

## **Doesn't That Sound Smarter?: An Analysis of the Writing Style of a Group of Advanced First-Year Writers**

**Monika Shehi**  
*University of South Carolina Upstate*

### **Introduction**

This project was born out of my preoccupation with the stylistic choices that impede clarity and communication in my students' writing. While teaching first-year writing, I have realized that these struggles are not unique to average first-year writers but become even more pronounced among the ambitious ones. Things came to a head when I was assigned an English 102 Honors class. The course was going to be demanding and fast-paced and would require various assignments, from literary analyses to proposal arguments. However, after a more experienced colleague told me that I could expect the Honors students to be better writers, I looked forward to spending less time addressing stylistic problems. Yet, what I found was that the writing of these ambitious students presented its own challenge. While the writing they produced was grammatically correct, the style was both wordy and vague rather than concise and to the point.

At first I thought the problem could be easily remedied. After reading the students' first batch of papers, I decided to talk to them briefly about the changes they needed to make to their writing styles. At the time, I was also teaching an upper-level writing class, where I was using Joseph Williams' *Style: Lessons in Clarity and Grace*. Keeping in mind Williams' lessons, I walked into my Honors class, wrote on Blackboard two sentences which I thought of on the spot, and asked my students which one they thought was better. I expected this simple exercise to

quickly and conclusively clarify the writing style they should adopt . The two sentences were: 1. Jim and Jane should not get married because each will undermine the other's freedom and 2. Jim and Jane should not get married due to freedom corrosion.

To my considerable surprise, the students overwhelmingly chose the second sentence. It was the sentence that was more in keeping with their writing style and the one which I had intended as the wrong model. Incidentally, it was also the sentence the students in my regular English 102 class, earlier that day, had chosen as the better written one. Indeed, the main difference between the two groups was that the Honors students felt much more confident that the style of the second sentence—and the similar ones they produced—was that of academic writing.

## ***The Question of Motivation***

When I decided to investigate what composition scholarship says about stylistic choices, I was not a little surprised to find out that the term often used in informal language to describe the deliberate camouflage or misrepresentation of real knowledge has been, for some time now, part of the scholarship that has problematized academic discourse. In their boldly titled paper “Bullshit in Academic Writing: A Protocol Analysis of a High School Senior’s Process of Interpreting *Much Ado about Nothing*,” Peter Smagorinsky et al. present an impressive list of other similarly striking titles that examine what they term the “construct of bullshit” (370). In this body of scholarship, one can delineate two camps: those who lament its disregard for truth and substance and those who appreciate its knowledge and performance of discursive and disciplinary conventions.

The earliest academic usage of the term seems to have made its appearance in Neil Postman's paper "Bullshit and the Art of Crap-Detection," presented at the annual convention of The National Council of Teachers of English in 1969. Postman defines "crap-detection" as "[s]ensitivity to the phony uses of language," which hides the lack of substantial knowledge. Thus, the ability to expose it requires "knowledge of how to ask questions, how to validate answers, and certainly, how to assess meanings." According to Harry Frankfurt, "bullshit" emerges in one's writing when "the obligations or opportunities to speak about some topic exceed his knowledge of the events that are relevant to that topic" (63). In "Deeper into Bullshit," G.A. Cohen revisits Frankfurt's argument and looks at how language produces this particular construction, observing that impenetrable prose is often considered by readers as impressive and scholarly, regardless of whether any ideas can be teased out of it or not.

In *The Structure of Written Communications: Studies in Reciprocity between Readers and Writers*, however, Martin Nystrand argues that the reason this type of writing succeeds is that it responds to the cues writers pick up regarding pervasive discursive conventions. Meanwhile, in "Just Bullshit" and "The Pragmatics of Bullshit, Intelligently Designed," Steve Fuller and George A. Reisch, respectively, revive William G. Perry's argument, which preceded that of Postman. In the paper he wrote in 1963 at the request of the Committee on Education Policy of the Faculty of Arts and Sciences at Harvard University, Perry uses a more delicate predecessor of the term in question and argues that "good bull appears not as ignorance at all but as an aspect of knowledge" (8). The key in Perry's analysis is the ability to demonstrate knowledge of disciplinary conventions. To a student's "wondrously depressing" disclaimer that he did not deserve the A he received because his paper "was mostly bull, really," Perry's

response is, “Yes, sir, what you wrote is utter nonsense. But, ah! Sir! it was the right *kind* of nonsense” (1). Smagorinsky et al. question whether this kind of nonsense in student’s writing is desirable—and how writing teachers should respond to it. They appear to conclude that since “[s]uch bullshit involves the projection of a completed product according to disciplinary conventions,” teachers should consider that “bullshit is indeed good stuff,” and “may benefit student writers as they learn to write within disciplinary expectations” (402).

