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Refining Research Representations through Fiction, Journalism, and Creative Non-Fiction Writing Ideas

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Refining Research Representations through Fiction, Journalism, and Creative Non-Fiction Writing Ideas

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Book Review: Refining Research Representations through Fiction, Journalism, and Creative Non-Fiction Writing Ideas

The Writing Life. Annie Dillard. NY: HarperCollins, 1989. 111 pages.

Thrice Told Tales: Three Mice Full of Writing Advice. Catherine Lewis. NY: Atheneum Books for Young Readers, 2013. 136 pages.

The Elements of Style. William Strunk, Jr. and E.B. White. NJ: Longman, Inc., 1999. 105 pages.

On Writing Well: The Classic Guide to Writing Nonfiction (30th anniversary edition). William Zinsser. NY: Harper Perennial, 2016. 321 pages.

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Research articles and academic texts are essential to higher education both as the end product of scholarship and as information used in courses and literature reviews to spark new scholarship. Academic writing has been criticized as an inferior form that would not be well received outside of higher education (Lahman, 2022). As Laurel Richardson said “. . . for years I had yawned my way through numerous supposedly exemplary qualitative studies” (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2018, p. 818). Scholarly writing has long been identified as boring (e.g., Caulley, 2008) but boredom on the reader’s part is not the essential point of this issue. Actual research with living beings is not

boring at all. It is fascinating, compelling, and bewildering at times. To portray qualitative research, in particular, in stultified, unnecessarily complex scientific tones is an injustice to those who have allowed researchers into their lives and intimate stories. Hunter (2018), writing about academic books, notes,

By “not particularly readable” I do not mean that ideas are not presented clearly, or that the prose is necessarily stilted or burdened by jargon. What I mean is that the books are written without regard to elements and narrative techniques that are fundamental to nonfiction in a trade setting—that academic writing is often hostile to storytelling as a way of conveying important truths. (para. 7)

There has also been some rich conversation against strict adherence to the dominant style guides (e.g., *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association*, *The Elements of Style*) as a form of oppression of speech (e.g., Lahman, 2022; Lisabeth, 2019; Younging, 2018). The advice in these guides is often “emblematic of the under interrogated systemic racism of

standardized English” and “this has far-reaching implications...” (Lisabeth, 2019, p. 22).

While there has been some development of style guides that include culturally responsive writing guidelines for groups such as indigenous peoples in the United States (Younging, 2018), we would add regionalism and classism to the intersecting identities that can cause those who know “the right way” to speak and write to stigmatize others, often viewing their writing style as a marker of poor scholarship potential.

Yet an understanding of any given academic discipline’s style expectations (e.g., APA) seems to be needed in order to “publish and persevere” (Lahman, 2022). This understanding also gives authors confidence as they seek to infuse their writing with ideas from creative nonfiction, journalism, and their personal cultural linguistic heritage. Understanding of discipline style expectations should include cultural sensitivity and flexibility and should not preclude pushing the boundaries of what is deemed “acceptable” in academic writing.

Towards this end, we review four style guides from the areas of journalism and creative writing, including the classics *The Elements of Style* (Strunk & White, 1959/1999) and *On Writing Well* (Zinsser, 2016), along with *Thrice Told Tales: Three Mice Full of Writing Advice* (Lewis, 2013), a contemporary guide with eye-catching graphics, and *The Writing Life* (1989), literary author Annie Dillard’s reflective thoughts on writing.

Strunk, Jr. W., & White, E. B. (1999). *The elements of style* (4th ed.). Pearson.

The Elements of Style presents pragmatic and practical content to guide any writer in a process of refining and revising their work for elements of style and

readability. The authors balance straightforward information with solid guidelines and direction for application, while modeling an infusion of style and humor throughout. The pages are easy to read and quick to turn and are structured in a way that allows any reader quick access to whatever nuance they need to address in their work. The book covers an expansive list of stylistic topics, each with brevity and directness that allow for significant transferability to writing. Authors with varying experience may find the elementary rules of usage both enlightening and refreshing, highlighting nuances of sentence structure and contraction usage. Punctuation and form are given life through direct examples and nuances of implementation, and traditional usage errors challenged with direct examples in an easy to skim, and structured list. *The Elements of Style* offers an accessible, simplified, and ready to go companion in writing. It does not enforce hard and fast rules like a strict teacher and is consequently better situated as a traveling companion and guide for each writer when it is needed. Its structure promises not to slow anyone seeking insight or advice in their writing and allows the reader to directly target the question at hand, to return to their own process without becoming lost in a lengthy narrative or descriptive maze of options. Not only will this work swiftly answer any lingering question, but its pages also present an array of useful information that may stimulate unexpected learning and growth along the way. Given the ease with which one turns the pages, it is possible to see this book as an opportunistic refresher for one’s writing style that will not exhaust all time and resources.

