model’s simplified assumption, such trust is not warranted.</p>	<p>If a scientific model is thought to be confirmed when its results are found to fit with observations of a target system, and thereby to accrue credit or to merit increased confidence in some general way, then users can be led to trust other results obtained from the model even when—because of the model’s idealized and simplified assumptions—this is not warranted.</p>
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Note in the above right-hand example how the writer seamlessly incorporates several of our rules. First, there is a consistent passive voice (rule No. 1). There is repetition (rule No. 7) because confirmation of a model implies accruing credit or meriting increased confidence. There is also specification (rule No. 5) with a pair of em dashes. Lastly, “in some general way” makes the argument general and bulletproof.

- 10.** Qualify. “Good” is qualified. Oftentimes the reader—especially your reviewer—cannot infer the qualifiers from the context. Do them a favor with qualifiers. Also see rule No. 9.
- 11.** Stack nouns together.
- 12.** Use footnotes frequently.^[1] Enlightenment writers embraced pages of footnotes. ^[2] You should, too. Extensive footnotes show your expertise and sophistication.

[1] Footnotes come in different favors and serve varying functions. Writers can use footnotes to place a thank-you note to friends, colleagues and anonymous reviewers, or a brief note to readers and satirical commentary to show your wit or the original version of translated texts—although you do not necessarily need to be able to read the original language—or a reference to other footnotes or issues that pop up in other parts of the same work, or long lists of earlier books and articles and strings of coded references to unpublished documents, or subtle critiques of the writer’s opponents because you would like to avoid burning bridges by drawing attention to them in the main text. All of these establish the writer’s credentials.

[2] Nowadays, footnotes are indispensable to historians; annotations have become their second nature indeed. Footnotes themselves also have a long history. Particularly, the Enlightenment saw footnotes proliferate. Prominent examples include Edward Gibbon, David Hume and Justus Moeser. See more: Grafton, Anthony (1997), *The Footnote: A Curious History*, Harvard University Press.

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