Thus, obfuscation in student’s writing can result from either wanting to appear more knowledgeable than possible or the desire to conform to academic conventions, a desire that can be even more pronounced among students placed in an advanced writing class. To understand what drove my students, however, I decided it would be best to conduct a series of interviews to discuss and better understand their stylistic choices.

## Method

The interviews I conducted with my students took place in the second half of the semester. During the semester, the students were assigned four major assignments which consisted of three literary analyses and a proposal argument, for which they had to submit both rough and final drafts. For the first assignment, I relied on written feedback to help the students revise the rough drafts, but after noticing that the second set of papers presented in general the same stylistic problems as the first, and after being surprised by the response I received when I tried to address the issue in class (as explained earlier), I decided to sit down one-on-one with my students to discuss the stylistic choices they were making in their papers.

In order to be able to examine the students' responses carefully, I decided to tape our interviews, but, to ease their anxieties about going on record and ensure an open conversation, I assured the students that I would use pseudonyms instead of their real names. I wanted our conversations to develop naturally so that the students would feel comfortable to discuss why they wrote the way they did. Toward that end, I scheduled an hour for each interview and made the conferences optional. Out of the seventeen students enrolled in the class, 14 opted to meet with me. To accommodate both my schedule and that of the students, the interviews were spread throughout the second half of the semester, while the students were working on the third literary analysis and the proposal argument.

The interviews were semi-structured. In order to get the conversation started, I had planned some initial questions. Specifically, I had planned to refer to the Jim and Jane sentences we had discussed in class as a group and ask each student which sentence he or she thought was more in keeping with the style of college writing and why. I had then planned to ask them what they thought the features of academic writing were before turning to the assignments they had submitted to discuss specific passages and the stylistic choices they had made there. Each interview developed differently: in some cases, the initial questions I had planned were helpful conversation starters; in other cases, the students were happy to discuss the topic of style and plunged right into it without much prompting from me; and, in other cases, I gave the students some time to chat about whatever they wanted to talk about before eventually turning our attention to the topic of style. In each case, however, we discussed what the student thought the features of academic style were and referred to specific passages from the assignments the student had submitted. If I thought a sentence was not clear, I asked the students to explain in

other words what they meant. We then discussed the stylistic differences between the two versions and why they had chosen the style they did.

## Results

After recording our conversations, I later reviewed them to focus on the segments that dealt particularly with discussions of style. Given the total length of all the interviews, I am presenting excerpts from four representative conversations (as stated above, we agreed that I would use pseudonyms to protect the students' anonymity).

**Madison**, a bubbly first-year student whose voice comes through loud and clear through the recorder, referred specifically to the improvised sentences I had used in class to explain why she wrote the way she did. She was clearly impressed by the sentence I had presented as the wrong model ("Jim and Jane should not get married due to freedom corrosion") and even described the first sentence ("Jim and Jane should not get married because each will undermine the other's freedom") as "blunt." The following is an excerpt from our conversation.

Madison: Like, when you wrote the sentences on the blackboard, the Jim and Jane, I know you said students don't like to go straight to the point and they'll go around it so they don't make it so blunt, I just think, like, I know sometimes I'll try to write a sentence that, like, sounds smarter, and maybe get a better grade.

Monika: What makes it sound smarter? Because if you look at the two sentences, one is straight to the point. Blunt? I guess it may seem blunt because it is more straightforward, more to the point.

Madison: The other sentence, I guess, is that it's longer and uses words that are not as easily understood.

Monika: Is it when a sentence is not understandable that it feels smarter?

