Investigating the Causes and Cures for Unclear Scholarly Writing

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INVESTIGATING THE CAUSES AND CURES FOR UNCLEAR SCHOLARLY WRITING

A Dissertation Prospectus
Presented to
The Faculty of the School of Education
International and Multicultural Education Department

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Education

by
Marlene Mahony
San Francisco
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Dissertation Abstract

Investigating the Causes and Cures for Unclear Scholarly Writing

This qualitative dissertation investigated possible causes and cures for unclear scholarly writing. For this study, a stipulative definition of unclear scholarly writing, or “academese,” is that the language tends to be vague and verbose. The problem, according to the included literature, is that people who use or accept vague language have less academic, social, professional, and civic power. Academese, some say, can detach readers and that can accordingly diminish collective exchange. Because higher education is meant to share knowledge, promote agency, and prepare students to communicate powerfully within and beyond the university, this study researched the causes and cures of vague or verbose scholarly writing.

Orwell (2012) detailed the dangerous consequences of vague or verbose political language, yet he connected that style to inherited traditions in academia. To evaluate inherited traditions of scholarly language, this study relied on the theoretical framework of Discursive Psychology, which integrates the theory of poststructuralism. Poststructuralists like Foucault posit that when we unconsciously inherit and accept fixed premises, we fail to evaluate if those premises are serving or constraining us. To create movement within those constraints (and work toward agency), poststructuralists say we should widen our lens and take a macro look at institutional structures (such as schools) and premises (such as assumed social roles). In addition to poststructuralism, Discursive Psychology draws from sociolinguistics, which examines the connection between language and social roles, such as the notion, or premise, that high language reflects high education.
To investigate that premise as well as the kind of language that reflects higher education, this qualitative study questioned 99 participants: 93 undergraduate students and 6 professors, all of whom were purposely selected for diversity and different levels of academic experience. The selected students were enrolled in a second-level required rhetoric and writing class, and so they were in the process learning how to transfer those writing skills to other disciplines. While the students were asked their perceptions of the kind of academic writing they needed to master, the professors were asked their perceptions of academic writing as well as possible causes and cures for academese.

The data—which was categorized, verified, and analyzed—revealed key findings. One finding was the disjunction between what the professors were teaching and what the students were learning. Another finding was that academics tend to use academese when they want present themselves as advanced scholars, when they want to belong to a discipline, and when they want to advance in a particular discipline. This insulation seemed to hinder audience awareness and the accessibility of the language.

To write more accessibly, the professors encouraged their students to use simple language and weave in elements of story, for a storytelling approach seemed to connect with readers and clear up the language. However, another inference was that many professors of diverse disciplines (busy teaching their own subjects) relied on writing instructors to teach clear prose. While the data suggested that writing instructors should integrate and reinforce more exercises in precision, story, and audience awareness, it also suggested that two required academic writing classes may not be enough for students to transfer and sustain a clear writing style.

Suggestions for curriculum change are to require all university students to take an advanced composition, rhetoric, or creative writing class. Because other disciplines (particularly the social sciences) were imputed to have a tradition of vague writing, more instruction from
those who are trained to teach writing—as opposed to those trained in other disciplines—could likely help students and future scholars write more clearly within and beyond the university.

This dissertation, written under the direction of the candidate’s dissertation committee and approved by the members of the committee, has been presented to and accepted by the Faculty of the School of Education in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education. The content and research methodologies presented in this work represent the work of the candidate alone.

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May 11, 2018
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CHAPTER 1
THE RESEARCH PROBLEM

Introduction

In his essay Politics and the English language, George Orwell (2012) described the danger of the vague and verbose speaker: “When one watches some tired hack on the platform mechanically repeating the familiar phrases, one has the feeling that one is not watching a live human being but some kind of dummy.” Orwell (2012) elaborated that the feeling “suddenly becomes stronger at moments when the light catches the speaker’s spectacles and turns them into blank discs which seem to have no eyes behind them” (p. 534). The danger, he explained, is not that vague language is hard to endure but that it is hard to understand.

Orwell claimed vague statements can obscure one’s intentions. When politicians use vague or verbose language, Orwell argued, it is because the truth is “too brutal to face” (p. 534) or there is a “gap between one’s real and one’s professed aims” (p. 535). While Plato (2015) felt trained rhetoricians could be especially manipulative in disguising one’s aims, Aristotle (2009) believed sound rhetoric could lead one to a higher probability of truth. Aristotle explained that if one lined up a true premise with a true example, then one could reach a true conclusion. However, Orwell (2012) looked at these syllogisms, or deductive structures, at a language level, and he showed that if the language of the major or minor premise is unclear, then it is hard to reach a clear and true conclusion. In political language, said Orwell (2012), if the sentence is “cloudy” enough—“like cuttlefish squirting out ink”—then citizens will struggle to discern if the
claims line up for their best interests (p. 535). In his view, conclusions are connected to the clarity of individual statements.

Man Booker International Prize winner, Chinua Achebe also connected sociolinguistics to social justice when he said that language can be used “not only for expressing thought but also for concealing thought or even preventing thought” (p. 511). Reiterating Orwell’s (2012) claim that unclear language is “favorable to political conformity” (p. 534), Achebe (2015) argued that “government prose” tends to keep one “in the dark about affairs” even when one’s life “or children’s lives” depend on those affairs (p. 511). Yet both Orwell and Achebe claimed this vague and verbose language has been inherited like a tradition, and they connected that tradition to academia, where vague and verbose sentences are the norm.

When academic writers use language that is vague, general, repetitive, or verbose, it follows that readers will struggle to follow the meanings. Instead of evoking concrete mental images and a “fresh, vivid, homemade turn of speech,” claimed Orwell (2012), many academics default to prefabricated phrases, outworn cliches, and unnecessary clauses (p. 534). Orwell suggested verbosity is a sign that the writers themselves are struggling to understand the meanings. If vague language indicates distance between the writer and the words, then it follows that there will be distance between the words and the audience. Yet, despite the rift between the writer and the reader, Orwell (2012) argued that people accept this style because “orthodoxy, of whatever color, seems to demand a lifeless, imitative style” (p. 534). In fact, he suggested that the more this style is used, the more it embeds the premise that vague and verbose language is the mark of the educated.
Yet as Orwell disentangled samples of typical academic prose, he demonstrated that vague and verbose language is not a sign of education but of a sign of inexperience.

Statement of the Problem

The tradition of vague and verbose language is a problem commonly described in college composition handbooks. “No student these days feels comfortable writing ‘Jim kicks Bill,’” wrote academic writing handbook author Richard Lanham (1987): “The system seems to require something like, ‘Kicking Bill is an activity hugely enjoyed by Jim’” (p. 1). When published scholars use passive prose, or indirect phrasing, Lanham (1992) claimed, students who want to distinguish their writing as scholarly will model that diction. Although many rhetoric and composition instructors use Lanham’s exercises to help students tighten their sentences, Lanham argued that indirect language has become institutionalized. This makes it difficult for students to transfer their training in concision to their writing in other disciplines.

In many other disciplines, a common warrant, or assumption, is that detached language reflects an impartial researcher. Lanham (1992) said the “learned professions” defer to this style because they “want above all to sound learned and scientific—disinterested, impersonal, factual” (p. 60). More specifically, Lanham claimed that scholars defer to detached diction because they want to sound official. However, Lanham (1992) described “The Official Style” as a “scribal style, ritualized, formulaic” style that “reflects the general bureaucratization of American life” (p. 60). Similarly, in Writing with style, an academic writing handbook currently required in many college
composition classes, author John Trimble (2011) argued that this vague and verbose style continues because it is embedded in bureaucracy (p. 48).

The problem with this bureaucracy, the authors explain, is that in a quest to sound official, students and scholars alike sacrifice clarity and connection. While many writing instructors emphasize the importance of connecting to the audience with concrete and concise prose, both authors suggested vague and verbose writing is unconsciously inherited in a systematic way. The danger with systematic practices, claimed French philosopher Michael Foucault (2008), is that they turn into premises that people tend to inherit instead of question, and that makes people susceptible to political and social conformity. Foucault (2008) believed set premises are especially inculcated in institutions such as schools. In the case of the university, because a common premise is that scholarly writing must retain a certain remove, many fail to question if this style is effective. In her article “The problem is: You write too well,” written for The Chronicle of Higher Education, Rachel Toor (2017) claimed students tend to write in a way that will initiate them “into the guild,” and this means “conforming to models, even if they're not good models.”

Most universities aim to develop effective communicators and critical thinkers. However, when university students receive, repeat, and reinforce laconic language, tradition can trump content (Lanham, 1992; Trimble, 2010). Orwell (2012) detailed how academics can parrot the phrases of others instead of expressing original thought. Similarly, research scholar Aaron Kuntz (2015) claimed there is a tendency for university graduate students to become “technocrats” who repeat, reduce, and conform to research protocols instead of taking risks and intervening for transformative justice (p. 36).
potential problem with this conformity is that students might learn to repeat the claims of others yet not learn how to craft their own. It could also mean perpetuating a pattern of vague and verbose writing. If students confuse eloquent language with vague and verbose language, they might cement an ineffective style that they will use for the rest of their lives. Moreover, instead of working from the notion that good writing is clear, concise, and concrete (Trimble, 2011; Lanham, 1992; Tan, 2012; Lakoff, 2004; Orwell, 2012; Achebe, 2015; Pinker, 2014), they might expect others to use a removed style, and in turn reinforce the premise that vague and verbose writing reflects erudition. In fact, only 27% of advanced academic writing manuals name concrete detail as an essential writing element (Sword, 2012, p. 173). Orwell (2102) claimed that whatever is a cause is also an effect (p. 528), and if these students become published scholars, readers may repeat this vague and verbose style in their own writing.

Alternatively, readers may not connect to the writing at all, and this can diminish collective exchange. While the goal of education should be to develop the whole person (Nussbaum, 2015; Tagore, 2015), meaning students are knowledgeable in many different areas, some say disconnected writing creates chasms between disciplines. The mission of most universities is to have people learn and grow from one another’s insights. When departments develop a jargon that stays within the confines of that subject, said Mario Vargas Llosa (2002), that jargon may not be accessible to people outside the discipline, and that can diminish collective exchange.

In fact, some say vague and verbose language can work against the goal of collective exchange even within a discipline. Harvard professor in psychology, Steven Pinker (2014) said, “I had to suffer the daily experience of being baffled by articles in my
field, my subfield, even my sub-sub-subfield,” and Harvard professor in biology and and Nobel Laureate, E. O. Wilson (2002), said that even scientists dread reading science writing because it often fails to connect to the audience. Orwell (2012) suggested disconnected writing can be out of indifference. But this indifference could lead to such bland prose that readers drift away from the words on the page. Plus, when writers use more words than they need, readers will take more time to learn less, and that can also diminish collective exchange.

Moreover, when writers fail to edit, they can also diminish their credibility. This works against the common university goal to help students succeed as professionals. According to Daniel Oppenheimer’s (2005) Princeton study, “Consequences of Erudite vernacular utilized irrespective of necessity: Problems with Using long words needlessly,” academics who write in a clear and concise way are typically regarded as more intelligent, while those who write in a needlessly complex way are regarded as less intelligent. In fact, Trimble (2010) compared vague and verbose phrasing to giving someone a “weak handshake” because it creates a refuge or “smoke screen.” (p. 51). This can suggest that the person has not clearly worked out his or her own idea. Trimble (2010) wrote, “Vagueness lets me get by with sort of understanding, and it also disarms you a bit since you’ll have difficulty knowing where you disagree with me” (p. 51). A study on conference abstracts in linguistics found that early researchers use vague language to disguise incomplete results (Cutting, 2012), and even seasoned scholars in literature have been imputed to disguise what they do not know with thick jargon, “rendering them harmless” (Parini, 2005, p. 145). This vagueness—in addition to the
political consequences Orwell described—can have social and professional consequences beyond the university.

When students enter the professional world and seem unable to manage their sentences, studies show, they are not instilling confidence that they can manage their work or other workers (Mindell, 1995). According to a study published in *The Journal of Social Psychology*, concrete speech will increase perceptions of action orientation,” so “instead of helping individuals interested in managing their images, speaking in an abstract manner may actually hurt them” (Palmiera, 2015). In fact, imprecision has traditionally suggested insecurity, especially for women (DeBeauvoir, 1989; Lakoff, 2004). So students can diminish themselves both socially and professionally if they do not learn to communicate in a concise and concrete way.

Academic writing handbooks in most composition or rhetoric classes emphasize direct, concrete, and concise phrasing, and in most universities, these are required classes. The problem is that, because some college departments adopt different premises about what constitutes good writing, students who are trying to master powerful writing can be confused. According to a study by Bermann and Zippernick (2007), many students felt that what they learned in composition classes did not apply to their others classes; in fact, they even saw their composition instructor’s feedback as “meddlesome” (p. 132). Instead, they believed they should learn different writing codes for different subjects.

However, according to the theory of poststructuralism, such divisions have larger social ramifications. Foucault (2008) felt that when students learn not to question protocols, premises, teachers, or other authorities, they learn not to question larger social inequities. In other words, when they fail to question inherited institutional premises,
they might also unconsciously support inherited social premises that work against their best interests. As Orwell (2102) explained when he linked civilian compliance to political sophistry, when citizens accept language that disguises, dodges, deludes, or dismisses, they are positioning themselves to support social inequity.

Most colleges aim to promote both social and individual agency, and this involves fostering questioning citizens who learn and share knowledge. This involves questioning premises that hinder that process. That is why this study looked at the premises of certain writing protocols, for ineffective writing can inhibit the reader’s ability to understand, absorb, or question the content, and that can diminish collective exchange. This study set out to understand what causes scholarly language to be vague or verbose and what could be done to make it more concrete and concise.

Orwell (2012) believed the orthodoxy of vague and verbose language can be fixed with the right steps. Those steps include revising to make sentences more direct. However, in the university, students are often taught conflicting premises about whether or not to use direct language. That is why it is important to understand possible causes and cures for unclear writing across the academy. Perhaps, if students could adopt a more consistent premise of what constitutes effective writing, they could write more clearly as future academic scholars and even beyond the university.

**Background**

Because this study investigated what contributes to vague and verbose academic writing and how it can be fixed, it started with insights from rhetoric, writing, and linguistics. Most language experts agree that direct diction conveys confidence. According to Derek Soles’ (2005) text on mastering academic writing, all writing,
regardless of the discipline, should be clear and concise. If clear, concrete, and concise language is powerful (Orwell, 2012; Trimble, 2011; Lanham, 1983; Tan, 2012; Lakoff, 2004, Mindell, 1995, Mindell, 1995, DeBeauvoir, 1989), then it follows that unclear, vague, and verbose language is not. Linguists have also connected language styles to social power. According to Jim Wardhaugh (2015), “certain ways of speaking are combined with certain cultural models to produce and reproduce social meanings and structures” (p. 298). These meanings are reinforced by the way one is conditioned or expected to speak, such as wordiness in women.

In patriarchal times, wordiness suggested weakness. In her groundbreaking book *The second sex*, Simone De Beauvoir (1989), wrote that women were “a lost sex” (p. 263) because of their inability “to choose, to erase,” (p. 706), to appeal “to others,” and to edit for their understanding” (p. 263). Women’s wordiness, found Lakoff (2004), continues to suggest insecurity. Her study on Critical Discourse Analysis found that when people fill their sentences with needless words, they seem to be buying time to collect their thoughts. Moreover, women “reinforce their subordinate status” when they use hypercorrect grammar (Holmes, 2011, p. 301). In modern society, with more blurred identities, these patterns can move to any marginalized group (Holmes, 2011).

Even though imprecision suggests ineffective communication, the tradition of vague and verbose writing persists in the academe (Orwell, 2012, Lanham, 1993; Trimble, 2011; Achebe, 2015; Lakoff, 2004). Lakoff (2004) found that academics do this to sound scholarly, and Trimble (2011) felt this style is perpetuated by “Faith, Creed, and Rules” (p. 77). However, Lanham (1992) believed we could find a style that is both objective and effective: “If you can analyze, write, and translate it, maybe you could find
your niche in the system—public sector or private—without losing your soul to do it” (p. 60). While several writing experts have tried to understand how to teach that niche across the disciplines, more research needs to be done on why verbose writing is so common in the university and how it can be cured. Studies such as critical pedagogy have addressed reductive and formulaic teaching methods, and studies in linguistics have investigated how language registers can limit us socially, but more research needs to examine the impact of language traditions at the university level.

Need

Many universities aim to teach skills that facilitate social, civic, and professional power, and this research was designed to help facilitate that power with effective language. This dissertation starts with the premise that effective language is clear, concrete, and concise. Academically, future scholars need to help their readers benefit from the research and ideas on the page. Articulate but authentic communication can help facilitate the university’s goal for collective exchange. Good writing generally translates to good speaking, which is skill that elevates social power. Socially, a command of language will help individuals engage confidently in different settings. Professionally, college graduates will need strong intercommunication and writing skills in their jobs. That is why students need to practice clarity.

Civically, graduates need to become discerning citizens who can detect the premises that underlie unclear language. Colleges can promote social justice by encouraging students to vote according to the soundness of political arguments, not the sophistry of politicians. Discerning citizens know how to disentangle groups of words and identify subjects and verbs—or who is doing what—when political phrases become
opaque. Orwell (2012) believed clarifying cloudy language was the first step toward “political regeneration” (p. 528). If, as Orwell said, whatever is a cause is also an effect, then this regeneration could start in the university.

Academic, social, professional, and civic power can come from expecting clear language to be the norm, not the exception. This means investigating the causes and cures for vague and verbose academic language. In this lens, if university students can learn effective writing, then they can transfer those skills beyond the university. Syllogistically, because this dissertation worked from the major premise that university training is meant to foster both individual agency and collective exchange and the minor premise that clear writing promotes agency and collective exchange, then universities need to emphasize the power of clear writing.

Brief History

Some rhetorical context can elucidate the consequences of unclear language beyond the university. As stated earlier, in the academe, vague and verbose writers can undermine their credibility and remove their readers (Orwell, 2012; Lanham, 1983; Trimble, 2011; Pinker, 2014; Lakoff, 2004). Beyond the academe, claimed Orwell (2012), vague and verbose language has “political and economic causes” (p. 528), for it allows political speakers or writers to disguise oppressive intentions. This concern goes back to the Greeks, who believed that circular language could be a vehicle of oppression. Plato described how prisoners in a cave supported their own oppression by failing to question the false constructions presented to them. To detect this kind of manipulation, Aristotle claimed, every citizen should study rhetoric, for training in rhetoric could encourage people to question the veracity of the premises presented to them.
Deductive reasoning is meant to rely on sound premises. Aristotle (2009) said that “all men attempt to discuss statements and to maintain them, to defend themselves and attack others,” and whether we do this this from practice or habit, “the subject can plainly be handled systematically,” and so it is important to inquire why some succeed (p. 5). A successful argument his argument runs, relies on the ability to communicate a position, and that position must rely on clear and true premises. To assess someone else’s argument (and decide whose interests it serves), it is also important to discern premises. That can help distinguish sound rhetoric from sophistry.

Sophistry, explained one of the first female rhetoricians Gertrude Buck (2010), is used to impose one’s view upon another. Achebe (2015) drew from Orwell’s (2012) claim that opaque language can disguise oppressive intentions. When Achebe (2015) said vague and verbose language can be used “not only for expressing thought but also for concealing thought or even preventing thought” (p. 511), he connected the verbosity of the university to the sophistry of politics. Similarly, linguist and philosopher Noam Chomsky (2008) said sophistic politicians try to “obscure the fact that the essential and defining property of man is his freedom” (p. 79). From this lens, there is a reflexive relationship between language and power.

Language shapes rhetoric, claimed Orwell (2012) and rhetoric, claimed Aristotle, is a tool of power. Everyday, “human beings are engaged in defending and explaining their own actions” and “opposing or compromising with others,” which enables humans to “justify what they do and think” for themselves and for others; these justifications allow them to “solve problems and make decisions” (cited in Rottenberg, 2015, p. 6). Aristotle believed that the most effective communicators use logical reasoning and
evidence (logos) as they connect to the needs and values of the audience (pathos). This connection depends on the audience trusting the writer or speaker. To build this trust (ethos), the writer must show authenticity and authority (Rottenberg, 2015). Rhetoricians believe credibility can come from clarity. This enables a connection with the audience, which is a skill many rhetoric instructors remind learning writers to develop.

In essence, scholars have detailed how the language one learns in the university can impact one beyond the university. Sociolinguists (Brown, 2000; Holmes, 2011) and rhetoricians (Aristotle, 2010; Rottenberg, 2015) believe credibility can come from precise language; conversely, other luminaries (Plato, 2010) showed how manipulation can come from imprecision. Achebe (2015) and Orwell (2012) paralleled the vague and verbose language of academics to the language of politicians. From this premise, it is important for all university courses—which are designed to empower students academically, socially, professionally, and civically—to emphasize the power of precise prose. This emphasis could remind students to revise their writing for transparency and also help them discern political sophistry. In this way, clear language has power.

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to investigate the causes of vague and verbose language in higher education—also known as academese—and to research ways to fix it. Sociolinguists say concise, concrete, and clear diction conveys social power (Wardhaugh, 2015; Brown, 2000; Holmes, 2011; Lakoff, 2004), and the university is meant to elevate the social power of its graduates. Accordingly, this study worked from the premise that there is a connection between sociolinguistics and social power. By investigating what contributes to vague and verbose writing, where it is most
problematic, and what can be done to correct it, this study aimed to add to the literature of how students can learn, master, and discern the power of language. Because different disciplines work from different premises about what constitutes effective writing, this study could potentially help college students write more powerfully across the disciplines and beyond the university.

