

## *Stylish Academic Writing*

Helen Sword. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2012. Print.



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As a writing professor, I want to review books that deal with “how to write” as a way to help my students develop the art of writing. Of course there are the old standards – Strunk and White’s *Elements of Style*, or more recent books like *Eats, Shoots and Leaves*, which offers a humorous look at language. Every writing professor has a favorite book that should provide the groundwork for students to improve their writing. In her work, *Stylish Academic Writing*, Helen Sword shifts the focus from students to professional writers who want to write and who want others to read and enjoy their work. She proposes that we should take the advice that we give our students: to write with clarity. Her work is part study and part challenge to change our writing approach.

Her work is divided into two parts: “Style and Substance,” and “The Elements of Stylishness.” In the first part, she explains her analysis of over a thousand peer-reviewed articles across ten disciplines. Surprisingly, she did not find any journals that mandated a stodgy style, but she did find many articles that “thwarted [the reader] by gratuitous educational jargon and serpentine syntax” (5). While she doesn’t discount the need for technical report writing, she does support shifting the prevalent style of academic writing into “something truly worth reading” (31). Sword’s review of these journal articles is quite revealing of the false restrictions that we put on our writing.

In the second part, “Elements of Stylishness,” she takes us back to the basics of writing, all the way to the word and sentence level. Even her chapter titles are creative touches that drew me into the chapter: “Voice and Echo,” “Tempting Titles,” or “Hooks and Sinkers” --- all made me remember the chapter content. Within each chapter, she breaks up the text with sections that she labels “Spotlight on Style.” Each one focuses on an author who writes with an engaging style that demonstrates that making a connection with your reader is vital. Each of these “Spotlights” continues Sword’s focus on the art of writing. At the end of the chapter, she has a section of “Things to Try.” I was particularly interested in one that was described as “a playful insight into what ails a sagging paragraph” (60). By submitting a paragraph to Writer’s Diet Web site, your paragraph can be analyzed for its fitness. While the paragraph that I submitted fell into the category of “fit & trim,” without having read this book, I am fearful that I would have been in the “heart attack territory.”

While some readers might state that she is just telling us what we already know, sometimes we need to be told again. Perhaps this time, I will remember that in an essay “sentences are the bricks; paragraphs are the walls and windows” (122). If I build my essay from the ground up as she recommends, then I will have a “building” others will want to visit.