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### Tone and Style

For someone who teaches in the Information Age, my mental model of learning is quaint: Read some books. When a new hobby catches my eye, I buy some basic books written by experts, practice their advice, reread as needed, and then shift to advanced books as my skills develop. This has worked for baking bread (Hamelman, 2004), repairing mechanical watches (de Carle, 1979), and converting the family lawnmower into a high-horsepower hellion (Dempsey, 2008). I suspect that most academics agree with my intricate and nuanced read-some-books pedagogy, for this is how we learn what we know. Need to learn multilevel models, focus-group methods, or Bayesian statistics? There are books for that—painful books, to be sure, but that’s what learning is like sometimes.

And so, too, with writing: I learned nearly everything I know from reading books about writing. I started with the basics, which I still reread, and have ended up reading puzzling books on grammar and

linguistics. I don't get a lot out of those books yet, but I'm getting there—a lawnmower isn't rebuilt in a day. But surprisingly few professors and grad students read books about writing (Sword, 2012), and the quality of writing in the journals reflects it. Ignorance never stopped people from having strong opinions, of course, so arbitrary peeves—"Don't use contractions! Don't start a sentence with *But* or *And*! Don't omit the noun after *This* or *That*!"—pass for writing mentorship in most departments.

This chapter wades into the murky waters of style. My goal isn't to teach a chapter-length crash course in style. Head injuries aside, people should motor leisurely when learning to write: It takes years of reading and writing. Instead, we'll discuss a few key topics—the sound of your written voice, some fundamentals of grammar, and a hit-list of arbitrary peeves—that I hope spark some reflection on your own writing and inspire you to read some books.

## HOW DO YOU SOUND?

Hearing a recording of your voice is eerie. Unmuffled by blood and bone and brain, it sounds familiar yet unsettling, as if you were overhearing a grad student doing an uncanny impression of you. Let's take that self-consciousness and apply it to our writing, to the sound of our voice on the page. What do you sound like? A prim Victorian? A perky personal trainer? A wavering and stammering beginner? A congested hippo?

The tone of your writing is like timbre in music, an aspect of personality that readers discern in an instant. Let's get a diagnosis: Grab something that you wrote, read it with an open mind, and then evaluate it on the following dimensions of tone:

- *Personal versus impersonal*. Some writing sounds personal: It sounds like a particular person wrote it, cared about it, and wanted some other person to read it. It has the sound of a human transaction. Be it serious or silly, polemical or peaceful, it conveys the stamp of the author's personality and the sincerity of trying to say something well. Other writing sounds impersonal, the detached feel of writing associated with no human in particular. This is the sound of bureaucratic memos and corporate reports: They feel like disembodied text written by no one for some vague audience that won't enjoy reading it.
- *Informal versus formal*. Some writing shuffles about in beachwear: It feels casual and familiar, genial and earthy. Such writing has the improvisational and vivid feel of spoken English. Other writing slips off the weekend's flip-flops for the workweek's leather shoes: It feels serious and sober.
- *Collaborative versus combative*. Some writing sounds collegial: It feels like the author identifies with the audience, that he or she views the audience as collaborators. This reflects respect for the audience and a desire to reach through the page to the reader.

Other writing feels hostile: The author comes across as haughty or pedantic, as someone who underestimates or disrespects the reader. A collaborative writer teaches; a combative one wants to set someone straight.

- *Confident versus defensive.* Some writing feels confident: The writer comes across as assured and credible. Readers might disagree with the author's claims, but they agree that he or she has a legitimate claim on the material. Other writing feels defensive: The author is uncertain and afraid of being criticized. Such writing often has a strained, trying-too-hard feel or a cautious, hedged feel. Confident writing feels assertive—it seeks to make a point and change minds; defensive writing feels timid—it seeks to stave off criticism and avoid disaster.

So where does your tone fall? My guess is that most academic writers fall on the impersonal and formal ends: The typical journal article, after all, has the dense and crusty sound of a congested hippo. Most writers are in the middle of the collaborative–combative and confident–defensive dimensions, and only a few boorish and insufferable writers are both combative and confident.

Your goal is to become versatile, to have control over your tone. A writer who can sound only one way is like a chef with only one good dish. Good writers can shift their tone for different venues and purposes. Because most people sound too stiff, however, becoming versatile usually involves learning a personal and

informal sound. Even if you rarely write work with a casual sound, learning how to do so will teach you important mechanics and make your formal writing tighter. And once your tone takes off its periwig and slips into sweatpants, it might not want to go back. You'll find that most readers are like you: They would rather read good writing, and they respect people who write well.

