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# The oxymoronic pursuit of pleasurable academic writing. An interview with Helen Sword.

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## Abstract

Helen Sword, Professor Emeritus at the University of Auckland, New Zealand, specialises in modernist poetry and academic writing. In 2023, she was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society Te Apārangi for her ground-breaking scholarship on academic writing, which skillfully integrates theory and practice. Sword has inspired countless writers with her insightful and practical guides to becoming an accomplished and stylish academic writer, even within the constraints of academic conventions. Her notable books on academic writing include *The writer's diet* (2016a; first published in 2007), *Stylish academic writing* (2012a), *Air & light & time & space: How successful academics write* (2017), and *Writing with pleasure* (2023).

In this multifaceted interview, Sword discusses her journey to becoming an expert on academic writing, the current state of academic prose, and strategies for writing more stylishly and pleasurably. She shares her unorthodox research methods, which draw upon her background in literary studies and poetry, and emphasises the importance of the behavioural, artisanal, social, and emotional dimensions of writing. Sword also addresses the challenges posed by academic conventions and the role of generative AI, such as ChatGPT.

Throughout the conversation, Sword discusses practical tips and exercises for academics seeking to enhance their writing, find their voice, and rediscover the pleasures of the craft. She encourages academic writers to experiment, take risks, and trust in their ability to communicate complex ideas with clarity and style. Sword's insights will resonate with academics across disciplines who aspire to write more engagingly, creatively, and joyfully.

## Writing and teaching as a vocation

**Jürgen Rudolph (JR)**: We feel incredibly fortunate that you have agreed to be interviewed by us. We have been reading three of your books in our bi-weekly Writing Group one chapter at a time: *Air & light & time & space. How successful academics write* (Sword, 2017), *Stylish academic writing* (Sword, 2012a), and *Writing with pleasure* (Sword, 2023). Our online community of practice meets every other Friday with members from Australia, Greece, Ireland, Singapore, Turkey and the UK.

Our heartiest congratulations on your recent election as a Fellow of the Royal Society Te Apārangi! The society described you as "a world-leading expert on academic writing across the disciplines" and "an international authority on modernist poetry". Your "ground-breaking scholarship on academic writing has been praised by… [your] peers for its rigorous evidence base and its skilful integration of theory and practice" (Royal Society of New Zealand, 2023).

According to your Wikipedia page, you grew up in southern California. You moved east and gained an MA at Indiana University in 1986 before completing a PhD in comparative literature at Princeton University in 1991. You taught for ten years in the English department of Indiana University before moving to the University of Auckland in 2001, where you became a full professor. Could you please tell us about your school and university experiences? What made you want to be a professor? How did you become such an excellent and prolific writer?

**Helen Sword (HS)**: I've always loved writing, ever since I was a young child. At school, I was awkward and uncoordinated at school sports but praised for my reading and writing skills, so I naturally gravitated towards what I felt competent in and was encouraged for.

I'm telling that story now because, having worked with thousands of academic and professional writers from around the world, I've met so many people whose formative experiences around writing have been very different from mine. For me, it was easy to love writing because I was told that I was good at it, and I never really questioned that judgment. But since then I've met many academics who were told in high school that they'd never be writers, or who didn't grow up in households that cherished books as my family did. They had much bigger barriers to overcome on their way to becoming successful writers than I ever did. I was very fortunate in that respect.

> ***For me, it was easy to love writing because I was told I was good at it, and I never really questioned that judgment.***

I was one of those kids who adored their teachers. So in primary school, I wanted to be a primary teacher; in high school I wanted to be a high school teacher; and by the time I got to university, I naturally wanted to become a university lecturer – so I earned my PhD in comparative literature and eventually got a job in the English Department at Indiana University. At that point I thought I'd gone as high as I could go on the teaching ladder – but then, after I moved

Figure 1. Helen Sword as a teenager in California.

to New Zealand in 2001, I started working in an academic development center, teaching the teachers. I had to laugh – being a professor wasn't enough, I had to *teach* the professors!

My "writing about writing" is an extension of all that – another form of teaching, another rung on the "teaching the teachers" ladder. The "how to write" genre is so often based on anecdote and personal experience; I wanted to give it a proper research base. But my writing on writing has been informed by several other research strands as well. As a literary scholar and poet, I was trained to close-read literary texts; so in hindsight I can see it as a natural progression that I started close-reading academic texts in much the same way. That led to me writing about academic writing across the disciplines, and from there I started researching the habits and emotions of academic writers as well as their writing style.

It's been quite a journey! Back in the 1990s, when I was going up for tenure in modernist literary studies at Indiana University, I never could have imagined that I would end up doing all the other things I've done since then – but in hindsight I can see that it all makes sense.

> ***Writing about writing… is another form of teaching.***

## The sorry state of academic writing in higher education

**Fadhil Ismail (FI)**: In *Stylish academic writing*, you note: "For many academics, 'stylish academic writing' is at best an oxymoron and at worst a risky business" (Sword, 2012a, p. vii). To further quote you: "There is a massive gap between what most readers consider to be good writing and what academics typically produce and publish. I'm talking about a

Figure 2. Helen Sword teaching.

deeper, duller kind of disciplinary monotony, a compulsory proclivity for discursive obscurantism and circumambulatory diction (translation: an addiction to big words and soggy syntax)." (Sword, 2012a, p. 3). You observe that most articles on higher education were "very badly written" (Sword, 2012a, p. 4), encountering "gratuitous educational jargon and serpentine syntax" (p. 5). Do you have any explanation for the sorry state of academic writing overall and in Higher Education in particular?

**HS**: I started writing about academic writing because of my experiences with reading higher education research. Coming from literary studies, I was so used to the jargon in my own field that I didn't really notice it. But when I moved into the field of academic development and started trawling through higher education journals in search of interesting articles on tertiary learning and teaching, I was shocked to find how many of them were virtually unreadable. If people doing higher education research were trying to communicate their research findings to colleagues in other disciplines, I asked myself, why were they writing in such an inaccessible way? And, more importantly, what could be done about it?

Higher education research is a relatively young social science discipline, which I think results in a heightened sense of insecurity. Many social scientists overcompensate for that insecurity with jargon-laden prose and convoluted, passive-voice sentences, often in a misguided attempt to sound "scientific." Humanities scholars have their own writing quirks, of course; but in the social sciences, I've found that many academics suffer from an almost paralysing fear of not being taken seriously as researchers. When I looked at higher education writing more closely for my 2009 article "Writing higher education differently: A manifesto on style" (Sword, 2009), I found a surprising lack of consensus even on basic issues such as whether or not to use first-person pronouns in academic articles. The field still seemed to be figuring out its own stylistic conventions. (Interestingly, in a follow-up study looking at the same higher education journals a decade later, I found a remarkable shift between 2007 and 2017 toward much higher levels of first-person pronoun usage; but many scholars in the discipline persist even today in writing impersonal, passive prose (Sword, 2019)).

By the time my 2009 "manifesto on style" was published, I had already decided to broaden my writing research beyond higher education alone. I started asking academics from across the disciplines, 'What kind of writing do you value most? What does "stylish academic writing" mean to you?' (If you don't like the word stylish, by the way, I always tell people to feel free to replace it with *engaging* or *impactful* or *readable* or even just *good*). Over and over again, my respondents told me that they don't like academic jargon; they want to read accessible, story-driven prose; they enjoy books and articles that make a human connection. So I had to ask the question: Why aren't we all writing that way? What's stopping us?

Overall, I believe that most "bad" academic writing stems not from a deliberate effort to obfuscate but from insecurity and fear. Writers don't necessarily intend to be opaque, but they may lack the skills – and, more importantly, the confidence – to break away from the conventions they've learned or absorbed by osmosis. There's a widespread, remarkably persistent belief in academe that if you use clear, simple language and a personal voice, your papers will get rejected by peer reviewers. That fear is occasionally well-founded, for sure; but my research dispels that myth by showcasing examples of stylish scholarly writing that breaks the mould – and of writers who have been praised and rewarded for writing like human beings rather than robots on Mars.

