

CHAPTER 1

Join the Academic Conversation with Grace

“Is There Really a Better Way to Write?”

SEEN CORRECTLY, WRITING IS NOTHING MORE AND NOTHING less than communication between you and a reader. It is intimate: reading is often done quietly, while alone; the reader has no access to anything but what you share with them; you and the reader have, if even just briefly, a kind of relationship. And in that relationship, you are the leader. You select the words that convey your meaning, arrange them artfully, and hope that in doing so, you are able to achieve something in the mind of the reader. Writing is about meeting the needs of another person.

An awareness of those needs should be kept close to you as you write. And beneath those needs is a complex story. Pause a moment and notice what is happening as someone reads. At the microscopic level, the act of reading is quite staggering. A person looks at symbols on a page—we call them letters—and inside their brain,

those symbols are strung together to form words, which connect in all sorts of meaningful ways to actual, lived things. Three simple letters, “c-a-r,” immediately bring to mind a ton of steel, glass, and plastic, notions of teenage freedom, the romance of the open road, the smell of a new vehicle fresh from the dealership, and a thousand other things besides. When reading, the electrical and chemical signals of our brains are a flurry—even when imagining something as simple as a car.¹ When words are used carefully, to communicate rich and thoughtful ideas, the magnitude of the achievement is all the more great. Consider these lines from the US Declaration of Independence: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.” Contained in that one sentence is a constellation of ideas about how human beings should organize themselves in society and about what it means to be a human. Not long before Thomas Jefferson wrote those words, it was seen as self-evident that the few should rule over the many, and that those kings and lords could rule in ways indifferent to the quality of life under them. It is not an exaggeration to say that these words inspired millions of people to fight for a different kind of existence.² After reading these kinds of words, the minds of readers contained ideas that did not exist before, demands that had previously not had a shape—these words willed into existence new ways of organizing human life. Without these words, and words like them, how could we have ever

1 See for example Baretta et al. for an interesting study on the use of electroencephalography (EEG) devices to measure brain activity while reading.

2 Indeed, as many have pointed out, women and people of color were excluded from early American conceptions of rights and freedoms, and this document, along with others, inspired many of the rights movements that would follow to shape the world into a more humane place.

hoped for human rights and responsible government? All this from curiously shaped symbols on a page we call letters. Letters shaped words, words shaped brains, and the world changed.

The act of reading is so common now, and its fruits so widely distributed, that we take for granted the secular miracle that is literacy. In fortunate nations like ours, nearly everyone has learned to read and write—at least, to some degree. Our blessing of literacy has been the culmination of at least a few centuries' hard work and society-wide megaprojects like mandatory schooling. If you are anything like me and like most people, you are likely less than three human lifetimes away from illiteracy. In 1800, according to data from the Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD) and UNESCO, only around 12 per cent of the world population was literate (Roser and Ortiz-Ospina). Your ancestors had words, and might have been gifted at using them, but those words were temporary. They were conversations; they existed alongside almost always only hand gestures, helpful back-and-forths to clarify meaning when needed, and the gift of eye contact. The Earth is very old, we are very young, and writing is very new indeed. We haven't been doing it for very long, and while language might come naturally to us, no one is born able to write.

You would be forgiven for thinking that each of us writes in our own way, and that this is a good thing. Superficially, this writing-as-individual style idea has truth to it; no two people will write *exactly* the same way. We each bring our own background experiences, personalities, and everything that makes us *us* in our writing. That variation is good, of course, as far as it goes—writing would be hardly worth reading if it contained no personal variation.

But decades of cognitive science suggest that at a more profound and important level, some ways of writing work better than others. There are ways—call them general rules—to meet the needs

of a variety of readers more reliably. As human beings, our brains are more alike than they are different, and the brains of readers benefit from a shared set of principles about writing. Some of these principles are quite small and familiar: begin each sentence with a capital letter. Others are more complex and more subtle and require more of you. Some are best wondered about in advance; some are better focused on in the revision process.

The following sections attempt to illustrate the kinds of things that great writers do. These rules aren't intended to stifle you any more than music theory points the way to better songs. Underneath all music is a universal set of rules that fit our brains. Writing is no different.

The following sections will share with you a set of ideas on how to be a better writer, both in building up our words and in editing them after we've written them. The advice rests on how our brains work to understand written ideas. The advice will hopefully make clear that there are practical rules for engaging in academic conversations with clarity and strength, and that these rules can be learned.

But first, we need to know what others have said.

SHARPEN YOUR SKILLS

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1. Find a piece of writing you think is worth sharing with someone. Why is it worth sharing? What made it so memorable to you?
 2. Who are your writing heroes? What makes them so? What inspires you as a reader? Perhaps write a brief paragraph exploring this idea for yourself.