
David Mick: Inklings: From Mind to Page in Research

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INKLINGS: FROM MIND TO PAGE IN RESEARCH

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DAVID MICK,

Robert Hill Carter Professor of Marketing

McIntire School of Commerce, University of Virginia

Of all those arts in which the wise excel, Nature's chief masterpiece is writing well

*John Sheffield, Duke of Buckingham and Normandy
Essay on Poetry (1682)*

In recent years, researchers have represented data, analyses, ideas, and knowledge contributions in refreshing new ways. These innovations have ranged from three-dimensional photography and photographic collages to film making and poetry (see, e.g., Belk et al. 2003; Kozinets 2002; Henry and Caldwell 2004; Holbrook 1997; Sherry and Schouten 2002).

Notwithstanding, text writing (or prose) remains the primary mode of communicating scholarship. It also remains a nerve-racking challenge to do well, for the novice as well as the Nobel Prize winner in literature. Refusing the challenge, however, is out of the question, and settling constantly for satisficing or mediocre outcomes is hazardous. The unavoidable reality is that writing effectively is not just a necessary condition for getting published. Better writing propels an academic's influence and reputation, and the finest writing is more often found among the most distinguished researchers.

Unfortunately, editors of the *Journal of Consumer Research* (e.g., Ferber 1979; Lutz 1990), for example, have consistently observed that writing skills across that field are embarrassingly underdeveloped. There are many readily available books and articles on how to improve one's writing, though it appears that few researchers are committed to mulling them over and doggedly implementing the guidance. My goals in this essay are to encourage and facilitate increased attentiveness to the critical task of putting mind to page successfully. I will share some of the viewpoints and tactics I have learned about higher quality writing during my prior editing experiences and my own struggles to ascend from the amateur author leagues to the prose (oops).¹

Three Features of Excellent Writing

Excellent writing reflects excellent thinking (Summers 2001). When writers stumble and stall, it is more often due

to foggy and disorganized thinking than merely having a bad writing day. Just as it often occurs in our university classes, when students grumble that "I know what I want to say but I am having trouble writing it," many struggling writers are prone to engage in a common evasion of a deeper truth: their impasse is most likely mind-based, not pen- or keyboard-based. Resolving the mind makes quality writing easier to accomplish.

Excellent writing also balances accuracy and clarity with ingenuity and panache. Emphasizing one side to the detriment of the other is dangerous for different reasons, as in boring versus impenetrable. Scientists have historically stressed accuracy and clarity to such a degree that they "actually discount any fortuitous stylistic acumen among their colleagues as an irrelevant snare, casting suspicion upon the writer's capacity for objectivity in presenting the data of nature" (Gould 2004, p. 132). Admittedly or not, we have tended as a field to adopt this same perspective. But nature and events—human or otherwise—do not tell us their qualities and processes themselves. The researcher-writer does, through interpretation and writing. And he or she makes numerous stylistic choices at every moment in crafting a manuscript (more on this point below). Inevitably then, most scholars oscillate between precision and creativity in the earliest drafts of their papers. However, a successful author does not forget that, even when the goddess Muse is whispering encouragement toward inventive writing, the reader's comprehension of the ideas necessarily precedes the evaluation and use of the ideas. Thus, I mostly agree with Bem (1995) when he argues that in the final efforts to revise a manuscript, as submission for review is imminent, accuracy and clarity must take priority.

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Excellent scholarly writing, consciously or not, also adheres to a philosophy espoused by prominent French novelists of the late 19th century (e.g., Flaubert, Zola), known as *le mot juste* (the right word). They believed that in every word choice that the author makes, from start to finish, there is one and only one best option. Now, one can argue this point in various ways, including its ostensible assumption that the functions and meanings of words are so determinable for the given audience that an optimal selection is achievable. Due to space constraints (on the page and in my head), I will conveniently squeegee aside this mushy pile of problems. But I will argue, nonetheless, that the philosophy of *le mot juste* is an inspiring value and a pragmatically sound goal that helps writers far more than it hurts them. Moreover, this philosophy applies well beyond word choices and semantics to all stylistic matters. These include sentence length, voice (passive versus active), and other apparently mundane, but actually significant, grammatical gear such as commas, semi-colons, dashes, hyphens, parentheses, capitalization, footnotes, and the like. Daunting though it is, every mark on the page matters. Excellent writers accept that weighty responsibility at all times and strive mightily to fulfill it.²

Expecting Expectations

Readers, individually, have needs. They require the writer to help them understand and appreciate what the writer has in mind, and these requirements take the form of expectations about what the writer should do (or not) when generating a particular text.

