

Good And Bad Academic Writing: Some Examples

From Emma Darwin's blog *The Itch of Writing*

You've probably got here from my post about Academic Writing: if you haven't you might want to have a look at that first.

These extracts are all taken from the beginning of their respective arguments, and so they're talking about the same kind of thing: what has been said on this subject before, what's missing and, at least by implication, what this book is going to be talking about. The first four are all models which you could happily follow, the last two are much less clear, so have a look at them all and try to decide how each one has the effect on your understanding that it does have. For example, look for:

- the basic somebody-did-something structure of English in each phrase and each sentence
- where the language is sophisticated to good effect (either for precision, or for the energy and interest) and where it just makes things more confusing
- where the language is plain and everyday to good effect
- how the author makes abstract ideas concrete
- how the author controls long phrases and units of meaning
- how the author keeps introductory units and tailpiece units under control, or does the tail wag the dog?
- how the punctuation does or doesn't help to articulate those different units of meaning, and keep the reader following along the connections from one unit to the next

And if you're not convinced by my assertion that commas are your friend, try reading the last two aloud. Would more punctuation help?

One effect of the persecutions in Germany has been to prevent antisemitism from being seriously studied. In England a brief inadequate survey was made by Mass Observation a year or two ago, but if there has been any other investigation of the subject, then its findings have been kept strictly secret. At the same time there has been conscious suppression, by all thoughtful people, of anything likely to wound Jewish susceptibilities.

– George Orwell, 'Antisemitism in Britain' in *Essays*, London, Penguin, (1945) 1984, p.279.

Though the type of grand narrative offered by Marshall was anathema to the national curriculum, the high sales of *Our Island Story* demonstrated that this was not the case with the general public. The most popular recent television treatments of our past, such as Simon Schama's *History of Britain* and David Starkey's *Monarchy*, by and large followed the model of focusing almost exclusively on the actions of kings and queens.

– Edward Vallance, *A Radical History of Britain*, London, Abacus, 2009, p.4

[...] while this is a history of the shapers more than the shaped, I remain unapologetic about the catholicity of its discussion. My subject is the community of the nation, an entity not supposed to have existed before the French Revolution. But when seventeenth-century

writers and preachers speak of their Fatherland, I take them seriously, at least in not supposing the term to be a subterfuge for the interests of class.

– Simon Schama, *The Embarrassment of Riches*, New York, Vintage 1987, p.6

The seventeenth century, as the Golden Age of Spanish literature and art, has always attracted the attention of scholars, and has inspired work of high quality. But Spain's other seventeenth century – the century of military defeat, political disaster and economic decline – has received on the whole a meagre treatment by the standards of the best European scholarship, and remains to this day relatively unknown.

– J.H.Elliott, *The Count-Duke of Olivares*, London, Yale University Press, 1986, p.ix

Recent scholarship on the public sphere has maintained that we need to examine the many manifestations of the public which shaped nineteenth-century politics, commerce, class, gender, and national identities. Most of these studies have reconfigured but been informed by Jürgen Habermas's notion of the public sphere as an ideal realm of rational discourse located between the private sphere of the family and the market and the formal institutions of the state.

– Erika Diane Rappaport, *Shopping for Pleasure*, Princeton, Princeton University Press 2001, p.78

Analysts of global integration have been rightfully concerned with elucidating global inequalities. But increasing interconnectivity has also created possibilities for seemingly marginal people to affect larger patterns of interrelation. By concentrating on how economic power is deployed by dominant global actors, analysts of globalizing processes have largely overlooked the ways in which quotidian acts such as consumer demand across the globe influence economic relations, however asymmetrical those relationships might be.

– Jeremy Prestholdt, 'On the Global Repercussions of East African Consumerism', *American Historical Review* 109 (3) 2004 pp.755-81, p.755

And finally, just to remind ourselves, here are **George Orwell's Rules of Writing**. Note especially number six:

1. Never use a metaphor, simile, or other figure of speech which you are used to seeing in print.
2. Never use a long word where a short one will do.
3. If it is possible to cut a word out, always cut it out.
4. Never use the passive where you can use the active.
5. Never use a foreign phrase, a scientific word, or a jargon word if you can think of an everyday English equivalent. [Emma adds: but only if the everyday English equivalent is just as precise in its meaning].
6. Break any of these rules sooner than say anything outright barbarous

– George Orwell (1946), 'Politics and the English Language' in *Essays*, London, Penguin 1984, p.359.