Madison: (giggling) I mean, I don't know, if you read it on the blackboard, it sounded like someone smart wrote it.

Monika: Why?

Madison: May be because the words were bigger, may be because when you wrote it, you had to read it again, think about it. I don't know. I just felt like a sentence like that, if you were really smart, you'd get it the first time, but most people read it again to get to the point, so if you wrote a sentence like that you'd get a better grade.

**Katie**, a quiet but attentive early riser, wrote her exploratory paper about the controversy surrounding the proposal to install wind turbines in her picturesque New England small town. The assignment called for students to explore all sides of a controversial issue with an open mind before arriving at a position of their own. Writing about the controversy that had enveloped her hometown community, Katie was clearly aware of her argument, but I thought her sentences suffered from the awkward structure that gets in the students' way of explaining their ideas clearly and wears down the reader's attention. The sentence we focused on as an example was the following: "Some of the turbines will be located in the water and underground, but a few hundred feet will still be above sea level, causing problems in the sky." After some discussion, we arrived at this possible revision: "Even if they are installed offshore, the wind turbines will still cause problems in the sky because they will rise several feet above sea level." Like many of

the other students I interviewed, Katie thought the revised version was clearer, but she was not quick to offer an explanation for why she didn't write that way in the first place even though she conceded it came more naturally. However, the following excerpt of our conversation is revealing:

Monika: Why did you use these sentences instead of saying...

Katie: (breaking into a rare laughter) I don't know why. Now it makes sense. I talk like that [the way we revised the sentence], so I don't know why. Because it [the way she had originally written her sentence] sounds more formal. It just gets in my way, maybe, and I want to sound...

She did not finish her sentence. But whatever she thought of the original sentence, she evidently felt it would be the more appropriate style to use in her paper—even though it was not the way she talked or what made more sense to her.

**David**, a Chemistry major with a straight gaze and a strong handshake, could write crisp and precise sentences such as “The passage begins with an obvious marker of Dorian Gray’s imminent character development.” However, he would also write sentences like this one: “In addition, Lord Henry reveals the naivety of his own principle’s effect on a life by praising Victorian hedonism.” Since the second sentence was the thesis of his analysis, we focused on it in order to help him clarify his position. I pointed out the ambiguities of the sentence. What was naïve: the effect of Lord Henry’s principles on a young man’s life (what the sentence actually stated), or Lord Henry’s unawareness of the effect his principles would have on a young man’s life? What revealed this naivety? Did Lord Henry reveal it by praising Victorian Hedonism (what the original sentence stated)? David agreed that he was not sure of what he was trying to



communicate. After thinking about it, he concluded that what he meant was that Lord Henry, despite his seeming worldliness, was, in David's words, "naïve when he praises Victorian hedonism because he doesn't realize how that is affecting Dorian." After breaking down his original sentence and attending to each of its ideas, we arrived at this version: "While he is praising Victorian hedonism, Lord Henry is quite unaware of how his principles are affecting a young man's life. This shows him to be rather naïve despite his seeming worldliness." I thought this new version revealed and developed an interesting insight—Lord Henry not as the malicious Mephistopheles to Dorian's Faust, but rather a clueless peacock—and tried to understand why David hadn't written this way to begin with.

David struggled to explain his stylistic choices. At first, he seemed to believe that he was not sufficiently aware of his audience:

David: I think the reason my writing style has developed in this manner...

Monika: ... in this way

David: ...yes, that's another example, is that when I'm writing my papers, I'm writing them for me, and I know what I mean because I have done the research. I guess I need to think more about the audience.

At the same time, he seemed to think that writing in the style I was requesting meant simplifying his ideas. As he put it, "I need to think of the ideas on a more basic level than what I was trying to express there." Since he was the last student I was meeting for the day and he was finished with his classes, we were able to engage in a lengthy discussion, at the end of which he came to the following conclusion:

It's more on the end result of what people come out fully understanding once they're done with my paper than saying, oh that sounded kind of difficult, kind of smart... that's how I need to think about this. When I write something, will they fully understand it? I think I had the wrong mindset going into the paper, I think that's going to be hard to break, but I think I'll do it.

