

## On Writing and Academic Conventions

### *Commentary*

SILVIO WAISBORD

George Washington University, USA

Pablo J. Boczkowski and Michael X. Delli Carpini's piece "On Writing in Communication and Media Studies" is a timely contribution to a subject that sorely needs attention. They rightly point out that, although writing is essential to academic work, it is rarely discussed in media and communication studies. I completely agree. We are far more likely to discuss issues related to theory, research, methodology, findings, and arguments than writing, as if this were a relatively minor concern compared to the "true" fundamentals of academic scholarship, or something that other people do.

Because we don't talk about it enough, we overlook the fact that writing is central to our work. Writing shows a mind at work. Writing is how we convey how we think, express our creativity, and distill hours of work into arguments. Writing is the way we walk readers through our research and thought processes. Writing is how we hope to persuade readers that our ideas matter.

We typically find an instrumental approach to writing—writing strictly in the service of arguments. Good writing is associated with a dry style, primarily interested in conveying ideas in a clear and straightforward manner, that often follows the familiar structure of academic papers: introduction, literature review, research design, methodology, findings, analysis, and conclusion. Such writing is serviceable, but it is artificial. Writing clearly is, no doubt, central. It is sufficiently difficult (and rare) to be pooh-poohed as an easy skill. There is nothing wrong about writing sans bells and whistles, but doing so does not truly reflect the richness of our thinking. I have yet to meet anyone who thinks along the writing conventions of scientific articles.

Also, instrumental writing is useful for team projects, which are not uncommon in various corners of communication studies. This type of writing offers an easy-to-master, shared language for authors to express collective ideas in a succinct manner. Blending distinctive, personal writing styles in a team paper or book is exceedingly difficult. Try to imagine your favorite fiction or nonfiction writers combining their distinctive voices in a joint piece. Sounds improbable, right?

Finally, instrumental writing is valuable because it is more accessible than turgid, self-indulgent prose. It is driven by the interest in making a persuasive argument rather than engaging in flashy rhetorical swordplay. Instrumental writing may get a bad rap from those who think writing is closer to a craft than a science (and may cause one or two yawns), but it serves good purposes.

Discussions about writing generally focus on how-to ideas and tips. There is no shortage of recommendations about frequency and pace—from daily habits to support groups to writing retreats. In my

experience, no single set of suggestions works for everyone. Each individual needs to discover her own writing style, routines, strengths, and weaknesses. Becoming a better writer is a lifelong pursuit. With that purpose in mind, I am reminded of the recommendation given to experimental composers and interpreters: Master the fundamentals and the standards, and then find your own voice and artistry.

I am reluctant to come up with general guidelines for scholars qua writers. Full library shelves have done a much better job than I could do in this regard (see, e.g., Sword, 2017). Just two reminders that may come in handy, especially in moments of quiet desperation. Don't wait for inspiration; sit down and, on a good, beautiful day, inspiration may come. And to paraphrase an observation credited to both W. H. Auden and Paul Valéry: A piece of writing is never finished; it is only abandoned.

We need to recognize that scholars increasingly write for different publics and platforms. We need to understand and develop our preferred styles of writing (which may mirror our preferences as readers). We need to cultivate various forms of writing that are suitable for different projects and opportunities. There is no one-size-fits-all writing given the wide scope of ideas and publication venues. We need to figure out the size of the canvas, as Boczkowski and Delli Carpini suggest. Concise writing is needed to present arguments in journal articles and newspaper columns, which have distinct editorial expectations about facts and flourish. Other times, ideas fit better in book chapters and solo monographs. Likewise, certain styles of social media postings may not be deemed appropriate for conventional scholarly publications (or even for academia, but that's a different problem).

These considerations raise what, in my mind, is a crucial aspect of writing: It is inseparable from institutional contexts and expectations. Institutional expectations weigh on writing. Scholars are (generally) not freelance writers. We may take some liberties to decide our writing preferences, but we work in institutions with rules and norms that affect career paths and reputation. Our work is assessed by other institution members with specific expectations about excellence—rigor, evidence, originality.

So, even if we may want to promote different forms of writing, not all forms will receive similar recognition. The value of different writing styles is closely aligned with the types of output valued by our colleagues. Writing for journals, books, social media, storyboards, scripts, policy papers, and other venues may be deemed important depending on one's area of specialization and career path.

Also, we may want to support writing that brings out unique voices, but developing a distinctive writing style takes a good amount of time (except for the rare cases of superb, natural-born writers). Developing a personal style demands investing time, which is not abundant given the constant pressure to publish. Not everyone has time to experiment and cultivate a personal style when conventional metrics dictate that quantity is the preeminent goal. It is a problem akin to preferring methodological approaches (e.g., ethnography, participatory research) that demand considerable time and are less likely to yield a voluminous output in a short period of time. But I digress.

We may want to write for nonacademic publics by taking different positions—from public intellectuals to technical experts (Waisbord, 2019). However, not all forms of writing for public scholarship are similarly appreciated everywhere in academia. Also, writing for various publics demands particular skills.

Mastering Twitter by proffering nibbles of wisdom, sarcasm, and personal announcements is completely different from penning white papers in the language of officialdom.

We may want everyone to be a competent writer, but English is the lingua franca in the globalized academia (Mauranen, Hynninen, & Ranta, 2016). Writing in proficient English is mandatory for publishing in top-ranked international journals and reaching a broad public. Not all communication scholars around the world feel equally comfortable with academic English. This is not a minor problem considering that it directly affects citation indexes, individual stature, and the popularity of particular research topics.

In summary, we need to acknowledge the desirability of various writing styles as well as the significance of institutional factors. Certain aspirations may not be fully compatible with dominant institutional expectations. Pressures to produce quantity are not conducive to creative, original, and memorable writing.

So we need to discuss how communication scholars try to meet expectations while cultivating various forms of writing. We need to support experimental and audacious writing that shows a love of language; excellent writers are needed and remain in short supply. We need to write for students, too, not only for other scholars. New generations of students find conventional academic writing completely foreign; they are steeped in media cultures filled with snappy texts, peripatetic attention, unceremonious language, and polyphonic cadences. We should have several options in our writing tool kit for conversing with many publics. Let's talk more about writing.

### References

- Mauranen, A., Hynninen, N., & Ranta, E. (2016). English as the academic lingua franca. In K. Hyland & P. Shaw (Eds.), *The Routledge handbook of English for academic purposes* (pp. 68–79). London, UK: Routledge.
- Sword, H. (2017) *Air and light and time and space: How successful academics write*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Waisbord, S. (2019). *The communication manifesto*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press.