The reader's expectations are many, complex, and commonly nonconscious until they are violated. Since active writers are also typically ongoing readers of many works—including we researchers—active writers should presumably be astute at knowing what readers expect and at avoiding breaches of those expectations. But often they are not. Gopen and Swan (1990) provide one of the best discussions of the reader's expectations in the context of academic prose. They focus on a primary mode of reader expectations that relates to structural principles, of which they identify seven and supply several convincing illustrations. In outline, the seven principles are:

1. Verbs should follow their grammatical subjects as soon as possible.
2. The end of a sentence is the key stress position where the reader anticipates what the writer is drawing attention to.

3. The beginning of the sentence is the topic position where the reader anticipates the main person or chief thing in the "story" of the sentence to be identified.
4. Information provided earlier in the discourse should also be placed in the topic position for linkage backward and for contextualization forward.
5. Verbs of active voice should be regularly preferred over those of passive voice.
6. The reader needs context before being asked to consider something new.
7. The importance of the substance of the sentence should coincide with the relative expectations for the emphasis raised by the sentence structure.

Gopen (2004), Larocque (2003), and Trimble (1975) also discuss these and other principles of sentence structure that emanate from the reader's expectations. But these expectations do not stop there. They are also imperative to recognize and adhere to at the organizational tiers of paragraphs, sections, and manuscripts as a whole (see, e.g., Bem 1995; Sawyer 1988; Summers 2001; Trimble 1975). In general, writing with constant sensitivity to the reader's expectations leads to a more fluid and satisfying communication process.

There is another essential mode of expectations that the writer must deal with, and it is revealed through the recognition that skillful writing is skillful teaching (Bem 1995), which together serve to extend knowledge to a substantial degree. When that extension occurs during the reading of research, it typically involves learning something fresh or different in relation to what was previously believed about topics such as preferences, product use experiences, advertising, word of mouth recommendations, branding, and consumption communities. In general, readers expect to be taught as a result of their efforts.

Murray Davis' (1971) article on what constitutes interesting research is a classic statement on readers' expectations at the level of theory and substantive content, and on the preconditions and experience of being taught. To reach a judgment that a piece of research is particularly interesting, Davis argues that scholarly readers expect to have their prior beliefs challenged in a manner that is not only convincing, but is also practicable in terms of their own subsequent research. For example, readers may expect to learn that what was thought to be simple is instead complex (or vice versa); what was thought to be unrelated is instead related (or vice

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versa); what was thought to be positively related is instead negatively related (or vice versa); and so on (see Davis 1971 for numerous other examples). Outstanding scholarly writers accurately gauge the existence and the importance of their audience's prior beliefs about the given topic before they compose. They further recognize that their readers expect to have those beliefs considerably changed as a consequence of reading the writer's manuscript.

In sum, readers have expectations that writers must know and honor. These expectations range from the levels of sentence, paragraph, and section structure up to the level of knowledge structure. Higher quality writing takes a more conscious and deliberate advantage of the availability of those expectations.

Some Tips for Better Inklings

First and foremost, to become a more effective researcher-writer, one must read and periodically re-read the leading sources of insights on writing, which I suspect most consumer researchers do not. Too busy I suppose. But if some of my points above are worth heeding, there are few tasks more important to a scholar than improving his or her writing ability. I highly recommend articles by Bem (1995), Sawyer (1988), Sternberg (1993), and Summers (2001), in addition to excellent books of varied breadth by Cheney (1983), Gopen (2004), Larocque (2003), Strunk and White (1979), Trimble (1975), Williams (2002), and Zinsser (2001).

Second, to become a better writer one must become a much better reader. Pick out some of the top researcher-writers in our field and then re-read their works slowly and savoringly, as if sipping a fine wine, rather than skimming and skipping, as if gulping a diet soda. Read portions or the whole of their works aloud. Pause to appreciate the rhythm of sounds, the flow of phrases and sentences, and the stirring expedition of thoughts. This exercise exposes the purposeful and learnable intricacies of impressive writing.³

Third, after identifying first-rate authors and reading them aloud, set about to emulate them in a customized manner. This basic strategy is what many of the renowned composers, painters, athletes, architects, inventors, and social and religious leaders did in their formative years and afterwards. They appreciated and imitated the pre-eminent performers in their fields, while creatively modifying what they learned to take advantage of their own strengths and

the current contexts of their lives and work. Consumer researchers who follow that same path in their writing will produce texts of higher quality and impact.