**FI**: It is as if the serpentine syntax is like a defensive, protective cover of the conventions.

**HS**: Yes. It's a protective cover against attack. I think it was George Orwell, who talked about…

**JR**: …in "Politics and the English language" (Orwell, 2000)…

**HS**: …writers turning to long words and exhausted idioms, which he likened to a cuttlefish spurting out black ink to hide itself. [All laugh.] Orwell saw that as something politicians were doing deliberately, in order to obfuscate and confuse. But I don't believe that most academic writers are trying to pull something over on their readers. They're writing that way, as Fadhil said, mainly as a protective gesture. Another way I've heard jargon described is as a kind of barbed wire that's been put up to keep ordinary readers out.

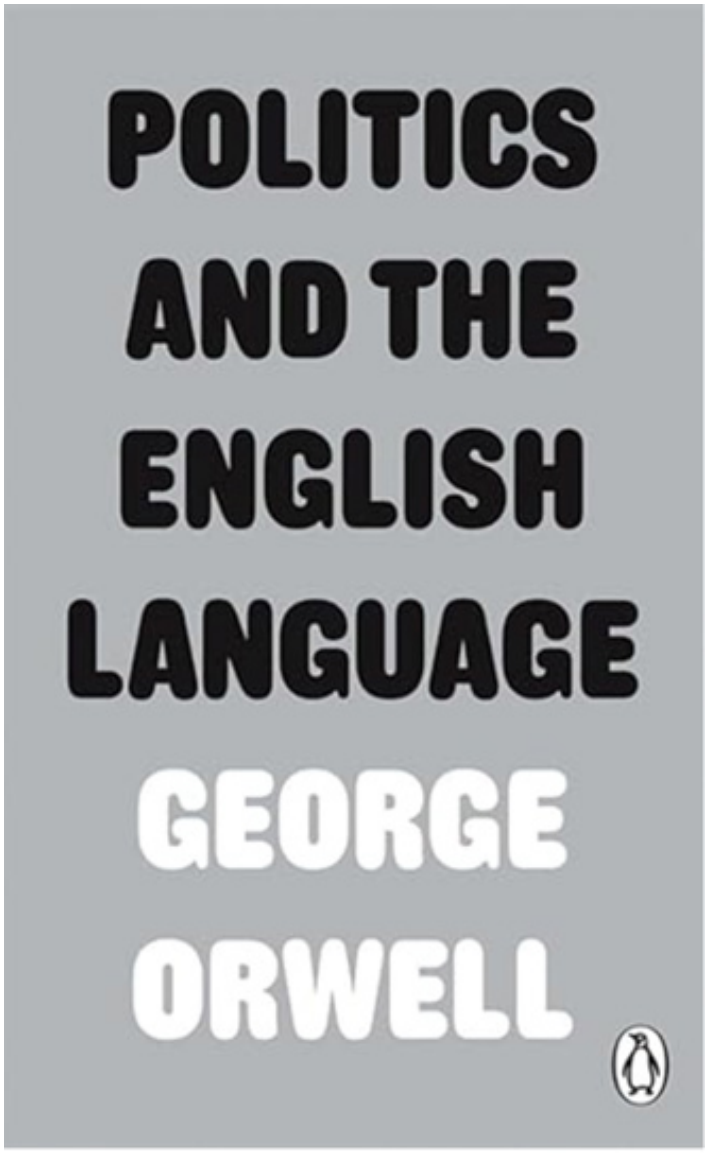


Figure 3. Book cover of Orwell's *Politics of the English language* (first published in 1946). The text is included in Orwell (2000).

## Breaking academic conventions

**Vanessa Stafford (VS)**: You were saying that writers are afraid to do it differently. My question talks about the reasons why they are afraid. In your observation, stylish academic writers use "interesting, eye-catching titles and subtitles; first-person anecdotes or asides that humanize the author and give the text an individual flavor; catchy opening paragraphs that recount an interesting story, ask a challenging question", etc. (Sword, 2012a, p. 8). Do you sometimes see the need to compromise, for instance, in the context of certain academic journals that demand a less stylish writing style? How can we balance your advice of breaking down academic boundaries with prevailing academic conventions?

**HS**: Many writers worry that their 'stylish academic writing' will get rejected by reviewers, but when I speak to journal editors, they say the opposite – 'Please, give us more engaging writing!' For example, when I first published my article "Writing higher education differently" in *Studies in Higher Education*, the editor at the time, Malcolm Tight, welcomed it enthusiastically. Later he even wrote a cover blurb for my book, *Stylish academic writing*. The message I hear again and again from academic editors and publishers is that they're desperate for clear, accessible writing.

The resistance often comes from the authors themselves out of fear, as we've discussed. It can also come from conservative peer reviewers acting as gatekeepers, trying to create clones of themselves. Ironically, academic research is supposed to be all about creativity and pushing boundaries, yet there's this gatekeeping mechanism that says 'No, you must conform to the lowest common denominator'. But I do think editors are hungrier for stylish writing than you might expect.

For writers who want to start testing those academic boundaries (which may turn out to be illusory!), my advice is to start small: just try one or two things, maybe a slightly more interesting title or a catchy opening paragraph, and wait to see the reaction. Over time, as writers get positive feedback, they become emboldened to take more stylistic risks. I've had many people tell me 'I got the grant!' or 'My paper got accepted!' after they zinged up their writing with an engaging title or a compelling metaphor. One scholar I've worked with extensively, a criminologist, uses poetry, fictional narratives, and dramatic techniques in his articles; these days, he's recognised and applauded for his engaging style, but it took courage and confidence for him to take the first step.

The very phrasing of your question betrays the assumption that, as academics, we're *supposed* to be conservative and disciplined! But I believe the opposite: as researchers working at the frontiers of new knowledge, it's our job to accept and explore unconventional styles appropriate to our aims.

Of course, that can be quite tricky if you're a PhD student and your supervisor is more traditionally-minded. You may need to choose between finding a new supervisor aligned with your values, or just getting through your doctorate while toning down your style for now. Ideally, though, you'd have an open-minded supervisor encouraging you to develop an authentic scholarly voice from the start.

The criminology scholar I mentioned had a doctoral supervisor like that, who greenlighted and encouraged his experiments with style. But I've heard many stories of supervisors shutting down students' attempts at innovation, often while telling them "It's for your own good." Personally, I think that's nonsense. Strategically opposing that power structure while you're still a student can be challenging, but if you can find the right balance between convention and innovation, it can lay important emotional groundwork for your future academic career.

## Tempting titles

**FI**: It does remind me of my PhD and how I had to stick to conventions and survive. I now have a chance to push boundaries and be more stylish. Your chapter on "Tempting titles" (Sword, 2012a) is one of my favourites. It's so inspiring, and it opens up doors. To what extent does a catchy title

influence the remainder of the article? Do you have any favourite examples of tempting titles? How does the title shape the writing of that article?

**HS**: That's a great question. I've published some books and articles where I had the title in mind from the start and others where the title only emerged towards the very end of the writing process. Either way, the title plays a crucial role in influencing the reader's expectations. As I mention in *Stylish academic writing*, the title is like the front door of your house or apartment: either it invites your reader in or it warns them to stay away. If you have a catchy title that piques your reader's interest, but then the content doesn't deliver on that promise, they will likely feel disappointed. Conversely, when you knock on the door of an article with a conventional title, you know exactly what you'll find inside. [All laugh].

One of my favourite examples of an engaging-and-informative title is one I encountered at an educational conference some years ago: '"Throwing a sheep" at Marshall McLuhan'. The phrase 'throwing a sheep' referred to a popular Facebook phenomenon at the time, and Marshall McLuhan is a widely recognised commentator on new media, so the title not only caught my attention but also provided me with enough context to make an informed decision about whether to attend the panel. Unsurprisingly, that session was very well-attended; the title did an excellent job of drawing people in.

Of course, such an unconventional title may deter some scholars who assume that it lacks seriousness. But for me, the 'throwing a sheep' example shows how a clever title can capture attention and generate interest. I love the movie title 'Snakes on a Plane' – it tells you exactly what you're in for! [All laugh].

