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Is the academic essay becoming a fossil through lack of authorial voice? The case for more stylish and exploratory writing

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Abstract

First year BA students writing their first academic essays are bombarded with advice about achieving academic tone: key features of this are the avoidance of personal pronouns and a preference for the passive over the active voice. These conventions can however become fossilised, turning essays into a ‘monolithic form’. While this advice helps to ground the student’s appreciation of rigour and works towards greater objectivity and research-based accuracy, this article asks whether killing the pronouns can also strangle the individual voice. The pronouns are one obvious feature among many that contribute to clarity of style. The standardised forms are easier to assess than the more exploratory and elliptical style of essay writing, which tends to be less valued and understood. Using the ideas of Sturm (2012) and Sword (2012), this piece explores contradictory evidence in sample authors and style guides, and aims to nuance advice by combining academic rigour with strengthening the students’ authorial voice, while still remaining mindful of conventions.

Keywords

academic essay style, expository, objectivity, pronouns, authorial voice, empowerment

I could begin here in one of two ways:

The obfuscation inherent in pseudo-objective academese has been partly caused by the lamentable restriction of a number of key stylistic components in academic writing, one of which is the lack of personal pronouns.

or

I first twigged something was wrong when a voice popped into my head: ‘what you just said is misleading!’. This thought occurred when a student had asked me plainly, ‘but why can’t I use my own opinion?’. To which I had trotted out the usual, ‘don’t use “I” or “we” in academic writing as it relies on an unquestioned assumption about who is speaking’.

This choice about style creates a dilemma about writing. I very often find myself on auto-pilot with this piece of well-intentioned advice. The student who asked it in Study Support glanced back at me, still baffled. She, like many others, was in a self-confessed struggle to make that leap either from having no knowledge of academic writing or from using the typical style encouraged in school opinion essays – crammed with ‘I feel’, ‘I think’ and ‘in my opinion’ – to writing her first seriously researched essay of critical analysis, and she was up against a wall.

This question about how students can use 'my opinion' is repeated each year with every fresh cohort. It depends upon how they understand 'opinion', so I usually shift the emphasis towards the word 'argument'. But the response still knocks the shine off their egos.

Doubts multiply when I ask myself if I actually follow the advice; I have to confess 'not really' or 'it depends'. If I remove 'I' from my writing, does that guarantee objectivity? On the surface it may, but might this not also strangle the individual authorial voice? This too needs to be nurtured in tandem with a keen eye on rigour and accuracy. I do this by explaining what it takes to get an A. Yet their writing still has to survive the mangle of strict assessment criteria. The resulting essays can sometimes seem flat, standardised and formulaic.

Avoiding the use of 'I' is just the most potentially misleading suggestion; another piece of style wisdom, alleged to instantly give writing an 'academic' tone is to switch active verbs to passive, as active verbs are what journalists and novelists prefer. Passives proliferate in turgid academic writing, but to suggest they have no place in lively writing is also false. Pinker slyly reminds us that sentence structure has invisible layers, designed to reveal sequence, which only the passive can do (Pinker, 2014). These conventions have become so firmly entrenched that they almost deflect any question of their validity. Attempts to avoid the use of 'I' or 'we' can lead to some ponderous, opaque prose whose chief fault is a stream of abstract words. Take this example from Pinker's talk entitled 'The Sense of Style': 'It is the moment of non-construction, disclosing the absentation from the concept, in part through its invitation to emphasize, in reading, the helplessness of its fall into conceptuality' (2014, 1:48). He concludes with what I suspected all along, that 'bad writing is a deliberate choice' (Pinker, 2014, 2:19) – think – legal and government documents.

Harvard literary scholar, Helen Sword (2012) asks: why does academic writing have to be this turgid and dull? Her research masochistically counted the use of 'I' (among other features) and the evidence from across the disciplines is contradictory. We might expect to find that the science disciplines abhor the use of 'I' where Higher Education embraces it wholeheartedly, but the opposite is true. HE has a greater fondness for 'I' less writing than science does (Sword, 2012), making it harder to read and understand.

The pronoun wars

Sword mentions popular science writers such as Oliver Sacks, Steven Pinker and Richard Dawkins, whose prose sparkles with 'I's, concrete examples, allusions and engaging anecdotes. Yet, for our students, the standard lab report has to suffice. To remove 'I' from these suggests that the person doing the experiment has no influence on the outcome. In first-year essays we encourage a new sense of rigour and this might well involve curtailing and highlighting awareness of the sloppy use of 'I' just as a gardener might prune trees. This is fine, as long as it also encourages the freedom to make 'intelligent choices' as to what is appropriate, which might include using 'I' occasionally. According to Sword (2012), making flexible choices is the key to better writing. Reducing writing to a formula causes problems, as a student could use academic style in their personal reflection writing and have a strong individual voice in their essays.