These dimensions are continuous, so don't get trapped into false choices like, "If we don't write formally then our articles will sound like middle-school diaries." Imagine each dimension as a scale from +10 to -10, with 0 as the midpoint. As you learn to control your tone, you'll find that you can slide along these scales at command. And you should—your tone should change on the basis of your purpose and your audience. Calibrating your writing, not sticking to an extreme, is the mark of a controlled writer. Here are my opinions about how to navigate these poles:

- Your body of work should span most of the informal (+10) to formal (-10) dimension. Some genres—books like this, blog entries, newsletter essays, and some journal articles—work better when you let your hair down; other genres—grant proposals, progress reports, and some journal articles—demand the austere bun. Most of your work will be in the middle. Even people like me who find it hard to be serious have some stuffy stuff, as Exhibit 2.1 shows.
- For the personal (+10) to impersonal (-10) dimension, you'll rarely want to stray into the impersonal

## EXHIBIT 2.1. Within-Person Variation in Informality–Formality

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Writers who can write informally don't always do so. To wit, here's a snapshot of my own variability on the informal (+10) to formal (–10) dimension:

This book is probably around a +8. When planning the book, I thought an informal sound would make writing it more fun for me and more interesting for you. So far, so good, I hope.

My journal articles for journals that are open to informal writing are around +3 (e.g., “In this study, we explored some intriguing implications of our recent studies. We expected that . . .”).

My articles for stodgier journals are around 0 or –1 (e.g., “The present experiments build on our recent experiments and extend them significantly. Specifically . . .”).

My grant proposals are around –3, and my grants' progress reports are around –7—no duct-tape jokes there (e.g., “The experiments completed in the prior project period built on the results obtained in the initial year and extended them in several critical respects”).

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side of the scale. Even when writing formally, you shouldn't conceal yourself behind your writing. Be they goofy or grim, your writing and ideas are yours. A grant proposal should sound more formal than a blog entry, but it should be just as personal. Impersonal constructions—*One could propose* instead of *We propose*—make a writer sound bored and indifferent. Aim for a range of +7 to +3—make your writing sound like you.

- Abandon hope, all ye who tread into the combative half of the collaborative (+10) to combative (–10) dimension. Your work should be between +10 and 0. Not much of it will be close to +10—writing about mentorship, pedagogy, and professional skills, like this one, will be up there—but none of it should be below 0. We are entitled to our voices but not to our readers: Pretentious, haughty, and patronizing writing is a turn-off.
- Even if you can't yet control where you fall on the confident (+10) to defensive (–10) dimension, you know where you should be. Anxiety makes some people shrink and others puff up, so defensive writers sound either timid or strident. A confident writer, in contrast, comes across as a reasonable person with the credibility that comes from reading widely, thinking logically, and respecting the discipline's norms for scholarship.

## CRAFT

A portfolio of sounds is our goal, but in all cases our writing must exude craft, a sense that there's an expert behind the words with a firm hand on the wheel and a steely gaze on the horizon. Writing informally doesn't mean forsaking grammar; writing formally doesn't mean heaping passive sentences on the page. To gain control over how you sound, you must master some basic mechanics. Most people can write only one way because they are hemmed in by their paltry knowledge of grammar.

## Read Some Books

The first step in craft, of course, is to read some books. Writing might come more naturally to some people than others, but we all can write well if we spend some quality time with good books. Exhibit 2.2 lists a handful of books to get you started. These are my touchstone books: They are among the few things that the grad students know they shouldn't mock when I'm around. After reading those, buy whatever seems useful and read at least one book a year.

## Snuggle Up to Punctuation

In most scholarly articles you will find only two punctuation marks: the comma and the period, with the former dwarfing the latter. Ignorance about the lowly facts of punctuation, I'm convinced, underpins most of the ghastly writing we see in journals. Commas and periods afford only a few sentence forms and hinder some elegant forms of subordination and coordination. With only two tools in the box, the writer is limited to building lowly spice racks and trivets.

### *Semicolons*

I love semicolons. My love is an intellectual one, unlike Chuck Wendig's (2011), whose essay "I Want to Buy the Semi-Colon a Private Sex Island" says more than women were meant to know about the bond between men and their punctuation marks. One fears to learn what he thinks of the virgule.

## EXHIBIT 2.2. A Reading List for Academic Writers

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*On Writing Well* by William Zinsser (2006)

More than any other book, *On Writing Well* will scrape the barnacles from your weathered and crusty style. Zinsser argues for a personal tone, the sound of one person speaking to another. The book is packed with tattoo-worthy quotes, such as, "Few people realize how badly they write" (p. 17). Them's fighting words.

