

Academic writing is a fraught and mysterious thing. If you're an academic in a writerly discipline, such as history, English, philosophy, or political science, the most important part of your work—practically and spiritually—is writing. Many academics think of themselves, correctly, as writers. And yet a successful piece of academic prose is rarely judged so by “ordinary” standards. Ordinary writing—the kind you read for fun—seeks to delight (and, sometimes, to delight and instruct). Academic writing has a more ambiguous mission. It's supposed to be dry but also clever; faceless but also persuasive; clear but also completist. Its deepest ambiguity has to do with audience. Academic prose is, ideally, impersonal, written by one disinterested mind for other equally disinterested minds. But, because it's intended for a very small audience of hyper-knowledgable, mutually acquainted specialists, it's actually among the most personal writing there is. If journalists sound friendly, that's because they're writing for strangers. With academics, it's the reverse.

Joshua Rothman, *Why is academic writing so academic?* *The New Yorker* 20 Feb. 2014.

<http://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/why-is-academic-writing-so-academic>.

Bookstores and newsstands have shut their doors. Newspapers, magazines, and entire publishing houses have stopped their presses. And the public, wearing big, Internet boots, has stomped through the gates of the university. "Writing for the public" is, by now, a fairly meaningless thing to say. Everyone who tweets "writes for the public." Lectures are posted online. So are papers. Most of what academics produce can be found, by anyone who wants to find it, by searching Google. These shifts have made exchanging ideas easier, faster, cheaper, and less dependent on publishers—and even less accountable to readers.

Every day, more scholars are writing more words for less money than ever before: They are self-publishing and tweeting and blogging and MOOC-ing.¹ Much of this is all to the good, especially insofar as it disseminates knowledge. But publicity and public-spiritedness are not one and the same, and when publicity, for its own sake, is taken for a measure of worth—some tenure evaluations are conducted by counting "hits"—attention replaces citation as the academic author's compensation. One trouble here is: Peer review may reward opacity, but a search engine rewards nothing so much as outrageousness.

The new economy of letters hasn't made academic writing better, but it has made it harder for certain kinds of intellectuals to be heard. All the noise has silenced the modest, the untenured, and the politically moderate.

Jill Lepore, The New Economy of Letters, *The Chronicle Review*, 3 Sept. 2013

<http://www.chronicle.com/article/The-New-Economy-of-Letters/141291/>

¹ Massive Open Online Courses

Hedging. Academics mindlessly cushion their prose with wads of fluff that imply they are not willing to stand behind what they say. Those include *almost, apparently, comparatively, fairly, in part, nearly, partially, predominantly, presumably, rather, relatively, seemingly, so to speak, somewhat, sort of, to a certain degree, to some extent*, and the ubiquitous *I would argue*. (Does that mean you would argue for your position if things were different, but are not willing to argue for it now?)

[...] Writers use hedges in the vain hope that it will get them off the hook, or at least allow them to plead guilty to a lesser charge, should a critic ever try to prove them wrong. A classic writer, in contrast, counts on the common sense and ordinary charity of his readers, just as in everyday conversation we know when a speaker means *in general* or *all else being equal*. [...] Any adversary who is intellectually unscrupulous enough to give the least charitable reading to an unhedged statement will find an opening to attack the writer in a thicket of hedged ones anyway.

Sometimes a writer has no choice but to hedge a statement. Better still, the writer can *qualify* the statement—that is, spell out the circumstances in which it does not hold rather than leaving himself an escape hatch or being coy as to whether he really means it. If there is a reasonable chance that readers will misinterpret a statistical tendency as an absolute law, a responsible writer will anticipate the oversight and qualify the generalization accordingly.

Pronouncements like "Democracies don't fight wars," "Men are better than women at geometry problems," and "Eating broccoli prevents cancer" do not do justice to the reality that those phenomena consist at most of small differences in the means of two overlapping bell curves. Since there are serious consequences to misinterpreting those statements as absolute laws, a responsible writer should insert a qualifier like *on average* or *all things being equal*, together with *slightly* or *somewhat*. Best of all is to convey the magnitude of the effect and the degree of certainty explicitly, in unhedged statements such as "During the 20th century, democracies were half as likely to go to war with one another as autocracies were." It's not that good writers never hedge their claims. It's that their hedging is a choice, not a tic.

Steven Pinker, Why academics stink at writing, *The Chronicle Review*, 26 Sept. 2014

http://stevenpinker.com/files/pinker/files/why_academics_stink_at_writing.pdf