**Theoretical Framework**

As this study investigated certain language practices in higher education, it relied on the theoretical framework of Discursive Psychology. Discursive Psychology is a blend of psychology, politics, and linguistics, yet it is “a branch of social psychology” that “shares more with linguistics than psychology” (Paltridge and Patkiti, 2012, p. 508); in particular, discursive psychologists tend to look at “things that are said, how, to what purpose, and to what effect in interaction” (p. 509). The interaction that this dissertation focused on was the exchange between the academic writer and reader.

A key element that Discursive Psychology uses to examine the larger social impact of these interactions is poststructuralism. Poststructuralists Michael Foucault and Jacques Lacan believed we are shaped by certain premises that existed before we were born. While Foucault believed that we, as a society and as individuals, “systematically form the objects of which we speak” (Paltridge and Patkiti, 2012, p. 509), Lacan (1977) believed we unconsciously assume and reinforce certain social codes by the force of language. In other words, Lacan believed that as soon as we learn to speak, we learn the roles we and others will fit into. Thus, Discursive Psychology encompasses the ways people assume and reinforce certain linguistic premises, such as gendered speech, elite speech, subordinate speech, or formal speech. For this dissertation, Discursive
Psychology provided a framework for how formal, or stilted language, affects the audience, and it add insight into what contributes to vague and verbose writing. This insight could potentially help college students reconsider features that make language effective.

When Orwell (2012) wrote “if language controls thought, then thought controls language” (p. 535), he was arguing that ineffective language diminishes both individual and collective power. When unclear language becomes commonplace, his argument ran, then people will think, write, and converse with less clarity. When vagueness seems normal, it follows that people will more likely accept vague explanations as normal instead of demanding transparent details.

The reason many readers and listeners do not expect more transparent language, suggested Orwell (2012), is because the verbosity in academic or political circles becomes its own premise of erudition. Poststructuralists believed the unconscious and reflexive structure of power is reinforced by linguistic and social constraints. These constraints, theorized Lacan (1968), are reinforced by language. Lacan (1977) wrote that—through language—one learns premises of law, order, and social position. When people unconsciously accept premises from previous generations, argued Foucault (2008), they are not necessarily questioning if those premises are empowering or constraining them. In fact, Foucault (2008) suggested that citizens unconsciously supervise each other to keep inherited structures in place, even if those structures do not serve them. What keeps such power structures from being questioned, argued Foucault (2008), is division.
Language patterns can reinforce social divisions, say linguists (Tannen, 1990; Lakoff, 2004). Foucault (2008) claimed division prevents citizens from uniting for collective power. Lacan (1968), Foucault (2008), and Butler (1988) argued that hierarchies are unconsciously learned, repeated, and reinforced by institutions such as schools. Foucault (2008) claimed teachers often reinforce divisive premises. This study investigated the premise that different disciplines should adopt different discourse styles. This draws from the warrant, or common assumption, that students should code-switch, or use different writing styles for different subjects. This study asked if these divided protocols limit a student’s writing potential. In other words, if students learn discordant writing premises (one for composition papers and one for social science papers, for example), how might they learn to write with consistent power beyond the university?

In sum, to consider the ramifications of effective communication beyond the university, this study drew from sociolinguistics, rhetoric, psychology, political science, and poststructuralism. To reiterate, sociolinguists claim that unclear communicators undermine their social power (Lakoff 2004; Tannen 1990, Holmes). Others claim that those who write in a removed way exclude the audience and inadvertently sustaining an invisible, hierarchical power structure (Lakoff, 2004; Achebe, 2015). Linguist Douglas Brown (2000) said that “language helps shape thinking” (p. 72), and Orwell (2012) claimed unclear language impedes our cognitive processing. Orwell (2012) described this process as reflexive, saying that language becomes “ugly and inaccurate because our thoughts are foolish, but the slovenliness of our language makes it easier for us to have foolish thoughts” (p. 528). Hence, he described a reflexive relationship between language and power.
That is why this investigation of reflexive relationship between language and power—in higher education—relied on the theoretical framework Discursive Psychology. This framework helped explain how institutional premises can be adopted unconsciously, and how individuals can unconsciously reinforce those premises, even when those premises reinforce institutional divisions that constrict them. Poststructuralists believed that one should get out and take a macro look at inherited structures—and the premises that support those structures—for understanding constricting institutional practices was the best way to disrupt them (Ruti, 2006).

One example of an inherited premise is that university students should learn different language styles for different disciplines. Another tradition students learn is that high scholars should adopt a highbrow style or confine their audience to readers within the discipline. This study investigated ways to disrupt these premises. While poststructuralists investigated how institutional divisions can impact individual agency, fewer scholars have examined how divisive, constricting premises can impact academic writing.

**Research Questions**

The following questions are designed to investigate what contributes to vague and verbose writing and what can be done to fix it.

1) What are the priorities for effective academic writing? What features mark that writing as effective?

2) What contributes to vague and verbose language? Where, in university writing, is this style most prevalent?
3) What can be done to help students write more concisely and concretely across the disciplines?

**Limitations and Delimitations**

When determining causes for vague academic writing, one the limitations—or uncontrollable factors (Roberts, 2004, p. 148)—of this study was that it was difficult to distinguish consistent factors because different departments prioritized different writing styles. Also, because this investigation was conducted by someone who teaches writing in the rhetoric department of the university studied, and that department emphasizes the practice of active prose, there may have been inherent bias in the reporting and crafting of this study. Also, this study may have unconsciously favor the writing techniques taught in rhetoric and writing classes over the writing techniques prioritized in other disciplines.

From a social justice perspective, while the evaluation of academic language in the university can offer insight into whether college students are learning the kind of language that enables scholastic, social, professional, and civic power, the scope of this study may have been too limited to describe a definitive causal relationship. Other factors, such as race, income, friends, family, and personality may impact a person’s ability to speak or write effectively. Also, as far developing citizens who seek transparent language and premises, external circumstances can also impact a person’s motivation to question polemics, policies, and premises. Moreover, these findings may be too discrete and limited to generalize into patterns.

The delimitations—or controllable factors (Roberts, 2004, p. 128)—of this investigation were that much of the data were drawn from professors and students at a Bay Area Jesuit university during the spring of 2018, and these findings may not reflect
the premises and practices of colleges in other regions, and they do not reflect a longitudinal analysis. Also, some of the participants were from this researcher’s own rhetoric and writing classes, which constitutes a convenient sampling.

**Significance of the Study**

While many studies have evaluated the connection between language and power, there has been little research on the impact of scholarly writing premises and protocols. In other other words, working from the premise that vague and verbose writing can diminish collective exchange, deter individual investment in social change, and undermine one’s credibility, this study researched what contributes to vague writing (such as protocols or practices within a discipline) and what contributes to clear writing (such as professors’ expectations or techniques). This information could potentially inform planners of college curriculums as they evaluate if more classes should be required in a student’s individual discipline or if additional rhetoric or creative writing classes should be required for all university students.

Moreover, by asking what contributes to discordant academics writing premises, this research may contribute to a more consistent expectation of effective writing that could span college departments. This consistency could be conducive to collective exchange and individual agency both within and beyond the university.

**Definition of Terms**

*Academese:* This is language that creates “both distance from and superiority over the addressee” (Lakoff, 2004, p. 88).

*Content words:* Content words, also known as lexical morphemes, are more concrete morphemes, such as “tiger, gorgeous, build, fast, and thought” (Master, 1996, p.
3) and they create certain images in the mind. These kinds of nouns and verbs evoke concrete mental images.

*Enthymeme:* This is a variation of a syllogism, with a foundation in deductive reasoning” (Rottenberg, 2015, p. 8). It is similar to a thesis statement.

*Ethos:* Aristotle believed that credibility, or ethos, was the “most important element in the arguer’s ability to accept a claim” (p. 7), and he believed this credibility came from qualities such as “intelligence, character, and goodwill” (Rottenberg, 2015, p. 7). Other qualities that can improve a speaker’s or writer’s credibility are objectivity, character, charisma, and authority, and polish. Polish involves clean grammar and clear writing.

*Function words:* Free morphemes, which are words that can stand alone, include function words, which are grammatical words such as “but, in, are, these, she,” and these words “create relationships among content words” (Master, 1996, p. 3). Words such as prepositions or articles connect content words.

*Logos:* Logical, statistical, syllogistic, historical, defining, comparative, and concrete evidence generally appeals to one’s rational sense. This is the “evidence or proof that supports a writer’s claim” (Rottenberg, 2015, p. 7).

*Pathos:* As opposed to logic, pathos appeals to the emotions, needs, and values of the audience. Elements of argument that appeal to the needs, values, and emotions of the audience, explained Aristotle (2010), help support an argument but should not be used in courtrooms. While a logical argument is persuasive, “more often emotional appeal combines with logic and ethical appeal to sway the audience” (Rottenberg, 2015, p. 8). Aristotle prioritized logos and ethos over logos.
Rhetorical Strategies: These are methods used in persuasion such as ethos, pathos, and logos. Aristotle believed that although logical arguments should be sufficient, people realistically responded to a combination of persuasive elements, such as ethos (credibility) and pathos (emotional appeals). This means appealing to the head and heart of the audience member while delivering the message with integrity and clarity (Rottenberg, 2015, p. 6).

Sophistic Diction: Strategic language that attempts to impose a position, view, or argument on the audience (Buck, 2010). Often, this involves evasions or obfuscations to prevent the audience from understanding the underlying intention.

Stipulative Definition: This is when one stipulates a particular definition for a certain context, such as saying “academese,” for this paper, means vague and verbose scholarly writing. Or, “ethos” in rhetoric classes refers to the writer’s clarity, objectivity, goodwill, authority, and presentation, but in general terms it means a good social presence (Rottenberg, 2015).

Syllogism: This is a deductive structure that includes a major premise, a minor premise, and a conclusion. If a major premise is “All mass murderers are narcissists” and the minor premise is “Seung-Hui Cho was a mass murderer,” then the conclusion would be Seung-Hui Cho was is a narcissist” (Rottenberg, 2015, p. 8). Aristotle (2010) explained that all conclusions are probable, not certain; however, the premise must be true for the conclusion to be true, so it is important to check premises.

Symbolic Order: This is Lacan’s notion that one learns social codes as one learns language. Lacan (1977) claimed that the moment one learns language, one learns one’s place in the community. Lacan called these codes the Symbolic Order. Lacan (1977)
claimed: “Symbols in fact envelop the life of man in a network so total they join together, before he comes into the world, those who are going to engender him” (p. 68). This is similar to Freud’s Reality realm.

Warrant: The foundation for an argument that works like a general assumption is known as a warrant. Toulmin explained that a warrant works like a premise but is an assumption the author “hopes the audience will share” (Wood, 2009, p. 96). An example of a warrant is that we are entitled to “life, liberty, and happiness” (Jefferson, 2012, p. 696).

Summary of Chapter One

Because universities are meant to empower students, and good writing is a sign of power, this study looked at potential causes and cures for ineffective writing. In the university, distinct protocols can shape academic writing in various disciplines, but many writing experts complain that certain premises—across the disciplines—lead to overly complex writing that undermines the author and confuses the reader. Therefore, working from the premise that vague or verbose language diminishes collective exchange, critical thinking, and individual credibility, the research questions of this study were crafted to gather information about what contributes to vague writing and what can be done to make it more accessible.

When academic writing becomes inaccessible, many scholars argue, the ability to learn, question, and share insight is hindered. Sociolinguists have linked precise language and personal power, yet many writing experts say that in the academe, imprecise and impersonal writing has been inherited like a tradition. This tradition, they claim, has turned into a unquestioned premise (Orwell, 2012; Trimble, 2011; Lanhan,
2002). To evaluate the writing premises in higher education, this study relied on the theoretical framework of Discursive Psychology, which blends linguistics, psychology, and poststructuralism. Poststructuralists draw from Foucault’s theory that premises are unconsciously inherited and reinforced by certain institutional communities. One of those institutions, he claimed, is school.

Research in Critical Pedagogy has examined how fixed premises in school can limit critical thinking and collective exchange, and theories in poststructuralism have explored how fixed institutional premises can extend into fixed social hierarchies. Rhetoricians have explored how language can reinforce these hierarchies, using sophisticated language to manipulate the underclass, and sociolinguists have studied how language patterns reflect and reinforce certain social roles, such as wordiness reflecting insecurity (Lakoff, 2004). However, more research needed to be done on the social, professional, academic, and civic impact of vague and verbose academic writing. This meant investigating how certain premises of scholarly writing can impact the both the writer and the reader. Understanding this impact can help college curriculum planners consider whether additional rhetoric, composition, or creative writing classes should be required for all college students or whether students should take more writing classes in their individual disciplines.

In sum, because higher education is meant to facilitate collective exchange, intellectual curiosity, and individual agency, this study investigated what common premises promote or hinder that process, and what might be done to help academics write more powerfully within and beyond the university.
CHAPTER II
REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Restatement of the Problem

Working from the premise that concise and concrete language is a sign of social power, this study asked how academics could write more powerfully within and beyond the university. The connection between sociolinguistics and social justice goes back to Aristotle and Plato, both of whom claimed that unclear arguments were a tool of social or political manipulation. Plato believed people were especially vulnerable to sophists, or trained rhetoricians, who could cleverly disguise their meanings with opaque arguments, and this opacity, claimed Orwell (2012), was supported by vague or verbose language. Achebe (2015) felt governments use longwinded language to prevent a populace from questioning political policies, and yet he claimed longwinded phrasing is often the mark of the academic.

In academia, others claim that imprecise language hinders the readers’ comprehension, reinforces bureaucracy (Lanham, 1992), excludes the audience (Lakoff 2004), disguises missing content (Cutting, 2012), dulls the delivery (Tan, 2010), limits interest (Wilson, 2002), wastes the reader’s time (Pinker, 2004), reflects insecurity (Toor, 2017), diminishes credibility (Oppenheimer, 2004), and diminishes collective exchange (Vargas Llosa, 2002). Although these scholars argue that vague or verbose language can limit critical thinking and slow collective exchange, this style persists in academic writing. That is why this study investigated what contributes to this “academese,” and what can be done to fix it.
Poststructuralist Jacque Lacan (1977) believed that the language we use shapes our roles in society. Both Lacan (1977) and poststructuralist Micheal Foucault (1977) theorized that our social codes are inherited, unconsciously, from previous generations. These codes are meant to promote societal order and productivity, explained Foucault (1977), and so they become premises. However, Foucault (1977) said these premises can also set social hierarchies in place, giving the elite more power than the masses. To create movement and individual power, poststructuralists believed we have to recognize what those constricting premises are and how they are held in place (Ruti, 2006). Foucault (1977) felt these premises are reinforced by institutions such as schools.

This study focused on the institution of higher education and the impact of certain language premises. This included examining competing protocols (such as the preferred syntax and voice for different departments) about what constitutes effective academic writing. Because university students can be confused by discordant writing protocols, part of this inquiry involved searching for a more consistent definition of effective academic writing. Drawing from five key fields, this literature review explored what contributes to the orthodoxy of overwrought academic writing (academese), how wordiness is perceived socially (linguistics), what facilitates the unconscious acceptance of premises (poststructuralism), what pedagogical premises perpetuate that acceptance (critical pedagogy), and how abstruse language might manipulate or empower (rhetoric).
**Academese**

“Together with wearing earth tones, driving Priuses, and having a foreign policy, the most conspicuous trait of the American professoriate may be the prose style called academese,” wrote Princeton professor Steven Pinker (2014). To illustrate what academese is, Pinker (2014) referenced a Calvin and Hobbes cartoon of Calvin titling his homework: “‘The Dynamics of Inter being and Monological Imperatives in Dick and Jane: A Study in Psychic Transrelational Gender Modes,’” after which Calvin said, “Academia, here I come!”

To show how this kind of writing surfaces in academia, Pinker (2014) cited scholars who won awards for The Bad Writing Contest (1996 to 1998 Press Releases). One year, the top award went to poststructuralist Judith Butler for this sentence:

> The move from a structuralist account in which capital is understood to structure social relations in relatively homologous ways to a view of hegemony in which power relations are subject to repetition, convergence, and rearticulation brought the question of temporality into the thinking of structure, and marked a shift from a form of Althusserian theory that takes structural totalities as theoretical objects to one in which the 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. (p. 13)

Butler’s (1977) article was published in the scholarly magazine *Diacritics* and cited often by other scholars, but Pinker (2014) referred to this kind of prose as gobbledygook.

*What is gobbledygook?* As a contributor to the *Plain English Campaign*, Sep Meyer (2017) compiled several definitions, including Fowler’s *Modern English Usage*
(1998), which defined gobbledygook as "official, professional, or pretentious verbiage or jargon." Meyer (2017) explained that this term was coined by a Texas congressman, Maury Maverick (1944), who compared "that terrible, involved, polysyllabic language" government officials use to the gobbling of a turkey, for a turkey was "always gobbledy gobbling and strutting with ludicrous pomposity." Meyer’s (2017) own definition of gobbledygook was “the way most writers over-complicate writing to make elementary thoughts hard to understand,” and he said they do this by using “two, or three, or ten words in the place of one” or by using a “a five-syllable word where a single syllable would suffice.” As an example, Meyer (2017) told of the doctor who testified in court that a person was “suffering from circumorbital haemotoma,” which Meyer explained was a black eye.

To use a parallel term for gobbledygook, Myers (2017) cited Sir Ernest Gowers, who used the word “officialese” to describe the “turgid or pedantic official prose” used in many official documents and settings. In academia, Richard Lanham (1979) referred to this “Official Style” as a “scribal style, ritualized, formulaic, using a special vocabulary to describe a very special kind of world, the world of bureaucratic officialdom” (p. 61). Lanham (1979) argued that we have lost a natural style of writing, for the “low style has dissolved, the high style has hardened and dehydrated, and the middle style has simply evaporated,” and the “Official Style threatens to replace all three” (p. 60). The official style, said John Trimble (2011), commonly translates to “roundabout” writing (p. 48), and this kind of “serpentine syntax,” wrote Helen Sword (2012), would often “thwart” her “desire to learn” (p. 5).

These complaints are not new. Plato (2015) exposed the circular language used by
many rhetoricians, and Seneca (2015) uncovered the contradictory content of the sophists. Orwell (2012) detailed how “cloudy” language had become a tradition in both politics and academia (p. 534). In 1947, editor Samuel Williamson claimed that “social scientists—economists, sociologists, and authorities on government” could not “write as well as their students” (p. 17), and he particularly ascribed poor writing to verbosity. But, according to Alain de Button (2017), there has also “been an upsurge of complaints about the way academics write” in “English, history, philosophy, modern languages and the classics.” Because these complaints have spanned the disciplines, many writing experts have explored what is wrong with academese, what causes it, and what can be done to fix it.

Many argue that the problem with academese is that it can dismiss, confuse, annoy, bore, and exploit the reader. Some claim it disguises missing content, diminishes the writer’s credibility, and wastes the reader’s time. Others say it assumes a superior tone that excludes readers both within and outside the discipline, and that this exclusivity hinders collective exchange.

When writing is vague and verbose, many claim, readers will struggle to comprehend the material, and this can inhibit collective exchange. Sword (2012) said that even though she was a trained “literary scholar,” she found that many research articles were “written in a style” that was “almost unreadable” (p. 4). After conducting several experiments on a wide range of academic writing, Oppenheimer’s (2004) quantitative Princeton study found that “longer words lower fluency,” which suggests that the writer is not fluent with the subject matter (p. 151). As a result, readers struggled to absorb the content. Pinker (2014) charged the field of linguistics as the “worst
offenders” of inaccessible writing, with “dozens of mystifying technical terms” such as “stage-level and individual-level predicates,” which Pinker explained “are just unintuitive ways of saying "temporary" and “permanent.” In another example, Pinker (2014) showed how terms like “Principles A, B, and C” could “just as easily” have been “called the Reflexive Effect, the Pronoun Effect, and the Noun Effect,” and this would have made it easier for readers to follow.

According to a study on vague writing in conference abstracts, early linguistics scholars “devoted little space to the ‘results’ and ‘discussion’” sections and more “space to the ‘method’” section, which helped researchers “disguise’ the lack of results” (Cutting, 2012, p. 292). Pinker (2004) described reading one scholar’s methods section in which the author had written, ‘Participants read assertions whose veracity was either affirmed or denied by the subsequent presentation of an assessment word,” but Pinker explained that the author could have instead written a straightforward declarative sentence like, “Participants read sentences, each followed by the word true or false,” which would have made the content more accessible and saved the reader time.

Many complain that academese wastes the reader’s time. Williamson (1947) found social scientists to be the most guilty, saying that instead of using the word “much,” social scientists would write phrases like “to a substantially high degree” (p. 17). In another example, Williamson (1947) described the “chore” of removing “the burdocks of excess verbiage which clung” to the manuscript of a well-respected scholar, a manuscript Williamson edited down from 30,000 words to 20,000 words (p. 17). But even when academics use a shorthand for other specialists to save time, said Pinker (2014), they could actually be taking more of the reader’s time. He explained that the
time it takes to follow abbreviations often negates the purpose of the shorthand. For example, Pinker (2014) described staring “at a table of numbers” that were “labeled DA DN SA SN” before he had to “riffle back and scan for the explanation,” and he wanted to know why the author did not just spell out the abbreviations because “the white space” around them “would have taken the same room as writing out “Dissimilar Affirmative, Dissimilar Negative, Similar Affirmative, Similar Negative.” Pinker (2014) claimed these kinds of writers “forget that the few seconds they add to their own lives come at the cost of many minutes stolen from their readers.”