**JR:** When I was reading your chapter, it inspired me to be a little bit more daring. I'm happy to tell you that our article "ChatGPT: Bullshit spewer or the end of traditional assessments in higher education?" (Rudolph et al., 2023) has been cited more than a thousand times. We strongly suspect that much of its popularity is due to the title.

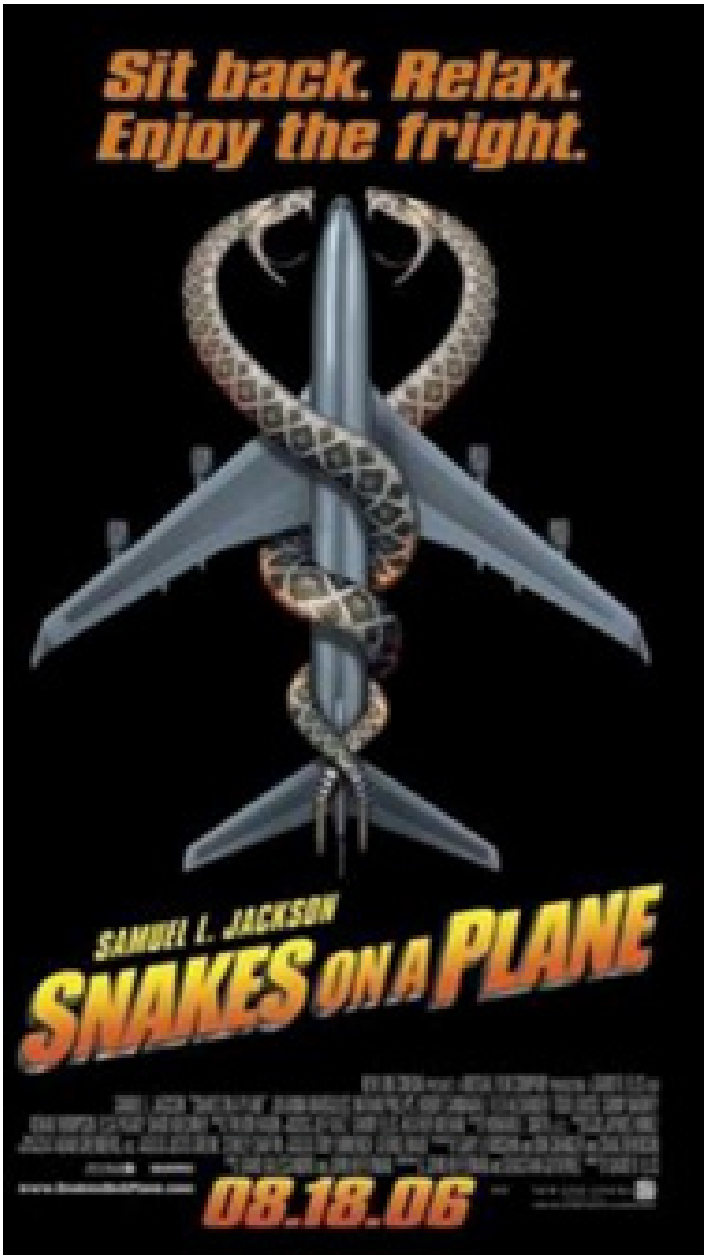


Figure 4. Poster art of the New Line Cinema film. Source: http://www.impawards.com/2006/snakes_on_a_plane_ver4.html#google_vignette. Fair use.

## The gold standard of clarity in complexity

**VS**: Awkwardly, because I promote everything that Jürgen does to my cohort, I've had to swear often because of that title! Thank you for that. [All laugh.] As a songwriter, I struggle with my academic voice, solid academic writing, and complex ideas or expressions. One of my favourite pieces of advice in *Stylish academic writing* is your adoption of David Green's (2009) grid that discusses clear versus difficult language and simple versus complex ideas. You posit that "stylish academic writers… mostly gravitate toward… complex ideas communicated in clear, comprehensible language" (Sword, 2012a, p. 152). Could you please discuss your observations on how academics can write more stylishly and avoid the pitfalls of saying a simple idea in an overly complex way in order to sound "more academic"?

**HS**: My aim in writing *Stylish academic writing* was to break down effective writing techniques one by one and show writers different ways to implement them while also pointing out common pitfalls to avoid. My online Writer's Diet Test (www.writersdiet.com) provides a heuristic framework, based on a very simple algorithm, for internalising and activating those principles. It's a tool that's actually been designed to make itself obsolete: the goal is for you to write your way out of needing the test at all, as crafting clear, stylish writing becomes more and more natural and automatic.

When I run workshops on *Stylish academic writing*, I always start by asking participants to describe what they think constitutes 'stylish academic writing' in their own discipline. At this point I can pretty confidently predict that the elements they describe will align with closely with my book's table of contents. One ideal that most academic writers agree on is the value of producing clear, well-crafted prose

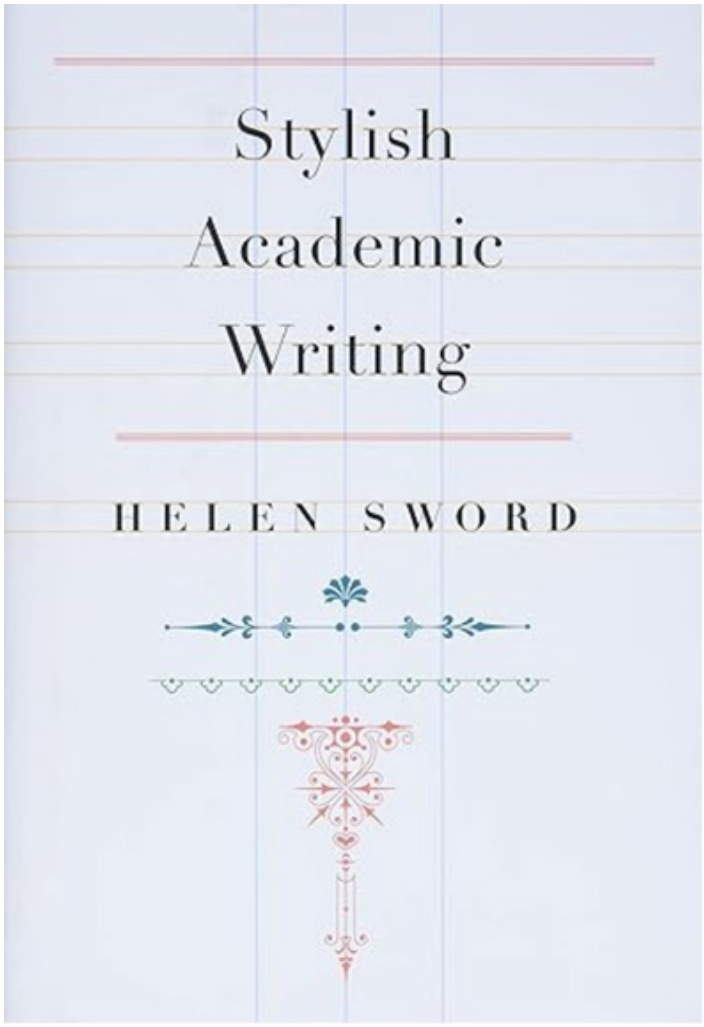


Figure 5. Book cover of Sword (2012a).

that illuminates complex ideas and arguments. But to do so you need master a collection of specific techniques, which is what the book sets out to teach you.

The closest thing to a magic learning potion that I know of is *reverse-engineering*. Find pieces of writing that you particularly admire, ideally by academics in your discipline, and examine them closely to see how they work on the level of syntax and style. For PhD students especially, those are the pieces that you can then take to your supervisor and say, 'This is what I'm striving for'.

You can also do this with articles or books in other disciplines, or with nonfiction prose, good journalism – anything you read that makes you think, 'That's really good. I wish I could write like that.' Then, apply what you've noticed to your own work. If your exemplar opens strong with a story while you tend toward ponderous, abstract introductions, rewrite your opening paragraph to start with a story next time. If your exemplar uses interesting metaphors to convey a complex concept, see if you can do the same. As Steven Pinker (2014) exhorts in his book *The sense of style*, try to uncover the 'tricks behind the mirror' of your favorite prose.

