

ED 292X
Academic Writing for Clarity and Grace
Spring, 2011
Tuesday, 2:15 to 5:05 pm
2-4 units; S/NC
Wallenberg Hall (Building 160), Room 120

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Course Description

The title sounds like a joke, since academics (especially in the social sciences) do not have a reputation for writing with either clarity or grace much less both. But I hope in this class to draw students into my own and every other academic's lifelong quest to become a better writer. The course will draw on a wide range of reference works that I have found useful over the years in working on my own writing and in helping students with theirs. The idea is not that a 10 week class will make students good writers; many of us have been working at this for 30 years or more and we're just getting started. Instead, the plan is to provide students with some helpful strategies, habits, and critical faculties; increase their sense of writing as an extended process of revision; and leave them with a set of books that will support them in their own lifelong pursuit of good writing.

Class process: Classes will include some instruction on particular skills and particular aspects of the writing process: developing an analytical angle on a subject; writing a good sentence; getting started in the writing process; working out the logic of the argument; developing the forms of validation for the argument; learning what your point is from the process of writing rather than as a precursor to writing; and revising, revising, revising. However, the main focus of class time will be spent working as a group through exercises in doing the work of spotting and fixing problems. For these purposes we will use some helpful examples from the Williams book that focus on particular skills, but most of the work will involve texts provided by the participants, students and instructor alike. Everyone needs to develop a recognition of the value of getting critical feedback from others on their work in progress, so we will be exchanging papers and having students work at editing each other's work. Student work outside of class will include reading required texts, editing other student's work around particular areas of concern, and working on revising their own paper or papers. Every week students will be submitting a piece of written work by email, which will involve repeated efforts to edit a particular text of their own, exercises in editing from the readings, and recommended revisions to the work of others. In doing this kind of writing and rewriting, we will rely on Word's tracking changes function to record the stages of change in the texts.

Much of class time will focus on working on particular student texts around a key issue of the day – like framing, wordiness, clarity, sentence rhythm. Students will submit papers electronically in advance and we will work through them together using a computer projector. Topics will include things like:

- Framing an argument (the opening section of a paper)
- Elements of rhetoric
- Sentence rhythm and music
- Emphasis – putting the key element at the end of sentence and paragraph; delivering the punch line
- Concision – eliminating wordiness
- Clarity – avoiding nominalizations; opting for Anglo-Saxon words
- Focusing on action and actors
- Metaphor and imagery
- Correct usage: punctuation, common grammatical errors, word use
- Avoiding the most common academic tics: jargon, isms, Latinate constructions, nominalizations, hiding from view behind passive voice and third person
- The basics of making an argument
- Using quotes – integrating them into your argument, and commenting on them instead of assuming they make the point on their own.
- Using data – how to integrate data into a text and explain its meaning and significance
- The relation of writing and thought
- Revision – of writing and thinking
- The relation of grammar and mechanics to rhetorical effect
- Sentence style
- The relation of style to audience
- Disciplinary conventions for style, organization, modes of argument, evidence
- Authority and voice
- Logic, systematicity, rigor

Eligibility

This class is open to doctoral students, master's students, and undergraduates.

Students with documented disabilities: Students who may need an academic accommodation based on the impact of a disability must initiate the request with the Student Disability Resource Center (SDRC) located within the Office of Accessible Education (OAE). SDRC staff will evaluate the request with required documentation, recommend reasonable accommodations, and prepare an *Accommodation Letter* for faculty dated in the current quarter in which the request is being made. Students should contact the SDRC as soon as possible since timely notice is needed to coordinate accommodations. The OAE is located at 563 Salvatierra Walk (phone: 723-1066, 723-1067 TTY).

Requirements

The requirements for students enrolled in this class include: Read the assigned texts about the writing process; write and edit your own work; edit the work of others; participate in the writing workshop in class; submit writing/editing for every class; and assume the role of both reviewer and reviewee. Let me say a little about each of these.

Read Assigned Portions of Required Texts about the Process of Writing: There are five required books for the class, which explore aspects of the writing process, and we will be reading selections from these books every week, along with some other articles about writing.

Writing and Editing Your Own Work: All students are expected to contribute their own written work to the class. These can be papers you are working on for other courses, research papers, master's projects, or doctoral dissertations. They can also be papers you have written in the past but want to revise, edit, and enhance. They can be past papers that you simply want to use as media for learning the craft of writing and editing. The understanding is that you will be willing to allow your work to be used for editorial comment by other students and, from time to time, for whole-class discussion.