Not only can academese waste the reader’s time, say some language experts, but also it can exclude the reader. According to linguist Robin Lakoff (2004), while lofty language in scholarly writing projects the notion of objectivity, it is really an act of exploitation, for it “maintains both distance from and superiority over the addressee” (p. 88). Lakoff (2004) elaborated that “euphemisms grant that the issue is touchy” but then skirt the issue: “Well this would be touchy if we were emotionally involved, but no, we are remote, so touchiness doesn’t arise” (p. 89). In other words, the researcher has the appearance of staying out of the discussion so readers can decide for themselves, but Lakoff (2004) called this convention a “sham,” for the speaker knows “very well he has the power to enforce a decision” (p. 89). Others claim this superiority encloses scholars in an exclusive group. National Teaching Fellow at the University of Gloucestershire, James Derounian (2011) argued that “stilted” academic writing is uniquely removed from the rest of the world: “And where else do you encounter depersonalised writing along the lines of not "I discovered" but "the author discovered," or "the research showed?” This distance, argued Derounian (2011), dulls one’s desire to learn the content: “Can you
honestly say that you look forward, with certainty, to reading articles published in august journals?” In fact, studies show that dull writing can lead to negative feelings about the author.

Instead of portraying erudition, some studies show that scholars who use academese can diminish their credibility. Oppenheimer’s (2005) study found that “increasing the complexity of a text does not cause an essay’s author to seem more intelligent” (p. 142); in fact, he concluded that “overly complex words” led “to decreased ratings of intelligence” (p. 147). Trimble (2011) wrote that indirect phrasing reflects a weak command of the content, for “if we think in terms of phrases, we’re only half-conscious of words” (p. 48). To reiterate Oppeheimer (2005), those who used “needless complexity” in “personal statements, sociology dissertation abstracts and philosophical essays,” for example, were perceived to have lower fluency; that lower fluency resulted in “negative evaluations” of the writer (Oppenheimer, 2005, p. 151). Sword (2012) described this kind of needless complexity as “very badly written,” (p. 4), and Pinker (2004) said this style “stinks.” People outside of academia also perceived overly complex writers in a negative way. Alain de Botton (2017) said this kind of scholarship “appears baffling (and at times laughable) to otherwise sober and judicious people beyond university walls.” Still, there is an assumption that scholars in the university understand each other.

However, others claim specialized language creates divisions even within university walls. Nobel Prize winner Mario Mario Vargas Llosa (2002) said to be wary of divisions that promote specialization “lest we feel we are not part of the tree”; in fact, Vargas Llosa (2002) said “specialized languages and increasingly arcane codes” not only
make information “more and more specific and compartmentalized” but also lead to a “lack of social understanding.” This kind of sectioning, he explained, cuts off our ability for critical thinking. Instead of seeing how humanity interrelates, he argued, we prevent people from connecting across time and space.

Others say specialized writing can shut down intellectual discovery and critical thinking. Williams and Colomb (2010) said we “bewilder readers when we can’t organize complex ideas coherently,” and this can hinder the reader’s ability to gain insight. Others say the constraints of this style can limit the complexity of a writer’s analysis. Tan (20) paralleled the removed writing she learned in school to the binary thinking of standardized tests, both of which reduced her thinking to categorized choices instead of encouraging her to consider the complexities in between. Derounian (2011) said that higher education is “about learning” and “broadening horizons,” yet “we do ourselves no service at all by writing arcane tripe that obscures rather than illuminates.” In their view, academese can diminish collective exchange. “Currency?” asked Derounian (2011). “Relevance? Agency for change?”

In essence, many writing experts feel that the problem with academese is not just that it is inaccessible but that this inaccessibility prevents readers from understanding, and hence questioning, the content (Button, 2017; Pinker, 2014; Trimble, 2011; Lanham, 2002; Vargas Llosa, 2002; Toor, 2017; Lakoff, 2004; Sword, 2012, and Derounian, 2011). Orwell (2012) argued that if one cannot understand the sentence, then it is hard to tell if one should agree or disagree. Concerns like these that prompted Pinker (2004) to ask why “a profession that trades in words and dedicates itself to the transmission of knowledge” would “turn out prose that is turgid, soggy, wooden, bloated, clumsy,
obscure, unpleasant to read, and impossible to understand?"

Because complaints about vague and verbose writing have spanned generations and disciplines, many have tried to understand what causes it. Pinker (2014) suggested that to understand academese, we should try to “engage in what academics do best: analysis and explanation.” Part of that analysis involves examining the writing expectations, protocols, and culture of different disciplines in higher education.

In *The essentials of academic writing*, a text that teaches students to write in various disciplines, author Derek Soles (2005) said that all good academic writing “projects a forceful and confident voice,” has a “fluid and vigorous style, has “clarity and energy,” is organized, edited, and it develops ideas with enough detail for “readers grasp the knowledge” (p. 6). However, he also said that writing styles should change according to the department. Essays “must conform to the rules and conventions of the academic discipline—the subject—for which it written” (Soles, 2005, p. 7). In other words, students need to learn different writing styles for different departments.

Soles (2005) said the “social sciences, the natural sciences, the humanities, and the businesses all have their own subset of discourse conventions” (Soles, 2005, p. 8). These subsets include the paper’s format. Humanities and languages use MLA style; psychology and education use APA; and history, economics, and creative writing use Chicago style (Soles, 2005). Soles (2005) found that expository essays tend to be shorter, with more charts and graphs that emphasize fact over opinion. Quantitative researchers follow the order of hypothesis, literature review, methods, results, discussion, and conclusion. To avoid bias, he explained, the writer should maintain an objective, formal, and standardized voice until the discussion section. Protocols for this objectivity call for
certain linguistic features, such as the passive voice and avoidance of first person pronouns, or the word “I.” While Soles (2005) claimed that writers in the sciences and social sciences “value a clear and concise writing” style (p. 10), he also conceded that this means adopting the “somewhat less efficient passive voice” (Soles, 2005, p. 8). However, many have questioned the orthodoxy of these protocols and even the purpose of passive syntax.

Passive syntax is generally discouraged in rhetoric and composition departments. The passive voice typically calls for nominalizations, or turning adjectives or verbs into nouns. When Pinker (2004) asked why “academics stink at writing,” he looked at English grammar itself. He explained that English “includes a dangerous tool for creating abstract terms,” which are nominalizations. The process of nominalization, Pinker (2014) explained, takes a perfectly spry verb and embalms it into a lifeless noun by adding a suffix like –ance, –ment, or –ation.” For example, instead of “affirming an idea,” said Pinker (2014), you effect its affirmation; rather than postponing something, you implement a postponement. A study on vague language in scholarly abstracts found that the “universal general nouns had pre- and post-head modifiers” and those modifiers did not add much meaning” for the readers (Cutting, 2012, p. 292). The study also listed “frequent universal general nouns” as “activity/ies, aspect/s, context, effect/s, factor/s, feature/s, implication/s, people, place/s, practice/s, resources and situation(s)” (Cutting, 2012, p. 292). Novelist and linguist Amy Tan (2012) described her own journey with this removed style of phrasing. She wrote that she once tried to assume the discourse of an elite scholar by writing lines like, “The intersection of memory upon imagination,” but later she realized it was “a speech filled with carefully wrought phrases: and “burdened”
with “nominalized forms, past perfect tenses, conditional phrases,” all of which were “forms of standard English she had “learned in school and through books” (p. 233). As a result of these standards, wrote Lanham (1992), natural language is scarce: “The low style has dissolved, the high style has hardened and dehydrated, and the middle style has simply evaporated” (p. 60); in fact, Lanham said, “The official style threatens to replace all three” (p. 60).

Some argue that this style is used because it is part of an inside language within a particular academic community. However, Pinker (2014) said even those scholars who “do groundbreaking work on important subjects, reason well about clear ideas, and are honest, down-to-earth people” still “stink” at writing. One reason for this, Pinker (2014) claimed, is that academics know the material so well that they fail to imagine “what it is like for someone else not to know” what they know. Williams and Colomb (2010) said that because "we respond less to the words on the page than the thoughts in our minds” (p.7), it is difficult to predict when readers will find our writing unclear; therefore, we tend to "read into it what we want them to get out of it,” and we often stop revising when it meets our needs of clarity (p. 7). For example, there is an expectation that social scientists should use a standardized and serious discourse that focuses on the content, not the writer. The warrant is that other scientists will easily understand scientific phrasing. But Pinker had trouble with the insider theory, saying, “I suffer the daily experience of being baffled by articles in my field, my subfield, even my sub-sub-subfield” (Pinker, 2014). This suggests that the author is not taking the time to revise for clarity and concision.

Wilson also had trouble with the insider theory. Wilson (2002) said that
“scientific results are by necessity couched in specialized language” (p. 11); however, he added that few scientists enjoy these articles because they do not connect to the writing. Wilson explained that all humans are hard-wired to learn material through narrative. If scientist would provide more narrative in their prose, he suggested, their writing would be more compelling; however, because scientists tend to be “semiliterate journeymen with respect to the humanities,” he said, they are “correspondingly” removed “from the heart and spirit of our species” (p. 11). But even scholars attempting to connect to their audience, or to “convert science into literature,” as Wilson (2002) termed it, are constrained by the “standard format of research reportage in the technical journals.”

Some say academese has been perpetuated by bureaucracy: “The Official Style,” Lanham (1992) said, “reflects the general bureaucratization of American life” (p. 60) because “learned professions want above all to sound learned and scientific—disinterested, impersonal, factual” (p. 60). Similarly, Deronian (2011) felt stilted language is perpetuated by inertia, saying, “this is how it's always been done,” and “therefore this is how it stays.” This inertia, Derounian (2011) claimed, is reinforced by administrators who want to “stick to the plan, the format, tried and trusted” and by blind reviewers “who know the convention, expect certain styles and approaches and enforce these.” What sets these conventions in more deeply, argued Derounian (2011), is the time delay. Many articles take a year to get published, he explained, and so the style sets in. Trimble (2011) also claimed this style is perpetuated by bureaucracy. In his chapter, “Faith, creed, and rules” Trimble (2011) said people “come by this literary prudishness” by “various means”:

some through puristic concern for the language that gradually stiffened into
morbid scrupulosity; some through ignorance reinforced by others’ ignorance”; some for a hunger for the security of dogma and absolutes; and some, it would seem, merely through the snob appeal of elitism. (p. 77)

Trimble (2011), like Lanham (1992) and Orwell (2012), suggested this kind of orthodoxy leads to a lifeless, unconscious delivery, and Lanham (1992) claimed that when language is used “unthinkingly, it becomes the quickest tipoff that you’ve become system-sick and look at the life only through the system’s eyes”’ (p. 60). In other words, bureaucratic language shuts down connection and critical thinking.

Another reason for overly complex writing, some claim, it that is suggests seriousness. Pinker (2004) said that “the gatekeepers of journals and university presses insist on ponderous language as proof of one’s seriousness.” Derounian (2011) claimed complex phrasing is perpetuated by academics who “insist on fancying up their credentials.” Yet De Button (2012) called this complexity a “sham designed to make readers feel more stupid and writers cleverer than they are” (De Button, 2017). Sword (2012) said these kinds of writers take on a “godlike persona” (p. 36), and Lakoff (2004) wrote that if “you want to seem cool and above it all, you use the passive” (p. 88), avoid colloquialisms, use hypercorrect grammar, the “academic authorial we,” and the word “one” as opposed to “you or I,” all of which are common premises of scholarly writing (p. 66). This coolness, Lakoff suggested, was perpetuated by the need to be a part of an exclusive academic group. When China Achebe (2015) complained about the “mystifications” of passive phrasing such as, “'Bilateral mastectomy was performed instead of ‘Both breasts were removed,’” he ascribed it to “learned people guarding their precincts of their secret societies (p. 511). In this view, as a result of academese, readers
are disconnected from the content, and that hinders critical thinking and collective exchange.

Another reason for academese, some say, is that different departments emphasize different protocols of syntax and voice. Wilson (2002) explained that there are deep-rooted expectations of what is done in scientific circles. However, DeButton (2017) found that even professors in the humanities have “been seduced by the technical prose-style pioneered by French poststructuralists. Poststructuralist Mari Ruti (2006) explained that theorists are wordy because they want to “defy the notion of transparent and commonsensical meanings,” and she said she personally enjoyed working through the complexity of that prose. At the same time, Ruti (2006) said that when she tried to cross over to a wider audience, she faced the “high stakes of lucidity” (preface xvii). She found it more “disconcerting” to write in an accessible way because that “leaves the text naked and exposed in many ways that a more obscure style eludes” (preface xvii).

Another reason for academese, some say, is that it can hide undeveloped research or ideas. Pinker (2204) claimed that academics “in the softer fields spout obscure verbiage to hide the fact that they have nothing to say”; he even said they “dress up the trivial and obvious with the trappings of scientific sophistication” because they are “hoping to bamboozle their audiences with highfalutin gobbledygook.” In fact, studies found that general nouns or passive language can be a tool to hide undeveloped content. According to Cutting’s (2012) study on vague language in conference abstracts, “reviewing committees seek abstracts which are interesting, innovative and of scholarly quality” (p. 283), yet she found that when new linguistics researchers submitted abstracts, they used general nouns and “clusters of research general nouns” to “compensate for
incompleteness” such as weak data or results (Cutting, 2012, p. 283) or lack of “details about the research” (p. 284). She found that when early researchers lacked a “precise referent,” they would say something like, “I wanted to know about their culture, experience etc.” (p. 284). She noticed that one researcher tried to hide a lack of data by saying: “the methodology used and the data collection procedures and analyses, as well as preliminary results and implications” (Cutting, 2012, p. 292). Replacing concrete content with vague language is imputed to happen in the humanities as well. Jay Parini (2005) said that “Marxist oddballs tend to cluster in language and literature departments, where the jargon is so thick that nobody can understand what they are saying anyway, rendering them harmless” (p. 145), and Williams and Colomb (2010) said that we “throw in a tangle of abstract words, in long, complex sentences” when we want to cover up the fact that “we don’t know what we're talking about” (p. 6).

Others say early researchers use general, passive, and impersonal writing because they are self-conscious. Toor (2017) said academics often “fall into self-conscious style” because they feel insecure, and Pinker (2004) concurred that the “hallmarks of academese are symptoms of this agonizing self-consciousness.” Writers tend to “freeze up” explained Williams and Colomb (2010), when they are trying to master new ideas and material (p. 7). Others say early researchers learn that detached prose is the mark of an advanced writer and so they try to conform “to the norms of the guild.” Yet another possible reason for academese is that the student may lack self-awareness. Toor (2017) described one graduate student who was asked to revise his dissertation. He said his committee told him he wrote too well. Toor (2017) wondered if what he heard “wasn't standing in as code for something else,” like “overwritten.” Or precious. Or self-
consciously clever. Show-offy. Ornate. Baroque.” But for the most part, Toor (2017) claimed that budding scholars learn this “crabbed style” because of a “general sense” in academic circles that “if you write too clearly or too well, you will be punished.” Amy Tan (2012) described her own effort to assume the diction of the advanced scholar, but looking back, she called one of her own sentences (“That was my mental quandary in its nascent state”) a “terrible line,” which she “could barely pronounce” (p. 237). Tan (2012) felt that conforming to this style prevented her from writing well. It was her mother, she explained, who taught her to remember her reader.

In his book, *The art of teaching*, Jay Parini (2005) said teachers have a responsibility to teach students to think critically and question content. However, according to these scholars, overwritten language prevents such elucidation. Put differently, the complexity of writing interferes with the complexity of thinking. Pinker (2014) said, “Enough already. Our indifference to how we share the fruits of our intellectual labors is a betrayal of our calling to enhance the spread of knowledge. In writing badly, we are wasting each other’s time, sowing confusion and error, and turning our profession into a laughingstock.” That is why he and other writing experts gave concrete suggestions about what could be done to fix academese.

To fix academese, experts say, writers should focus on having a command of the content and writing in a concise way. Sociolinguist Grice said that to build credibility: 1) “say only as much as necessary” 2) “say only what is true” 3) “say only what is relevant” and 4) “Be Clear” (Brown, 2000, p. 257). In academia, wrote linguist Andrew Cohen (2017), potential scholars should be clear and concise. Cutting (2012) proposed that experienced scholars in the field should help early researchers convey their
objectives and results more clearly in their publications (p. 284). When Williamson (1947) reduced a manuscript from 30,000 to 20,000 words, it was so it would take “less time to read and it could be understood quicker” (p. 17). Even dissertation handbooks warn scholars to be precise. Qualitative Researchers Bodgan and and Biklen (2007) wrote that a long paper is easier to write than a short one; in fact, they said a long paper is just a draft: “Get back to work,” they said, and “say it once!” (p. 199). This concision puts the focus on the content.

Pinker said that a good writer takes command of the content. To do this, said Pinker (2014), one should stop apologizing, hedging, using shudder quotes, qualifiers, metadiscourse, and unnecessary technical terms or disclosures. Pinker (2014) said that “self-conscious writers” tend to “kvetch” that “what they’re about to do is so terribly difficult and complicated and controversial,” but the reader understands this and would rather get to the content. Even when one does need to hedge or use qualifiers in a effort to maintain objectivity, Pinker explained, it can be done mindfully. Instead of “leaving himself an escape hatch or being coy as to whether he really means” what he’s saying, Pinker (2014) said a scholar can “spell out the circumstances in which” a statement “does not hold” so that hedging becomes a “a choice, not a tic.” This means that the writer should make deliberate decisions in revision.

Moreover, Pinker explained, good writers will reduce metadiscourse, or signposts. For example, Pinker (2014) said that instead of writing something like, "This chapter discusses the factors that cause names to rise and fall in popularity,” we could instead ask a question like, “What makes a name rise and fall in popularity?” By eliminating the longer “self-referential” version that announced what the chapter will do, Pinker (2014)
explained, the reader can get right to the controlling idea. Also, Pinker (2014) said, by using more active verbs, a writer can reduce words like “approach, assumption, concept, condition, context, framework, issue, level, model, perspective, process, prospect, role, strategy, subject, tendency, and variable,” which are the metaconcepts or nominalizations he said slows and stiffens the reading. Concrete language, he explained, will help the reader absorb the material more directly. Still, even when the words are concrete, he warned, they should be accessible. For example, Pinker (2014) said, replacing “murine model with rats and mice will use up no more space on the page and be no less scientific.” In this way, the writer can teach the reader. By “adding a few words of explanation to common technical terms, as in "Arabidopsis, a flowering mustard plant," rather than the bare "Arabidopsis" a writer could reach more readers.

To reach more readers, Pinker continued, writers should craft sentences as if they are having a conversation. “The reader can recognize the truth when she sees it,” said Pinker, “as long as she is given an unobstructed view. And the process of directing the reader’s gaze takes the form of a conversation” (Pinker, 2014). Williams and Colomb (2010) said that writers need to “figure out how what we put on the page makes the readers feel as they do,” and so writing becomes an act of empathy (p. 7). Tan (1997) learned from studying linguistics that language has the power to heighten awareness. Even listening to the “broken” yet vivid English of her mother, Tan (2012) understand language is most powerful when it was “vivid, direct, full of observation, and imagery” (p. 234). This vividness and directness, Pinker explained, is a way for the writer to share “what the reader has not yet noticed, and he orients the reader so she can see for herself.” The purpose of writing, elaborated Pinker (2014) “is presentation, and its motive is
disinterested truth.” But to share this truth effectively, he explained, the writer must have a complete command of the content. That means knowing “the truth before putting it into words” instead of “using the occasion of writing to sort out what he thinks” (Pinker, 2014). So even though the writer must be in control of the content before presenting it to the reader, he or she must also treat the reader as an equal.

This equality can even be established with pronoun choice, some say. After evaluating data from 1223 questionnaires, Sword (2012) said that no discipline forbids the use of the first person pronouns or recommends passive syntax (Toor, 2017). In fact, Sword (2012) found that the APA Publication manual has "advocated the use of personal pronouns since 1974”; in fact, she found that other publications such as ACS Style Guide, the AMA Manual, and the CSE Manual all encourage scholars to use “we or “I” (p. 39). Trimble (2011) said scholars could connect to readers by using the first person pronoun: “If you mean “I,” say ‘I.’ Don’t wrap yourself in pomposities like ‘the writer; or ‘one’ or ‘we,’ for the “printed page already puts enough distance between the two of you” (p. 66).

Pinker (2014) said that because the writer and reader “are taking in the spectacle together, a classic writer can refer to them with the good old pronoun we.” To give an an example, Pinker (2014) wrote that instead of writing something like, “The previous section analyzed the source of word sounds. This section raises the question of word meanings," a writer could instead phrase this in a more relatable way: "Now that we have explored the source of word sounds, we arrive at the puzzle of word meanings.” When the writer maintains too much distance from the reader, these writing experts warn, then the reader may not invest the extra time to puzzle together the meanings.