*The Practical Stylist* by Sheridan Baker (1969)

This book had an incalculable influence on my writing. Baker's thesis is that in style "there are things to do and things not to do, and these can be learned" (p. 2), an appealing idea. I prefer the editions published from the late 1960s to the 1980s, which are pitched at a higher level. Baker's book unleashes some great lines, such as, "All this time you have been writing sentences, as naturally as breathing, and perhaps with as little variation" (p. 27).

*Garner's Modern American Usage* by Bryan Garner (2009)

Need to know whether it's okay to use *while* for *although* or *since* for *because*? Confused about the difference between *clinch* and *clench*? Unsure if *butt naked* or *buck naked* is proper usage? This spectacular book, an A-to-Z dictionary of usage, has it all. You might expect an A-to-Z dictionary of usage, grammar, and spelling to be boring, but Garner's book sparkles. In reference to hypallage, for example, we learn that "pedants who complain about almost any phrase like the ones listed ('But the marker itself isn't permanent, is it?') are simply parading their own pedantry" (p. 431). Any usage guide with a page-long entry on *duct tape* (vs. *duck tape*; p. 282) demands our respect.

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Semicolons have only two common uses and one common misuse. The first use connects two independent clauses. Here the semicolon provides a sense of balancing and pivoting, so it nicely contrasts two ideas:

- A collaborative writer teaches; a combative one wants to set someone straight.
- Writing informally doesn't mean forsaking grammar; writing formally doesn't mean heaping passive sentences on the page.

Semicolons work when both clauses are parallel instead of subordinated. If the second part is subordinate to the first, you probably want a colon or dash. The second use separates elements in a complicated series. If the elements in a series have their own subordination with commas, use a "serial semicolon" instead of a serial comma to segregate them.

The most common misuse of a semicolon is to slap a fragment after one:

- Our experiments used outcomes from both individual and contextual levels of analysis; unlike past research.

When coordinating two clauses, a semicolon is correct only if a period would also be correct. *However* seems to cause the most trouble after semicolons: Stick a comma after it if you mean *but* or *yet* but not if you mean "in whatever amount or manner" (e.g., "However you go, go quickly").

- Study 1 provided initial support for our hypothesis; however, it didn't find the expected mediation.

### Colons

Most beginners see the colon as a pony with one trick: enumerating a list. You can use the colon for this, of course, but the colon is a trickster. It brings together two elements that are closely related, particularly when the second element elaborates on the first:

- For someone who teaches in the Information Age, my mental model of learning is quaint: Read some books.
- Some writing shuffles about in beachwear: It feels casual and familiar, genial and earthy.

Common elaborations for colons are *general: specific*, *concept: instance*, *action: consequence*, and *claim: evidence*. Enumerating items in a list is merely one kind of elaboration:

- In most scholarly articles you will find only two punctuation marks: the comma and the period, with the former dwarfing the latter.

Colons are hard to replace. A period implies more separation than you want; a semicolon implies parallel coordination rather than elaboration. You can often use commas instead of colons, but the resulting sentences are wordy and stiff:

- Some writing shuffles about in beachwear, **in that** it feels casual and familiar, genial and earthy.

- In most scholarly articles you will find only two punctuation marks, **which are** the comma and the period, with the former dwarfing the latter.

### *Dashes*

Dashes—also known as *em dashes* because they are the width of a capital M—are habit forming and probably dangerous to today’s sheltered youth. With few constraints on their use, dashes are easily abused. They open up new frontiers in style, so learning the dash is like taking your first trip abroad, albeit with better showers.

The dash has two common uses: inserting and appending. First, using two dashes, you can insert a clause or phrase into a sentence. Dashes licentiously allow nearly anything to slip in, from short phrases to several sentences:

- Dashes—also known as *em dashes* because they are the width of a capital M—are habit forming and probably dangerous to today’s sheltered youth.
- Ignorance never stopped people from having strong opinions, of course, so arbitrary peeves—“Don’t use contractions! Don’t start a sentence with *But* or *And*! Don’t omit the noun after *This* or *That*!”—pass for writing mentorship in most departments.

Inserting is hard without dashes. Parentheses work, but they mute rather than emphasize. Commas work in some cases (e.g., inserting a subordinate phrase) but not in others (e.g., inserting a whole sentence).

Second, using one dash, you can append a clause or phrase to a sentence. The appended element can be short or long, a series or a single thing:

- There are books for that—painful books, to be sure, but that’s what learning is like sometimes.

Don’t combine inserted and appended elements in one sentence—the reader will struggle to identify what is inset and what is appended—like this one—it’s too confusing.

You are probably thinking, “Might I perchance combine punctuation marks into flamboyant celebrations of coordination and subordination?” As if you had to ask:

- Some genres—books like this, blog entries, newsletter essays, and some journal articles—work better when you let your hair down; other genres—grant proposals, progress reports, and some journal articles—demand the austere bun.