Meanwhile, students who were writing in the style I preferred were the least confident in their writing abilities and did not seem to derive much reassurance from my enthusiastic compliments. One student whose writing impressed me right away was **Sarah**, an unassuming International Business major, who listened attentively in class but spoke only when called upon. Although I had singled out her writing in class as a model for clarity and precision, during our interviews she expressed that she "hated" her writing style. The following is an excerpt from our conversation.

Monika: I like your writing style. I was surprised, you caught my attention, when you said, let's see, what were the words that you used?

Sarah: I think it stinks [laughter].

Monika: Right, that's what it was, it caught me by surprise. Why do you think it stinks?

Sarah: I don't know [long pause], I guess I think good writing has this, like, I guess, smart sounding language, maybe, I can't think of the right words for it, like, very elegant and flowery, I guess.

Monika: O.K., so you don't think your language sounds smart?

Sarah: Maybe it's not that I don't sound smart, but that it's not elegant, I guess. I just like to say what I have to say and that's it, I don't like to dress it up, basically.

I tried to find out what she meant by “dressing it up.” We looked over the assignments she had completed—both final and rough drafts—and focused on two sentences, one from her literary analysis and one from her proposal argument. The two sentences were the following:

1. Blanche is able to manipulate Stella into taking care of her every whim by making Stella feel guilty for abandoning Blanche and her family's estate when things took a turn for the worst.
2. One reason conservatives resist ‘universal health care’ is that they believe it means ‘socialized’ care; while this claim has some merit, it is not completely accurate and has negative connotations that must be dispelled before any truly open discussion on universal health care can take place.

I pointed out that these sentences were clear, precise, and to-the-point, but Sarah clearly did not think they met the stylistic requirements of college writing. It seemed that what made her uncomfortable was the clarity of her sentences—which to her indicated the absence of the “dressing up” academic style requires:

Sarah: Maybe I mean big words, yeah, low frequency words is what I'm thinking.

Monika: So, words most people don't use, right? O.K., let's say I was talking about *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and I wrote a sentence like “The concept of beauty in Dorian Gray is contingent upon the status of the heart” [an actual sentence that had been produced in one of the papers].

Sarah: It sounds kind of wordy, but at the same time it sounds like elevated language, it makes it sound good.

After a long discussion of what makes writing “elevated” or “smart,” Sarah shared the following:

Sarah: It’s just the way you are brought up here, if you think of smart people, like Nobel Prize winners, or doctors, just like, that’s how they talk, I just kind of assumed that’s the way to [write].

I would also like to point out here the remarks made by two different students, **Ian** and **Jessica**, which I thought were particularly significant. When explaining his stylistic preference, Ian said that “the way you write affects how people perceive you.” Meanwhile, Jessica shared that “it’s intimidating to think that as an English major, I have to address not only all the different ideas, but I have to do it in such a way that I have style.”

## Discussion

As these excerpts demonstrate, students tried to write their papers in a way that “sounds smarter.” It is easy to understand why students in an Honors class would be particularly preoccupied with how intelligent they appear and would write in a way that justifies their status; as Ian said, “the way you write affects how people perceive you.” What the interviews also reveal is that what sounded smart to them was a writing style that was not easily accessible and required the reader to read their papers several times in order to understand them. Accessible writing was perceived to be of a “basic level (David) and “stunk” (Sarah), whereas opaque writing displayed an “elevated” style (Sarah) and “would get a better grade” (Madison). Thus,

for these students the level of intelligence and style existed in an inverse relationship to the level of comprehensibility and the effort the reader had to invest. The style that sounded the smartest was the one that was the most difficult to understand and required the greatest effort on the part of the reader. While the suggestion that first-year students entering the university would resort to convoluted language to appear more knowledgeable than they are would not be new, I would argue that the conversations I had with my English 102 Honors students reveal that they were not engaged in the production of what Philip Eubanks and John D. Schaeffer consider “bullshit that aims to get by with something worse than a lie: disengagement” (386). Instead, they attempted to write in a style that they believed—rightly or wrongly—to be more appropriate for academic writing.