E. O. Wilson (2002) felt this connection could be strengthened with the use of
narrative. As mentioned before, he argued that if scientists included more tension and narrative in their writing, more people could benefit from great discoveries of science. Using evidence from cave drawings, Wilson (2002) explained that humans are hard-wired to understand narrative. This is how they filter, process, prioritize, and remember information. However, he explained, because science writing is so removed, even scientists dread reading science writing. He concluded that if scientists wrote with more tension and heart—as Wilson (2002) did himself in the opening of “Power of story,” (saying “Let me tell you a story.”), they could connect to more readers.

Sword concurred. She said stylish writers, across the disciplines, “know the importance of sustaining a compelling story rather than merely sprinkling isolated anecdotes throughout an otherwise sagging narrative” (Sword, 2012, p. 87). In fact, she claimed a piece that holds “no suspense, no narrative arc” will not capture the reader or teach lessons, and she found that researchers competing for prestigious grants understood that those grants depended on their ability to tell a good story and connect with the reader (p. 87).

This connection could potentially facilitate collective exchange within, across, and beyond the university. Pinker (2004) and Derounian (2011) felt that writing with more clarity and connection could multiply one’s readership. In most universities, composition instructors emphasize the importance of connected, concise, and concrete prose, and common composition textbooks include reading from authors like Llosa, Trimble, Lanham, Tan, and Pinker. However, an additional question is whether the skills college freshman learn in these composition classes can transfer to their other academic writing.
Some researchers have investigated how instructors can help students transfer these skills. According to a study done by Bergmann and Zippernick (2007), many college students said that what they learned in their freshman composition classes did not transfer to their own disciplines. Some students described their composition instructor’s feedback as meddlesome (p. 132) or intrusive (p. 129). Other students felt that English or Rhetoric classes were designed for them to express their opinions, while other courses called for more substantial and relevant writing. In fact, for those classes outside of composition, students “revealed a very strong acceptance of the authority of disciplinary standards, conventions, and expectations to dictate rules for writing within the boundaries of a specific discipline (p. 129). Because of this awareness of discordant writing protocols, students expressed that they focussed on mastering the different “citation systems” of each genre as well as “conflicting stylistic rules,” such as whether to use “I” or the passive voice (p. 133). Students would then typically adopt the style that was encouraged in their majors.

Just as Cutting (2012) suggested that professors in the discipline mentor beginning writers, other studies suggested that writing should be taught by professors within the discipline. Like Bergmann and Zippernick (2007), Elizabeth Wardle’s (2009) study concluded that the transfer of skills learned in freshman composition or rhetoric classes was “not easily accomplished (p. 766). She based this on feedback from college students who saw little connection between the different writing genres. Many students responded that what they learned in rhetoric or composition classes did not help them write effectively in other disciplines; in fact, several students reported that the skills they learned in composition classes were not relevant in other classes. This is why Wardle
(2009) concluded that students should be trained to write by professors of various disciplines, as those professors better understand the nuances of their own genre.

To explain this, Wardle (2009) had to clarify exactly what a genre was. Features of certain genres, she explained, “arise as a result of specific and complex rhetorical situations” (p. 768), and they are unique to the needs of that discipline. “The activity system” in freshman year composition (FYC) classes, as Wardle (2009) explained it:

[I]s radically different from other academic activity systems in its use of writing as the object of primary attention rather than as a tool for acting on other objects of attention. Because of this difference in primary focus, the rhetorical situations of FYC courses around the country do not mirror the multiple, diverse, and complex rhetorical situations found across the university in even the most basic ways. (p.766)

In other words, if the communication styles are shaped by the needs of distinct disciplines, and those needs are constantly changing, then “simply teaching the institutionalized features of a genre to students also ignores the complex reasons why that genre evolved” or when that genre feature is “no longer effective” (Wardle, 2009, p. 768). Although Wardle (2009) did not provide many concrete examples, she theorized that writing transfer happens through generalization. In her view, when instructors focus on limited skills, then students cannot make the generalizations they need to adapt to different disciplines. Thus, she concluded that the skills a freshman learns in college composition classes are too limited to transfer to other disciplines. Moreover, she felt it was asking too much to expect composition instructors to teach the kinds of generalizing techniques that could apply to various writing settings. Because Wardle (2009)
concluded that freshman composition instructors should not “teach students to write in the university” she proposed designing courses that “teach students about writing in the university” (p. 767). While she did not explain what this looked like, she did suggest a change in the college curriculum. That change meant turning freshman composition courses into electives and having students learn writing by the professors of various disciplines.

However, a different study found that students could indeed learn transferable writing skills in freshman composition. Instead of asking students to write in a general way, Downs (2010) suggested that curriculums should not just encourage “skill-based transmission of information” but also should prepare students to write for different disciplines (32). To do this, Downs (2010) explained, students should be trained to work from prior knowledge. Downs (2010) theorized that students become “enculturated” into other university “sites and communities” when “they get there” (p. 45), so a base sense of learning to learn, or learning ways to learn writing in diverse disciplines needs to be taught before that. Learning how to learn to write, they explained, could happen when students create a connection to the writing and process general principles. In Downs’ (2010) view, as opposed to the practical skills one might learn in a composition course, “metacognition” about “the nature of writing” could help students write effectively across the disciplines (p. 21). Downs (2010) found that when teachers based writing assignments on “questions, activities, and functions” (p. 44) and when they asked students to tap into universal challenges such as “writer’s block, methods,” or “errors” (p. 32), then students could develop an awareness of the writing process that they could successfully transfer “across different university disciplines (p. 31). In this way, Downs
(2010) concluded, composition classes could be useful if they taught students to think about ways they would learn to write in different contexts.

However, according to a study by Lockhart and Soliday (2015), transferable writing skills could be taught in freshman composition classes. This could be done, they claimed, if professors emphasized the skill of reading. When reading developed, their study suggested, writing developed. Lockhart and Soliday (2015) explained that as students transitioned from lower division writing classes to upper division classes in their majors” (p. 26), they “had to find ways to read in order to find ways to write” (p. 25); this meant there was a “reflexive” relationship between reading and writing (p. 25). Students who learned to annotate reported that they were “better prepared for later writing or reading tasks” (p. 28), for as they made connections and put ideas “in their own words” (p. 28), they learned to “access other information” (p. 34), categorize ideas, interpret arguments, and “break down complicated ideas (p. 30). Also, as students became more “engaged” (p. 30), they wrote “down important thoughts” (p. 29), and so when it came time to write, students reported they did not have to invent “completely new ideas” (p. 29).

Not only did Lockhart and Soliday (2015) find that reading can help with “invention” (p. 29) but also they found it helped with clear writing. Students who developed critical reading skills, the researchers found, could write more transparent and polished prose. They also found that the act of close reading taught students to integrate quotes and organize ideas, and this helped students became more “rhetorically aware” (p. 31). Unlike what Wardle (2009) found her her study, Lockhart and Soliday (2015) found this rhetorical awareness allowed students to “emulate successful structures or genres” (p.
33). This ability to emulate effective writing, the study found, helped students model effective writing in other disciplines as well. As they learned to “recontextualize” and “adapt” previous knowledge to the new contexts (p. 34), they were better positioned “to write successfully” in the “discourse of their major” (p. 24). Reading, Lockhart and Soliday (2015) found, helped students go “beyond writing to the full surround of literacies needed to succeed in academic tasks” (p. 24), and close reading also developed student confidence in their own reading and writing (p. 33). In conclusion, by emphasizing reading, Lockhart and Soliday (2015) found that teachers of freshman composition courses could prepare their students to write clearly in their other academic writing and beyond.

**Summary of Academese**

In conclusion, studies show that clear writing improves the writer’s credibility and facilities collective exchange. Oppenheimer (2005) advised people to “write clearly and simply if you can, and you’ll be more likely to be thought of as intelligent” for simpler writing is easier “to process,” and and that, he found, “is associated with a variety of positive dimensions” (Oppenheimer, 2005, p. 142). Pinker (2014) said writing “succeeds when it aligns language with truth, the proof of success being clarity and simplicity,” and Tan (2012) claimed clear and simple language could heighten awareness. Tan (2012) felt she had had mastered English when she envisioned her reader and wrote in way that was “easy to read” (237). Another benefit of clear and simple writing, claimed Derounian (2011), is that it could expand one’s readership. By multiplying readership (Pinker, 2014), scholars could facilitate both critical thinking and collective exchange.

Nevertheless, as evidenced from the comments in the opening of this section, an
overwhelming complaint is that college students are not learning to write clearly. Orwell (2012) said “orthodoxy” seems to create a lifeless, imitative style” and he found this style pervaded academic writing (p. 534). Orwell (2012) also said that whatever is a cause is also an effect, and the slovenliness of our language makes it easier to have foolish thoughts” (p. 528). In this lens, unclear language has consequences beyond university prose. That notion has led many to explore what contributes to the orthodoxy of vague or verbose academic writing. Some believe it is perpetuated by superiority, insecurity, incompleteness, unawareness, disconnectedness, carelessness, or discordant protocols. While several scholars and studies have detailed how unclear academic writing, or in this case academese, can undermine individual credibility and diminish collective exchange, this style persists. Toor (2017) said, “there are people who live in a universe where clarity and grace in communication are seen as failings, and many professors are doing little to reverse this style.” As professors gain more insight, they could potentially revise their own style and help students write more clearly, for our language choices reflect our identities.

Linguistics

In *Frankenstein*, written in 1818, Mary Shelly depicted the connection between identity and language. As Felix teaches Safie words and syntax, the monster learns by imitation, a concept B. F. Skinner articulated in his claim that humans learn language by imitation. This contrasts Chomsky’s theory that humans have an innate gift for language that is unique to its species. For example, Chomsky (2008) explained that “birds grow wings as a result of their genetic endowment, not by learning,” just as humans go through puberty “because that is the way they are designed, not by observing others and deciding
to do the same” (p. 254). The monster is not human, so the leap of creativity that stems from a black box of innate data (that Chomsky claimed all humans have) is complicated. While Piaget believed cognition comes before language (Brown, 2000, p. 37), the monster’s cognition sparks with the incipience of language. This is how Shelly (1985) depicted the way one learns about history, good, evil, and social codes. The more one learns language, the more one learns one’s role in society.

In the 1970s, linguist Robin Lakoff (2004) said that when women speak, they not only reflect but also reinforce gender dichotomies. Studying women in college laboratories, she found that women tend to speak as if they won’t be believed. Lakoff claimed women “reinforced their subordinate status” when they filled their sentences with unnecessary words (Holmes, 2011, p. 301). These extra words included lexical fillers (“you know”); tag questions (“Isn’t she?”), rising intonation on declaratives (“Good!”), empty adjectives (“cute”), precise color terms (“magenta”), intensifiers (“just”); hypercorrect grammar (between you and I), euphemisms (“passed away”), avoidance of swearing (“Fudge!”), and emphatic stress (“BRILLIANT!”) (Holmes, 2011, p. 302). The conclusion was that a woman emphasized her words because she doubted their weight. In this interpretation, the “empty adjectives” and “uncertainty” of “women’s language” translates to a “deficit language” that reveals her suppression (Holmes, 2011, p. 324). However, linguist Janet Holmes (2011) wrote that since Lakoff mostly studied college students in laboratories, her research “lacked linguistic precision and a clear “theoretical framework” (2011, p. 303). Though Lakoff’s (2004) findings were considered groundbreaking, she also looked at language as a dichotomy of men’s dominance and women’s submission. According to Jane Sunderland’s (2015) article,
“Research in language and gender,” research before Lakoff also conveyed a “binary study of men and women” (p. 507). Many linguists looked to variationist (age, class, region, sex differences) studies and quantitative surveys of gender, language, pronunciation, and grammar. This research included William Labov’s surveys, which presented clear distinctions between men and women (Sunderland, 2015, p. 507). After Lakoff’s studies, there have been evolving ways of evaluating female speech. Susan Gal recognized more contexts for gendered speech (for example, men retained more Hungarian to stay in the community while women wanted to “marry out”) (Sunderland, 2015, p. 507), while Lesley Milroy found social context more impactful than gender. In the “second wave of western women’s movement” (since 1970), more focus has been on “what is said about or written about women, men, girls, boys, gender relations—and how, what we might term ‘gendered discourse’” (Sunderland, 2015, p. 505).

In An introduction to sociolinguistics, Ronald Wardhaugh and Janet M. Fuller (2015) described consistencies in typical male or female speech, suggesting that men and women are conditioned to speak differently. Their findings on language formation, group affiliation, and sociolinguists suggested that speech varieties, whether they be vernacular, slang, or standardized, are equally valuable. However, they also explain that different linguistic keys align with different social levels.

People use particular “keys” (“tone, manner, or spirit”) to present themselves, and precision is one of these keys (Wardhaugh, 2015, p. 233). We usually have more than one key on our ring since we need to open different doors, such as work or home. For example, a woman might use a high-pitched, talkative, hedging (using words like sort of, cute, little, you know) style at home with her children and a lower-toned, more direct
register at work (Holmes, 2011, p. 321). As opposed to the notion that women are always more talkative, men talk more than women in meetings (Holmes, 2011, p. 43). At the same time, a study done on prospective jurors, found that males deleted “non-essential” words more often (Holmes, 2011, p. 309). Holmes (2011) said that when men delete non-essential words or phrases from their sentences, they are using more direct and dominant speech (p. 309). The language we use—or choose—connotes social position. The third wave of linguistic studies focus on the “mutability of style” which considers varying social contexts (and complicates conclusions), and linguists commonly believe that “speaker agency” comes from “how speakers position themselves in conversation” (Wardhaugh, 2015, p. 192). Roles can shift. This mobility may have to do with media, feminism, “queer” and transgender movements, or diversity, for example, but linguists find people currently have more latitude to select—and identify with—speech styles of various groups, classes, or power levels (Holmes, 2011).

More recent linguistic studies consider “intersectionality of context, gender and sexuality—not heteronormativity” (Sunderland, 2015, p. 506). Policewomen can adopt more masculine sounding speech while “men in salons follow more feminine patterns” (Holmes, 2011, p. 320). Homosexual men may draw from female patterns to indicate orientation (“wavy intonation and dramatic variations in pitch,” camp talk, exaggeration), depending on place and time (Holmes, 2011, p. 322-3).

Holmes (2011) said that while speech patterns align with certain power roles, these keys are not fixed. For example, tags may be purposeful. Holmes (2011) found that women’s tags indicate kindness, agreement, and empathy (p. 308), so women add extra words for solidarity (p. 301). Holmes (2011) said women provide four times more
positive feedback with each other (Mm, Yeah) to “enlarge on or develop the ideas of the previous speaker” (p. 314). And as opposed to the assumption that women always talk more, Holmes (2011) noted that in professional settings, men tend to be more talkative than women. Also, expert men hedged in court to be more cautious (Holmes, 2011, p. 304). Other studies found facilitators (leaders, teachers, interviewers) used more tags to invite others into conversation, soften criticism (Holmes, 2011, p. 306), and strengthen questions (Holmes p. 307). So Holmes conceded that extra words do not always reflect subordination.

According to Deborah Tannen’s (1990) book, *You just don’t understand me*, “indirectness itself does not reflect powerlessness” (p. 226); in fact, she said “only modern western societies place a priority on direct communication, and even for us it has more value than a practice” (p. 227). Polite speech tends to be less direct, and in non-western contexts, some men use more polite forms than women (Wardhaugh, 2015, p. 261). In Madagascar, men use more polite and indirect phrases than women, while in Samoa, the higher the status, the fewer polite devices—emphasizing distance (Holmes, 2011, p. 310). So people can choose particular speech patterns to identify with a particular group. Older people tend to be less direct because they no longer feel compelled “to protect their masculinity” (Wardhaugh, 2015, p. 260). So indirectness can be a sign of confidence.

In his book *Um: Slips, stumbles, and verbal blunders, and what they mean*, Michael Erard (2007) claimed fillers show higher cognition. He cited studies that show that speech disfluencies such as “um” or “ah” indicate someone is working through complex thoughts. He also claimed men use “ums” and “ahs” more than women do, and
that children actually have to learn to use pause fillers because they are not natural to human speech. Erard (2007) elaborated that fillers are more frequent at the beginning of sentences as people plan the rest of their phrases. He concluded that people who use these pauses more frequently are natural planners and crafters.

Nevertheless, Holmes (2011) concluded that women, in general, are wordier than men, and that patterns of subordination still had “more to do with gender than role or occupation” (p. 315). Holmes (2011) said that “every phonological, lexical, and syntactic selection conveys social information,” so “every time we speak, we are either reinforcing existing norms or we are challenging them” (p. 321), which aligns with Lacan’s (1977) theory that language shapes social roles and social roles shape language. Most linguists conclude that English reflects a tradition of patriarchy and that when a woman speaks tentatively, she is reinforcing a position of subordination.

The book *A Woman’s guide to the language of success: Communicating with confidence and power*, detailed how this language deference is reflected in the workplace. The author, Phyllis Mindell, EdD (1995), said women often hedge and second-guess their statements, and they also tend to start sentences with “I feel” instead of showing conviction about their opinions or giving clear direction. Mindell (1995) included tips in every chapter on how to tighten phrasing and strengthen assertions so that women could learn the “language of success,” for “we all hunger for tools that will empower us to work, to communicate, and to lead with confidence” (1995, preface vii). Still, other experts find that too much confidence can backfire. In her *Washington Post Article*, linguist Deborah Tannen (2016) drew from Lakoff’s (2004) findings that gender expectations create a “double-bind” for women. For example, Tannen (2016) explained
that if a leader or manager “talks or acts in ways expected of women, she risks being seen as underconfident or even incompetent.” On the other hand, Tannen (2016) said if a woman, such as Hillary Clinton, “talks or acts in ways expected of leaders, she is likely to be seen as too aggressive and will be subject to innumerable other negative judgments — and epithets — that apply only to women.” So if a woman deviates from an expected style, she has to still find a way to sound natural.

If natural language connotes credibility, unnatural language suggests insecurity, say several linguists. Wardhaugh (2015) explained that males typically indulge in the covert prestige of nonstandard speech (which is in the third wave of variation studies (p. 189), while some females “use more standard variations” (p. 172) to “dissociate themselves from the working class” (p. 208). “Status conscious” women avoid contractions and follow standard syntactical sentences (Holmes, 2011, p. 301), but writing teachers say this kind of diction can sound forced. Trimble (2010) claimed that strict adherence to correct standards suggests a writer lacks confidence, and this aligns with Lakoff’s (2004) theory that hypercorrect grammar makes women appear insecure. It has been surmised that Hillary Clinton worked with a coach so she could sound less scripted and more natural (Walker, 2016). Daniel Goleman (1996), author of *Emotional intelligence* said all humans are wired to connect, and this connection is essential to strong communication. Strong communication, say sociolinguists, align with social power. Holmes (2011) found that if gender and social identity are constructed, not fixed, then we can open more social doors by picking the right language key.

The combination of high and low speech is typical in most cultures. In *An introduction to language and linguistics*, Ralph Fassold (2006) introduced the idea of
diglossia, which is a term that reflects language distinctions: we tend to use a high (H) speech or a low (L) speech, depending on the appropriate situation. For example, high speech is used in school, government, print, news, and other more formal situations, while low speech is used with family, friends, and informal situations (Fassold, 2006). This happens with different languages as well, such as the standard language versus the dialect or local vernacular (Holmes, 2011). Both registers are appropriate for a sense of belonging, Fassold (2006) found, so one needs to read the context and tailor the speech style accordingly. Often groups will use both. At the same time, Fassold (2006) questioned whether there should be such a division between the high and low forms or if the ideal language mixes the two to allow more social mobility.

Similar to Foucault’s theory that our systems of limitations come from external forces, existentialist and philosopher Simone De Beauvoir (1989) claimed that social divisions came from historically developed hierarchies. She also believed the goal of attaining wealth prompted certain individuals to oppress others. These premises of social power were passed to the next generation, and that generation conditioned the next generation. That is how women, explained De Beauvoir (1989), were conditioned to capitulate. By detailing how patriarchy was motivated by the male’s wish to control property, she argued that economics contributed to gender codes and binary speech practices.

De Beauvoir’ (1989) book, The second sex, contended that we are shaped by language. DeBeauvior (1989) wrote, “one is not born but becomes a woman” and it is “civilization as a whole that produces this creature” (p. 267). She explained that in the first three to four years, boys and girls have similar attitudes. Citing poststructuralist
Jacque Lacan, DeBeauvior (1989) explained that males distinguish themselves by seeing females as “Other”; the baby feels forlorn as he detaches from the connection with the mother, and this “subjectivity” makes him want to “lose himself in the bosom of the Whole” (1989, p. 268). Looking for a solid identity, DeBeauvior (1989) claimed, he projects “his existence into an image” that others value, and through their “Gaze,” the male perceives the value of masculinity. He encounters himself “in a projected form” (DeBeauvior, 1989, p. 269). The contrast of identities she theorized, helps the male to feel more masculine. These qualities, she explained, are not instinctive. DeBeauvior (1989) explained that girls are taught that “more is demanded of boys because they are superior,” and mothers keep the tradition alive (, p. 271), so girls are “indoctrinated” to the “doom” of “passivity, coquetry, maternity” (p. 268). This shapes the way a woman speaks, and the way a woman speaks, DeBeauvior (1989) argued, shapes the way she is perceived.