### *Punctuation to Avoid*

Exposure to the wide world of punctuation can make beginners giddy and impulsive, but you should exercise some restraint with some of the seedier marks.

- The virgule, usually known as a slash (/), should be reserved for technical purposes, such as marking scientific units (e.g., ohms/sec, miles/hour), pronunciation (e.g., /nt/), and the ends of quoted lines of poetry. Don’t write *and/or*, *he/she*, *mood/*

*emotion, aggression/violence, scamp/scapegrace*, or other hybrids—such hedging betrays your uncertainty about what to say.

- After centuries of obscurity, the ellipsis (. . .) came into favor with disaffected teenagers who like the breathy and discursive tone it lends to their inane online ramblings about how misunderstood they are: “No one gets me . . . no one . . . and my parents? . . . whatever. . .” In their defense, it’s hard not to be misunderstood when most of your words are elided. An ellipsis signals that something was omitted from a quoted source. That’s it. Don’t use it to trail off (e.g., “It’s hard to say . . .”), if not for style then for the principle of keeping aposiopesis at home where it belongs.
- The exclamation point is the answer to a rhetorical problem dating to the ancient Greeks: How can you create a sense of elevated emphasis after your long, all-caps rant aimed at strangers on the Internet who dislike cats? I feel bad for the exclamation point, which has been skunked by its association with bad writers who have big emotions but small vocabularies. Avoid it. You will sound shrill and wild-eyed! SERIOUSLY!!!

### Write Shorter Paragraphs

Some authors can’t seem to write a subheading shorter than four lines, let alone a paragraph. They dislike runty paragraphs, confusing length with heft, wordi-

ness with purpose, size with insight. Granted, tiny paragraphs can be unsatisfying, like a teaspoon of ice cream, but that’s no excuse for sticking our heads beneath the soft-serve machine.

Sheridan Baker (1969) suggested thinking of paragraphs as “identical rectangular frames to be filled” (p. 17). Our intuition tells us that the natural scope of our ideas determines the length of a paragraph—big ideas need more space—but Baker is right. Writing should impose discipline on our ideas, which are rarely as big as we think. If we aim for four to six sentences for our standard expository paragraphs—the ones in our Introductions and Discussions—the paragraphs will flow nicely. With your regular frames as a backdrop, the occasional huge paragraph or single-sentence paragraph will appear emphatic and intentional, not lazy and accidental.

### Vary Your Sentences

Most academic sentences are ponderous things, clomping along from phrase to clause, from comma to comma to period. Your writing will be more interesting if you vary your sentences. One way is to vary by grammatical type, such as classifying your sentences as *simple*, *complex*, or *compound*. Simple sentences have only one main clause, complex sentences have only one main clause and at least one subordinate clause, and compound sentences have at least two main clauses coordinated in parallel (Quirk, Greenbaum, Leech, & Svartvik, 1985). Most academic sentences are big, complex ones held together with commas and hope.



A more natural way, however, is to vary by intuitive type. Readers think of sentences using tacit concepts like *simple*, *complicated*, *long*, and *spacious*. Exhibit 2.3 gives a handful of intuitive sentence types. Mixing and matching from this descriptive taxonomy of sentences will add variability. A rough but effective test of sentence variability is punctuation variability. If a page of text has dashes, semicolons, colons, and question marks, it usually has good sentence variability. Correlation is causation here: You can force yourself away from a comma-heavy style by using other forms.

Like punctuation, coordination is a neglected tool for varying sentences. Ponder, if you will, how you would coordinate two or more clauses or phrases. The most common form—perhaps the only to come to mind—is *syndeton*. In syndetic coordination, we use a coordinating conjunction, such as *but* or *and*, before the final element. We see syndeton everywhere:

- This works for baking bread, repairing mechanical watches, **and** converting the family lawnmower into a high-horsepower hellion.

But you have more choices than you think. Another option is to add the coordinating conjunction before each element, a form known as *polysyndeton*. You've seen this without noticing it:

- Unmuffled by blood **and** bone **and** brain, it sounds familiar yet unsettling, as if you were overhearing a grad student doing an uncanny impression of you.

### EXHIBIT 2.3. A Handful of Intuitive Sentence Types

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*Short sentences.* Short is relative: For academic writing, a sentence with fewer than nine words is probably short.

*Long sentences.* Long sentences are sleek and vivid when done well—just don't overuse them.

*Complicated sentences.* We've all seen these before. Long, abstract sentences packed with subordination will make your readers suspect that your text has been hastily translated from German. Avoid these unless you're Wilhelm Wundt.