The conversations reveal that the students’ concerns with the ideas they wanted to express and the expressive dichotomy they encountered upon entering the university interfered rather than competed with one another. The students did not demonstrate disregard for truth or substance, but they were trying to display mastery of the stylistic features of academic writing. I was particularly struck by what Jessica shared: “it’s intimidating to think that as an English major, I have to address not only all the different ideas, but I have to do it in such a way that I have style.” The remark indicates that she was concerned both with what she had to say and with articulating it in a way that would meet the expectations of the discourse community she was trying to become a member of: the task of mastering the style expected of English majors was perceived as an additional burden but did not displace the imperative to develop her ideas. The problem that emerges during the interviews is that the students’ efforts to adopt what they perceived to be an academic style interfered with their attempt to develop their ideas. The

solution, then, would not be to reward students for producing “the right *kind* of nonsense” (Perry 1), but to teach them to produce the right kind of sense, i.e. writing that is complex but does not frustrate comprehension unnecessarily.

## ***The Question of Complexity***

The reasons students equate profundity with obfuscation lies in their perception of the clues they pick up from academic writing, clues that have been problematized both in academic and public forums. In his *Wall Street Journal* op-ed “Language Crimes: A Lesson on How Not to Write, Courtesy of the Professoriate,” Dennis Dutton directs his gaze at specific sentences which illustrate what he considers “deplorable writing among the professoriate.” One of the examples he provides is the opening sentence of a book titled, aptly in his opinion, *The End of Education: Toward Posthumanism*. The sentence reads as follows:

This book was instigated by the Harvard Core Curriculum Report in 1978 and was intended to respond to what I took to be an ominous educational reform initiative that, without naming it, would delegitimize the decisive, if spontaneous, disclosure of the complicity of liberal American institutions of higher learning with the state’s brutal conduct of the war in Vietnam and the consequent call for opening the university to meet the demands by hitherto marginalized constituencies of American society for enfranchisement. (Qtd. in Dutton)

According to Dutton, this style relies for its prestige on “the natural humility of the readers” who equate opacity with complexity even though they are unable to access meaning.

In “Performative Stylistics: The Question of Academic Prose,” Chris Holcomb points out the grammatical features of this kind of academic prose. He focuses specifically on a sentence Judith Butler wrote for *Diacritics*, which received the prize for the worst sentence in English in 1998 by the *Philosophy and Literature* journal, then edited by Dennis Dutton. It reads as follows:

The move from a structuralist account in which social capital is understood to structure social relations in relatively homogenous ways to a view of hegemony in which power relations are subject to repetitions, convergence, and rearticulation brought the question of temporality into the thinking of structure, and marked a shift from a form of Althusserian that that takes structural totalities as theoretical objects to one in which insights into the contingent possibility of structure inaugurate a renewed conception of hegemony as bound up with the contingent sites and strategies of the rearticulation of power. (Qtd. in Holcomb 193)

After winning her prize, Judith Butler responded in a *New York Times* op-ed in which she maintains that “some of the most trenchant social criticism” is “often expressed in difficult and demanding language,” an argument she makes explicit in the preface for the 10th Anniversary Edition of *Gender Trouble*: “It would be a mistake to think that received grammar is the best vehicle for expressing radical thought, given the constraints grammar imposes on thought, indeed, upon the thinkable itself” (qtd. in Holcomb 194). Thus, in Judith Butler’s paradigm, radical thoughts require radical language. If it is difficult to read, it must be because it is difficult to understand, and if it is difficult to understand, it is because the writer is challenging rather than obstructing the reader.

Holcomb, however, argues that rather than challenging the rules of received grammar to give voice to radical ideas, the award-winning sentence from *Diacraties* manipulates those rules in order to strain “the limits of comprehensibility” (195). Identifying specific features that frustrate and impede comprehension, Holcomb points out that the sentence consists of “abstract nouns, pervasive use of nominalizations, weak verbs (such as *brought* and *marked*), the passive voice, and the strings of prepositional phrases that displace actions into nouns” (195). He also notices that “the sheer length of the sentence disperses, if not eliminates, positions of stress that are necessary in guiding readers in deciding what information to emphasize” (195). According to Holcomb, these features are rhetorical markers of a particular genre of writing: “This sentence does look strangely familiar, however. For the features and structures I identified in it are the very same features and structures that identify technobureaucratic writing” (195). The purpose of this type of academic prose is to impede accessibility by frustrating comprehension, and its style serves its purpose.