The way a woman is perceived, DeBeauvoir claimed, affects her sense of self. DeBeauvoir (1989) elaborated that when a woman has no sense of self, she acts like a “chatterer and a scribbler” who “unbosoms herself in conversations” (1949, p. 704). De Beauvoir (1949) said instead “appealing to others” and editing for their understanding, it “seems to her that to choose, to erase, is to repudiate a part of herself”(p. 706), so this “blundering and restlessness,” causes a woman to be “a lost sex” (p. 263). This is why an independent women, De Beauvoir concluded, “is justifiably disturbed by the idea that people do not have confidence in her” (p. 701). In essence, De Beauvoir claimed concluded that as patriarchal societies became more ingrained, men adopt a more direct speech style than women.

Other famous female writers agreed that societal premises conditioned women to
use more indirect language. Even with innate ability, argued Virginia Wolf in her essay, “Shakespeare’s sister,” women didn’t have the training, context, encouragement, or confidence to write with the “genius of Shakespeare” (2015, p. 49). Mary Wollstonecraft, who did have the training, still wrote with restraint. In “On national education,” when Wollstonecraft (2010) argued for equal education between men and women, she appealed to her readers by saying education would make women gossip less, connive less, and converse more meaningfully (2010, p. 44). To prove that a woman could be reasonable, Wollstonecraft’s prose was carefully wrought, but overwrought diction, DeBeauvior (1989) argued, was indicative of inferior language. When Wollstonecraft’s daughter Mary Shelly (1985) wrote Frankenstein (at age eighteen), she published her bold words and ideas under her husband’s name, Percy Shelly. This suggests that, traditionally, linguistic styles were trained— and constrained—by gender roles. In other words, language is shaped by larger power structures.

**Summary of Linguistics**

Many linguists have connected one’s social power to the the language one uses. In the 1950s, DeBeauvoir (1989) traced how, historically, women have been trained to speak in a deferential manner, and that involved using needless words. In the 1970s, Lakoff (2004) did a study using conversational analysis, and she found women used more filler words than man, and this wordiness reflected female subordination. Holmes (2011) and Wardhaugh (2015) compiled Lakoff’s findings with more recent linguistic studies and found that, although there are more blurred identities than the binary male versus female contrast, there is a consensus that those who used more concrete and concise language are generally regarded as having more social power.
**Poststructuralism**

Poststructuralist Jacque Lacan believed in a reflexive relationship between language and power. Lacan (1968) was a French philosopher and psychoanalyst who drew from many of Sigmund Freud’s (1909) theories of gender conditioning; however (as opposed to moving from the phallic to the real stage, as Freud theorized), Lacan believed our roles in society begin as soon as we learn to speak. Actually, in *Speech and language in psychoanalysis*, Lacan (1968) argued that we are engendered into the world even before we learn language. Once we begin to speak, theorized Lacan (1977) in his book *Ecrites*, we start to identify with “the figure of the law” (p. 67). Lacan called this law the Symbolic Order. In other words, Lacan (1977) claimed law starts with language, for “speech confers a meaning on the functions of the individual” (p. 49). This constructs the speaker’s identity (I am this, not that). More specifically, Lacan (1977) described language as “the name of the father.” (The Name of the Father” corresponded to Lacan’s Symbolic order, which involves detaching from the mother and and identifying with established patriarchal codes.) While much of this patriarchy is unconsciously assimilated, Lacan (1977) claimed, “all reality has come to man” through words, “and it is by his continued act that he maintains” and repeats this reality (p. 106). So the more we integrate into a given community, the more we develop a sense of what is normal. Both Lacan and Freud believed that while functioning people assimilate and transmit acceptable societal norms, deviant people defy the “taboos that bind and weave the yarn of lineage through succeeding generations” (Lacan, 1977, p. 66). In this context, deviant is perceived as defective, so although norms are unconsciously assimilated, Lacan believed social orders, such as patriarchy, are passed onto the next generation.
What can interrupt such inherited power structures, claimed Foucault, is *Parrhesia*, or truth-telling (Kuntz, 2015). Foucault (2008) found that people generally conform to an “omnipresent and omniscient power” (211) structure that relies on division. Separation of the masses, he claimed, prevents collective rebellion. Just as Foucault (2008) described the surrounding sense of soldiers during the plague, he described a surrounding sense of guards to manage prisoners. Foucault’s (2008) essay “Panopticism” detailed how prisoners—instead of looking left and right at fellow inmates to gain a sense of collective power—are separated to face a guard in a center tower. Each prisoner feels that he or she is constantly being watched, which makes the supervision feel ubiquitous. Foucault (2008) called this ubiquitous supervising force a “panoptic” (1977, p. 207) structure that is both “visible and unverifiable” (2008, p. 215); in other words, while panopticism must be a visible reminder of a supervising power, it must also be unverifiable, so one doesn’t know when he is being watched; however he “must be sure that he must always be so” (2008, p. 216). Similarly, Foucault theorized, since many central governments lack the manpower to manage a large populace, the enforcement of rules depends on people unconsciously policing themselves. Thus, restraint relies on division and self-supervision.

Self-supervision is also reinforced by collective knowledge, claimed Foucault (2006). This is different from collective power. Instead of a search for perspective and truth, Foucault theorized, people are fabricated into the system in a circular and collective way. Foucault (2006) elaborated that the “productive capacity of knowledge” is a “collective process” in which knowledge is replaced by shifting systems; these systems are based on “certain rules that one can register and describe” (p. 17). This compliance is
perhaps embedded in the way one assimilates knowledge. In *The Chomsky-Foucault debate*, Foucault (2006) claimed our “systems of regularity, or constraints” come from “outside the human mind, in social forces, in the relations of production, or class struggles” (p. 29). While Foucault (2006) believed “the content of various knowledges is dispersed into a particular society, and asserts itself as the foundation of education, for theories, for practices” (p. 29-30), linguist and philosopher Noam Chomsky (2006) believed we produce communities and knowledge innately. For example, Chomsky (2006) theorized that humans intrinsically learn language with a combination of a limited set of data, a hard-wired schemata of the brain, and a great leap of creativity. However, Chomsky (2006) said this creativity has to be tempered with restraint. If every phoneme were possible, a common language would be impossible. So constraints are vital for a unified language.

While Chomsky claimed that human nature projects us, innately, into language, he also believed that studying language could teach us about human relations. In his chapter “Language and freedom,” Chomsky (2008) said that “language is the product of human intelligence that is, for the most part, most accessible to study,” so in many ways, language can be “a mirror of the mind” (p. 90); in fact, Chomsky believed studying language “may contribute to a humanistic social science” that can “serve as an instrument of social action” (p. 90). Although Chomsky and Foucault differ on the extent to which language influences social structures, Chomsky’s theory of a reflexive relationship between language and power aligns with the tenets of poststructuralism.

This aligns with Lacan’s and Foucault’s view that that we inherit social premises from previous generations. Nevertheless, a limitation can come from relying on the
poststructural framework of Foucault and Lacan. While Lacan (1977) claimed we act according to our community codes the moment we learn language, the community he observed in France in the 1960s and 1970s was less diverse and more patriarchal than the community of the modern university, which is the focus of this dissertation. Even though deconstruction is based on the notion that identities are less binary than structuralists claimed, many impute Lacan’s claims to be just as binary because he based his theories on patriarchal codes. Another complicating factor is that Lacan diverged from Foucault in terms of the significance of language.

Summary of Poststructuralism

While both Foucault and Lacan believed we unconsciously assimilate and repeat societal rules, Foucault (2006) felt structures are imprinted by former panoptic (sweeping and insidious) grids of knowledge, which would mean our unconscious codes are multifaceted, not just a response to language. Chomsky (2008) believed language could teach us about human relations. However, as opposed to Chomsky’s and Lacan’s theory that we internally learn codes through the acquisition and assimilation of language, Foucault (2006) believed social codes are reinforced by various institutional forces that aim to increase production, such as schools.

Critical Pedagogy

When Nobel Laureate Richard Feynman (2010) taught physics as a visiting professor in Brazil, he gave a speech that made both university students and faculty squirm. Before his talk, he made administrators promise he could say whatever he wanted. They agreed, but they begged him not to criticize the textbook since it was written by a fellow faculty member. When Feynman got on stage he said that the
textbook was wrong and that “no science was being taught in Brazil” (p. 73). The students could recite the text cold, he said, but they didn’t do the homework, contribute, or ask questions. In other words, they could not apply the material. When someone in the State Department said Feynman was foolish and unable to understand Brazil’s problems, Feynman (2010) responded: “Quite the contrary: “I think this person in the State Department was naive to think that because he saw a university with a list of courses and descriptions, that’s what it was” (p. 74). Instead of critical inquiry, Feynman saw an institution that confined thinking and reinforced set premises.

This was the kind of classroom Paulo Freire (2010) would describe five years later, in 1968, when he said that, instead of applying concepts, students would repeat and comply. This compliance, Freire (2010) found, started early in school, and it conditioned students to believe that teachers “know everything and students know nothing” (p. 64). By learning not to question the teachers, the texts, the methods, or the assignments, the students learned to accept larger political principles. This, claimed Freire, made it easier to oppress the people as a whole.

Freire’s (2010) essay “The banking concept of education,” pioneered the theory of Critical Pedagogy, which encouraged both students and scholars to evaluate how power operates through “what counts” as schooling. He went on to say that as opposed to exchanging ideas in the classroom, teachers acted as authoritarians trying to “deposit” information into students (Freire, 2010, p. 65). Tagore (2015), described this dynamic as he described his grade school experience as “lifeless, colorless, dissociated from the context of the universe, within bare white walls, staring like eyeballs of the dead” (p. 41). However, Freire (2010) believed teachers could invigorate and empower students by
asking students to think critically. His theory of critical pedagogy was known to have inspired the American school system to adopt a pedagogy of dialogue, mutual engagement, and critical thinking.

McLaren (2009) claimed that one-way teaching comes from a systematic ideology that produces and represents values—and “all values have social roots and perform social functions” (p. 70). He broke down this process down using key terms: legitimation (representing itself as legitimate), dissimulation (concealing domination), fragmentation (placing groups in opposition), and reification (presenting the state as permanent) (2010, p. 70). So it is a “hidden curriculum” that perpetuates prejudice and class division (McLaren, 2010, p. 74). McLaren’s (2010) notion that we are “inextricably implicated in micro relations of domination” is similar to Foucault’s (2008) theory of hidden supervision (p. 72). Foucault (2008) claimed that although “educational psychology” is supposed to correct and address imbalanced power relations, it actually reproduces “in a concentrated or formalized form, the schema of power-knowledge proper to each discipline” (2010, p. 235). To clarify his claim for the reader, Foucault (2008) began with the story of the plague. The king’s army lacked the manpower to quarantine the masses, but as people were confined to their homes and only able to look out the window of the front door, they imagined a great army outside. This encouraged them to police themselves, even when no one was standing guard; in this way, the notion of constant supervision was a way of “fabricating” individuals “into the social order” (Foucault, 2008, p. 228). Foucault said the motivation for this was production and convenience. As the population increased and production growth became more complex, self-policing maintained compliance “at the lowest possible cost.” (Foucault, 2008, 229). Economical
output would be maximized when political processes could stay “invisible,” for when there were fewer questions, there would be less resistance” (Foucault, 2008, p. 229).

James Gatto (2012), who was New York City Teacher of the Year, described this kind of capitulation in American schools. Gatto (2012) believed that what helped create a “manageable populace” was division: the more separated and less educated the citizens are, the easier it is to manage them). Gatto (2012) applied Foucault’s (2008) theory—that divisive power structures are reinforced in schools—to the American school system. Gatto (2012) said Woodrow Wilson borrowed these divisive school from the Prussians to increase production and compliance.

Gatto (2012) said he quit teaching seventh grade because he was teaching students “how to fit into a world [he] didn’t want to live in” (2012, p. 665). Gatto (2012) claimed it was “a curriculum of confusion, class position, arbitrary justice, vulgarity, rudeness, disrespect for privacy, indifference to quality, and utter dependency” (p. 665). Gatto (2012) argued that the k-12 school system set a majority up to fail by boring students and confining teachers. Teachers, he explained, lack the latitude to devise innovative activities and exercises, and the accountability of high standardized tests narrows the curriculum even more—much like the micro teaching McLaren (2009) described. Gatto (2012) said policies of pedagogy and praxis are decided by an elite group of administrators who want to maximize education and minimize costs, and common curriculum, categorized syllabi, and bubbled-in answers are cheaper and faster to assess. Students and teachers are ranked accordingly. But as the curriculum became more perfunctory, Gatto (2012) observed, the students became more bored. “Divide children by subject, by age-grading, by constant rankings on tests” Gatto (2012) said, “and it was
unlikely they would ever re-integrate into a dangerous whole” (p. 669). Dependent on testing and tracking, some students are assigned honors classes and others remedial classes—setting the trajectory: a minority of managers rise to the top.

The system (assessment, division, tracking, and selection), claimed Gatto (2012), primes an elite group to manage a large labor class that “conflates opposition with disloyalty” (p. 666). This conditions the majority to behave, vote, and consume as directed. In his view, politicians and big companies can sell average citizens policies that counter their best interests and junk they cannot afford. Not only does this create a larger labor class, claimed Gatto (2012), but also it encourages consumption: “Buy those sneakers we can’t afford . . . buy those SUV’s” and “believe the lie that they constitute a kind of life insurance, even when we’re upside down in them”; this kind of thinking, he explains, leads a citizenry to “buy the press secretary’s” warning to “watch what we say” (p. 672). In other words, a top-down power structure prevents a strong sense of collective identity. So, according to the above theories, schooling reinforces the “social reproduction” that relies on stifled thought (Carmangian, 2008, p. 48). In this view, division creates compliance.

Similar to Gatto (2012), McLaren (2009), Foucault (2008), and Carmangian (2008), legal scholar and Harvard professor, Martha Nussbaum (2015) argued that compliance is reinforced in school. Paralleling Gatto’s (2015) theory that schools prime students for consumption, Nussbaum’s (2015) essay “Education for profit, education for democracy” detailed how—as opposed to educating the whole person—schools train students to “memorize and regurgitate on mandatory national examinations” (p. 67), which sets them up to support premises that counter their own interests. For example,
Nussbaum (2015) said that poor people usually rally behind the goal of a higher GNP even though high production does not necessary reflect democracy. However, Nussbaum felt that set pedagogical premises prevent the kind of critical thinking necessary to question this power structure.

Boal (2002) said often we have “crowns” or an “allegiance to anyone or idea” (section 10), and Foucault said we absorb “fixed identities” as we inherit these premises (McLaren, 2009, p. 72). However, Freire (2009) believed critical inquiry could help break fixed structures: when the world is “no longer described with “deceptive words,” it “becomes the object of that transforming action by men which results in their humanization” (p. 60). This transformation can happen, claimed Nussbaum (2015) when citizens began to think of themselves as a collective whole as opposed to individuals with distinct needs. In this way, education could foster collective synergy as opposed to collective compliance.

To break collective complicity, Nussbaum (2015) argued, schools should encourage more creativity and critical thinking. Hierarchical power structures are not only threatened by a “dangerous whole,” Nussbaum (2015) claimed, but also by the development of the whole person. This is why Nussbaum (2015) argued that democracy needs the humanities, for the humanities foster an appreciation of culture, art, religion, rhetoric, and literature, and those skills encourage critical thinking. In other words, Nussbaum (2015) believed that the best way to promote critical thinking was to educate the whole person. By educating the whole person, she argued, schools might encourage the kinds of citizens that would criticize themselves, traditions, and policies. This meant making rhetoric, reading, literature, and writing as vital as math and science. Tagore
(2015), also a proponent of educating the whole person, said we should adopt the Visva-Bharanti’s philosophy of the “ideal of unity in all the activities in our institution” (p. 43). By studying various insights about how the world is, said Ruti (2006) we might see how we are unconsciously managed, we can create movements in those structures to assert our power.

Allowing more creativity and flexibility, some claim, can prompt deeper kinds of questions. E. O. Wilson (2002) felt that narrative could help scholars reach a wider audience, and the transparency of that prose would enable the readers to gain deeper insights from the writer, thus facilitating collective exchange. Others felt the process of writing in a narrative way freed the writer to think more critically. For example, instead of removing the author’s voice and investment in educational inquiries, some claim that allowing more narrative will lead to more questions about where we stand in the world.

According to Boal (2002), “narrative digs deeper into subjective” and helps us “declare identity” (section 15). In her academic essay, “How to Tame a Wild Tongue,” Gloria Anzaldua (2008) says that although mainstream people strive to tame the Pachucos, her language is mixed, secret, and transgressive. Her writing itself is rebellious: “So if you really want to hurt me, talk badly about my language. Ethnic identity is twin skin to linguistic identity—I am my language” (Anzaldua, 2008, p. 46). She broke from traditional form of academic writing by weaving in Spanish words and free verse to explore her position in society. Similar to McLaren (2009)’s notion that education should help us think about our roles in society, politically and socially, Anzaldua (2008) posited that the act of creative and academic writing together helped deepen her examination. Anzaldua (2008) concluded by saying, “I will have my voice: Indian, Spanish, white. I
will have my serpents’s tongue—my woman’s voice, my sexual voice, my poet’s voice” and that voice has defiant power (p. 47).

In “Achievement of desire,” Richard Rodriquez (2008) explained that he used an intimate voice to explore how education affects class, ethnicity, culture, and family connection. While McLaren (2009) said the role of critical pedagogy was to discover how to make our lives better, Rodriguez (2008) said he used his writing revealed his pain, as he detailed how advancing in education meant he had to “balance allegiance” between home, a warm culture of Mexican immigrants, and school, scholastics (p. 549).

Rodriquez detailed how his allegiance to what Boal (2002) called “crowns” in society also created a murky self-identity. He confided to the reader: “What I am about to say to you has taken me more than twenty years to admit . . . schooling was changing me and separating me from the life I enjoyed before becoming a student” (sic, Rodriquez, 2008, p. 547). He showed that a creative voice helped him understand that education takes “self-transformation,” while school promotes “imitation” (Rodriquez, 2008, p. 560). He claimed even the “scholarship” student “relies on his teacher” and “becomes in every obvious way the worst kind of student, a dummy mouthing the opinion of others” (p. 560). (p. 560). At the same time, he applied this cognitive dissonance (processing two conflicting ideas at the same time) by also processing that higher education can bring enlightenment: “my education finally had given me ways of speaking and caring about that [loss]” (p. 563). So unlike what Feynman (2010) and Friere (1993) found in Brazil, Rodriguez (2008) showed that by fusing academic and creative writing, American higher education promoted both elevation and revelation instead of imitation and capitulation.

Mario Vargas Llosa (2002) argued that reading literature, especially, foments
critical thinking and facilitates collective exchange. Because literature connects humans by common experiences across time and space, Vargas Llosa believed that good literature is essential to democracy. He also believed reading literature was the best way to cultivate one’s language. If we do not read literature, Vargas Llosa (2002) explained, we limit our language, and if we limit our language, we lack the right vocabulary to, for example, describe oppression (the term “Orwellian,” for example). In fact, Vargas Llosa (2002) argued that without literature, we would turn into aphasics who lacked the vocabulary to even understand when we were dissatisfied. Dissatisfaction, Llosa claimed, is a key catalyst for change.

Similarly, Frederick Douglas (2010) described how literature can create the kind of dissatisfaction that prompts change. After he learned to read, Douglas (2010) said he was changed by a particular dialogue in *The Columbian orator* that showed the injustice of slavery. Once he understood that injustice, he began to abhor his enslavers. He even wanted to kill himself. But this anguish motivated him to become an abolitionist.

Similarly, in her book *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, Azar Nafisi (2012) described how the vivid details in literature conjured up a transgressive spirit: Despite their “repressive state” in Iran, Nafisi’s (2012) female students talked about creating their “own little pockets of freedom” (p. 514). Nafisi (2102) said “the worst crime” of “totalitarian mindsets is that they force their citizens, including their victims, to become complicit in their crimes” (p. 519). But Nafisi described how literature helped the girls think about ways to assert their individual agency.

This enlightenment is what Plato (1976) depicted in “Allegory of the cave.” He described constructions that were presented to prisoners in a cave, and it was the
prisoners willingness to believe these false constructions that kept them oppressed. When one escaped and saw the light, he recognized his previous enslavement. But when he returned to tell the other captives, they said he was crazy. Plato’s (1976) point was that that one’s captivity was predicated on one’s complicity in the oppression. This is similar to Foucault’s (2008) description of invisible, divisive, and unconscious structures that help manage a populace to prioritize production. In modern times, this aligns with Nussbaum’s (2015) view that schools prioritize neoliberalism over equality.

Neoliberalism, some claim, stifles thinking even in universities. In his book The responsible methodologist, scholar Aaron Kuntz (2015) said researchers are taught to test, box, reduce, and relay information. Neoliberalism encourages reduced and standardized methods, Kuntz (2015) claimed, because consolidated information is easy to absorb and compare. These tangible results are what scholars use to compete for grants, jobs, tenure, and publications, and so these researchers tend to categorize findings into clean conclusions. However, Kuntz (2015) claimed, this practice hinders transformation since it often overlooks marginalized individuals or groups between the categories and thus oversimplifies the whole picture.