*Sentences with inset clauses and phrases.* These sentences place something within the sentence—either a clause or phrase—using commas, dashes, or parentheses. Dashes emphasize the inset element; parentheses mute it.

*Sentences with appended clauses and phrases.* For an emphatic ending, append a clause or phrase to a sentence. A dash creates the right feeling of delay—try one sometime.

*Compound sentences.* Academic writing often compares and contrasts, pivots and balances. Compound sentences coordinate two main clauses that could stand alone as sentences. They work best when the clauses are tightly parallel in form and structure.

*Enumerated and elaborated clauses.* You can elaborate an assertion using a colon or dash.

*Questions.* Natural hooks, questions work well as the first or last sentence in a paragraph. To hook your hooks, write two or three questions in a row.

*Flamboyant sentences.* If you feel the dark urge to pull off a wicked sentence—one beastly in complexity, monstrous in punctuation, or nefarious in coordination—go ahead. You've earned it.

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Omitting the first *and*—unmuffled by blood, bone, and brain—would be syndetic. Polysyndeton reminds me of Steven Pinker, a fine writer who owns polysyndeton like a comfy sweater vest. In only the first few pages of *Words and Rules* (Pinker, 1999), for example, we see several examples:

- “All over the world members of our species fashion their breath into hisses and hums and squeaks and pops and listen to others do the same” (p. 1).
- “Inside everyone’s head there must be a code or protocol or set of rules that specifies how words may be arranged into meaningful combinations” (p. 4).

Keen observers of prefixes probably know what’s next: *asyndeton*, the omission of coordinating conjunctions.

- Some writers fear runty paragraphs, confusing length with heft, wordiness with purpose, size with insight.
- Writing for impact is trying to change the conversation: pointing out something new and interesting, changing how people think about a familiar problem, refining the field’s vocabulary, adding new concepts and tools.

Asyndeton is more common than you might think. For example, coordinating a compound sentence with a semicolon is asyndeton at work. The most common use by far comes from APA Style’s rules for citations,

which asyndetically coordinate two or more parenthetical citations via semicolons without conjunctions.

### **Be Short and Sleek**

We know we shouldn’t be wordy. We’ve been told a million times, but telling people to avoid wordiness is like telling them to quit smoking, to exercise more, and to stop wrapping bacon around their doughnuts. Wordiness is like secondhand smoke for your readers: Writers can do what they want in their own homes, but the rest of us shouldn’t have to suffer their bad habits in public.

Part of wordiness is visual. Visually dense text, like long paragraphs stuffed with long sentences stuffed with long words, makes readers reach for the machete, ready to hack through thorny brambles of *individuals* and *utilize*. Spacious text has shorter paragraphs, sentences, and words. The brevity creates more white space relative to black letters, thus making the page look less forbidding.

We’ve already made the case for shorter paragraphs. Baker’s (1969) individual frames of four to six sentences show a writer in control of the material. Shorter sentences come from two strategies: stopping and chopping. Stopping is easy. When tempted to slap another subordinate clause or phrase onto a sentence, stop, take a breath, and slap a period there instead. Chopping takes more practice. Using ellipsis, a method of grammatical reduction (Quirk et al., 1985, chap. 12), you

can chop words and phrases from your sentences. Readers never notice:

- Most psychologists who claim to know a lot about writing don't [know a lot about writing].
- I wear a size medium, if you're making some [T-shirts].
- Even if the viewpoints are the same, only one [of the viewpoints] has a mature foundation.
- Using ellipsis, [which is] a method of grammatical reduction, you can chop words and phrases from your sentences.

Try omitting a lot—see how far you can push ellipsis.

Picking shorter words should be easy, but old habits die hard, with nearly the identically extensive level of difficulty with which elderly habits expire. The prejudice in academic writing is for the long over the short, the oblique over the direct, the abstract over the concrete. Some long words are inescapable in scholarly writing, but most are easily given the slip. Consider choosing *but* over *however*, *people* over *individuals*, *try* over *attempt*, and *use* over *utilize*. I'm not sure why anyone writes *individuals*. Beloved by social scientists, the five-syllable *individuals* is like an invasive species, a hideous snake that gobbles the pretty ground-nesting birds. Seriously, people—or should I say, seriously, individuals—banish it in favor of *person* and *people* and specific classes like *students*, *veterans*, *children*, and *citizens*.

When I read or hear a word that strikes me as interesting or silly, I add it to a document stored on

my desktop. Most of them won't find their way into my writing—if you can work both *raconteur* and *cuneiform* into a sentence, send it to me—but some do, and making the list keeps me in touch with English's big menu.