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## An unorthodox research approach

**Shannon Tan (ST)**: You have analysed numerous works on academic writing, evaluated countless samples of academic writing and asked excellent writers to share their writing experiences in your books. Could you please tell us more about your method in writing about academic writing – that is, your approach, process, and methodology?

**HS**: My approach to each book evolved organically; none of it has been based on prior design or disciplinary conventions. I was trained as a humanities scholar and poet rather than as a social scientist, so I'm comfortable with ambiguity, mess, and the idea of writing to discover what I'm trying to say – quite a liberating perspective!

I can chart a clear progression through my four books on writing, starting with *The writer's diet* (2016a), my first foray into writing about writing. Back in the 1990s I had a little one-page handout that I used to give to my undergraduate students, with basic editorial advice such as 'circle every *be*-verb and get rid of half of them'. I eventually thought, why not try to quantify this advice into a meaningful algorithm? So I analysed hundreds examples of writing and came up with some numerical cut-offs. For instance, I found that if more than around 4% of the words in your writing sample are *be*-verbs, your prose is likely to feel quite sluggish to your reader – unless, of course, you're Shakespeare (To be, or not to be') or Dickens ('It was the best of times, it was the worst of times') and you're using *be*-verbs intentionally for a specific stylistic effect. My methods were very low-tech; I used hard-copy printed texts, color-coded highlighters and Excel spreadsheets to work out the algorithms. Fifteen years later, especially when compared to generative AI chatbots such as ChatGPT or Claude, my online Writer's Diet Test at www.writersdiet.com looks pretty primitive. But in some ways it's a more powerful tool than ever, as it does something that those generative AI tools don't do: it really requires you to *think* about your sentence-level writing and to make your own decisions about how to write more clearly.

That early work on *The writer's diet* led to *Stylish academic writing*, in which I moved from looking at grammar, syntax and vocabulary to focus on academic style more generally. I assembled a dataset of 1,000 academic articles from ten different disciplines, which I analysed according to some very basic quantitative metrics; for example, I counted the number of articles in each discipline that did or didn't use first-person pronouns, or that did or didn't open with a story or anecdote. But at the same time I was close-reading those same texts through my lens as a literary scholar, noting how grammatical and syntactical patterns differed between fields such as, say, philosophy and psychology. Here, my lack of linguistic training proved quite helpful; I approached academic writing guides from a literary perspective rather than a linguistic one, unburdened by methodological jargon. While linguistics prose can be virtually impenetrable to non-linguists, I found that I could make topics such as grammar and syntax accessible to writers who had never learned those subjects in school.

When *Stylish academic writing* came out, I started getting invited to run writing workshops in various disciplines, including the sciences. At first I thought, 'What do I know about science writing?!' But I quickly came to realise that I could offer a uniquely pan-disciplinary perspective to discipline-based researchers, and that they, in turn, had a lot to teach me about their everyday lives as writers. As people started sharing their very human stories about their struggles with time, work, and family and their anxieties about writing, I saw that my next book needed to focus on the writers themselves, not just their writing: I needed to lift my gaze from the words on the page to the people who put them there.

So I developed this grandiose idea that I could travel the world interviewing successful academic writers, asking them questions about how they learned to write in their disciplines, how they get their writing done, and how they feel about their writing. I applied for a couple of research grants to finance my travel, and off I went! It was my first experience doing interviews; but beyond jumping through the hoops of getting ethics approval, I mainly just trusted my literary instincts and mined the transcripts for compelling metaphors, quotes, and stories. That research led to my 2017 book, *Air & light & time & space: How successful academics write*.

For that book, and later for *Writing with pleasure*, I used the writing workshops that I offered at universities and conferences around the world to gather questionnaire data from the attendees, which meant that my research participants helped to shape the book's direction and content. Though I didn't use a systematic coding methodology, I could easily spot emerging themes, such as the joy of solitary writing or the importance of intimate co-writing situations. And when I noticed my respondents describing the material nature of some of their own most pleasurable writing experiences, I consciously began to incorporate more material, sensory practices into my own writing process.

So as you can see, each of my four books on writing has emerged from the previous ones; but none of them has been written according to a template. I've developed a different methodology and format for each of them, and each of them has taught me something new about my own writing process. There have been points in each book when I've felt stuck in what my colleague Inger Mewburn calls the 'valley of shit' – those moments when you really wonder if you can keep going. In *Writing with pleasure*, I used humor to pull me out of the mudbath – to the extent of inviting my book's illustrator, Selina Tusitala Marsh, to draw me wallowing in the mire! But overall, researching and writing each book has been an immensely joyful and fulfilling experience, and I've been blessed with the material resources and academic freedom to experiment and explore.

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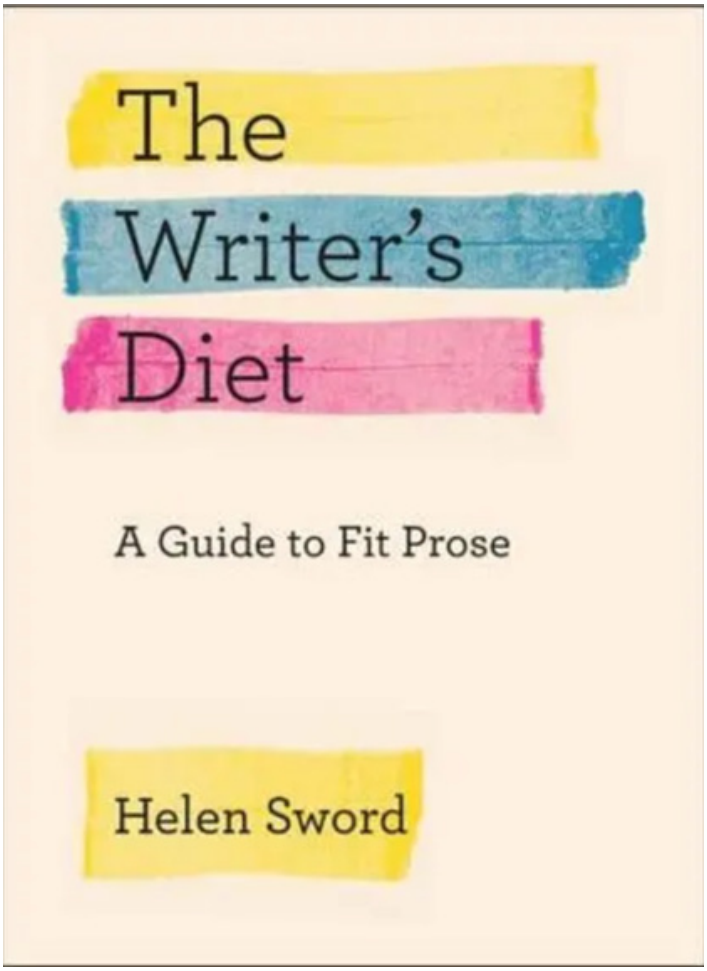



Figure 6. Book cover of Sword (2016a).

Figure 7. *The mudbath*. Illustration by Selina Tusitala Marsh (Sword, 2023, p. 183).

## Writer's diet test

**JR**: When I read your books, they look perfectly organised. It was really fascinating to learn about your creative and maybe even, to some extent, serendipitous, anti-methodological process, if you will. Despite my own training as a social scientist, I'm also deeply skeptical about being overly methodological. It's also your writings which influenced me recently to read a lot more fiction again. I'm absolutely in love with fiction at the moment, and I can't stop reading. I find that extremely meaningful. On the other hand, I tested my writing on your Writer's Diet website (Sword, n.d.; see Sword, 2016a). Unfortunately, it was diagnosed as "flabby" as opposed to "fit". (The same could be said about my body shape.) Could you please share some general advice on how to make our writing 'fitter' and 'trimmer'?

