

The Elements of Academic Style: Writing for the humanities, by Eric Hayot

New York: Columbia University Press, 2014, 243pp., £14 (pbk), ISBN: 0-231-16801-2

Reading this text, I was reminded of an older book, Richard Lanham's 1974 *Style: An anti-textbook*, aimed primarily at undergraduates. Like Lanham, Hayot, who addresses himself largely to would-be professional academics, argues that writers should not be distracted by the injunction of so many guides to write in a straightforward style. For both authors, that is a simplistic view. It is a view of writing, too, that Hayot has mocked in an article on academic writing in *Critical Inquiry* (Hayot, 2014). For both Hayot and Lanham, writing should delight as well as instruct, and the good writer should be concerned, crucially, with engaging the reader.

The Elements of Academic Style is arranged into four parts: 'Writing as practice', 'Strategy', 'Tactics', and 'Becoming'. In the first part, Hayot considers the nature of academic writing. He conceives of the reader as someone who enjoys being intrigued (so the writer should not give the game away immediately at the start of the text or the start of a paragraph). Hayot's reader, too, is someone likely to appreciate some figurative language and playful moments. But the reader can also be lazy (he or she is highly unlikely to read block quotations or endnotes). Above all, the reader reads from left to right, from front to back. The writer's sense of the text might be synchronic, but the reader reads diachronically, something the writer ought never to forget.

The book is concerned not only with the textual, but also with the pedagogical. A Professor of Comparative Literature and Asian Studies at Pennsylvania State University, Hayot takes aim at the place of student writing in US graduate education. Unfortunately, he argues, 'writing is the thing you pass through on your way to the real ideas' (12) when it should be valued as a site of meaning-making. He envisages a programme of graduate education that values writing as a means of thinking, and as a form of apprenticeship that leads on to professional academic writer status. Inspired in part by writing-focused developments in the Department of Literatures, Culture, and Languages at Stanford University, he imagines a curriculum in which, alongside the seminar paper, there are short papers and ten-page texts that could be extracts from something publishable. He claims that such attention to writing would make academic success far less arbitrary, and would 'double down on luck and class privilege' (16).

Hayot is at his strongest when analysing snippets of text and developing useful ways of thinking about writing. His big idea, what he calls the 'uneven U', comes in the second part of the book. He classifies language according to its level of concreteness or abstraction. Think of a scale going from 1 to 5. Hayot gives a 5 to language at the highest level of abstraction, and a 1 to a quotation, a summary, something evidential. In between, there is language that contextualizes, analyses, draws together, introduces, and comments upon. Hayot then gives us a graph with the vertical axis numbered from 1 to 5 (representing his five different levels), and a horizontal axis numbered 1, 2, 3, and so on (for each sentence in a paragraph). He plots the movement of thought in several 'model' paragraphs of contemporary criticism in literature and cultural studies. The patterns reveal an uneven U: paragraphs that begin at level 4, go down to the lower levels, and then ascend to level 5. This pattern becomes especially interesting when Hayot maps it onto larger structures: the section, the article as a whole, the chapter, and the book as a whole. He has to admit, however, that his favoured pattern does not always hold, and he allows that you might like (and need) to break the rule at times.

In addition to the uneven U, the third part of the book gives us other novel and useful terms, such as 'ventilation' and the writer's 'iceberg'. The well-ventilated text contains variation in register, and in the arrangement of theoretical concepts and concrete examples. The writer's 'iceberg' is everything he or she knows. But how much of that should be revealed to the reader? Hayot discusses this, along with the questions of what should appear in the main body of the

text, and what should appear in footnotes or be merely implied. He also covers topics we would expect to find in a book on academic style, but he thinks more interestingly about such matters than the writers of most guides. In writing of transitions, for instance, he points out that it is difficult to find any part of a text that is not in some way transitional. And in his focus on metalanguage, he urges us to think in terms far beyond 'signposting' by considering cues to the reader such as those found in grammar and punctuation. His chapter on citational practice presents little 'tricks' he has picked up from his favourite writers (such as the literary critic Franco Moretti's use of post-quotation summative sentence fragments).

The fourth part of the book is brief and the emphasis is on writing as a process and writer identity. The text ends with an appendix that offers exercises linked to chapter content.

For graduate-level student writers and new faculty in English literature and cultural studies, this is likely to be a very helpful book. The book will also be of value to doctoral supervisors in these areas wishing to help students with writing. But would the book be beneficial to those beyond Hayot's stated audience, 'scholars in literary and cultural studies', those wanting 'a book about how to write "theory," or rather, how to write literary scholarship in the mode that was born out of the influence of philosophy and cultural studies on literary criticism over the last three decades' (3)? While the book's subtitle is 'Writing for the humanities', Hayot says clearly, 'I make no guarantees as to its general applicability!' (3) Readers from beyond English or cultural studies, and without an interest in critical theory and postmodernism, could struggle with Hayot's examples, bite-sized chunks of longer texts that are not introduced or contextualized. Nevertheless, the book offers valuable ways of thinking about publication-level writing and ways of incorporating writing development into graduate education that could well be of value beyond Hayot's target audience.

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References

- Hayot, E. (2014) 'Academic writing, I love you. Really, I do'. *Critical Inquiry*, 41 (1), 53–77.
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