The book is divided into five sections. The first, covering elementary rules of usage,

includes common errors such as it's/its, parenthetical expressions and how to use them, and comma usage. The second section looks at elementary principles of composition, such as overall structure, paragraphing, use of the active voice, concrete language, verb tenses, and placement of emphatic words at the end of sentences. The third section presents “matters of form,” which include how to punctuate parentheses, using cues and key words, introducing quotations, and presenting titles and references. Some of these will be superseded by specific style guides such as the APA Manual. The last two sections, “Words and Expressions Commonly Misused” and “Words Often Misspelled,” provide useful resources and reminders—for instance that “all right” is always two words (never “alright”) or that the word “certainly” is unnecessary.

Zinsser, W. (2016). *On writing well: The classic guide to writing nonfiction* (30th anniversary ed.). Harper Perennial.

As alluded to in the title, *On Writing Well: The Classic Guide to Writing Nonfiction* by William Zinsser is a classic book for those wanting to begin writing or improve their writing skills. Broken down into four sections, Zinsser covers the principles, methods, and various forms of writing, followed by attitudes towards writing. Rather than being focused on what to do and what not to do, the book instead provides guidance on how to write about various non-fiction topics. While this book was first published over four decades ago, the advice contained within it still feels timeless. One of its greatest advantages is that each chapter is brief, making them digestible in a fast-paced, modern world. Zinsser also follows his own writing advice throughout the book and includes examples, adding substance to

his recommendations. While the book was originally intended to guide those wanting to write non-fiction, it is a useful tool for all writers seeking to improve their skill.

For qualitative researchers specifically, *On Writing Well* provides a plethora of useful advice. In most academic writing, researchers often strive to use catchy phrases and long words that may impress other academics. However, Zinsser is adamant that good writing is simple, concise, and clear. It is important that readers choose to continue reading because they do not feel it is a chore to do so (unfortunately, a common feeling when reading academic journal articles). Academics and qualitative researchers can greatly improve their writing by heeding this advice. Rather than continuing to use complex words to explain a concept or finding, they can benefit themselves and their readers by “[stripping] every sentence to its cleanest components” (p. 6). While the immediate benefit is to the reader for being able to understand the research and writing, the author also has the advantage of their work being accessible beyond purely academic circles.

Zinsser also guides scientific writers to be direct and linear in their writing, so that others can comprehend and replicate the study. The book emphasizes that good scientific writing leads readers step by step through the research process, while also humanizing the content so that readers experience the content as relatable and applicable. For example, Zinsser discourages the use of professional jargon because it can create distance between the reader and the content. Instead, the writing should be inviting rather than serving to prove one's own competence. It was also recommended to only include the most important findings in the study and provide summaries for the

rest. In essence, the writing should be informative while understandable.

Additionally, Zinsser implores writers to keep in mind the implications of historical and ancestral roots. As qualitative researchers, this can be important to consider because where we come from and the identities we hold can inform the kind of research we are formulating and, in turn, how we are conceptualizing and conveying the resulting data. Writers should strive to pursue topics that are appealing and of interest. When a writer chooses a topic which they are passionate about, the process will be more meaningful and bearable. Subsequently, the hope is that writers can aim to speak from their unique perspectives (while simultaneously trusting their writing style) instead of conforming to the styles of other writers. The essence and significance of how their values should inform the writing they produce was also discussed. If writers are aware of how they want to be recognized for the kind of writing they are producing, then the product will be sound from a place of intention.

While the book was written for a general audience of non-fiction writers, anyone seeking to improve their writing skills can find helpful advice within it. For researchers, this book will likely challenge what many have been exposed to within academia— long and complex prose that does not always make effort to be comprehensible to the average reader. Instead, Zinsser will push writers to re-evaluate how they would like to approach writing and skillfully bring them back to the basics.

Lewis, C. (2013). *Thrice told tales: Three mice full of writing advice*. Atheneum Books for Young Readers.