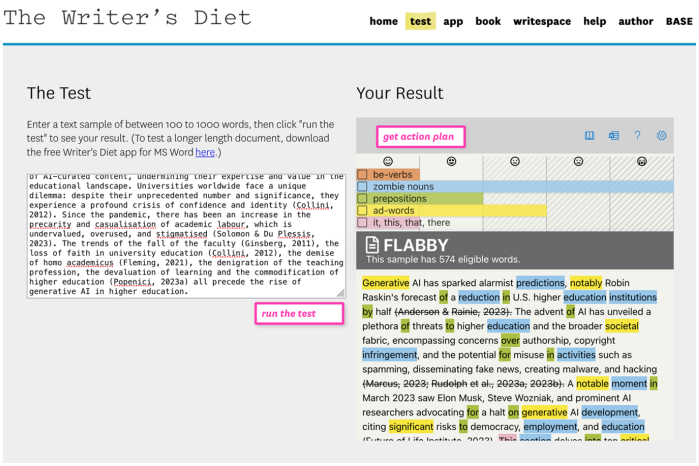



Figure 8. Screenshot from Helen Sword's *The writer's diet* website with a random sample from Jürgen's writing.

**HS**: As I mentioned earlier, *The writer's diet* started out as a one-page handout for my undergraduate students; I used the diet and fitness metaphor to show them the importance of putting their sentences through a workout, kind of like going to the gym. My 'fit vs flabby' tagline was inspired by Richard Lanham's book *Revising prose,* which teaches you to calculate the 'lard factor' of your sentences – that is, the percentage of unnecessary words that you can remove – and then to rewrite them using Lanham's so-called 'paramedic method' for reviving moribund prose.

For over a decade, no one raised concerns about the 'writer's diet' metaphor. But eventually, I started getting complaints that I was conflating written texts with human beings and using potentially 'body shaming' language. By then, The Writer's Diet was well established as both a book and an online tool, and I knew that many readers found the diet/edit analogy useful. I probably wouldn't choose the same metaphor now; but I can't turn back the clock. Instead, I've updated the Writer's Diet website and free Microsoft Word app so that users can now change the metaphor if they want to. Instead of 'flabby', for example, you can now have your writing labeled as 'cloudy' or 'cluttered' or 'foggy'.

The core principles of The writer's diet align with the advice that you'll find in other classic writing guides such as William Zinsser's *On writing well* (2006), Joseph Williams' *Style* (Williams & Colomb, 1995), and Strunk & White's *The elements of style* (2007). Write clear, active, verb-driven sentences whenever possible; favor concrete nouns and vivid verbs; avoid long sentences crammed full of confusing syntax; give your readers people, places and things that they can visualise and actions that they can illustrate with a hand gesture.

Of course, all academic writing inevitably involves complexity and abstraction. But as a rule of thumb, I advise scholarly and professional writers, whatever their discipline, to make sure that they include at least a few sentences per paragraph that pair a concrete subject and an action verb, with minimal abstract language. And rather than using the same vocabulary as every other academic writer you know – 'usual suspect' verbs such as *examine, analyse, understand* – try sprinkling in some unexpected, evocative word choices now and then.

## Zombie nouns

In the writing sample that you shared with me, Jürgen, the main issue flagged by the Writer's Diet Test is "zombie nouns" – that's my pet name for *nominalisations*, which are abstract nouns derived from other parts of speech. I wrote an article called "Nominalizations are zombie nouns" for the *New York Times*, which in turn got made into a TED-Ed video that's had over a million views on YouTube – my single most successful academic publication to date! The phrase "zombie nouns" has now entered the lexicon; it's been quoted by Sir Harold Evans (2017), Steven Pinker (2014; 2020), and various other well-known writing experts.

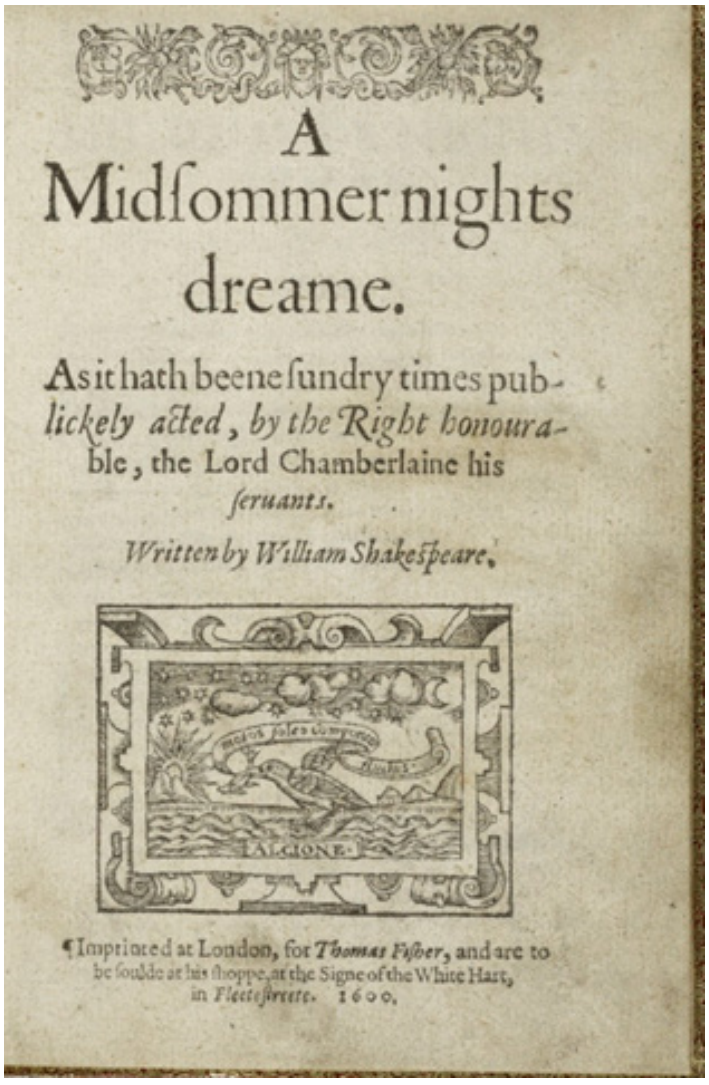

Figure 9. Screenshot from Helen Sword's (2012b) zombie noun video on YouTube.

Now, I'm not suggesting that you should get rid of *all* your zombie nouns, or any other words highlighted in your test results. None of these words are inherently 'bad' or poor choices; it's just that you've used quite a high percentage of zombie nouns in your sample (6% or more), which in turn signals that your writing style is relatively abstract, you're asking your readers to work quite hard to understand your meaning.

There's nothing wrong with abstraction, of course – it's vital academic currency. But concrete language aligns better with how our brains process information. The more intangible concepts you try to cram into a single sentence

or paragraph, the harder it becomes for your readers to visualise your ideas and mentally represent them. I'm not saying that you should ditch the zombie nouns entirely; but do consider weeding out a few of them and replacing them with more concrete anchors such as examples, illustrations, and relatable human subjects. Abstract nouns give readers nothing tangible to hang onto. Shakespeare (2021, 5.1.16-17) described how poets turn "the forms of things unknown" into shapes that we can visualise; they give "to airy nothing / a local habitation and a name". That's what stylish academic writers do too.

***Concrete language aligns better with how our brains process information. The more intangible concepts you try to cram into a single sentence or paragraph, the harder it becomes for your readers to visualise your ideas and mentally represent them.***



A
Midſommer nights
dreame.

As it hath beene ſundry times pub-
lickely acted, by the Right honoura-
ble, the Lord Chamberlaine his
ſeruants.

Written by William Shakeſpeare.

¶Imprinted at London, for Thomas Fiſher, and are to
be ſoulde at his ſhoppe, at the Signe of the White Hart,
in Fleetſtreete. 1600.

Figure 10. Title page of the 1600 edition of Shakespeare's *A midsummer night's dream*. LUNA: Folger Digital Image Collection. CC-BY-SA 4.0.

As for your other test results: well, you came out fine in the 'be-verbs' category, which is great. Your verbs are quite energetic – 'sparked', 'unveiled', 'advocating', 'citing' (see Figure 8) – so if you can bring a similar energy to your use of nouns, you'll be fine. My advice for you, going forward, is to zoom out from this *specific* Writer's Diet diagnosis and test some other samples to see if you always use such a high percentage of abstract nouns. If so, you can make a deliberate effort to reduce your dependence on zombie nouns and to incorporate more concrete language into your writing, then retest from time to time to gauge your progress.