Edit the Work of Other Students: All students are also expected to devote time to editing papers prepared by other students in the class. It's often easier to see the problems in others people's writing than in your own, so editing the work of peers is a good way to learn the craft of editing. The idea is then to apply these same editing skills to your own work.

Participate in the Writing Workshop in Class: Every week in class we will spend at least part of the time working on writing problems as a whole group. We will take a particular paper of yours or mine, project it on the screen, and then talk about how to improve it, recording the changes as we go and then comparing versions. Or we'll look at a student paper that has been edited by a peer, considering the value of the proposed changes, and work on enhancing the benefits for the text. Or we'll take instructional examples from a book on writing, in order to work on particular skills – such as concision, clarity, action, rhythm, balance, grace, and emphasis.

Submit Writing for Every Class: Every week, students will be required to edit either their own paper or a paper by a colleague. Students will make their editorial changes and comments using Word's Tracking Changes function, so we can see both the original text and the proposed changes. Two days before class, students will email their revised texts both to me (and to the author, if editing another person's work).

Assume the Roles of Both Reviewer and Reviewee: Writing is a very personal process and the things we write are expressions of who we are, so it is important for everyone in the class to keep focused on being constructive in their comments and being tolerant of criticism from others. Criticism from others is very important for writers, but no one likes it. I have a ritual every time I get feedback on a paper or manuscript – whether blind reviews from journals or publishers or personal comments from colleagues. I let the review sit for awhile until I'm in the right mood. Then I open it and skim it quickly to get the overall impression of how positive or negative it is. At that point I set it aside, cursing the editors for sending the paper to such an incompetent reviewer or reconsidering my formerly high opinion of the particular colleague-critic, then finally

coming back a few days later (after a scotch or two) to read the thing carefully and assess the damage. Neurotic I know, but most writers are neurotic about their craft. It's hard not to take criticism personally. Beyond all reason, I always expect the reviewers to say, "Don't change a word; publish it immediately!" But somehow they never do. So I'm asking all members of the class both to recognize the vulnerability of their fellow writers and to open themselves up to the criticism of these colleagues in the craft.

Grading

This course is offered on a Satisfactory/No Credit basis. To pass, students must complete course requirements.

Readings

Required books (all but Garner are available at the Stanford Bookstore; Garner is much cheaper online; so is Fish)

Williams, Joseph M. & Colomb, Gregory G. (2010). *Style: Lessons in clarity and grace* (10th ed.). New York: Longman.

Becker, Howard S. (2007). *Writing for social scientists: How to start and finish your thesis, book, or article* (2nd ed.). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Graff, Gerald, & Birkenstein, Cathy. (2009). *"They say, I say:" The moves that matter in academic writing* (2nd ed.). New York: Norton.

Fish, Stanley. (2011). *How to Write a Sentence and How to Read One*. New York: HarperCollins.

Garner, Bryan A. (2009). *Garner's modern American usage*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Other required readings, which are available in PDF on the course's site on Blackboard (<http://bb8.stanford.edu>):

Munger, Michael C. (2010). 10 tips for how to write less badly. *Chronicle of Higher Education* (Sept. 6). Chronicle.com.

Yagoda, Ben. (2011). The elements of clunk. *Chronicle of Higher Education* (Jan. 2). Chronicle.com.

Zinnser, William. (2010). Writing English as a second language. *Point of Departure* (Winter). Americanscholar.org.

Lepore, Jill. (2009). How to write a paper for this class. History Department, Harvard University.

Haslett, Adam. (2011). The art of good writing. *Financial Times* (Jan. 22). Ft.com.

March, James G. (1975). Education and the pursuit of optimism. *Texas Tech Journal of Education*, 2:1, 5-17.

Gladwell, Malcolm. (2000). The art of failure: Why some people choke and others panic. *New Yorker* (Aug. 21 and 28). Gladwell.com.

Weinberger, Eliot. (2011). "Damn right," I said. *London Review of Books* (Jan. 6). Lrb.co.uk.

Recommended reference works (I have not ordered these at the bookstore since they are less expensive online):

Weston, Anthony. (2008). *A rulebook for arguments* (4th ed.). Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing.

The *Weston* book is the clearest and most usable manual available to help scholars make effective arguments. The author is a philosopher who has an uncanny ability to provide the lay reader with a concise and understandable outline of the basic rules for constructing arguments that work. In it he walks the reader through the minefield of fallacies that so frequently destroy the most earnest attempts to make claims and support them. His rules are easy to follow and his examples are quite helpful in showing what good and bad arguments look like in practice. The first part of the book focuses on the problem of creating effective short arguments; the second part extends this to the process of writing arguments that extend over a full-length paper or book. This short book is a must read for all of us who are in the business of trying to write in a manner that is both logical and persuasive.