## REFLECTING ON PEEVES

Most researchers who claim to know a lot about writing don't. Instead of hard-earned knowledge of rhetoric and a nuanced sense of why writers make the choices they do, they have a list of arbitrary pet peeves that got flogged into them in grad school: Don't use contractions; don't write *this* or *that* without a following noun; and never, lest centuries of precious science crumble to dust at our feet, write "That book argued . . ." or "This study found . . ." Versatile writers know that these are merely one of several options, so it's fine for writers to forsake contractions or make "No Anaphor is a Zero" T-shirts—I wear a size medium, if you're making some—so long as they know what they're doing. It's the difference between parroting our parents' political beliefs and having our own political beliefs—even if the viewpoints are the same, only one has a mature foundation.

But such choices are rarely informed. Most people who denounce demonstrative pronouns, for example, don't know that there is a name for what they're denouncing. For most, it's just another entry on a musty list of *Shalt Nots* that the elders passed down. Let's apply the cool eye of reason to these peeves and see what we think.

## First-Person Pronouns

As an undergraduate I was repeatedly warned about first-person pronouns, as if they were unseemly characters loitering at the edge of campus. “Your research paper isn’t a diary,” said one professor—this was the early 1990s, back when people would write their innermost secrets in a small, hidden book instead of posting them to the Internet—“and science isn’t about your personal thoughts.” The argument against *I* and *we* comes from a model of science that confuses objectivity with validity. By concealing the human influence, such writers hope to make their work appear disinterested, unbiased, and universal.

APA Style later argued for using first-person pronouns, and my sense is that most people are comfortable with them. First-person pronouns make your writing more informal and personal, so they’re good tools for controlling your tone. For writing that calls for a collaborative tone, you can use first-person plural pronouns that bind the writer and reader. One form of *we*—the generic, inclusive *we*—refers to the writer and reader as part of a broader class of people, such as academic writers, psychologists, or all of humanity. Another form—the inclusive authorial *we*—refers to the writer and reader as a pair. You’ll notice both forms, along with directly addressing the reader as *you*, throughout this book. Many people confuse these *we* forms with the often (and probably justly) mocked royal *we*—when a singular author adopts a plural

persona—but don’t let that deter you from exploring different ways of relating yourself to your readers.

## Metonymy

You’ve probably heard someone tell you to avoid describing inanimate objects as agents, particularly *books*, *findings*, and *theories*. This usually takes the form of an exasperated rant: “A *book* can’t argue for anything; it’s just a book. Did it jump from the shelf and starting chattering away? Only the *author* of a book can argue for something.” We’re thus told to prefer the wordy “On the basis of our interpretation of the literature, we would suggest” over the sleek “The literature suggests.”

What we have before us is *metonymy*. Along with metaphor, its more glamorous twin, metonymy is one of the two higher order classes of figurative thought. As linguists remind us, figurative language isn’t an ornamental gilding of literal language: Most speech and thought are figurative (Gibbs, 1994; Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). When beginners want to write clearly, they tend to confuse clarity with literalism. But because the mind thinks figuratively, writing is easier to understand when it appeals to figurative thought. “This theory proposes” isn’t literally true, but it has a vivid figurative meaning that is hard to misunderstand.

Metonymy is a figurative device founded on substitution: parts for wholes, features for objects, effects for causes, actions for agents, and places for things

found there, to name a handful. Parts for wholes is probably the prototypical metonymy (Peirsman & Geeraerts, 2006): When we compliment friends on their nice wheels, disparage financiers as suits and hippies as long-hairs, or ask someone to get us some numbers, we're using a feature to stand in for the whole.

Metonymy's many forms are everywhere. Consider "I'm picking up some coffee—want some?" This seemingly literal sentence is rich in metonymy: *picking up* substitutes the final act in a long set of behaviors (grasping the cup) for the full set (leaving the office, placing an order, paying money, and so on), and *coffee* substitutes the contained (the liquid in the cup) for a container. Similarly, you probably attend or work at a *four-year college*. The college isn't four years—the undergraduates attend it for four years, allegedly—but the phrase stands in metonymically for a complex set of curricular goals and historical trends. *The book argued* is a classic metonym: Something created (the book) stands in for the creator (the author). (This form is sometimes called *hypallage*, which switches an object for a subject.) Similar examples pervade English, even in our vaunted scholarly journals—Exhibit 2.4 shows some common academic examples.