Members of my WriteSPACE community (www.helensword.com/writespace) have access to a premium tool called Writer's Diet Plus, which generates a personalised Action Plan based on your test results. But even if you're not a WriteSPACE member, there's a free guide available online that explains all the Writer's Diet diagnostic principles and algorithms (https://writersdiet.com/writers-diet-help/). And the book, of course, is the most valuable resource of all for evaluating your Writer's Diet Test results and tightening up your prose.

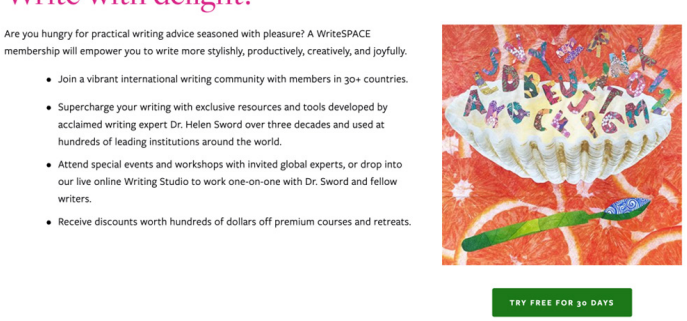



Figure 11. Helen Sword's WriteSPACE community website (https://www.helensword.com/join-the-writespace-bl).

**JR**: Thank you so much, that's super helpful.

## Dimensions of writing (BASE)

**FI**: In *Air & light & time & space* (Sword, 2017), you adopt a holistic, inclusive approach toward academic writing and distinguish four "BASE habits": behavioural, artisanal, social and emotional habits. Could you please provide us with an overview of these habits and share some of your personal manifestations of them?

**HS**: The book contains three chapters on each of these habits, so there's a lot of material there. Plus, after the book came out, I co-published an article called "BASE pleasures: The behavioral, artisanal, social and emotional dimensions of academic writing" (Sword et al., 2019), which provides an analysis of additional data that didn't make it into the book. The BASE model moves us beyond thinking only about our behavioural and artisanal habits – that is, productivity and wordcraft – to focus on the social and emotional dimensions of writing as well, and above, on how all of these elements can work together to help us build a successful writing practice.

People often tell me, 'I need to write more' or 'I need to write faster' or 'I need to write better', and they go and buy books and enroll in workshops on how to do each of these things.


Figure 12. Book cover of Sword (2017).

But if you don't have a strong emotional base for what you're doing – that is, if your writing practice isn't undergirded by positive emotions to help you overcome the inevitable challenges – any new habits that you develop are unlikely to stick. Social support, likewise, turns out to be tremendously important; many of the successful academic writers whom I interviewed for the book mentioned key individuals who were crucial to their development and success as writers. So the behavioral, artisanal, social, and emotional dimensions all work together and reinforce each other.

That's why I developed my interactive "Writing BASE" diagnostic tool, which is accessible through the Writer's Diet website (click on the 'BASE' icon in the top right corner - see Figure 13). The tool invites you to reflect on your own BASE habits and offers tailored suggestions for holistic growth across all four dimensions. The wider and stronger your writing BASE, the better foundation you'll have for cultivating an abundant writing practice filled with 'air & light & time & space'.

My subsequent research on the BASE model (Sword et al., 2019) has shown that there's a particularly strong correlation between the emotional and artisanal dimensions, as well as the emotional and behavioral dimensions: if you rate yourself highly in one of these dimensions, you tend to do so in the other, and vice versa. Going back to the example

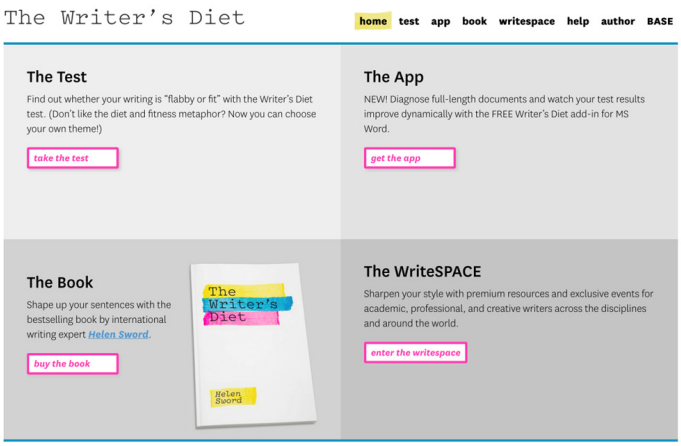



Figure 13. Helen Sword's Writer's Diet website (https://writersdiet.com/).

that I gave you right at the beginning of our conversation: I was told I was a good writer from an early age, so I put a lot of energy into developing my writing skills; conversely, my high level of skill led me to feel good about my writing. Which came first, the chicken or the egg? It doesn't really matter; my point here is that two strengths, emotional and artisanal, developed in tandem and reinforced each other.

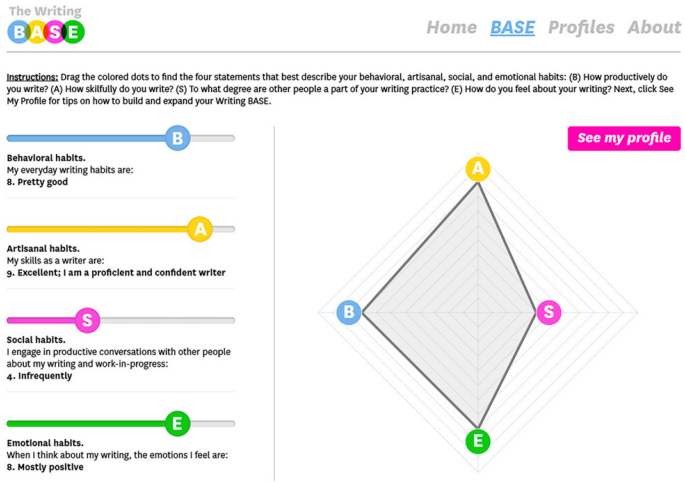



Figure 14. A sample BASE result. The coordinates B = 8, A = 9, s = 4, E = 8 have yielded the shape called 'The Lone Wolf' (Sword et al., 2019, p. 2485).

By the same token, if you really hate to write, you're less likely to put time and energy into developing your skills or getting your writing done; instead, you'll be looking for every possible excuse to run away from your writing. So if you want to create and sustain positive behavioral habits as a writer, you need to develop positive emotional habits to go with them – which is why, when I run workshops on 'how successful academics write', I call the emotional dimension 'the base of the BASE'. If your BASE profile indicates low self-confidence in all four dimensions – that's the "Pebble" profile, which suggests that you're building your writing practice on a very narrow BASE – I generally recommend that you start by addressing your negative emotions around writing and look for ways of bringing more positive energy to your writing practice.

*Writing with pleasure* (Sword, 2023) emerged directly from my BASE research. When I was researching *Air & light & time & space* (Sword, 2017), I gathered data from two different groups of informants: the 100 successful academic writers whom I interviewed, plus around 1,200 other academics who filled out a written data questionnaire. I asked both groups the same question: 'What are the main emotions that you associate with your academic writing?' For the anonymous questionnaire respondents, the most frequently mentioned emotion was *frustration*. (I later wrote an article called "Frustrated academic writers" (Sword et al., 2018) to try to figure out what that's all about!) But for the handpicked 'successful writers', the most frequently mentioned emotion word was pleasure. Academic writing guides tend to focus mainly on behavioural habits or stylistic advice, with little attention to the social dimensions of academic writing and even less on the value of cultivating positive emotions about writing. If they mention emotion at all, it's usually in the context of how awful writing makes us feel, how hard it all is, and how we need to shut up and stop complaining if we want to be productive – almost as though academics should regard emotion as a mark of shame rather than a sign of our humanity.

> ***If your BASE profile indicates low self-confidence in all four dimensions… I generally recommend that you start by addressing your negative emotions around writing and look for ways of bringing more positive energy to your writing practice. That's why I wrote Writing with pleasure.***

**VS**: In *Writing with pleasure* (Sword, 2023), you offer 18 fascinating pleasure prompts to your readers. Could you discuss a few that your students or even you yourself have found particularly useful? I absolutely loved the Butterflies and Cocoons (p. 43) and Compass Points (p. 209) prompts on transforming limiting beliefs into liberating truths. I personally reacted to those two, but I don't want you to be steered to those if that's not what you would say.