Not only can standardized research constraints dismiss the complexity of a problem, claimed Kuntz (2015), but also these protocols can be exploitive. Qualitative researchers Andrea Fontana and James Frey (2005) said the even in the interviewing process, the researcher assumes a posture of neutrality yet takes a position of control as he or she frames the questions, paces the questions, and selects salient data. They found that although these methods limit exploration, the protocols are seldom questioned. Kuntz (2015) felt these unchecked academic protocols impede social justice and truth—or what
Michael Foucault termed *parrhesia*. The best way to uncover this truth, claimed Nussbaum (2015), was to use rhetoric.

By understanding rhetoric, Nussbaum (2015) argued, students could come to understand and invest in the political process. In fact, she used rhetoric herself to explain how neoliberalism relies on policies that exploit the poor to profit the rich. Nussbaum claimed that when countries measure their success by a high gross national product, they dismiss the poor and privilege the rich, yet many schools in the U. S. mirror this very disparity. Public schools do this, she explained, when they prioritize collective, bottom-line results over individual enrichment and empowerment. To describe the disjunction between the practice of the American school system and the principles of American democracy, she crafted a syllogism. Nussbaum (2015) began by citing the Preamble to the Constitution to reiterate our democratic goal to “establish justice” and “promote the general welfare” of the people (p. 62). Nussbaum (2015) also cited Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which states that every citizen should have an equal right to education and to the “full development of the human personality” (p. 62). However, instead of the expected syllogism (Major Premise: The UDHR says every education system should develop the human personality; Minor Premise: U. S. education develops the human personality; Conclusion: The U. S. complies with the UDHR), Nussbaum exposed a different construction. After establishing the American goals (the Preamble and Article 26) for her major premise, Nussbaum’s (2015) minor premise was that “American schools fail to advance the individual since the school system protects the goals of the elite” (p. 66). She concluded that the “growth model is not compatible with goals of democracy” since “achievements in health and education” do not clearly
correlate to “economic growth” (p. 66). In other words, she explained, because the tenets of neoliberalism create a dichotomy that is often fostered by bottom-line numbers, systematic protocols, and easily assessed accountability, schools are in the end treated like businesses.\footnote{1} Humanities are cut as science and technology expands. Nussbaum (2015) concluded that the way to rebalance power was to foster a questioning citizen and rhetoric was a means to asking these questions. However, clear rhetoric, explained Orwell (2012) also depends on the clarity of individual statements.

**Summary of Critical Pedagogy**

While Poststructuralism theorizes that societies often inherit and reinforce set premises without questioning if they are empowering or oppressing the majority of the citizens, Critical Pedagogy evaluates how certain educational premises can prime citizens for oppression. Freire (2010), who pioneered the term Critical Pedagogy in the 1970s, compared constrictive pedagogical teaching practices to a banking system in which the teachers deposit information into students who memorize and repeat the information instead of questioning the material. Gatto (2012) and Nussbaum (2015) argued that this same dynamic happens in American schools that encourage students to memorize and repeat information for standardized tests. This rote learning, they argued, stunts a student’s ability to think critically and become a questioning citizen. This kind of rote response, claimed Kuntz (2015), extends to the university, where researchers accept set premises and protocols instead of intervening to gain more insight and truth. Nussbaum (2015) believed that students would think more critically and be more civically invested

\footnote{1 Although this study focuses on higher education, it is important to investigate how the foundation of American schools shapes advanced academic practices.}
if they had training in rhetoric.

**Rhetoric**

Aristotle believed that citizens could empower themselves by learning to use rhetoric effectively and to discern the rhetoric of others. Similarly, in his chapter “Language and Freedom,” Noam Chomsky (2008) correlated language and social power. He argued that we should study the human mind to understand its call to social justice or its capitulation to oppression, and he believed language is the easiest way to study the mind. Chomsky (2008) said many politicians try to “obscure the fact that the essential and defining property of man is his freedom” (p. 79). Like Plato Chomsky (2008) felt this obfuscation can be achieved with strategic speech. In this lens, there is a need to understand the dynamics of strategy and language.

Linguist Douglas Brown (2000) said that “language helps shape thinking” and “thinking helps shape thought” (p. 72), and George Orwell argued that language has the power to shape a populace. Orwell (2012) described a reflexive relationship between power and language when he claimed language becomes “ugly and inaccurate because our thoughts are foolish, but the slovenliness of our language makes it easier for us to have foolish thoughts” (p. 528). The danger with this, claimed Orwell (2012), is that the “decline of language must ultimately have political and economic causes.

When Orwell (2012) stated, “If language controls thought, then thought controls language” (p. 535), he was particularly referring to the dangers of verbose and vague language. The problem is, he theorized, that it becomes difficult to detect confusion or corruption. When people accept ideas that don’t square with their best interests, explained Orwell (2012), it is usually because they don’t understand what is being said.
In fact, Orwell (2012) said political leaders count on the underclass not understanding their diction. Claims tend to be vague, he said, when the true intention is meant to be disguised. In other words, politicians turn to “euphemism, question-begging,” said Orwell (2012), when the truth is “too brutal to face” (p. 534) or there is a “gap between one’s real and one’s professed aims” (p. 535). Orwell (2012) claimed that if the sentence is “cloudy” (p. 534) enough, then it is difficult to discern if the agenda lines up with the country’s stated interests—or more importantly, if it lines up with the individual’s interests (p. 535). When people do not understand the claim, it becomes difficult to tell if they agree or disagree. This is how Orwell (2012) concluded that “if thought corrupts language, language can also corrupt thought” (p. 535).

In “The present status of rhetorical theory,” Gertrude Buck (2010), a nineteenth-century rhetorician, described the difference between manipulative and ethical arguments, or more specifically the difference between the Platonic and sophistic approaches. A platonic exchange is supposed to be a mutual communication for mutual discovery and truth (Plato, 2015). But instead of a platonic exchange, explained Buck (2010), this sophistry (or spun language) is designed for the speaker to impose his or her ideas on the hearer. Sophists might engage the listener, she explained, but only as a strategy to win. This is how Buck (2010) concluded that the “art of rhetoric is the art of war” (p. 499).

Plato felt sophistic rhetoricians were especially egregious in the way they manipulated their audience. Pericles use persuasive language to reengage the Athenians in war with Sparta, yet in 55 CE, Lucius Seneca (2010), a well-respected scholar and statesman in ancient Rome, challenged the contradictory language of Pericles, saying
they created “a deceptive semblance of reality” (cited in Rottenberg, 2010, p. 21).

Seneca also examined the abstruse and abstract language of other sophists. In his piece “On liberal and vocational studies,” Seneca said, “These ‘people provide me with knowledge that is not going to be of any use to me, while the others snatch away from me any hopes of ever acquiring any knowledge at all” (cited in Rottenberg, 2010, p. 21). The manipulative use of sophistic language was a reason why Aristotle believed every citizen should study rhetoric. Aristotle believed this training could help people better discern how language is shaped and how premises are crafted.

While Plato believed rhetoric was used to oppress, Aristotle believed rhetoric could empower people both in speaking and listening. He felt this power came from one’s manner of speech and clarity of claims. Aristotle showed how people could craft convincing and ethical claims (or enthymemes) by using rhetorical strategies such as logos (logic), pathos (appealing to the audiences’s needs, values, and emotions), and ethos (credibility, clarity, and character). Aristotle believed that deductive arguments could help citizens be more discerning, for it would give them a tool to distinguish the soundness of arguments. He elaborated that rhetoric could elucidate the truth if one argued syllogistically: if the major premise and minor premise were true, the conclusion would be true. Thus, understanding syllogisms\(^2\) could help citizens disentangle the premises of another person’s argument, which could help them understand the true intention of the claim and defend against political manipulation. Although Aristotle felt legal courts should rely on logos, not pathos, to reach a closer probability of truth (so judges would be swayed by established premises, not emotion), he argued the

\(^2\) This syllogistic structure is what Nussbaum (2015) used to describe how Neoliberalism exploits the poor.
combination of credibility, heart, and reason was the most powerful communication style.

Summary of Rhetoric

While Aristotle believed learning rhetoric could help citizens craft their claims more clearly as well as expect others to deliver transparent claims, Plato believed rhetoric could be used to obscure the truth. Orwell (2012) this obfuscation happened most easily when sophisticated politicians used vague or verbose language. Orwell (2012) believed that because clear language could expose one’s intentions, cleaning up both academic and political speech was the first step toward “political regeneration” (p. 528). Orwell (2012) claimed writers and speakers should call up concrete mental images so that the audience can grasp their meanings. However, instead of creating concrete mental images, Orwell (2012) wrote that politicians and professors alike resort to verbal limbs, vague phrases, and verbose language. As Orwell unpacked examples of elaborate scholarly sentences, he exposed that little content remains. This is why Orwell argued that there were high stakes to accepting vague or verbose language.

Summary of Literature Review

According Orwell (2012) and Achebe (2015), vague and verbose language is conducive to political conformity, for when people do not understand what is being said, they will struggle to tell if they agree or disagree. However, this vague language, many say, pervades both politics and academia. Some say academics use obscure language when they are trying to disguise what they do not know (Trimble, 2011; Pinker, 2004) or incomplete results (Cutting, 201). Others say overwrought language is an inherited tradition that is reinforced by bureaucracy (Lanham, 2002; Trimble, 2011, De Button, 2017; Orwell, 2012). Lakoff (2004) discussed the pain of reading essays from college
sophomores who modeled the academese of many scholars. Trimble (2010) and Lanham (1983) argued that we should challenge the common premise that detached academic writing is effective writing. When Ruti (2006) argued that poststructuralism could be used to question such premises, she included that more transparent writing could help more people consider the ramifications of set premises.

Linguists have detailed how language we use typically corresponds to the language we use, and the language we use helps reinforce our social roles. Lakoff (2004) detailed how those who have traditionally used less direct language have tended to take a more subordinate position in society. Holmes (2011) reported that those who used more direct speech tended to assume a more dominant position in life, and men typically had more direct speech.

Poststructuralists such as Foucault (2008) looked at these unconscious power dynamics in a more global and philosophical way. He theorized that it can be difficult to comprehend meanings that shape our social hierarchies because they are often “omnipresent and omniscient” (211)” as well as “visible and unverifiable” (215). This order will not just be reinforced by neighbors and teachers and parents, said Foucault (1977) but by institutions such as schools so a larger invisible social machine could drive national production. Butler (1988) concurred that the repetition of acts is what keeps both meanings and hierarchies in place. Nevertheless, Ruti (2006) felt poststructuralism could offer a “model of creativity” that allowed people to review power by emphasizing “the signifier” and “the slippery nature of all processes of meaning-making” (p 49). Lacan (1977) referred to the signifier as language.

Lacan (1977) believed that language fabricated us into social roles. He said we
construct a self that fits in the Symbolic Order, for the symbolic is the law, and we tend to accept the meanings of signifiers that existed before we were born. Lacan (1977) believed the best way to understand elusive signifiers and the best way to understand our own meanings is to study the role of language in our lives. In fact, Lacan (1977) believed language was the key controller of a reflexive and multifaceted power structure. Just as Lacan (1977) described language as an unconscious tool of power, Orwell (2012) described how vague language was tool for political conformity, and Lakoff (2004) described vague language was a tool of exclusion and division.

According to Critical Pedagogy, this division and exclusion can start in early in school. Freire (2009) argued that social inequity relies on collective compliance, and this compliance is inculcated by certain educational premises. Rote learning, regurgitation, and restrictive pedagogy, he claimed, can prevent students from questioning content or traditions. Moreover, when schools discourage students from questioning teachers or traditions, he theorized, students are primed to accept larger social and political policies. In other words, asymmetrical power structures rely on fixed pedagogical premises.

In the university, Kuntz (2015) argued that this compliance and bureaucracy is perpetuated by set protocols that are motivated by neoliberalism. These protocols, he elaborated, encourage researchers to write like technocrats who categorize and oversimplify information. To achieve clean, bottom-line categories, Kuntz (2015) explained, information is extracted from context, and this prevents scholars from intervening for transformative justice. That is why Freire (2009) urged teachers and students to think critically about the premises that shape pedagogy.

Tagore (2015), Nussbaum (2015), and Gatto (2012) also believed that set
educational practices impede individual agency. Gatto (2012) argued that restrictive and divisive pedagogical structures teach elementary students learn to conflate opposition with disloyalty, so a majority will go into the labor class and be managed by an elite few. This is meant to increase production and promote a populace that vote and consume as directed. To create the critical thinking necessary to resist these kinds of neoliberal structures, Nussbaum (2015) proposed that students should take more classes in the humanities, such as rhetoric, for these courses could promote the critical thinking necessary for individual empowerment.

Aristotle claimed rhetoric could facilitate this empowerment. Effective rhetoric involves persuading others with ethos, pathos, and logos, he explained. In fact, Aristotle claimed knowing rhetoric would help citizens see sophistic language for what it is—which, according to Plato was powerful manipulator. Orwell (2012) claimed vague language easily disguises sophistry and fallacies, which “favorable to political conformity” (p. 534). In his view, when words are obscured, we are less likely to defend against corruption. Orwell said, “If thought corrupts language, language can also corrupt thought” (2012, p. 535). Orwell believed that the best way to fight this corruption was to clean up our own language and to expect transparency from others.

Pinker (2004), Williams and Colomb (2010), Trimble (2011), Lanham (2002), and Tan (2012) detailed different ways one could clarify one’s writing for the reader. The benefits of this clarity, they pointed out, was that it would facilitate collective exchange and individual empowerment.

To reiterate Foucault (1977), it is difficult to see the roots of common social and political power because we often fail to question the premises we inherit. He explained
these premises are established by an intricate and invisible panoply of power relations that rely on division, and that these divisions are reinforced in institutions such as schools. In the university, divided premises about what constitutes powerful writing in academia could be an example of that division. So while the role of divisive discourse has been applied to larger power structures, such as race or gender dichotomies, and there has been extensive analysis of constricting premises in educational institutions, but there needs to be more discussion about the impact of constricting academic discourse premises in the university so that students are learning the power of language.

Scholars have addressed the social implications of divisive or constricting pedagogical premises in K-12 education (Gatto, 2012; Freire, 2009; Nussbaum, 2015; Tagore, 2015), and Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) has evaluated the connection between verbose language and diminished social power (Lakoff, 2004; Tannen, 1990). However, fewer studies have combined these investigations at the university level.

More research needs to explore the connection between constricting premises and restrictive writing in higher education so that professors encourage their students to think critically, communicate confidently, and write clearly. This starts with questioning key premises of scholarly writing. This study intends to fill the gap in the literature by investigating causes for vague and verbose academic writing as well as ways to cure it. In sum, this study will research what is wrong with vague and verbose academic writing, why it persists, and what can be done to cure it so that teachers and students alike can practice clear and concise academic writing.
CHAPTER III
RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Statement of the Problem

Unclear scholarly writing, say many scholars, can diminish the credibility of the writer and hinder collective exchange. This goes against the university’s goal to advance the individual and promote intellectual discoveries. By seeking the perspectives of 6 professors and 93 college students, this study explored potential pedagogical and philosophical reasons that both starting and seasoned scholars might write an unclear way. Investigating these reasons was meant to open the discussion for possible changes that might clarify this writing style. This chapter describes the design, setting, participants, instruments, reliability, data collection, data analysis, and researcher of that investigation.

Design

This investigation used an inductive, qualitative research design. Creswell (2009) explained that “the landscape of qualitative research procedures shows diverse perspectives” that range from “social justice” to “ideological perspectives” (p. 173), and a motivation for this study was to look at ideological perspectives that might hinder the power of one’s of language—and potentially limit one’s social power. Qualitative researchers also tend to use an inductive approach that allows participants to shape the themes of the study. In this way, the themes are built from “the bottom up” (Creswell, 2009, p. 175). So instead of imposing a view, the researcher focuses on “learning the meaning that the participants hold about the problem or issue” (p. 175). The research process itself remains “emergent,” as the “phases of the process may change after the
researcher enters the field and begins to collect data” (p. 176). For this study, both the process and the themes emerged from the ground up.

Accordingly, this study also relied on grounded theory, which Bodkin and Biklin (2016) defined as a procedure “in which the researcher collects data and does analysis at the same time,” or put differently, an inductive approach that takes information and makes sense of it (p. 263). Creswell (2009) similarly explained that grounded theory allows emergent themes to be identified in an inductive, holistic way (p. 201), and that allows one to “describe a research problem that can best be understood by exploring a concept or phenomenon” (Creswell, 2009, p. 98). Again, for this study, that phenomenon is a pattern of unclear scholarly writing.

In addition to grounded theory, the design of this research was supported by the theoretical framework known as Discursive Psychology. Theoretical frameworks may be “organized around identifying the social, political, and historical context of the problem” (p. 176), and Discursive Psychology aided in identifying the social, political, and historical context of unclear language. In this way, the researcher aimed to provide a “holistic account” of the various collected interpretations and to add her own interpretation in a way that the “complex picture” could be understood by the audience (p. 176). By promoting that understanding, this researcher wanted to open the possibility for new theories and themes to emerge.

In essence, this qualitative study was supported by a theoretical framework as well as a “strategy of inquiry” that sought information from the ground up (Creswell, 2009, p. 193). That approach enabled the process and themes to emerge—as opposed to
evaluating the data from the lens of a set premise, or a deductive approach that forced a conclusion.

**Setting**

Qualitative researchers, Creswell (2009) elaborated, typically observe their subjects and interview their participants in “natural settings” as they collect data (p. 175). In this case, that natural setting was the university. The Bay Area is known as a melting pot of diverse ethnicities, cultures, religions, sexualities, and socio-economic levels, and that is one of many reasons this Bay Area university was selected. Because this campus offers undergraduate, graduate, and doctoral-level courses, it provided a wide range of insight into traditional premises of scholarly writing. While the professors’ feedback was obtained through Skype, phone, or written response, the students were questioned in campus classrooms.

**Selected Course**

The class selected for the setting of this study was a core writing course, which for the purpose of this study, will be called Rhetoric and Writing II or RW II. This course is generally taken during a freshman’s second semester to fulfill the university’s academic writing requirement. Because RW II is neither a first semester nor an upper division course, most of the attending students are in the process of declaring their majors in various disciplines. Moreover, in RW II, students are meant to learn writing skills that can transfer to those disciplines, and so this course was purposefully selected because the students were in the midst of processing that transfer.

To take RW II, students must have completed the requirement for the first semester of freshman composition. While this is typically RW I, some students test out or
finish an equivalent elsewhere, such as at a junior college. Those students who have completed RW I have typically covered specific structural, syntactical, stylistic, and rhetorical strategies. In fact, in this department’s curriculum, all RW I students are required to write a rhetorical analysis to ensure they understand ethos, pathos, and logos, which are forms of persuasive argument.

The focus on persuasion is significant because academic writing in other disciplines is typically designed to be more objective (or less persuasive) than the writing in the rhetoric classes. While rhetoric classes focus on research and objective presentation, they also focus on crafting claims. For context, Aristotle (2009) said that to build a successful claim, the rhetorician needs ethos, logos, and pathos. Ethos means building the credibility of the writer or speaker so the audience will listen to the claim, logos is the logic to support that position, and pathos is the emotional appeal designed to sway the audience. Because this is the last required academic writing class for many students, skills such as structure, format, support, grammar, coherence, cohesion, and style are meant to be mastered by the end of the semester. While it was assumed that RW II impacted the students’ perception of academic writing, it was also assumed that the students were learning about writing in other disciplines. Therefore, because the participating students were of diverse majors but enrolled in RW 2, their perceptions of effective writing seemed particularly valuable.

**Population**

The students in RW II were purposefully selected to reflect the perspectives of the students across the university. “Purposeful selection,” as Creswell (2009, p. 178) termed it, calls for analyzing a group that will reflect the larger group, so the participants needed
to be similar in background. While the selected students were similar to one another in age—mostly 17-19 years old—with similar preparation in academic writing, they were dissimilar to the university’s upper division students age, preparation levels, and experiences. However, the mixture of ethnicities and political, economic, and religious backgrounds was meant to reflect the diversity of the general student body. As Magnusson and Maracek (2015) wrote, institutions such as schools have “their own formal structures and informal hierarchies and relationships” (p35) and that means they will present different experiences. Purposeful selection looks to include a “full range of those experiences” (Magnusson & Maracek, 2015, p. 35). Because RW II is broadly required, it was selected to reflect diverse individual experiences, the diverse Bay Area demographic, and the diverse university demographic.

However, a weakness in the study was that this researcher taught two of the courses that selected to be researched. What made this a convenient sampling was that 29 of the participants were her students. Therefore, other efforts were taken to maintain a diverse pool of participants. One of those efforts was to collect data from other classes. So 64 students were selected because they were learning from other RW II professors. In total, 93 students and 6 professors were purposefully selected for this study.

The purpose of questioning students was to understand the kind of writing they felt they needed to master to advance in the university, while the purpose of questioning professors was to understand—in a more dimensioned way—how professors perceive, prioritize, and promote effective scholarly writing. While this study sought similar groups of students for comparison, it sought professors of dissimilar disciplines. To elicit different individual perspectives, stratification methods were also used to select
professors of different positions, teaching experience, genders, and ethnicities. Despite their contrasts, this study intended to isolate consistent notions that these professors had about scholarly writing. With this “purposeful selection,” this researcher recruited professors who represented the following disciplines: history, linguistics, psychiatry, anthropology, creative writing, and rhetoric and writing.