These, however, are not the only models of academic writing, and it is important for students to understand that it is possible to achieve complexity without sacrificing clarity. Crucial to understanding and teaching this notion of accessible complexity is the work of Joseph Williams, whose lessons in style were guiding my teaching in my Honors class. Whereas Holcomb identifies the stylistic features of technobureaucratic writing that “frustrate and impede comprehension” (195), in “Defining Complexity” Williams identifies the stylistic features that make a text easy to process. In Williams’ analysis, when a semantic structure consists of a series of clauses that constitute a complex or compound-complex sentence, we can process it more



easily than when it is a simple sentence that strings a number of phrases. To illustrate his point, he gives the following sentences:

1. The government's investigation into the shipment of the wheat by the exporter was met by his refusal in regard to an examination of his method of payments for its domestic transportation.
2. The government investigated how the wheat was shipped by the exporter, but he refused to let the government examine how he paid to have the wheat transported domestically.

The first sentence shares the stylistic features of Judith Butler's award-winning sentence. It relies heavily on nominalizations ("investigation," "shipment," "examination," "transportation"), contains only one, passive voiced verb ("was met"), and displaces the information into strings of prepositional phrases ("the government's investigation," "refusal in regard to an examination of his method of payments for its domestic transportation"). By contrast, the second sentence is noticeably easier to process because it substitutes the simple sentence construction of the first with a compound-complex structure that establishes a clearer hierarchy of ideas.

Williams' definition of complexity explains the point that I was trying to make to my students with the two Jim and Jane sentences, namely that accessible style is both grammatically and cognitively more complex. The construction "It is detrimental for Jim and Jane to get married due to freedom corrosion," which students thought was more sophisticated, is grammatically a simple sentence that contains one, weak verb ("is") and a prepositional phrase ("due to freedom corrosion"), both of which provide limited information; the second model ("Jim and Jane should not get married because each will undermine the other's freedom"), on the

other hand, uses strong verbs (“should not get married,” “will undermine”) and develops the prepositional phrase (“due to freedom corrosion”) into a causal dependent clause (“because each will undermine the other’s freedom”) that explains not only the reason why the action in the independent clause is undesirable but also the agent of the undesirable action.

The other aspect of complexity that emerges here is the correlation between syntactic and semantic structures, i.e. the degree to which the grammatical structure of the sentence supports or interferes with the semantic structure the reader needs to process. Information is easier to process when verbs indicate the action and subjects coincide with the agent or source of action. This is the lesson I was trying to keep in mind when I advised Katie to revise “several feet will be above water, causing problems in the sky” into “the wind turbines will still cause problems in the sky because they will rise several feet above water.” The revised version replaces a simple sentence with a complex one and moves the action from the modifier dangling at the end of the original sentence to the verbs of the independent and dependent clauses. At the same time, it places the agent of the action firmly in the subject position of both clauses. This is also the reason I advised David to revise “Lord Henry reveals the naivety of his own principle’s effect on a life by praising Victorian hedonism” into “While he is praising Victorian hedonism, Lord Henry is quite unaware of how his principles are affecting a young man’s life.” The original version is a simple sentence that places the action in a noun phrase (“his own principles’ effect on a life”) and an adverbial phrase (“by praising Victorian hedonism”). The version I suggested, on the other hand, is a complex sentence that indicates the action through strong verbs in the dependent clauses (“praises,” “affects”) and places the agents of those actions (“Lord Henry,” “his principles”) in the corresponding subject positions.

If we are to define complexity this way, as the style that uses complex grammatical constructions and a close correlation between grammatical and semantic structures, we realize that the style the students perceived as simple is both complex and difficult to achieve. As Williams points out, “we find it very difficult to express every idea in its full clausal form rather than its more abstract phrasal form” (Williams 597). However, this style requires more work and may serve the reader better than the writer. The conversations I had with my students reveal that they clearly saw style as a performance vehicle and they were not convinced that the style I was asking them to adopt would enable them to negotiate their entrance into the academic discourse community. They found its transparency—how simple it was for them as readers to process it—unsettling. Even the students who were already writing in that style saw it as a liability rather than an asset. They aspired to a style that would allow them to negotiate a different relationship with their readers; they wanted to “dress up” their ideas, not undress them for all the readers to see. What kind of smart person would do that?