**HS**: There's so much material in there that I could talk about. I run an annual six-week online course called *The pleasure catalyst* for academic writers from around the world, mostly faculty and PhD students, who want to find more pleasure in their writing practice. Rather than taking them systematically through the 18 prompts, I focus on sections of the book that readers find particularly compelling.

One concept that seems to resonate with many people is the idea of "social balance" in writing – that is, finding a healthy personal balance between solitude and social interaction. It's not as simple as saying 'I'm an extrovert, you're an introvert'. For most people, the key is to set up your writing practice so that you can benefit from the pleasures of both modes, plus everything in between, such as writing on your own in a crowded café or sharing your writing with a friend in an intimate, trust-filled setting.

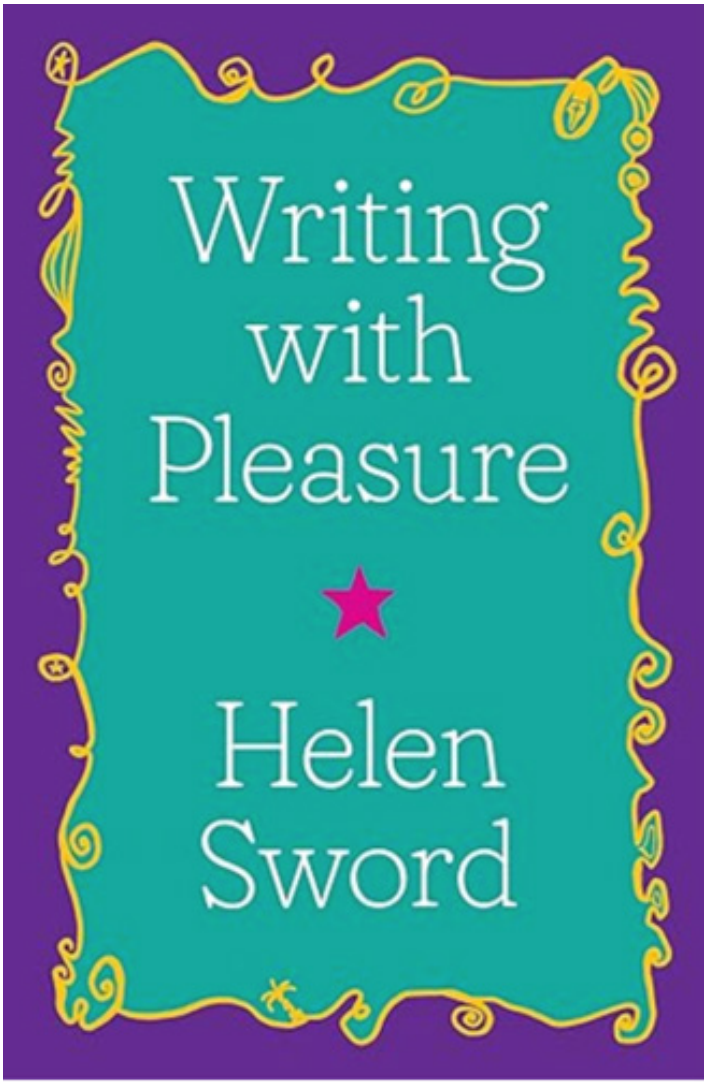



Figure 15. Book cover of Sword (2023).

The chapter that has most directly influenced my own writing practice is the one focusing on the physicality of the writing process: that is, the pleasures of notebooks, pens, coloured paper, and other analog tools (see Sword, 2023, chapter 6, "On the ground"). Many academics seem to fear that, if we're seen scribbling in a colourful notebook or walking in the park or putting beautiful flowers on our desk, we'll be dismissed by our colleagues as unprofessional and lacking in seriousness. But why shouldn't we embrace our full humanity in our scholarly life? Why shouldn't we nurture our bodies and minds with physical and aesthetic delight? The pleasure prompts in the 'On the ground' chapter encourage you to bring more colour, materiality, and handcraft into your writing process, not as a distraction from your intellectual work but as a way of strengthening it.

Another one of my favorite pleasure prompts is the one called 'Lifelines, Leylines, Desire Lines' (Sword, 2023, pp. 236-237). It comes towards the end of the book and encourages you to trace themes and metaphors that have been woven throughout your own writing life over time. It's been fun to watch the participants in my Pleasure Catalyst rediscovering modes of thinking and creating that have served them well in the past, then consciously reintegrating them into their writing practice today.

Figure 16. Helen Sword in the park.

Readers also enjoy the pleasure prompts that invite them to explore profound yet often-suppressed dimensions of their writing life through the complex terrain of metaphor. As a poet and poetry scholar, I've always loved metaphor. With *Writing with pleasure*, I just took the lid off! [All laugh.] Every chapter employs at least one central metaphor, and in some cases I run through a whole sequence of them; for example, my chapter on the writing process is titled 'Wind, river, stone', invoking elemental metaphors that represent the pleasures and challenges of pre-writing, drafting, and crafting, respectively.

***I've always loved metaphor. With Writing with pleasure, I just took the lid off!***

The chapter that I found trickiest to write was the one called 'Star Navigation' (Sword, 2023, Chapter 9), which is all about personal and cultural identity – how to carry the influences that made you who you are into your academic life and writing, rather than leaving them at the door. The chapter introduces non-Western concepts and epistemologies that have influenced me in my two decades of living in Aotearoa New Zealand, where Māori and Pasifika ways of thinking and being are part of the cultural landscape. I wasn't sure whether the star navigation metaphor would land with readers elsewhere in the world; but when I invited the participants in my Pleasure Catalyst to make their way through the pleasure prompts in that chapter, they told me that they found the exercise deeply empowering: 'Here's where I'm from, here's my standing place, and here are the stars and constellations – the core values and beliefs – that guide me on my journey'.

**VS**: Thank you for struggling to write that chapter; it's my favourite one.

**HS**: That's lovely to hear.

**FI**: In *Writing with pleasure*, you discuss the importance of having positive emotions to derive pleasure from writing. To our surprise, you state that you occasionally suffer from writer's block and impostor syndrome (when you write that you "decide the next morning, almost invariably, that everything I had written the previous day was rubbish" (Sword, 2023, p. 171)). What steps can writers take to experience 'positive emotions' during the writing process and counter their imposter syndrome?

HS: It's funny to me that you call me 'prolific', because I often feel like the slowest writer in the world! Aside from *The writer's diet,* which is relatively short, each of my books on writing took me around five years to research, write, and revise, with at least two years dedicated to the core process of writing and self-editing. I really am excruciatingly slow.

I've written about all this in *Air & light & time & space* (Sword, 2017). Researching and writing that book – which is, after all, about the writing habits of successful academics – helped me reframe my own perceived sluggishness as a positive trait. Now, instead of labelling myself as 'finicky' and 'snail-paced' and 'excruciatingly slow' (as I just did a moment ago – old habits die hard!), I've learned to embrace my perfectionism and my reverence for the craft. Yes, I sometimes find it hard to release a sentence until I have worked it over at least 20 times – I'm not exaggerating! – but that's okay. My slowness is my superpower – and my interviews with one hundred successful academic writers confirmed that I'm not alone. Very few of the leading scholars I talked to produce top-notch work that just flows out effortlessly without intensive revision. Most, like me, work through draft after draft after draft.

So when I encourage academic writers to write with pleasure, I don't mean it's all going to be joyful dancing through the daisies. Any meaningful creative process entails light and shadow, or what I call chiaroscuro, after the Italian painting technique of using darkness to illuminate the foreground light. In *Writing with pleasure*, I offer readers techniques for reframing their negative emotions about writing, much as I've done for myself by transforming the pejorative label 'finicky' into the more positive 'meticulous' and 'craft-focused'. Instead of banishing the shadows, you can 'turn your roadblocks into your rocket fuel', as I like to put it (See my "What's Your Writing Roadblock? Quiz" at www.helensword.com/). The emotional process involves not just acknowledging what you regard as your flaws, but redefining them as strengths worth embracing.

