

An Appeal to Anyone Writing Anything

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As an English Major, staff member at the Journal of Undergraduate Research and Scholarly Excellence, and general book-lover, I have come to believe formal writing is a lie.

Growing up, I was taught that first person – the “I” and “me” of writing – was inappropriate for academia, and would be treated as such. If you spend any time with academic English papers, you’ll see this notion holds strong. Some scholars even employ the unfortunate technique of replacing first-person ideas with third-person sentences, endowing the piece with the voice of an awkward-yet-omnipresent king.

Formal writing creates a tone of opinion, which may be interpreted as bias. But unlike science, whose laws exist whether humans understand them or not, writing is purely a human invention. English writing, especially, has more exceptions to rules than rules themselves. To attempt formality is to pretend there exists a standard, unbreakable set of rules that there simply is not.

The rules guiding formality exist (and should only exist) when they serve to make writing as clear and precise as possible. As language evolves, so does writing. It used to be considered incorrect to end a sentence with a preposition (some still hold onto this 18th century relic), but no modern speaker would argue that “paid for the house had been” is clearer than “the house had been paid for.”

Writing is a form of communication. The goal of writing is to communicate. Rules of writing exist to make writing as accessible as possible. If following a rule makes your writing less accessible, that rule has failed to do perform its goal, and should be ignored. Rather than clarity, academic writing seems to value the intentionally obtuse. By layering simple statements with jargon and third-person distance, the academic creates writing which is safe – writing without accountability. Although scholars will always be there to push the field forward, their insights may be found beneath a mire of jargon, tepidness, and purposeful dilution. What can be said for

a field of study that favors the obtuse over the confrontational? That prefers pompous mediocrity to humble innovation?

My appeal is this: be comfortable with fallibility. The next time you have an idea, don’t water it down until it’s an inoffensive, pale reflection of itself. State it clearly and boldly. Admit all human thought, no matter how fundamental it seems, will by definition be imperfect and worthy of reexamination.

I’m tired of seeing academic intelligence defined by the pretentious unoriginal. Advancement in thought should be for everyone, not just the formally trained. Don’t be formal: be straightforward.