## Conclusions for Teaching

The interviews I conducted with my Honors English 102 students show that the students were concerned with both meaning making and negotiating their entry into academia by appropriating “the privileged language of university discourse” (Bartholomae 6). Towards that end, they tried to replicate or aspired to the stylistic features which they believed are rewarded in academic discourse and found conflicting advice in my teaching. As I was reviewing my interviews with them, I realized that their concerns were valid, and I needed to do more than

explain to them how I wanted them to write their papers. As teachers of writing, we have the task of explaining to our students the evaluation criteria they will face not only in our class but in other rhetorical contexts as well. It's interesting here to note that when I asked Katie why she wrote the way she did, she conceded that the revised sentences were more like "the way I talk," and that her writing style "gets in my way," but she also pointed out that she wrote the way she did because it "sounded more formal." Although she eventually yielded to my stylistic requirements, I was not sure that she would continue to write the same way for other classes. She did not seem at all convinced that "formal" writing should be clear. As Dutton, among others, points out, one could easily find extensive evidence to support her doubts.

I would argue that we need to acknowledge the diversity of discursive models students encounter as they try to invent the university, warts and all; however, part of that task is also to make students aware that the paradigm that equals opacity with depth of thought and makes incomprehension a requirement for prestige is not the only model of academic discourse. In this paper, I have focused on the work of Williams and Holcomb, but they are only two of many more examples of the cognitively complex but stylistically accessible model of academic discourse. The professoriate has more to offer than a lesson on how not to write: Dutton, the author of that verdict, would undoubtedly find welcome respite and much to celebrate in the lessons provided courtesy of respected and celebrated scholars like Patricia Bizell, Peter Elbow, Andrea Lunsford, Sondra Perl, Mike Rose, Robert Connors, Paul Butler and many, many others. We would not be hard pressed to find in these scholars' writing an illustration of the stylistic features Joseph Williams advocated throughout his academic life. But this kind of writing requires both technical knowledge and rhetorical daring.

In “Style in the Diaspora of Composition Studies,” Paul Butler argues for the importance of bringing stylistic analysis out of the overlooked corners of composition studies and back into the center of composition scholarship and teaching. In “Reconsidering the Teaching of Style,” he points out that when students attend to style, “they discover explicit techniques that will help them with their writing” (81-82). His argument echoes Williams’ belief that we can teach our students what features of style to avoid and how to avoid them. This technical knowledge is essential and is one of the reasons Robert J. Connor calls for a return to the study of the sentence as the basic unit of meaning making in “The Erasure of the Sentence.” In this regard, I find it interesting that, although David was cooperative and recognized that he needed to think more about his audience, he also seemed to fear that I was asking him to think “at a more basic level,” a concern echoed by other students who thought I was asking them to write in a simpler style. At the heart of their dilemma is their desire to articulate complex ideas that would show they were worthy of the distinction of being placed in an Honors first-year writing class. Analyzing the stylistic features of their writing can help them become aware of how their sentences work to make meaning.

However, it is not enough. I believe that the interviews I conducted suggest that the problem that emerges in the writing of first-year students is not their intent to hide their lack of knowledge, which is the essence of the “construct of bullshit” (Smagorinsky et al. 370), but their fear of exposing their ideas. If they do struggle at points to build on their incipient ideas, it is because they are afraid to lay bare the foundations—to their readers and, therefore, also to themselves. David eventually concluded that he must be more concerned with whether the readers “will fully understand” what he means. Clear expression is vital to the development of

ideas through vigorous discussion, but it also invites closer scrutiny from the reader and, therefore, demands greater courage from the writer. One way to muster that courage may be to pay no heed to our audience as we write, as Peter Elbow argues in “Closing My Eyes As I Speak: An Argument for Ignoring Audience.” That, however, would be difficult for ambitious students eager to prove their knowledge of disciplinary conventions. I would suggest that if we prefer that our students write in a style that presents complex ideas clearly, we need to not only explain to them what to do and demand that they have the rhetorical courage to do it, but also show them how academic discourse rewards that courage.

