

Fluid, Elegant, Even Beautiful: Academic Writing as an Artistic Skill

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For students, there is often a disconnection between enthusiasm for their chosen subject, and their perception of academic writing as a tedious chore: restrictive and uninspiring. What if this perception could be altered – with academic writing seen as a joyous and sparkling creative act? This paper suggests two ways for developing such an approach. Firstly, it explores how principles of visual art can be applied to writing. Secondly, it considers the metaphors which can help students appreciate the ‘shape’ of a text. As a way of piquing curiosity and offering fresh perspectives, this approach can benefit students from any discipline.

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INTRODUCTION

The approach outlined here is inspired by my passion for interdisciplinarity, and particularly the intricate relationship between language, art and mathematics. These fields of study exist to be played with, remoulded, transformed – and to delight us. Cross-disciplinary thinking refreshes the mind, enabling us to see powerful new connections from the patterns that emerge.

The American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) sponsors an annual contest called ‘Dance Your Ph.D’. The philosophy behind this is simply that ‘all science should be explained with dance’ (AAAS, 2019). If esoteric branches of STEM subjects can be translated into a compelling visual aesthetic, why can we not bring this aesthetic to our teaching of language and, more specifically, to essay-writing?

QUOTES ON ACADEMIC WRITING

Resistance to the Genre

Consider the following:

‘For in Calormen, story-telling ... is a thing you're taught, just as English boys and girls are taught essay-writing. The difference is that people want to hear the stories, whereas I never heard of anyone who wanted to read the essays’ (Lewis, 1954, p.36).

‘(Professors) demand dreariness because they think that dreariness is in the students’ best interests. Professors believe that a dull writing style is an academic survival skill because they think that is what editors want’ (Limerick, 1993).

Written almost 40 years apart, and in very different contexts (the former is from the ‘Narnia’ series of children’s novels; the latter an article in the New York Times), these quotes nevertheless have much in common. They each encapsulate the reputation of academic writing as a penance for both writer and reader. Can this reputation ever be transformed?

Writing as Art

Now consider this:

Qualities of good writing ‘include passion, commitment, pleasure, playfulness, humour, elegance, lyricism, originality, imagination, creativity and “undisciplined thinking”’ (Sword, 2012, p.159).

‘We do not always know to whom, or to what, we are reaching (...) sometimes people can write a whole essay without being able to say, or say entirely, everything they mean, or all they feel’ (Hayot, 2014, p.77).

Both of these quotes raise some provocative points, which could indeed form the basis for a fascinating classroom discussion. Firstly, could Sword's espousal of ‘undisciplined thinking’ be problematic? Does creativity thrive best when certain restrictions are in place, as it calls upon our ingenuity to circumvent these restrictions? Secondly, Hayot draws our attention to two philosophical aspects regarding the audience: there is the challenge of writing to an unknown reader; and also the acknowledgement that sometimes we cannot fully express our ideas to ourselves-as-audience, let alone to others. From these quotes, we can start to ponder whether vagueness and uncertainty in writing are necessarily a bad thing, or simply the honest output of one who recognises that life itself is tangled and complex. Students who have had the need for thesis statements and topic sentences relentlessly drilled into them, along with the ‘take a stance!’ mantra, might find such perspectives refreshing.

Having these conversations in class -whether or not one agrees with the views expressed- can be both enlightening and liberating.

CLASSROOM TECHNIQUES

Developing and Applying Visual Literacy

As this approach is based upon principles of visual art, the first step is to develop students’ awareness of said principles.

As a starting point, I take the excellent video ‘What is visual literacy?’ narrated by Brian Kennedy, the then Director of Toledo Museum of Art in Ohio. After explaining the five key elements of visual art (line, shape, space, colour, texture), he goes on to explore eight underlying principles. These are as follows (Kennedy, 2013, 10:00 - 12:15):

- emphasis;
- balance;
- harmony;
- variety;
- movement: the way that a sense of ‘motion’ is conveyed by the use of shape, line, colour and so on – which invites the eye to travel around the picture;
- proportion;
- rhythm;
- unity: the sense that the picture works as a coherent whole, rather than a bundle of disparate elements.