To protect the privacy of the university, course, and participants (Bodkin and Biklin, p. 47), all names were changed. In the initial data analysis, pseudonyms were used to reflect the diversity of the students. Quotes were placed around the names in the initial data analysis; however, not even pseudonyms were used in final data description. A summative account (with supporting quotes) of the students’ perceptions of scholarly writing was used to provide context for the professors’ feedback. The professors’ feedback was also presented anonymously. Instead of using pseudonyms, this researcher wanted to emphasize the discipline of the professor. That is why the participants were ultimately referred to as “the historian,” “the linguist,” “the psychiatrist,” “the anthropologist,” “the creative writer,” and “the rhetorician.”

The historian has a Ph.D in History, has won a Pulitzer Prize, has won the National Book Award, and has published several books on American History. He attended and taught at Ivy League universities on the East coast. Based on his experience, he was well-versed in scholarly protocols and styles of writing in higher education.

The linguist was educated in Europe, where she earned her doctorate in linguistics. She also conducted research in Africa, where she evaluated connections between language and social justice. She published books and articles in linguistics, and since moving to the U. S., she has taught linguistics at a top tier university in the Bay
Area, where she teaches both undergraduate and graduate students. In addition to her teaching, she is the editor of a scholarly journal in higher education, so she understands scholarly writing not only as a writer but also as an editor.

The psychiatrist is a medical doctor in the field of psychiatry. She was raised in Iraq and moved to the U. S. for medical school, and she has lived in the Bay Area for most of her practicing career. She has training in academic and creative writing, and she has taught other doctors how to write in their field.

The anthropologist has an MBA, a law degree, and a Ph.D in anthropology. He has over twenty-five scholarly publications, many of which focus on social justice. The anthropologist has taught graduate students at the Jesuit university used for this study. His classes in anthropology encourage students to learn from past marginalized cultures as well as current hegemonic structures so that they can envision ways to create more democratic societies. Although this professor was fluent with different academic protocols and language styles of diverse disciplines, his interview particularly focused on elements of qualitative writing in anthropology and general education.

The creative writer is the author of a best-selling book and a professor who taught at the Jesuit university being studied for this dissertation. Although his Ph. D was English Literature from an Ivy League university, he left academia for a career as a sportswriter and television commentator. While continuing to work as a sportswriter, he returned to the university to teach in the MFA department.

The rhetorician is also a professor at the Jesuit university that was studied. Her degree is in Creative Nonfiction but she teaches in the rhetoric department. To add context, rhetoric and composition departments typically hire literature and creative
writing specialists because their training covers the same skill set needed to teach researched, analytical, organized, logical, grammatical, and presentable essays. It often happens that these professors get on-the-job training in rhetoric to learn the persuasive strategies, or artistic proofs, that Aristotle defined. All of the professors in the rhetoric department have expertise in teaching research and academic writing.

**Instruments.**

To investigate the causes and cures of unclear scholarly writing, this study relied on the researcher’s own instruments, which were interview questions crafted by the researcher.

**Research Questions**

Three umbrella questions were crafted to organize this study:

1) What are the priorities for effective academic writing? What features mark that writing as effective?

2) What contributes to vague and verbose writing? Where, in university writing, is this style most prevalent?

3) What can be done to help students write more concisely and concretely across the disciplines?

Follow up questions were crafted to draw out specific details. These follow-up questions were originally inspired by Cahill’s (2010) dissertation and Toor’s (2016) interview series. Cahill (2010) and Toor (2016) asked other academics their perceptions and expectations of good academic writing. Those questions were modified, expanding on, and field-tested by five people or more (Roberts, 2004, p. 138). For this study, six individuals who were department chairs, coordinators, or professors of academic writing suggested revisions and ultimately approved these final questions:
**Research Question 1:** What are the priorities for effective academic writing? What features mark that writing as effective?

For Professors:

How would you distinguish scholarly writing (in your field) from other academic writing (in other academic fields)?

What are the attributes of this style? Can you name some specific features?

What are the drawbacks [of this style]? Can you name some specific features?

Do you sense there are any social ramifications for the continued use of this style?

Do you sense there are any political ramifications for the continued use of this style?

For Students:

How would you distinguish scholarly writing from other writing?

What are the attributes of this style? Can you name some specific features?

What are the drawbacks? Can you name some specific features?

**Research Question 2:** What contributes to vague and verbose writing? Where, in university writing, is this style most prevalent?

For Professors:

What do you believe causes those drawbacks?

What elements did your professors prioritize for good scholarly writing?

Were you encouraged to write for a readership beyond your discipline? If so, how?

For Students:

What elements do your professors prioritize for good scholarly writing?
Research Question 3: What can be done to help students write more concisely and concretely across the disciplines?

For Professors:

What are your priorities/techniques for teaching students about good academic writing?

Do you believe any protocols/practices with style, format (MLA/APA, syntax (active/passive), or pronouns (first/third person) should change in your or any other academic discipline? If so, which?

For Students:

Have you been encouraged to write for a wide readership? If so, how?

The first section of the Results section described the participants’ responses in narrative form. The second part of the Results section organized those responses according to generated themes. The student feedback provided context for those themes; however, the professors’ responses primarily generated the themes that led to the philosophical and pedagogical conclusions of this study.

Reliability and Validity

To ensure reliability and validity, all of the participants were purposefully selected to represent a stratified sampling that would ensure the diversity of the study. After obtaining written permission from each volunteer and eliciting feedback in the way that was respectful, convenient, and effective, this researcher sustained a chain of evidence by taking and retaining detailed notes. Thick description, as described by Geertz (1973), was used to describe the details of the data collection process. After the data was collected, double-checked, and transcribed from the participants who did interviews, the
transcriptions were returned for clarification. In addition to obtaining the participants’ written consent, documenting the data collection, transcribing, clarifying, triangulating (the students’ with the professors’ responses), and protecting the individual’s answers, the data was then coded. Those codes were consistent and cross-checked before any findings could be concluded.

This process of data collection was reviewed by an outside expert who is trained in education and research. This encouraged the researcher to account for her own bias and to include data that went against her original assumptions (Creswell, 2009, p. 192). In sum, by following these validated protocols to glean feedback from a stratified sample of participants, this researcher collected, identified, coded, categorized, analyzed, verified, described, and interpreted findings that could potentially add insight into the causes of cures of unclear scholarly writing.

**Procedures**

While the students were asked to respond to five questions in writing, the professors were asked to respond to ten questions in writing or through interviews. The interviews lasted from twenty to forty-five minutes. Some preferred not to be recorded, so notes were taken instead. These notes and interviews were transcribed and returned to the interviewees to expand, clarify, and approve their responses. This took approximately fifteen minutes. Those who opted to respond in writing may have taken longer, so the approximate time commitment for the professors varied.

This researcher was careful not to impose on the participants. She crafted questions and recruited participants in a way that would “minimize disruption” (Creswell, 2009, p. 90). This researcher asked to collect data during class time but care was taken
not to disrupt the professor’s agenda or monopolize class time. The students who volunteered to participate were given fifteen minutes to sign a consent form and answer five questions on a handout. While the questions were open-ended, they were designed so students could jot down phrases instead of writing full sentences.

Care was also taken not to impose on the participating professors. The professors selected to be interviewed were sent short emails instead of formalized solicitation letters (See Appendix B). A formal letter seemed to signal a removed, time-consuming task, whereas a quick personalized email seemed to emphasize the value of each individual’s time and the value each could add to the study. The email clarified that the professors would be asked no more than ten questions and that they could respond through Skype, a written response, a phone interview, or in person. However, the professors were encouraged to elaborate on any question or explore any reflections prompted by the ten questions.

**Data Collection and Analysis**

For the sake of expediency, I will switch to first person to describe my process of data collection and analysis, as Creswell (2009) and Bodkin and Biklin (2016) advise qualitative researchers to do (p. 194). I will also use “thick description” to explain the details of how this data was obtained and recorded in my field notes (Creswell, 2009, p. 200) during the spring semester of 2018.

In total, I collected information from six professors and six classes of rhetoric and writing students. The first class was listed in my notes as part of Group 1: (Participants 1-29). It was my own RW II class, which consisted of ten students. Initially, I was not planning to use this group for the study but to experiment with the time, procedures,
privacy, and collection of data. First, I passed out the consent forms and gave a brief account of what was expected of them and how their identities would be protected. I explained that their answers would in no way impact their standing in the class and that their feedback would help teachers benefit from their insight. Then I passed out one-page sheets with five questions. I asked them to respond not by sharing what they took from my class (especially since we were only a few weeks into the semester) but by giving an overall account of what they learned from professors of diverse disciplines. I also asked them to jot down (in their own handwriting) first impressions and not to worry about writing full or grammatical sentences.

However, even though I was hoping for natural responses in a natural setting (Creswell, 2009, p. 200), some of the responses felt unnatural. After I collected the consent forms and questionnaires, I noticed that many students wrote their responses in a formal, academic way, with several function words (words that lack content) as opposed to content words (words that are more specific, like “sources” or “structure”). This seemed to slow the students’ ability to provide concrete detail, so for my next class, a class of nineteen students, I specifically asked them to avoid crafting sentences and to instead jot phrases or words. However, I again noticed that the fully crafted sentences were written in a formal way, which made me think they might be trying to write academically for the teacher instead of sharing their own authentic and immediate responses. Also, the fully crafted sentences seemed to provide less data but take more time. I was mindful that if this activity took more than ten minutes, it would conflict with the time-frame I promised the professors who agreed to let me visit their classes. As I said, initially I thought I would use my own students only for practice, but after
comparing their responses with those of the other students, I found that my own students’ responses helped show a pattern of impressions, a pattern that contributed to the findings in this study.

To collect the data from Group 2 (Participants 30-59), I visited two more RW II classes that met at approximately the same times as mine: Wednesday at 9:15 am and 10:30, February 14, 2018. The mood was good. The professor had already written his agenda for the class on the board, and I understood how generous he had been to give up this class time. His students did not know I was coming, but they were pleasant, and all but one student agreed to volunteer their responses. By then, I knew to ask them to jot down their impressions instead of writing full sentences and this again generated more raw concrete reactions. It became even more clear that succinct answers generated more data.

By the time I questioned Group 3 (Participants 60-93), the procedure was more streamlined. I knew to ask students to write their names and emails legibly. To retain their anonymity, I had already learned to assign the same number to the questionnaire and consent form. This procedure went more quickly. Also, typing up the relevant information went more quickly.

The data collection from the professors took longer. The interviews were designed to last approximately twenty minutes, but two did not want to be recorded, and so I typed frantic notes as they spoke. These interviews took from forty to sixty minutes. Afterwards, I transcribed my notes and and returned them for review. The clarification and expansion time was estimated to be no more than fifteen minutes for professors, but this may have varied. Other professors opted to answer in writing. Some wrote little;
some wrote much. This would have affected time frames. These written responses were not transcribed, but the respondents were invited to expand or clarify their responses at any time. The average commitment for most participants seemed to be from thirty to sixty minutes.

Once the transcripts were finalized, I categorized the responses according to the dominant themes. To do this, I followed a step by step process to compare, contrast, organize, classify, interpret, and present the collected data (Creswell, 2009, p. 194). That involved what Creswell (2009) described as intuitive analysis, which allowed the information to “unfold” from the ground up (p. 201). Bodkin and Biklin (2016) defined this approach as a procedure “in which the researcher collects data and does analysis at the same time,” or put differently, an inductive and qualitative approach that takes information and makes sense of it (p. 263).

To ensure objectivity and to avoid shaping the participants’ answers, the feedback was categorized according to the themes. I started by organizing the information. I deleted function or filler words, typed up the key phrases, annotated, categorized, and coded their responses. Roberts (2004) described the coding process as reading the transcriptions and writing down ideas, starting with one interesting document and asking what it is about, writing more ideas in the margins, listing the topics, clustering similar topics, creating columns of similar topics, distinguishing major from extra topics, abbreviating topics into codes, and writing the codes next to the corresponding information of the transcriptions (p. 143). After this preliminary ordering, Roberts (2004) recommended grouping topics that relate to one another and “drawing lines between categories to show interrelatedness” (p. 143). The researcher can then finalize
abbreviations and categories to do a “preliminary analysis” to see if the information needs to be reordered (Roberts, 2004, p. 154). That was the step by step process I used to organize the data.

Prevalent codes were given the following abbreviations: researched and proven (RP), structured and organized (SO), formal or removed tone (FR), formatted or grammatical (FG), complex vocabulary (CV), complex or difficult ideas (CX), theoretical or philosophical (TP), concise and concrete (CC), premises or protocols (PP), rhetorically strategic or persuasive (RP), flexible or creative (FC), vague or abstract (VA), exclusive or alienating (EX), audience awareness (AA), understandable or readable (UR), time-consuming or laborious (TL), concreteness and concision (CC). There was a “preliminary analysis” before these codes were finalized (Roberts, 2004, p. 154). I noted the most frequent codes, assigned them final codes (as the sample in the appendix D illustrates), and put those codes in a cluster at the end of each section. These clusters appeared to be patterns (Roberts, 2004, p. 143), and those patterns emerged as themes which were presented as the Results of this dissertation.

**Background of the Researcher**

Years ago, as I was washing dishes, a political speech changed me. As a single, white English major with a full-time job in retail, I was more concerned with Victorian fiction and viscose fabrics than real-life issues. Plus, to me, political talk always seemed as cloudy as dirty dishwasher. But as I plunged into my own dishwater, I began listening to the background TV and soon I was tuned in to a State of the Union address. By the time I dried the last dish, I was deeply committed to the idea that education could foster personal power.
I have now been in education for almost twenty years. Even though I earned a B.A. and M.A. in English and an M.F.A. in Creative nonfiction, I have primarily worked as an adjunct professor of Rhetoric and Writing. My experience with rhetoric has convinced me that education can promote not just personal power but also social justice. I have watched my students react to certain speakers or writers with the same reaction I had.

Many feel moved, for example, as they trace how Martin Luther King moved a culture from segregation to integration by channeling language into social power. However, in my own experience as a doctoral student studying sociolinguistics and social justice, some of the most heated social justice issues felt like a chore read, and this was primarily because the language was vague or verbose. When the claims seemed formulaic and the phrases seemed fancy, I detached. So instead of sparking me toward action, the detachment of the writing dulled my reaction. Also, because I felt like I was taking more time to learn less, I started detaching from the discipline. This got me wondering about the potential for the wrong diction to lose a potential advocate. At the same time, as someone crossing from the humanities to the social sciences, I wondered about my own bias.

As a writing teacher who values a certain style, it was difficult to absorb or adopt a different scholarly style. Still, while I understood the need for scholars to remove their own opinion and spotlight the material—not themselves—I also saw how the material became blurred by unnecessary vagueness and verbosity, commonly known as “academese.” That is why, for my dissertation, I wanted to research what was wrong with academese, what caused it, and what could be done so that the next generation of
academic writers and speakers could compel and transform their audience by language as clear as my rinsed and dried water (okay wine) glasses.

**Protection of Human Subjects**

After receiving the approval to proceed from the dissertation committee, this researcher obtained approval from the Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects (IRBPHS) so this research could begin. Steps were taken to avoid disrupting the selected participants, and care was taken to honor all of the appointments and commitments made with them. Before the participants were asked to sign consent forms (See Appendix A), they were provided with the necessary and appropriate information for their role in this study. They were also informed that they could withdraw from the study at any time, without explanation, and that no positive or negative academic, professional, or social consequences would come from participating in the study. The participants were also assured that their rights, privacy, and information would be protected throughout every stage of this study’s data collection and discussion. After the data was officially collected, pseudonyms were used in the coding process, but in the presentation of data, not even pseudonyms were used for any participant. The professors were referred to by their disciplines. Any audio-recordings will remain protected by passcode and all printed transcriptions will stay in a locked and secured location until they are disposed of in three years.
CHAPTER IV
FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

Overview

To research the possible causes and cures for unclear scholarly writing, this study sought the perspectives of professors and university students. This information helped elucidate certain institutional premises that may cause vagueness or verbosity. By making these premises more transparent, and thus clarifying the problem, specific changes could be considered to improve scholarly writing across the disciplines.

This chapter covers those possible causes and changes in two sections: Data Description and Generative themes. The Data Description will primarily detail the feedback of the professors, as this dissertation focused on the professors' responses. The feedback of the students is briefly boxed in the Data Description, and it is also included in the second section, Generative Themes to provide context and comparison. The feedback of all participants was coded, categorized, analyzed, and organized into themes.

The second section of this chapter, Generative Themes, details those themes according to the umbrella questions of this study. For example, in the section under Question 1, which investigated the priorities for effective writing, the themes that emerged from the professors and then the students will be presented. This format will be repeated for Question 2. The students did not respond to Question 3. Here are the three umbrella questions that organized the second part of this chapter.

Research Questions

1) What are the priorities for effective academic writing? What features mark that writing as effective?
2) What contributes to vague and verbose writing? Where, in university writing, is this style most prevalent?

3) What can be done to help students write more concisely and concretely across the disciplines?

As stated above, this first half of this chapter will focus on the students’ and professors’ feedback to these questions. Because the student feedback was used for context and comparison, not for quantitative analysis, the responses of the ninety-three participating students was compressed according to five categories: the features, benefits, and challenges of scholarly writing, what their professors prioritized for effective writing, and if they were encouraged to write for a wide audience.

**Data Description**

According to Students:

**TABLE 1:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Features of Scholarly Writing</th>
<th>Structured: “standardized,” “thesis-driven,” “having an introduction, middle paragraphs, and a conclusion that followed a claim.”</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Formal:</strong> Objective, cautious,” “educating but dry,” “dissociated,” and avoiding the word “I.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Refined:</strong> sophisticated,” “knowledgable,” “credentialed,” “formal,” “fancy,” “academic based,” “intellectual.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Articulate:</strong> “wordy,” a “very scientific vocabulary,” and “complex vocabulary.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Polished:</strong> “properly written,” “perfect grammar,” “driven by rules,” and “formatted.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Complex:</strong> “rigorous,” “involving critical thinking,” was “hard to comprehend,” “confusing” and included “logic that can hardly be understood by normal people, but easy with professionals and scholars.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Persuasive:</strong> rhetorical strategies, such as ethos, pathos, and logos.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Non-scholarly writing:</strong> “laid back,” “everyday speech,” “conversational,” “informal,” “creative,”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Structure</td>
<td>Complex vocabulary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------</td>
<td>--------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“organization,” “multiple main points leading to one consensus,” “properly laid out and outlined,” logical connections,” “organized information”, “well-thought out,” or “developed”</td>
<td>“SAT/ACT words,” “diction,” “full sentences,” “complex sentence structure,” “dense paragraphs filled with academic language,” “specific diction,” “diction is challenging,” “good vocabulary,” “big words,” “wordy but not confusing,” “elevated language,” “scientific vocabulary,” and the “ability to learn new words”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**TABLE 3:**

**Challenges**

**Confusing:** “overly complex,” “too complex ideas,” not clear, vague, “difficult for some of us,” “confusion,” “hard to understand,” “challenging to understand and longer,” “frustrating to read,” “readers get confused,” “sometimes misunderstood,” “hard to understand,” “lack of details,” and not “informative.”

**Constraining:** formulaic “loss of individuality of writer,” “loss of unique style,” “may not allow students to fully express how they feel about the topic because the essay is too formal,” “forces me to leave out some information,” “[loss of] voice,” “character of the writer is lost,” “loss of emotion,” “limit creativity,” “your ‘voice’ is lost in all those big words,” “more rigid,” “lack of simplicity or fresh thoughts,” “limited room for failure, but also imagination,” “must remain within certain subjects,” “no expression,” “no creativity,” “lots of rules,” “no variety of format,” “limitations of what can be written,” “no account for personal experience.”

**Laborious:** “more than one draft to nail it,” “lengthy,” “hardships of writing perfectly,” “long process of knowing what to say,” “difficult to flow paragraphs,” “smooth transitions are harder,” “ability to just write without being told is ‘too simple writing,’” “preoccupied with all of the tasks needed to complete” the paper, “run out of ideas,” “writer’s block,” “repeating yourself too much,” “more time-consuming,” “not everyone can write well academically.”

**Impersonal:** ”gives people security of feeling smart [by using] difficult language,” “lacks personality in style,” “cold and to the point,” “common people are turned off, won’t be as eager to learn,” “defers the average reader to even touch it,” “not inspiring,” “most people aren’t drawn to this style,” “makes [one] not want to read,” “boring,” “less likely to be enjoyed,” “loses reader with impersonal voice,” “hard for the reader to distinguish whether the writer is actually passionate about the topic,” “not enough detail,” “no connection to the writing topic,” “lacks personality in style,” “cold and to the point,” “loses reader with impersonal voice,” and "normal people would have difficulty understanding them.”

**Complex vocabulary:** “wordiness,” “too many words,” “jumbled ideas,” “big and complicated words,” “long,” “lengthy,” “unnecessarily long paragraphs or pieces,” “too complex ideas, words,” “very difficult language,” and “can sound too technical.”
TABLE 4

**Professors’ Priorities**

**Structure:** “a good outlined essay,” “proper structure, acronyms TCQE and SOAPS, clear thesis that organized the rest of the essay,” “intro, body, and conclusion,” “thesis statement that established a clear answer to the question,” “keeping to the point,” or presenting an “organized, focused point.” “structure allows the writing to flow in a way that is strong” and puts “evidence where it needs to be, “answer the teachers’ question

**Support:** “outside sources, examples for points made” “reliable sources, “evidence,” cited examples,” “a “variety of sources,” “support for the argument,”

**Flow:** “good flow. “good flow and organization” to “build the argument” or claim.

**Form:** “proper formatting,” such as “proper MLA/APA citing.” “good grammar,” “good sentence structure,” and to avoid the word “I.”