Students might be even more puzzled by this advice if they do a careful reading of the key authors referred to in London College of Fashion's first year Cultural and Historical Studies unit: Berger, Steele, Hall, Hebdige, Butler and others. But contrary to expectation, reading such authors is more joy than a chore, exactly because they happily and frequently use 'I' to position themselves in relation to their topic. For instance, Hall relishes his pronouns: 'the

conceptual map that I carry around in my head is totally different from yours, in which case you and I would interpret the world in totally different ways' (1997, p.18). Steele too gives us plenty of pronouns and manages to sound more natural than forced (2012).

Flusser is strong on this point: 'No one thinks academically. People just pretend they do. They force themselves to think like that. Academic style is a result of effort' (2002, p.192). So it is not just students who feel the strain of getting their heads around dry academic tone. A point that Sword corroborates: when asked, Sword found that people were scared of doing anything different (2012). I find that writers with reputations for being obtuse and difficult – for instance Foucault and Kosovsky Sedgewick – are less clogged with nominalisations than their less able copyists. They allow themselves the use 'I' with concrete examples. Their style does not (always) baffle with abstract terms, except when it has no other option. Even in philosophy writers such as Heidegger, whose prose is famously laboured, use the plural pronoun effectively: 'The being whose analysis our task is, is we ourselves. This being of this being is always mine' (1996, p.39).

This notion that writing should avoid the pronoun is strange indeed: not only does removing the 'I' from a piece of writing not guarantee objectivity, neither does it make for better prose. There are very good reasons for foregrounding the use of 'I' – to explain what triggered your interest in a topic, to confess to any bias via an anecdote, and to acknowledge the observer effect that can distort the outcome. This is, at least, more honest than hiding behind scientific objectivity. The perceiving 'I' is as relevant as other factors in a study. Science articles can be as biased as any in humanities – track the funding, sponsors (and their gender) to discern where bias may lie. The provocative thinker, Nassim Nicholas Taleb (2007), who models himself on the Roman essayist Seneca, has drawn attention to the trickster-style of logic that sabotages the truth through an excessive reliance on statistics. Even neutrality is a myth according to Sword (2012, p.94), as we can be so easily blindsided.

The wall that students confront when facing the demands of academic writing may even become more impenetrable over time. It can short-circuit their brains, paralysing them into poor confidence with writing. One student handed me an essay for feedback saying, 'I know it's terrible, but I just don't know what to do about it'. She needed to learn objectivity and evidence her ideas: so, do I say, remove the 'I'? But this is just stage one her control of excessive pronouns. Later on, I will say 'you can reintroduce 'I' by the back door, when you are more confident at using it'.

Point First and Point Last essay styles

The problem is that the academic essay is becoming fossilised, what Sturm (2012) terms a 'monolithic form'. But there is the possibility of a less predictable, more exploratory essay style based on the example of Montaigne, whose essays are exemplary but tend to meander. This more elliptical 'discovery' style is how the essay originated, yet it tends to get pushed aside as the expository 'knowledge-displaying' style of essay muscles in for supremacy. Sturm calls these the Point First (PF) and Point Last (PL) essay types. As indicated by Figure 1 on the following page, the PF essay starts with a point and plods step-by-step to its logical conclusion: it is 'knowledge displaying'. The PL wanders in an apparently random fashion, segueing enigmatically to its end point and is 'knowledge discovering' (Sturm, 2012).

Type	PF Point First	PL Point Last
image	round trip	one way
end	returns to starting point	arrives at end point
function	epistemic	heuristic
mode of function	expository, epideictic	performative, personal
logic	tautological	dialogical
mood	indicative, thus factual	subjunctive, thus fictive
address	informative	interactive

Figure 1: Table displaying the characteristics of knowledge-displaying and knowledge-discovering essays (Sturm, 2012)

In the USA the genre of creative non-fiction has taken root much more firmly than in the UK, where such cross-disciplinary genres tend to take time to become accepted. One of the most startling examples from the UK is Geoff Dyer's *Out of Sheer Rage* (1995) – a procrastinator's delight. Such styles make effective use of rhetorical devices – flashback, unreliable narrators, an episodic structure, symbolism, etc. – that fiction writers do use, but in non-fiction. A good example of 'meandering style' is the lyric essay writing of John D'Agata in *Halls of Fame* (2003). D'Agata blends poetic and fictional devices into his essays which seemingly lead nowhere. John Haskell's essays have also challenged conventions integrating influences from the Argentinian writer, Jorge Luis Borges (Marcus, 2013). In these texts the boundaries are looser; expectations more on the alert.