Metonymy is inevitable—we have minds that structure experience figuratively and a language that's more figurative than literal. But metonymy is also desirable, something to cultivate in our writing. By omitting huge classes of features, it makes writing compact; by high-

#### EXHIBIT 2.4. Metonymy and You

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Metonymy is widespread in academic writing. Like "the book claimed," the following examples have replaced the implied subject (in most cases, *people* or *researchers*) with something else:

- The following examples have replaced . . .
  - A glance shows . . .
  - A large literature demonstrates . . .
  - This theory contends . . .
  - Recent research, however, contradicts . . .
  - A more nuanced approach reveals . . .
  - Our findings indicate . . .
  - More attention to assessment will enhance . . .
  - The rise of new technology afforded . . .
  - A century of thought suggests . . .
  - Latent variable models distinguish . . .
  - Figure 2 depicts . . .
  - The outcome of the statistical test supported . . .
  - New metrics of heart rate variability can clarify . . .
  - Qualitative methods illuminate . . .
  - A moment's reflection, however, casts doubt . . .
- 

lighting concrete features, it makes writing vivid and interesting; and by appealing to our figurative minds, it makes writing easier to understand.

Ease of understanding, this final part, is the crux of it. Most metonymic expressions are so easy to understand that they feel literal. Only the deliberately obtuse will respond to sentences starting with "A quick glance shows," "Qualitative methods reveal," "Empirically supported treatments emphasize," "A feminist analysis sheds light on," or "Multilevel

models handle nested scores by” with “What? How can a glance show or a method reveal? What demented glossolalia is this?” Such people should show their readers and the English language more respect. Everyone understands metonymy because our minds think figuratively, so good writers should write metonymically. If your peers and adviser disagree, just say, “But the book *Write It Up* argued for metonymy.” If they reply, “No, the *author* of the book argued for it,” go ahead and tell them that only my book argues for it—me, I could go either way.

### Split Infinitives

Grammarians from the old-school—the one where students brought their own candles and coal and were threatened with thrashings—had a curious fetish for Latin, believing it to be the root of all modern languages. Split infinitives, such as *to critically examine*, were thus discouraged because Latin’s one-word infinitives can’t be split. For modern writers, I would strongly discourage you from splitting infinitives when preparing your manuscripts for submission in Latin. The editors and reviewers will mock your twee Latin grammar, and your office mates will snicker at your *vulgare latinum*. But if you plan to submit your manuscript in English, which has two-word infinitives that can be split like bananas with equally tasty results, then feel free to ignore the old-school advice from the 1800s.

### Contractions

The mind recoils at the contempt heaped on contractions. One suspects a Freudian reaction formation, as if contraction deniers type *isn’t* and *couldn’t* when alone in their darkened offices but then stew in shame and self-loathing. Countless times I’ve heard colleagues in-tone, “Contractions aren’t acceptable in scientific writing.” (They rarely say “are not acceptable.”) But why not? Like the belief that kissing gets you pregnant, the belief that contractions are unacceptable for academic purposes is just another folk idea passed down from ignorant elders. Books about nonfiction style and usage encourage contractions, even in contexts many scientists consider formal (e.g., Garner, 2009; Zinsser, 2006).

You should use standard contractions because they let you control your tone. They are pivotal for sliding along the informal–formal dimension, for mimicking the loose feel of personal speech. In spoken English, people avoid using contractions only in highly formal occasions, so text without contractions inherits a somber and liturgical tone. And the mental sound of contractions is milder: They feel less stressed and emphatic. For many common contractions, the contracted form undergoes a phonological reduction—a dropping of sound—that softens it (Quirk et al., 1985, p. 123). The /nt/ sound in *isn’t*, for example, usually reduces to /n/ when spoken. Read these and feel how they sound:

- Our central prediction was not supported.
- Our central prediction wasn’t supported.

In *was not*, the sharp *t* is preserved and *not* is stressed. In *wasn't*, the final *t* is omitted and the emphatic *not* is avoided.

Controlling tone means understanding the causes and effects lurking in our language. If you want a formal, emphatic sound, don't contract; if you want an informal, softer sound, contract. Always contracting is as feckless as never contracting, but never contracting is the more common foolishness. You're never emphatic if you're always emphatic, so avoiding contractions limits your tonal range.

### Starting With *And*, *But*, and *Because*

Like most urban legends, the prohibition against starting sentences with *and*, *but*, and *because* is something people heard from someone who heard it from someone who heard it from a cousin. Strong writers of serious nonfiction start a lot of sentences—around 8% (Garner, 2009, p. 122)—with conjunctions. *But* is a great first word: It starts the sentence with a one-syllable signal that we're changing direction. *And*, too, is a crisp signpost: It quickly signals continuation and elaboration. Because these words mark the direction of an argument, they make excellent beginnings to a paragraph's first sentence.

Writers who believe this urban legend are left with stale and wordy alternatives. Instead of the sleek *but*, they're stuck with the ponderous *however*, a three-syllable word that means "How did my adviser hear

about this party? Hide that stuff." And instead of *and*, they're left with paperweights like *in addition*, *furthermore*, and *moreover*.