## Works Cited

- Bartholomae, David. "Inventing the University." *Teaching Composition*, edited by T.R. Johnson, Bedford/St. Martin's, 2008, pp. 2-31.
- Butler, Judith. "A Bad Writer Bites Back." *The New York Times*. March 20, 1999.  
[query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=950CE5D61531F933A15750C0A96F958260](http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=950CE5D61531F933A15750C0A96F958260)
- Butler, Paul. "Style in the Diaspora of Composition Studies." *Rhetoric Review*, vol. 26, no. 1, 2007, pp. 5-24.
- . "Reconsidering the Teaching of Style." *English Journal*, vol. 100, no. 4, Mar. 2011, pp. 77-82.
- Connors, Robert J. "The Erasure of the Sentence." *College Composition and Communication*, vol. 52, no. 1, Sep. 2000, pp. 96-128.
- Cohen, G. A. "Deeper into Bullshit." *Bullshit and Philosophy: Guaranteed to Get Perfect Results Every Time*, edited by Gary L. Hardcastle and George A. Reisch, Open Court, 2006, pp. 117—135.
- Dutton, Denis. "Language Crimes: A Lesson in How Not to Write, Courtesy of the Professoriate." *The Wall Street Journal*. Feb. 5, 1999.  
[www.denisdutton.com/language\\_crimes.htm](http://www.denisdutton.com/language_crimes.htm).
- Elbow, Peter. "Closing My Eyes As I Speak: An Argument for Ignoring Audience." *College English* vol. 49, no. 1, Jan. 1987, pp. 50-69.
- Eubanks, Philip, and John D. Schaeffer. "A Kinder Word for Bullshit: The Problem of Academic Writing." *College Composition and Communication*, vo. 59, no. 3, Feb. 2008, pp. 372-

388.

Frankfurt, Harry. "On Bullshit." *Raritan Quarterly Review*, vol. 6, no. 2, 1986, pp. 81-100.

Fuller, Steve. "Just bullshit." *Bullshit and Philosophy: Guaranteed to Get Perfect Results Every Time*, edited by Gary L. Hardcastle and George A. Reisch, Open Court, 2006, pp. 241-257.

Holcomb, Chris. "Performative Stylistics and the Question of Academic Prose." *Rhetoric Review*, vol. 24, no. 2, 2005, pp. 188-206.

Nystrand, Martin. *The Structure of Written Communication: Studies in Reciprocity Between Readers and Writers*. Academic Press, 1986.

Perry, William G. Jr.. "Examsmanship and the Liberal Arts: A Study in Educational Epistemology." *In the College Years*, selected publications of the Bureau of Study Council, Harvard University, Mar. 1963, pp. 1-13,  
[bsc.harvard.edu/files/bsc/files/bsc\\_pub\\_-\\_examsmanship\\_and\\_the\\_liberal\\_arts.pdf](http://bsc.harvard.edu/files/bsc/files/bsc_pub_-_examsmanship_and_the_liberal_arts.pdf).

Postman, Neil. "Bullshit and the Art of Crap-detection." Paper presented at the annual convention of the National Council of Teachers of English, Washington, D.C., Nov. 28, 1969, [criticalsnips.wordpress.com/2007/07/22/neil-postman-bullshit-and-the-art-of-crap-detection/](http://criticalsnips.wordpress.com/2007/07/22/neil-postman-bullshit-and-the-art-of-crap-detection/).

Reisch, George A. "The Pragmatics of Bullshit, Intelligently Designed." *Bullshit and Philosophy: Guaranteed to Get Perfect Results Every Time*, edited by Gary L. Hardcastle and George A. Reisch, Open Court, 2006, pp. 33-47.

Smagorinsky, Peter et al. "Bullshit in Academic Writing: A Protocol Analysis of a High School



Senior's Process of Interpreting *Much Ado about Nothing*." *Research in the Teaching of English*, no. 44, vol. 4, May 2010, pp. 368-405.

Williams, Joseph, M. "Defining Complexity." *College English*, vol. 40, no. 6, Feb. 1979, pp. 595-609.