Becker, Howard S. (1998). *Tricks of the trade: How to think about your research while you're doing it*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

The *Becker* book focuses on "tricks of the trade" in doing research. What he means by this is not the technical tricks but the intellectual tricks that allow researchers to make sense of their data – by asking productive questions, adopting fruitful angles for analysis, employing logical strategies, and avoiding common mental traps. In separate chapters he focuses on imagery (metaphors, images of how things work as a starting place for research efforts), sampling (data as a mechanism for persuasion, validity, representativeness), concepts (uses of theory, approaches to conceptualizing what you see), and logic (considering the full range of possibilities, looking for what's missing). He provides some wonderful examples of "how to think about research while you're doing it" (in the words of the subtitle), drawing heavily on his own research experience. Tricks include such things as treating the exception as the rule, looking for the case that would upset your theory, and exploring the assumptions behind the observation that "nothing is happening."

Booth, Wayne C. et al. (2008). *The craft of research* (3rd ed.). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

The *Booth* book provides a smart and systematic account of how to carry out research from beginning to end. He starts with the problem of how to conceptualize a study and formulate a question, then moves on to a discussion of how to deal with all the succeeding steps in the research process: dealing with data, using scholarly sources, constructing valid claims based on data, formulating persuasive arguments, representing data, organizing research reports, revising and refocusing arguments, and so on. This is a wonderfully rich resource for anyone who wants to do research and write about it. He manages to be both quite explicit (the difference between a research problem and a research question; how to use

quotations in academic writing) while always emphasizing the intellectual work that research entails.

Course Outline

- 1) 3/29: Introduction to Course; Writing Rituals; Writing Well, or at Least Less Badly
 Zinnser, William. (2010). Writing English as a second language. *Point of Departure* (Winter). Americanscholar.org.
 Munger, Michael C. (2010). 10 tips for how to write less badly. *Chronicle of Higher Education* (Sept. 6). Chronicle.com.
 Lepore, Jill. (2009). How to write a paper for this class. History Department, Harvard University.

- 2) 4/5: Workshop; Clarity
 Williams, Joseph M. & Colomb, Gregory G. (2010). *Style: Lessons in clarity and grace* (10th ed.). New York: Longman. Lessons One, Two, Three, Four, Five, and Six.

 4/12: No Class Meeting (AERA)

- 3) 4/19: Workshop; Writing a Sentence
 Fish, Stanley. (2011). *How to Write a Sentence and How to Read One*. New York: HarperCollins.
 Haslett, Adam. (2011). The art of good writing. *Financial Times* (Jan. 22). Ft.com.

- 4) 4/26: Workshop: Grace
 Williams, Joseph M. & Colomb, Gregory G. (2010). *Style: Lessons in clarity and grace* (10th ed.). New York: Longman. Lessons Seven, Eight, and Nine.

- 5) 5/3: Workshop; Structuring the Argument in a Paper
 Graff, Gerald, & Birkenstein, Cathy. (2009). “*They say, I say:*” *The moves that matter in academic writing* (2nd ed.). New York: Norton.
 Wroe, Ann. (2011). In the beginning was the sound. *Intelligent Life Magazine*, Spring. <http://moreintelligentlife.com/content/arts/ann-wroe/beginning-was-sound>.

- 6) 5/10: Workshop; Usage
 Garner, Bryan A. (2009). *Garner’s modern American usage*. New York: Oxford University Press. Selections.
 Yagoda, Ben. (2011). The elements of clunk. *Chronicle of Higher Education* (Jan. 2). Chronicle.com.

- 7) 5/17: Workshop; Clarity of Form
Williams, Joseph M. & Colomb, Gregory G. (2010). *Style: Lessons in clarity and grace* (10th ed.). New York: Longman. Lessons Ten, Eleven, and Twelve.
- 8) 5/24: Workshop; Writing in the Social Sciences
Becker, Howard S. (2007). *Writing for social scientists: How to start and finish your thesis, book, or article* (2nd ed.). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- 9) 5/31: Workshop; Examples of Writing with Clarity and Grace
March, James G. (1975). Education and the pursuit of optimism. *Texas Tech Journal of Education*, 2:1, 5-17.
Gladwell, Malcolm. (2000). The art of failure: Why some people choke and others panic. *New Yorker* (Aug. 21 and 28). Gladwell.com
Weinberger, Eliot. (2011). "Damn right," I said. *London Review of Books* (Jan. 6). Lrb.co.uk.