To all of this, I also like to add other aspects that may be apparent, such as symmetry, reflection, radiation from a given point, and so on.

Once students have seen the video and are familiar with the concepts, I scatter a variety of art cards on the table. These pictures will usually be a mix of figurative and abstract, of different genres, eras and origins. Students each select one or two cards: it could be one they like, one they dislike – or one of each. After some quiet thinking time, they discuss their chosen card(s) in pairs, applying the principles of visual literacy as outlined above. They consider what does or does not work well in the pictures, and why. This is followed by whole-class discussion.

To take things further, if feasible, students could take part in sketching sessions that focus on form and pattern (flowers and plants work well for this). This helps to develop awareness of visual literacy principles and what it feels like to put them into action.

The next stage can come as a surprise to students -and a pleasant one at that- when they realise that these same principles can equally be applied to writing. All kinds of text can be used for the subsequent activities: students can bring in a text of their choice (either their own work or something by another author) and compare their responses with their classmates, as they did with the pictures in the previous activity. This enables stimulating discussion and deep insights, as students consider how a text's content comes alive through its form.

Such activities can also be constructed as a guided self-study, using a PDF with a 'click and reveal' for suggested responses. Figure 1 shows a text which I constructed for this purpose, along with a question for students to consider:

FIGURE 1
THE POETRY OF ACADEMIC WRITING (1)

Read the following paragraph (in italics).

Consider: How many sentences are there? How do they compare in length? Is there a sense of rhythm/pattern? If so, what does it do? What is the effect of the final sentence?

What elevates a piece of writing from being merely adequate into something which is fluid and elegant, even beautiful? Some key principles in art and design are relevant here. Unity and harmony, subtle variations and striking contrasts, tone and rhythm - all of these entice and guide the reader through the depths and shallows of the text. A writer is essentially an artist with words.

My reveal offers the following analysis: 'The paragraph consists of four sentences of differing length: medium, short, long, very short. This variation not only gives the paragraph a pleasing rhythm that avoids monotony, but also breaks up the rush of ideas into manageable bursts. It moreover builds to a climax: planting the question, introducing the central idea, and then elaborating on its theme with a fast torrent of nouns. Finally, it concludes with a simple eight-word sentence, which could be perceived as either the calm after the storm or a short sharp shock – or, paradoxically, both.'

Having explored variety and rhythm here, the next question probes deeper into the same paragraph (see Figure 2):

FIGURE 2
THE POETRY OF ACADEMIC WRITING (2)

What is the effect of:

- the trio of adjectives (*fluid and elegant, even beautiful*)?
- the pairs of words, joined with 'and' (*unity and harmony; subtle variations and striking contrasts; tone and rhythm; depths and shallows*)?

My reveal indicates that the trio packs a punch while creating ‘a pleasing balance of ideas’, where ‘two might seem bare, four might be excessive.’ The pairs, whether through agreement or contrast, form word partners which ‘bring order and meaning, thus enabling the reader to make sense of it all.’ Thus emphasis, balance and unity appear to be the big players here.

Not an Amorphous Blob: The Shape of a Text

In the following activity, students take a sample text (of any feasible length) and consider what may be the best visual metaphor for its shape. For example, it could be:

- Circle (the text smoothly follows an idea round, seamlessly coming back to the starting point);
- Braid (opposing ideas weaving in and out of each other, converging and diverging, creating a new synthesis);
- Tree (this might start with an obvious idea -symbolised by the tree's canopy- but when we penetrate deeper, we realise there is a far-reaching ‘root system’ which, though it might not be immediately apparent, forms the essential foundations on which the idea is based);
- Constellation (a set of scattered, seemingly disconnected ideas, whereby it is up to the reader to join them up and make sense of them – as in some types of poetry);
- Firework (from a fairly unspectacular starting point, the idea explodes into unexpected places);
- Others: doughnut/ knot/ arrow/ flower/ lightning bolt/ spider web ... and so on?