Your writing won't sound right unless you start some sentences with *and*, *but*, and *because*. You'll find more use for *but* and *because* than *and*, but all three are essential tools for sleek writing. Aim for starting 5% to 10% of your sentences this way. (I picked that range because people use only 5% to 10% of their brains, according to my cousin.)

### Demonstrative Pronouns

A peculiar peeve forbids writing *this* or *that* without a subject noun. The peeve is communicated via a rant that sounds like: "Don't write '*This* indictates.' This what? This theory? This finding? This platypus? It could refer to *anything*. Always be precise." That's how we learn that writing *This suggests* is bad but writing *This finding suggests* is good. The scoundrels in this scenario are the *demonstrative pronouns*—*this*, *that*, *these*, and *those*—single words that can refer to complex antecedents, such as clauses, sentences, and thematic units (Givón, 1983; Quirk et al., 1985). Whereas the twee pronoun *he* can refer only to one guy, the brawny pronoun *that* can encapsulate intricate ideas expressed with large chunks of text.

Could the peevish be right? Demonstrative pronouns would be worth avoiding if they sowed confusion or created needless mental work for the reader. And

it's true that demonstrative pronouns appear in challenging texts that require close attention to maintain textual coherence. For example, in Norman Bridwell's (1966) *Clifford Takes a Trip*, a *bildungsroman* of yearning, Clifford the Big Red Dog encounters a barrier to finding his owner, Emily Elizabeth: "And then he came to a toll bridge. Clifford had no money. But **that** didn't stop him." Likewise, in Mercer Mayer's (1983) *I Was so Mad*, an intriguing reflection on anger and authority as refracted through the experience of Little Critter, the protagonist, we see:

Dad said, "Why don't you play in the sandbox?" I didn't want to do **that**. Mom said, "Why don't you play on the slide?" I didn't want to do **that**, either. I was too mad.

That's like *The Catcher in the Rye* for 3-year-olds.

Don't fear being misunderstood: Give your readers some credit. Linguistics research is on your side. Studies of topic continuity have shown that demonstrative pronouns are easily decoded and understood (e.g., Brown, 1983; Givón, 1983). They appear close to their antecedents, not paragraphs or pages later, so our oft-underestimated readers understand what we mean. If it works for *I Was so Mad*, it will work for the *Journal of Emotional and Behavioral Disorders*.

You should use demonstrative pronouns: They are grammatically correct and stylistically effective. We can understand how they work in two related ways. In the first, situational ellipsis, demonstrative pronouns mark a grammatical reduction, an omission.

We learned earlier that ellipsis makes writing lean and sleek. Demonstrative pronouns can be seen as a situational kind of ellipsis, a form that relies on knowledge that the reader and writer share outside the immediate text.

- Unexpectedly, none of the seven experiments supported our predictions. **This** [apocalyptic, face-scraping failure] suggests that our model should be reconsidered.

In the second, anaphora, demonstrative pronouns mark a grammatical substitution, a replacement of one thing with another. *That* is thus an instance of anaphora:

- Need to learn multilevel models, focus-group methods, or Bayesian statistics? There are books for **that** [learning multilevel models, focus-group methods, or Bayesian statistics].
- A recent meta-analysis, however, found substantial heterogeneity. In light of **that** [finding], we explored several likely moderators.

In some cases, the subject is replaced with nothingness, a form known as zero anaphora:

- Dad said, "Why don't you play in the sandbox?" I didn't want to [play in the sandbox]. Mom said, "Why don't you play on the slide?" I didn't want to [play on the slide], either. I was too mad.

Regardless of how we understand them, demonstrative pronouns make your writing better by improving cohesion. When writers omit a subject noun



instead of restating it, they imply that the current statement is closely tied to the prior one. Readers thus bind them more closely (see Oh, 2005, 2006; Quirk et al., 1985). Ironically, people who avoid demonstrative pronouns because they want to be clear are harming comprehension.

Grammar, usage, and style are on your side, so hold your ground the next time your adviser decompensates into “*That? That* what? You could be referring to anything!” You can derail the rant by sniffing and licking Quirk et al.’s (1985) massive book—that will work.

### WRAPPING UP

Like a speaker who tours high schools with slides of sexually transmitted infections, this chapter talked about making good decisions. I’d prefer you make some choices more often—the choice for a more personal and informal sound—but any choice is fine if it comes from an informed understanding of writing. We considered some problems and sketched some guidelines, but this chapter can offer only a nudge. Becoming a good writer requires spending quality time with some writing books, putting the advice into practice, and maintaining high standards. As William Zinsser (2006) reminded us, “You will write only as well as you make yourself write” (p. 302).