That's where the metaphor can help. In *Writing with pleasure*, I explain how my own personal metaphor of *mosaic making* (something I also do as a personal hobby) helps me structure my writing and affirm my identity as a craftsperson in the medium of language. As a mosaicist, I know I'm always going to be arranging and rearranging the components of my work, looking for new patterns; and I'm always going to be dissatisfied when I have to glue it all down. That's just a part of my process – not something I need to beat myself up about.

For me, craft is everything. I love reading the work of other writers who are good at explaining the technical aspects of writing and can give me new insight and tools for improving my own craft – for example, Joseph Williams's *Style: Toward clarity and grace* (Williams & Colomb, 1995) or Steven Pinker's *The sense of style* (2014). And I especially value those writers whose own work is beautifully crafted – I was about to say 'whose craft is on display', but actually, the best-crafted writing is often not on display. William Butler

Yeats (2022, p. 45) wrote:

> A line will take us hours maybe;
> Yet if it does not seem a moment's thought,
> Our stitching and unstitching has been naught.

The poet's job is to spend hours on a single line so it seems like 'a moment's thought'. The same paradox holds for stylish academic writers: I may have to spend hours on a single paragraph to ensure that it flows smoothly and easily for my readers, so easily that all my hard work becomes invisible.

**JR**: Earlier, you were already speaking, very briefly, about ChatGPT. What opportunities and threats, if any, do you see for academic writing when it comes to generative AI such as ChatGPT?

**HS**: I've written a bit about generative AI on my blog (https://www.helensword.com/helen-sword-blog), as a way of getting my head around its potential affordances and pleasures. As a craft-focused writer, I don't feel personally threatened by GenAI – at least not yet. Chatbots such as ChatGPT and Claude are very good at churning out a certain kind of bland, conventional prose, and they generally produce more active, concrete, legible sentences than the average undergraduate (or academic researcher!). But their attempts to imitate the prose style of specific authors are pretty clunky, partly because they're terrible at dealing with metaphor or, more generally, with nuances of style.

***As a craft-focused writer, I don't feel personally threatened by GenAI – at least not yet. Chatbots such as ChatGPT and Claude are very good at churning out a certain kind of bland, conventional prose… they're terrible at dealing with metaphor or, more generally, with nuances of style.***

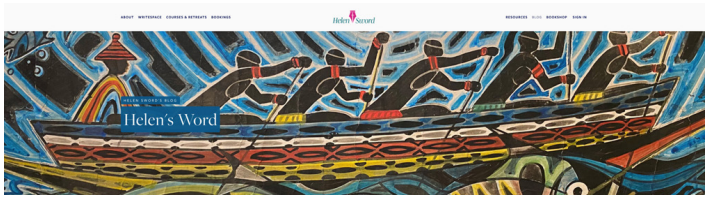



Figure 17. Helen Sword's blog. Screenshot.

I have great respect for the kinds of people who develop and use these tools. They really are extraordinary! And I'm certainly not a Luddite who believes we shouldn't be touching this stuff. But I don't think that any of us want to see our students – or, worse yet, our colleagues – outsourcing all their writing, and by extension their thinking, to machines. We still need human beings to learn to write and think for themselves. Otherwise, how can they possibly evaluate the efficacy of the tools?

As for opportunities: well, if you're a writer with a well-developed sense of style, plus a human brain and human feelings, I believe that your high-level writing abilities will become more and more valued, rather than less and less relevant, as time goes by. We've seen that happen with other tools: for example, Photoshop hasn't put 'real artists' out of work, it's just enabled amateurs like me to play around with visual images.

***As for opportunities: well, if you're a writer with a well-developed sense of style, plus a human brain and human feelings, I believe that your high-level writing abilities will become more and more valued, rather than less and less relevant, as time goes by.***

**JR**: I'm in full agreement with everything you observe. It also doesn't help that generative AI chatbots do not have long-term memory. That's why they cannot really write something long, at least at this point. I think your caveat is very important that we are at a very early stage of all this development. At the moment, I also think that despite the initial amazement, it is actually rather disappointing in many respects. We should focus on our own humanity.

**HS**: If I were still the director of a higher education research centre, as I used to be, and if I had ChatGPT to help me write the annual report, that would certainly be tempting. [All laugh.] I could just input the information, and then the chatbot would turn all my bullet points into coherent prose and maybe add some useful charts and graphs. Those reports hardly get read anyway; in fact, for all I know, the dean's office already has a chatbot reading and summarising them. That would give me more hours for working on my books, which are hard to write and slow, so I really need that time!

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## Follow the pleasure

**VS**: You mentioned that a book might be a five-year process, with the writing process being maybe two years. What advice would you give to keep the momentum of writing even when you don't feel like it or are busy with other tasks? How do you avoid beating yourself up when you have not met your writing goals for a particular day or week?

**HS**: One solution might be to set different kinds of goals – for example, what I call SAFE goals, which are Small, Achievable, Forgiving, and Easy!

Back when I first started writing about writing, I was an evangelist for what I call "the Church of Daily Writing," based on the quasi-religious imagery employed by behavioural psychologist Robert Boice in his book *Professors as writers* (1990). Because Boice's methods worked for me, I went around trying to convert everybody else I knew. But eventually I began to see that such a highly regimented, goal-driven way of working could in fact be counterproductive for some people, because it can lead to all kinds of anxiety and guilt. Any behaviour fueled by negative emotions rather than pleasure will eventually take people backwards.

In fact, as I've documented in my article "'Write every day!': a mantra dismantled" (Sword, 2016b), there's no one practice that works for everyone. The best way to write is whatever way works for you!

That's what a lot of those exercises and prompts in *Writing with pleasure* (Sword, 2023) are aimed at helping you figure out. Where and when do you actually enjoy writing, and how can you build on that pleasure? Maybe you notice that whenever you write by hand, new ideas come flowing in; so you say, 'Right, I'll do a bit of writing by hand every morning'. Or maybe you find that you write more clearly and fluently if you've gone for a walk or swim before your writing session; so you say, 'Right, I'll make that part of my regular routine'. Word goals can be really discouraging, as most people underestimate the number of words that they typically produce in an hour. Ultimately, a pleasure-focused approach is going to be more fruitful than saying, 'I have to write this many words in this amount of time, or else I'm a failure.'

**VS**: That's great advice.

**HS**: That's my main advice. Follow the pleasure, follow the pleasure.

***The best way to write is whatever way works for you!... Follow the pleasure.***

## Future plans

**JR**: Do you have any future plans that you would like to share with us?

**HS**: I've left university life, after more than three decades, and am now running my own writing business, which is called WriteSPACE (www.helensword.com/writespace). People keep asking me, 'Oh, what's the next book? What's the next big project?,' but I don't actually have one. All my energy now goes into the online resources that I create for my WriteSPACE members, such as online courses, digital tools, videos, podcasts, and live workshops for scholarly and professional writers from across the disciplines and at any stage of their career. I run a lot of free online events too, so I warmly encourage your readers to sign up for my newsletter (https://helensword.substack.com), which is the best way to stay in touch.

I love bringing people together from around the world into the virtual space, and I've always been fascinated by the interface between the digital and material worlds, so that's really become my sweet spot now. I do a lot of work with paper collage and other tactile, colorful media, which wasn't really possible when I was a conventional academic. We've talked about the stylistic conventions of scholarly writing, but there are a lot of other conventions, too, that are telling us we shouldn't be creative in certain kinds of ways, we shouldn't speak in certain kinds of ways, we shouldn't act in certain kinds of ways. It turns out that bringing the arts, color, and creativity into our intellectual lives makes us better scholars.

***We've talked about stylistic conventions of writing, but there are a lot of other conventions, too, that are telling us we shouldn't be creative in certain kinds of ways, we should speak in certain ways, we shouldn't act in certain kinds of ways. It turns out that bringing the arts, color, and creativity into our intellectual lives makes us better scholars.***

Figure 18. Helen Sword and Freddie. The same picture graces the cover of *Writing with pleasure* (Sword, 2023).

**JR**: Thank you so much for this wonderful interview!

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