Lewis's (2013) text is technically a children's book with short chapters and charming illustrations by Joost Swarte. The simplistic approach to writing advice might make a certain type of scholar turn up their nose—I've seen many a professor or doctoral student sneer at anything too "creative," seeming to fear that engaging with creativity will cause others to take them less seriously. Of course, as McVey (2008) puts it, "all writing is creative writing" (p. 289). Writers are engaging in creative work, whether they feel comfortable admitting it or not. Therefore, anyone engaging in writing is, by definition, a "creative person." Csikszentmihalyi (1996) points to several paradoxes that appear in creative people—one of which is being simultaneously playful and hard-working. *Thrice Told Tales: Three Mice Full of Writing Advice* fits perfectly within the paradox of playfulness versus hard work. It may consist of childish line drawings and simple prose, but the 92 very short chapters cover a wide range of writing issues and provide the sparks of inspiration that every writer needs. While there are various chapters on literary conventions most applicable to fiction (e.g., Plot, Flashback, Sex in the Story), many are specifically useful to qualitative research writing. Among these are Point of View, Character Presentation (both the direct and indirect method), The Lenses of Psychic Distance, Cliché, Ambiguity, Showing and Telling, and Setting. The chapter on lenses, for instance, illustrates how a writer can use a telescope, binoculars, or magnifying glass in presenting information. This mirrors Wolf's (1992) classic ethnographic study, *A Thrice-Told Tale*, which presents three ways of relating the same incident. All qualitative researchers need to continually challenge themselves to find new ways to represent their work, and "to take a broader view of

authorial voices” (Brearley, 2000, p. 1). This book provides a very different approach to writing advice that is fresh and fun. It may have you quoting one of the cartoon mice on the cover, whose speech bubble reads, “I can too be a writer. I just read this book!”

Dillard, A. (1989). *The writing life*. HarperCollins.

This text outlines important considerations as one contemplates the writing process. Through a philosophical perspective, the author describes writing with an almost poetic voice. At times, the abstract style can be challenging to consume, but delivers a strong introduction into the depth of the writing process.

It became apparent that this was not going to be a typical “how to” that one might expect when delving into a book about writing. This book was filled with metaphor after metaphor that aided to depict the ups and downs, the strengths and weaknesses, the resiliencies and soft spots in the writing process. At times, it was easy to get scooped up into the metaphors and the stories told by the author, Annie Dillard. She wrote in a way that swept the reader into the struggles of what a writer goes through.

At times, it was difficult to follow and appeared so due to the lack of storyline or narrative. Although we did appreciate the metaphors that outlined the constant struggle of a writer and ways in which to stay motivated, we felt as though we needed to re-read many parts of the book for clarification. This is likely due to the struggles writers often experience, as expressed by Dillard. At times, the book seemed poetic, and would draw the reader into a scene, especially when the author was discussing chopping wood at her cabin where she secluded herself to write. Chapter 4 illustrates this well. In this chapter, she tells

the story of her typewriter going up in flames and it was a specific story that lasted two pages and ended the chapter. It was a brilliantly written story; however, for a beginning writer, it can be difficult to see how this story relates to the writing process.

Throughout the book there are poignant phrases or paragraphs on which the reader might be able to focus for a whole season as a writer. These can be seen as quotes on the writer’s mirror like personal mantras for a day of writing. In Chapter 5 Dillard states, “The writer...is careful what he reads, for that is what he will write. He is careful of what he learns, because that is what he will know.” These segments are eye-opening, simple, and motivating. And funnily enough, the next few paragraphs may not feel as helpful or poignant, but Dillard weaves these stories, personal anecdotes, and metaphors throughout in such a way that *The Writing Life* could likely be read at various times in one’s writing career and each section would have new meaning and significance. It’s important to note various sections allude to famous works, authors, ideas, etc. that may not suit the average reader. It seems likely that the book is well-suited for more experienced or well-read individuals who see writing as a long-term part of their career and profession. It would likely fit well as a supplement book for a master’s degree in writing program.

Overall, the book was beautifully written and provided some concrete ideas for new and experienced writers while also incorporating these elements in a fascinating and seamless way. *The Writing Life* will be at least thought-provoking and at most an invaluable tool and source of comfort for writers in their career.

Discussion

As academics we need to work toward a broader recognition of the oppression that comes with inflexible control over what constitutes scholarly writing and the tragic and continued loss of the many ways of knowing and expressing knowledge. Yet it is essential to hold this perspective in tension with the need to make basic discipline writing requirements (e.g., a thorough, traceable reference and citation system) explicit to novices who need to publish to persevere and achieve. The challenge for the qualitative writer becomes how to hone (Lahman, 2022) academic writing in order to portray research participants in rich ways which convey the reader into varied contexts in a compelling manner while remaining true to the data.

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