Fourth, there are different strategies for writing. Inexperienced and middling authors seem to lock onto one strategy, knowingly or not, and then never master it sufficiently. Outstanding authors recognize they have choices in their strategies for composing, and they often develop expertise in one or two approaches. Outstanding authors also tailor their plans and efforts to meet such exigencies as page limits, manuscript deadlines, the involvement and role of co-authors, the characteristics of their audience, and so forth. Chandler (1993, 1995) identifies five different writing strategies: architectural, bricklaying, oil painting, watercolor, and mixed. For example, the architectural strategy is a conscious, rationalist, and linear effort at planning-writing-editing that does not accept the view that writing itself is a mode of thinking. In contrast, the oil painting strategy encompasses little planning other than initial interconnected insights, a crude first draft through which writing is used to better understand the author's thinking on the topic, and then intensive revising. None of these writing strategies is inherently superior to the others, and it is not unsound to rely solely on one, as long as the writer grasps the trade-offs of that reliance and can make the most of it. Probably the most fruitful route to becoming a superior writer is to gain familiarity with diverse writing strategies and then to implement them at different times to meet the goals and conditions of the writing at hand. That meta-strategy is far better than having a rigid writing strategy that remains unrecognized and haphazardly adopted.

Fifth, excellent writing is more likely to occur when the mind and body are refreshed. This advice seems so much common sense that it hardly deserves mentioning. But in our harried lives we often do not properly prioritize our duties and tasks, or we feel compelled to complete key activities at times when we are not psychologically or physically well prepared to do so. Some scholars reflect and write better in mornings, others at night, and others at staggered times across the day. The best authors know their tendencies, talents, and shortcomings well, and they strive to make sure that when the most crucial periods of their writing are upon them, that they prepare themselves and their surroundings to optimize their concentration and progress.

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In closing this essay, I offer a summary list of additional suggestions for exceptional writing in consumer research. Start the process by identifying only one or two mega-themes for knowledge contribution (usually reflected or condensed in the title), stick very closely to them throughout the entire manuscript, and explain how all sub-themes fit precisely within the mega-themes. Strive overall to write a manuscript that any neighbor or relative could understand. Work especially hard on the opening and the closing of a manuscript because these are decisive for attracting and catapulting the reader into enthusiastic judgments about the manuscript's insights. Keep the links between ideas short and direct, with few detours or complicated routes of logic. Accept the fact that persistent cycles of revision work are almost always more consequential than the construction of the first draft. Read a nearly completed manuscript aloud in order to find the more subtle, but still important, glitches to be fixed. And last but hardly least, seek the counsel of a professional copy-editor whenever the magnitude and the difficulty of the writing necessitates.

Conclusion

Writing is rarely undemanding, and it does not necessarily get easier with experience, because the writer's standards rise. Hemingway once confided that he had painfully struggled in writing the ending to one of his great novels 39 times. The interviewer then asked, "Was there some technical problem there? What was it that stumped you?" To which Hemingway famously replied, "Getting the words right." In our field, a substantial differentiating characteristic of eminent researchers is their writing. They are committed to honing their writing skills and to never pronouncing a writing task done until they are unshakably confident they've gotten it right. Write on.

David Mick

Endnotes

1. I thank Jane Carlson (copyeditor), Daniel Chandler, Chris Janiszewski, Ed McQuarrie, Marsha Richins, and Linda Scott for comments on a prior draft of this essay. As usual, I remain solely responsible for all its ups and downs, including poor puns.
2. *The Good Soldier: A Tale of Passion* by Ford Madox Ford has been hailed as the finest French novel (i.e., *le mot juste* novel) written in English. This elegant work begins with a gutsy first line: "This is the saddest story I have ever heard."
3. Opinions surely vary on who are among the leading writers in our field. It would be a natural question to ask of me, nonetheless, since I have dared to raise the issue in this essay. I focus here on a few names that are salient to me and who have published solo articles at some point in the *Journal of Consumer Research* (making it straightforward to know their complete role in the writing). Accordingly, I would nominate these individuals (in alphabetical order) as being among our best writers: Russ Belk, John Deighton, Morris Holbrook, Chris Janiszewski, Grant McCracken, Marsha Richins, Deborah Roeder-John, Linda Scott, and Itamar Simonson.

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