Again, students can apply this to all kinds of writing, and use it to peer review each other’s work. They may disagree on the shape of a particular text. This is not a problem, and may even be a desirable outcome as it is always intriguing to explore our differing perceptions and interpretations. The important thing is to develop awareness of the connection between form and content, both in one’s own writing and when considering the work of others – even when this is subjective.

Figures 3 and 4 show two sample paragraphs which I devised for this kind of exploratory exercise. (Once students have become familiar with the idea of shape as visual metaphor, they will be ready to apply it to longer, more complex texts.) I suggest dividing the class into two groups: each group is given one of the paragraphs, with the task of deciding on its shape. The tutor can provide a limited set of options if this helps. After some (hopefully) lively debate, the groups can share the outcome of their discussions with the whole class.

FIGURE 3 WHAT SHAPE IS THIS PARAGRAPH? (1)

On how museums engage with younger audiences:

When it comes to engaging the interest of children, science centres are often a far more appealing proposition than conventional art galleries. The interactive equipment at venues such as London’s Science Museum or the Glasgow Science Centre invites us to come and explore in a way that is tactile and playful, and involves our various senses -touch, sound, smell- not just the visual. This multi-sensual stimulation is in stark contrast to the somewhat staid ‘do not touch’ atmosphere of, say, London’s National Gallery or Tate Britain. It could be, of course, that this very staidness is an essential part of the gallery’s atmosphere, giving us a sense of almost religious reverence. After all, some would argue, it is a place of serious learning and aesthetic appreciation, as well as a repository for valuable artworks – not a glorified toyshop. However, if such institutions are to arouse the interest of the next generation, with the same level of success that science centres are enjoying, they may have to challenge some existing preconceptions about what is appropriate and desirable.

My suggested shape for this is a braid (although there may of course be alternatives which are just as valid). The science-centre-versus-traditional-gallery arguments twist around each other: science centres are less staid and stodgy ... but... staidness might be a good thing ... but... it fails to arouse the interest of the next generation. As they weave, it is as if the two are engaged in a particularly competitive dance with much at stake.

FIGURE 4 WHAT SHAPE IS THIS PARAGRAPH? (2)

On the legacy of punk:

Punk iconography, in a 21st Century context, may still symbolise a rejection of mainstream values. Yet this is not always the case. Some people deliberately adopt aspects of punk imagery -purchased from a high-street store or even a designer label- as a kind of escapist fantasy, or simply because they feel it lends an aura of 'edgy cool', while actually rejecting the underlying punk ethos of rebellion and anarchism. Thus mainstream consumer culture readily takes the aesthetics of a movement or counterculture, exploiting it for commercial or personal gain –while neutralising its anger, raw energy and the entire ideology that gave it political potency. In a sense, this is a particularly insidious form of cultural appropriation.

The shape I suggest here is a firework: the text shoots away from a fairly anodyne starting point – and explodes. We all know that punk imagery ‘may still symbolise a rejection of mainstream values’, but the audience is probably unprepared for the term ‘cultural appropriation’ to appear in such a context. It therefore takes that audience to a whole new place, perhaps even echoing the shock factor of punk itself. (Again, disagreement and alternative shape suggestions are possible.)

CONCLUSION

This paper has explored two aspects of academic writing as an artistic skill: the application of visual literacy principles, and the use of visual metaphor.

As humans, we love to find pattern and will always seek it out, either consciously or unconsciously. A well-crafted text will manifest some kind of shape, even when we disagree on what that shape might be. It should not be an amorphous blob – unless its very cloudlike blobbiness somehow has the desired effect. A blob, after all, may have been the writer’s intention all along.

With every step -whether it is a word, sentence, paragraph, essay, dissertation, article or novel- a writer is making artistic choices. Again, these may be unconscious. But it is fascinating for the reader to stop and consider: what is the effect of these choices, and what if the writer had chosen differently? And when a student can apply these questions to their own writing, that is where magnificent things can start to happen.

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