Some of these techniques find it hard to flourish in the 'academosphere' as Sturm (2012) calls it, where the 'five paragraph' package predominates. An essay may have a disjointed but subtly elliptical structure and this is a structure we could teach students to write. Another reason for encouraging more creative experimentation in writing is to align more with the high percentage of Art and Design students at UAL that have specific learning difficulties, particularly dyslexia. Even those not screened or assessed for dyslexia exhibit similar features such as enhanced capacity for visual/spatial thinking (Appleyard, 1997). Students at UAL are less inclined to think in straight lines than in draping, sculpting, or performing and product realization. Add to this the fact that we live in a world of digitally designed communication where literacy is not just verbal but also visual, multiplied by how each text is hyperlinked (Kress, 2000) to a network of interconnecting texts. The monolithic essay is linear, yet offering students alternative options to suit their cognitive processing styles is challenging. Francis (2009) offers fun ways to explore writing as a creative act and resources such as Writing-PAD encourage more experimental, diverse and even collaborative forms of writing for subjects in art and design. These are signs that the monolith is fragmenting and appreciation of more diverse essay styles is growing.

Nick Sousanis has produced a visual PhD on 'insurrection against the fixed viewpoint' that sets a new bar for what is possible (Doctorow, 2015). Design rationales are presented like mood boards with blended text and image using Adobe InDesign. At UAL this use of more visual presentation varies course by course, depending on how the curriculum has configured the balance of academic writing to the design practice component.

Read like a butterfly and write like a bee

So what advice should we be giving students so as not to clip their wings too soon? What would give them more agency, while at the same time increasing awareness of the power of academic writing to convey ideas and shift paradigms?

Advice should be carefully nuanced, not simplistic. Word choice, for example, can be a stumbling block. Does good writing also have to be full of big words and complex structures in order to be impressive? Yes, and no. George Orwell (1946) famously argued for plain English, as language is a slippery medium. He said that writers should use smaller words for clarity. This guide is mostly true. If a smaller word is the right choice; I would say use it. The point is not size, but whether it is appropriate. Bigger might indeed be more fitting. Sorry to disagree there, Mr. Orwell. However, explaining this creates more stress for students.

Pinker's advice is to be engaging and to steer clear of all 'verbiage about verbiage' (2014) which often comes from overuse of techniques such as turning verbs into 'zombie' nouns as Sword calls them (2012), allowing them to float like helium balloons across the stagnant page. Writing should not be designed to impress others with the dexterity of its words, but to engage us with its elegance, simplicity and integrated fusion of the three Cs: Clarity, Concision and Cohesion: easier said than written. Writer Phillip Pullman says 'Read like a Butterfly and write like a Bee' (Sword, 2012, p.170); a notion that links nicely to my preference for 'nailing' a word as opposed to merely 'choosing' it. The right word cannot be any other. In this, I think of Nabokov's precision-honed style and his nailing butterflies. Perhaps to 'sting' is even better?

Anne Lamott, an author with pronounced style values, compares writing to dancing by observing that the best dancers do not look at their feet when they are doing it (1994). Similarly, writing requires an almost indefinable confidence that comes from practice and intuitively knowing which words are right in relation to their neighbours in the sentence. While there is more method than madness to writing, there is also the inner freedom that expresses itself through the whole. Sword zeroes in on the elegance of good writing (2009, p.332), and on writing's power to be transformative and 'empowering' (Benson Brown, 2014). Flusser goes even further to suggest that writing becomes 'a point of departure for a committed existence' (2012, p.194). Writing can even be healing (Pennbaker, 1997; DeSalvo, 1999) and contribute to a sense of well-being – this is not solely true of reflection writing. How we refresh and realign the apparent dullness of academic essay writing and bring it back to its exploratory, not expository, roots becomes ever-more relevant.

It may be that this gripe arises from how I perceive that gap between what the academic essay is and what it could be, and where I witness students' hard struggle to express themselves and fit into all the seemingly arbitrary rules. It may be a residue left by my not making more of my background in creative writing, or just a feeling that we need to venture into new territory.

Chipping away at the monolith might not get very far, since it is still a perfectly usable form. But I am hopeful that we might see a growth of more diverse formats, and that those have value too; and, once in a while, if a student chooses to use 'I', who am 'I' to disagree?

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Biography

Kieron Devlin has worked in Academic Support at LCF for seven years, having come from worldwide experience in Language teaching. His research interests include: Learning Development, Creative Writing, Literature, Cultural Studies, Neurodiversity, Intelligence theory, Visual Thinking, Multi-literacies, Mindfulness and Therapeutic Approaches. He has Masters degrees in T.E.S.O.L (University of Leicester) and Applied Linguistics and an MFA in Creative Writing (New School University, New York).