**Analysis:** “critical and analytical thinking,” “complexity,” explain “important and interesting” elements of the text” but they were also taught to

**Clear language:** content “expressed in a clear, concise way,” show “clear intentions.” “good academic language,” to be mindful of “word usage,” “word choice,” “diction choice,” “use as little words as possible to describe a point.” .” “clarity of thought.”

TABLE 5

**Intended Audience**

**Readership:** “Just the professor,” “not encouraged to write for a wide audience”

**According to Professors:**

To glean answers to the three umbrella questions, six professors of diverse disciplines were asked ten questions: 1) what distinguishes scholarly writing, 2) what are the attributes, 3) drawbacks of this style, 4) causes for those drawbacks, 5) what their own professors prioritized, 6) what audience they were taught to imagine, 7) if any
protocols needed to change, 8) potential social, 9) or political ramifications of this style, and 10) techniques to teach clear writing. For the sake of clarity, in the Data Description, the professors responses are presented in a consistent sequence according to these disciplines: history, linguistics, psychiatry, anthropology, creative writing, and rhetoric.

The Historian:

To understand the causes and cures for unclear scholarly writing, and to get a sense of how professors of various disciplines perceive their own genre of writing, this researcher interviewed a professor of history. The professor has a Ph.D in History and taught at an Ivy League university. He won a Pulitzer Prize, the National Book Award, and published several books on American history, so he was well-versed in the protocols of scholarly writing.

When asked to distinguish academic writing in his field from the academic writing in other fields, he said that historians have more “interdisciplinary space” for “a broad reaching style” than other disciplines such as English or sociology.

He saw the more insular academic writing as a drawback. One field he particularly named as “infected” with this insular style is literary theory. “You don’t know what they’re talking about in the MLA association,” he said. He also described political science writing as using a “tribal” style, but he called the social sciences the “worst.” In fact, he used the term “oxymoron” when it came to the social sciences, suggesting that while the social sciences are meant to study human society and human relationships, they write in a way that is “only translatable to inside scholars.” In history, he said, “there’s nothing quite like that.” A key attribute of scholarly writing in history,
he explained, is that history is connected to the humanities, and as historians write about
the lives of others, it “becomes biography,” and that “forces you into a writing style” that
is more compelling and connected.

The historian felt that one reason for the insular style in literature, political
science, or the social sciences is that these academics are “defensive about their own
legitimacy,” and so they compensate by writing in a way that sounds overly academic.
He explained this by talking about his own experience at a top tier university. If he had
gone to a good public university, he said, he would have “flunked out.” He could only
“play in the majors,” he said, but "not the minors” because there is a “set of rules to
internalize in the majors” that require a certain “dexterity.” He described this dexterity
by explaining what it was not, and he said it was not bound by the constraints of other
academic disciplines. The “academic world is a process of professionalization,” he said,
and that process “inoculates you against any more expansive understanding of human
behavior.” “So you have these smart people” at Ivy League universities writing “micro
histories. So what?” He connected this “so what?” to abstruse scholarly writing, saying
academics “get promoted for doing things that are only understood within the tribe, but
then where are you?” This “pedantic narrowness,” he claimed, which worsens as the
scholar teaches graduate students. Because this narrowness prevents scholars from
“accessing the public,” it prevents the public from benefiting from the scholar’s
discoveries.

Teaching undergraduates, he continued, “forces you to expand, to teach courses
beyond your own field.” He explained how this impacted his writing: “I’m writing to the
same people I’m teaching, people who are really smart and don’t know anything.” He
gave the example of Kurt Vonnegut. Vonnegut said older people have the experience to write a story, while younger people “don’t have anything to say.” When a younger man asked what he should do to be a better writer, Vonnegut told him to “give up.” The historian parallel this to academics: “People who are trapped in the discipline don’t know how to talk about it,” and they “don’t know why what they’re doing is unintelligible, unrelatable.”

Not only is this removed academic style “in another world,” he said, but also “identity politics makes it worse.” He said scholars will say things like “I am interested in exploring . . .” and then bringing that professed “theoretical infrastructure to a set of evidence that doesn’t fit.” This was another reason the historian felt it was a “liability” for a scholar “to be successful with an academic audience.”

When asked what his own professors prioritized for good scholarly writing, he said it was telling a good story, and this circled back to why he thrived in a “big league” university. He explained this with his own story. His first year at university, he thought of quitting. He told his professor, “A lot of these people know more than I do.” But his professor told him, “You can learn what they know; they cannot learn what you know: You can write.” What made him a good writer, his professor told him, was his sense of paradox, a paradox he attributed to being a Southerner, a place that had a “history of that itself.” Capitalizing on that, his professor told him to read the original sources and “tell the story” that was revealed from those sources. “Don’t depend on historiography,” his professor told him, “and don’t depend on what others said.” When the historian asked his professor, “If I don’t know the story, how do I tell that?” the professor responded: “If you don’t know the answer to that, you should leave.” So it was
his natural instinct for story-telling and his professor’s guidance that set up his scholarly writing to be successful.

When the historian was asked if he was encouraged to write for a wide readership, he answered that he learned to write for a larger audience, or the public, not for other academics. He said he never learned to write “academese.” Again, he found that what allows tenure “cripples you as a writer” because the “scholarly audience and the public audience are different animals.” Although he said “some can do it,” he was taught that good academic writers need to “unlearn the syntax and vocabulary” of the academe. Over the years, he added, people told him they wanted to write books the public could read like he did. Again, he attributed this success to his training in the “big leagues,” for this environment did not constrain his instinctive writing skills.

When asked if he felt any protocols of scholarly writing should change, such as the requirement of APA or MLA format, or the use of first person verses third person, he said no. He felt the scholar needs to learn whatever is appropriate in the discipline. There are “rewards set up to do what it does,” he explained, so to succeed as an academic, “that’s what you have to do.” For example, he avoids the first person in his history books but will use “I” in the preface. It all “depends on what you’re writing,” he reiterated. He learned to “how to move from one realm to another,” or “how to straddle both worlds,” as he put it, and he did not see the need to change any set styles.

He was asked if he thought there were any social ramifications to the traditional scholarly style, or academese as he termed it, and first he said, “That’s an academic question!” However, he did say academics tend to communicate with an “inside world” and not with the “outside world.” Those who “opt for an academic identity” tend to live
in a “bubble,” he said, and that creates a “disjunction between who you are as an academic and who you are as a person.” A political ramification to this insular language and identity, he responded to the follow-up question, is that it is “difficult to translate what’s happening to the public.”

When asked about his own priorities and techniques for teaching students good academic writing, he had several responses. First he said there are no techniques to teach someone to be a good writer: “Some people have it, and some people don’t.” He gave the example of Audrey Hepburn walking into a room. “She has it,” he said. “She’s a natural, and she didn’t go to school and learn that.” He felt it was the same way with writing: Someone who “doesn’t have it” will “never be a writer.”

However, he believed students could be taught to be good writers. As his own professor taught him, to be a good academic writer, one had to “unlearn” the “vocabulary and syntax” of the insulated discipline. Also, he felt a person could improve with “sheer practice” and reading the professor’s comments. His own comments would consist of “Huh?” in the margins, but the challenge with commenting on someone’s writing, he explained, is that “you’re trying to play with somebody’s syntax,” and in that way, “you’re playing with their mind, their cognitive processing.” Nevertheless, he said, “They write; you comment.”

He told of how one student came to his office asking for help: "She held up her fingertip and said, ‘I want you to teach me to write with a style that is as distinctive as this fingerprint.’” His advice for students like her is “to create and use language in ways that are sonorous.” The way to practice this, he explained, is to read great writers and try pick up their “rhythm.” Examples of writing with great rhythm, he added, are Fitzgerald’s
The great Gatsby; Kingsly Amis’ Lucky Jim, which is a satire on academics; Nabokov’s daughter, by Stacy Schiff, and Lincoln’s cabinet, by David McCullough, who reportedly learned to write by reading Sports Illustrated. He named Chernow, who wrote the original Hamilton, as an example of someone who knows how to “digest information in a way that’s artful” and that is “not elegant but accessible.” He also recommended Lytton Stratchey, who wrote about the Victorian era—which, said the historian, “can never be written” because “we know too much about them.” When we know too much about a people or era, he explained, we cannot write about it all, so the “process of writing” must be “selective.”

In his view, good writing is instinctive, selective, accessible, and relatable. Most importantly, the writer should know and care about the story. And what the historian cares about is “common humanity.” “We’re all the same,” he said. “We live out our lives. We die.” This is why he felt the priority of writing should be to connect with the reader.

The Linguist:

When the linguist, a professor, editor, and published writer, was asked to distinguish scholarly writing from other writing, she said that scholarly writing refers to other scholars who have done research before. These scholars follow a set structure “that is defined by the institution.”

The attributes of this style, she explained, are that “it requires strong support of evidence and significant facts based on scholarship and research.” For her, however, it was more scholarship-based than research-based because the “claims are linked to scholars who have done thorough work,” and this thorough work provides significant
evidence that “others can draw from in the field.” To make sure the evidence is valid, relevant, and reliable, she continued, those scholars use a “solid methodology.” This methodology ensures “an ethical way of finding data” that is “supported by significant scholars,” so the “claims are not opinion but evidence-based.” What publishers or reviewers tend to value the most, she continued, is the method of data collection, the references, and the consistency of the structure.

However, a drawback of this academic style, she added, is that many scholars tend to use an “academic jargon” that can be especially “challenging for Bachelors or nonacademic readers.” She felt scholars should instead use a language that people “outside their world” can understand; that way their work “can be shared” instead of “staying in their library and bookshelves.” She also felt scholars should write in a way that goes beyond their individual fields so those fields can be “interconnected.”

When asked what might cause scholarly writing to be vague or verbose, she linked the traditional academic style to theology. In particular, she paralleled the language and structure commonly practiced in the university to elements in The Bible: “The way we structure our ideas and the way we research other scholars,” she claimed, is “often in favor of people who grew up reading The Bible,” for they better “understand the structure requested such as footnotes, references, citing, [and] structure.” She pointed out that many priests have their Ph. D.’s in philosophy, and when she worked with them, she noticed the “link between the way they presented theology” and the way they presented their other “academic work.” She clarified that she was only referring to the connection between the academy and Christianity because she reads English and French; she could not speak of other religious books such The Koran, because she does not speak Hebrew
and Arabic. Nevertheless, she felt that the structure and “limitations” of the university follows structures in the Bible. She also compared the disciplines and department protocols—with the department chair and faculty in a pyramid form—to certain hierarchies presented in the Bible.

When asked if she would change any protocols or practices of academic writing, such as the use of APA versus MLA, or first person versus third person, she said she would keep the current structure but stressed the importance of consistency. A consistent set of structures and rules, she explained, “helps us to be thorough in our way of writing.” It also helps with ethical scholarship, she added, for academics learn that if they “take any sentence that doesn’t belong” to them, they give the immediate citation. She found APA format to be the most helpful and accurate, but she felt comfortable switching to the style of a particular discipline. Nevertheless, she saw her students “struggle” to master the different formats and protocols.

When asked about pronoun protocols, she said she preferred first person pronouns. The challenge, she explained, is that scholars are taught to avoid the word “I” in the academe. So, she said she would would use “I” but attribute the idea to a source, such as writing, “I argue according to . . . ” and then cite the source.

She recommended using passive syntax, however, when addressing political issues. “We need to be very careful when we address sensitive issues,” she said, for when “we are not politically correct, there can be career consequences.” That is why she encourages scholars to say, “It is said,” which will protect them both “as workers and researchers.” She also warned that academics need to take a neutral tone when applying for positions, for if they seem “too direct,” they may not be considered “a potential
candidate.” Because universities rely on public funding, she explained, they need to be careful about hiring researchers who seem too opinionated.

At the same time, she felt it was important to use one’s own words when expressing the work of other scholars. “When we use different words,” she elaborated, we access different people.” For some people, she said, certain words “can trigger an understanding that other words cannot.” Depending on the language used or the language of the reader, she found in her experience as both a reader and a writer, scholarly words will have “different subtle meanings.” Triggering these different meanings and bringing a new understanding to the reader is one of the reasons she tells beginning scholars to rephrase instead of using a direct citation.

In her experience, if a scholar used overly complicated language, she would read another scholar’s account of the content. For example, when she read Pierre Bourdieu, one of the most cited French sociologists in academia, she would “read another scholar who rephrased” him because "one needs a special dictionary to understand his words.” He wrote this way, she explained, because of the politics in the academe. Originally, Bourdieu’s language, which reflected a lower class, was “not acknowledged,” and so to prove he could be a part of the higher class, he adopted the abstract style of many academics.

At the same time, she felt it was important for students and scholars to read complex academic language. A benefit of reading scholarly journals, she said, is that it helps “increase and maintain” a vast vocabulary. She added that “one year of university increases one’s words by 2,500.” While she acknowledged that many want the kind of relatable writing that appears in newspapers, she felt that “instead of reducing” scholarly
writing “to journalism,” we should distinguish the language between newspaper and journal articles.

“When we teach writing, she explained, “we teach that we have to look at different genres.” At the same time, she said, “we should try to look at them together because they’re all linked together.” Her main advice for scholars who want to publish—aside from being “well structured”—is to remain “clear and simple” so their ideas can “reach a larger audience.” In her view, successful scholarly writing is a combination of research, methodology, structure, citation, and clarity: “Follow the ‘red thread,’” she said, “to keep the reader captivated.”

The Psychiatrist:

When the psychiatrist was asked to distinguish writing in her field (of medicine) from other fields, she answered that many styles should depend on the context. For example, she explained that expository writing is used for textbooks and scholarly articles to “impart specific, proven, scientific information.” However, she felt scholarly writers should combine narrative and descriptive elements to present case studies, and they should use more persuasive writing to “interpret data” or “argue conclusions” for that data or case study.

A drawback of expository writing, she said, is that is can be “redundant” or it can rely on memorization, which “can be easily forgotten” by students “if not reinforced with practical examples.” That is why she believed scholars should combine various styles to “convey the necessary information without losing the student’s interest.”

While she herself was not encouraged by her own professors to write to for a wide readership, she did not see any major social or political ramifications to language that
was not accessible outside her discipline. Moreover, she did not feel that any practices with protocols, such as the use of third person or APA format, needed to change.

Her main priority for teaching students was to respond to their individual needs. “Some need didactic learning,” she said, “and will memorize and repeat information imparted to them,” while “others learn best by reading a story and applying learned information in a practical setting.” So teaching writing for her is a matter of understanding the student and helping the student understand the context and audience.

The Anthropologist:

The anthropologist, a professor with an MBA, a law degree, and a Ph.D in anthropology, had over twenty-five scholarly publications. Although he was well-versed with different academic protocols and language styles of diverse disciplines, he particularly focused on elements of qualitative writing in anthropology and general education. Many of his classes focus on social justice and ways to empower citizens. He does this by encouraging students to learn from past marginalized cultures as well as current hegemonic structures so they can envision ways to create more democratic societies.

When asked to distinguish the writing in his field from the writing in other fields, he gave a multifaceted response. Given his educational background, he explained that he wrote for “two scholarly audiences, educational research and educational anthropology.” He described both as “somewhat practice oriented although anthropology tends to be a little more theoretical.” Negotiating these different approaches has not been difficult for him, he said, because he likes to write in a layered way, “encompassing new practice, new theory, model building, new policy and sometimes different ways of knowing,”
which is an approach he says fits both fields of educational research and educational anthropology.

He distinguished the expectations for scholarly writing in anthropology from other fields in the academy, describing the scholarly writing of comparative literature as “more philosophical and hardly concerned about practice at all,” while history writers tend to “dwell on matters of concept rather than practice or even lived life.” Conversely, he described his latest book as a combination of “autoethnography with theoretical critique and also new model building—in that it proposes and performs a new, more community based approach to democracy for the U.S.” As a follower of Foucault, his research often studies oppressive power structures, and one of his papers calls for a citizens’ panel to add the people’s voice to larger policy decisions that impact them socially and economically.

His most recent audience has been the “lay public in mainstream newspapers in the form of editorials,” a forum that allows more creative voice and form. Of all the writing styles he practices, he said prefers creative writing. In fact, he shared that he tries to “sneak in creative writing approaches” into his scholarship, and he strives to “overlay that interest and passion” by using a combination of styles and envisioning different audiences. While he conceded that “about a third” of his academic writing “might be construed to be too abstract and theoretical and even inaccessible,” he wants to reach a wide audience, so the rest of his writing is “often storytelling-based,” appealing to both “scholarly and lay circles.”

When asked about the attributes of scholarly writing, he described the empirical and philosophical nature of this form. Mixing the two, he explained, allows for more
complex analysis. In his qualitative writing in particular, he explained, he strives "to weave theory and storytelling to render a sense of ‘intersubjectivity’ and ‘unfinalizability’” to his analysis. To explain what this looks like, he referenced Mikhail Bahktin’s (1984) writing in *Problems of Dostoevsky’s poetics*. He said Bahktin’s interpretation of Dostoyevsky shows how an “accomplished writer will strive to achieve ‘intersubjectivity’ in which each character described in the text maintains her or his own voice and shifting positionality,” so that character does not fall prey to the author’s own particular world view.” If one is able “to establish a degree of ‘unfinalizability,’” he explained, “the story will submit to different possibilities for outcomes for the characters and field site once the storytelling is finished.” For him, the “ideal qualitative write up” includes elements that Bahktin integrated into his own writing:

[I]rony, satire, parody, surprise, turning point for the soul, the hero, double-voicedness, polyphony, carnivale, mixing of prosaic and poetic speech, diatribe, freedom from plot, the fantastic, the comic, the description of national legend at a time of decay and destruction of ethical norms, points of crisis, death and renewal, decrowning, humor.

The anthropologist acknowledged that while these elements are “not always easy to add,” they are “wonderful if they do appear.” Moreover, he claimed his style can potentially render a “complexity and lack of finality, and even a kind of multi-voiced view of truth.”

While he described ways in which scholarly writing could be wonderful, he also detailed ways they were not. In addition to being both time-consuming and mentally exhausting, he added that “the many facets that appear in a write-up of this kind” have the potential to alienate readers who are “looking for clarity and final truth in the form of
dense and abstract scholarly language.” He did add that more open-minded readers and reviewers were starting to change this level of “conservatism,” and he felt the need for finality meant that many academic journals would not publish his kind of “romantic realism” or multifaceted, layered writing.

When asked what might cause scholarly writing to be vague, he focused on conflicts between general research writing and qualitative writing. He felt the “mismatch between the standard, dense, abstract scholarly text” and his own “more open, multi-layered and polyphonic writing” stemmed from the fact that both qualitative and educational research “have been stuck in this self-perceived and self-appointed task of making qualitative data sound scientific.” The problem with trying to sound scientific,” or “positivistic,” he continued, is that this kind of writing relies on “clarity, validity, reliability, and finality,” which “if worshipped exclusively” in the academe, can potentially “leave out much of the human condition, of lived life itself.” In other words, over-clarifying the writing does not illuminate the complexity of the world we live in, or in his words, “the fast shifting macro social forces of today that we often do not understand until they have engulfed us.” That is why he believed the social science researcher has an obligation to study, understand, and describe “the state of the inchoate” (or things or states of being that are in a state of formation), so researchers can provide insight that might contribute to social justice. More specifically, he believed that this multifaceted approach to research and writing enables scholars to recommend ways “to renew and reposition social structures and procedures” that “better serve humanity than the existing ones that may indeed be quite theocratic, managed by secret societies, and oppressive.” In his view, without this public awareness, subtle structures of inequality
can remain in place, unnoticed and unchallenged. So with more flexible, dimensioned, and layered writing, he claimed, “the rich, context-driven and multi-voiced state of human existence” can be described more closely to “how it is lived by the people being studied.”

When asked what his own professors prioritized for good scholarly writing, he said that in graduate school, some professors encouraged his creativity, and some did not. One famous professor yelled that he was wasting his time trying to do qualitative research and that he “would be better advised to stick with quantitative research methods!” Another famous professor allowed him to keep his “polyphonic pilot study” in his “quantitative dissertation,” but only “as long as it was confined to the Appendix!” However, he was surprised to find that most of his professors urged him to avoid verbose or abstract language and that all of his professors appreciated his clarity. So even within the field of education and sociocultural anthropology, he said, his professors encouraged clarity, and this, he said, caused him “to become more persuasive.”

Despite this emphasis on clarity, the anthropologist said he was not encouraged to write for readers beyond his discipline. Instead, he was expected to write for scholars within the discipline and pay attention to these key elements: (a) use impeccable research methods; (b) apply theory in deep ways; (c) present . . . findings in the usual linear, empirical research format.” He explained that this format required the following structure: “Background, Literature Review, Methods, Results, Discussion, Conclusion.” While adhering to this protocol, he said that he was able to sneak “polyphonic and novelistic writing” into his “autoethnographic writing” and his “poetic ethnography” and that his professors accepted this approach.
When asked if he believed any practices or premises should change in traditional scholarly writing, he said he was “confounded” that he had “to keep switching from one protocol to another” because the various disciplines and fields” continue to “insist on different styles and formats—MLA, APA, Chicago Style, etc.” However, because he was experienced in writing for the different genres, he said he was “way past the hang-up over “active/passive voice” and “first/third person positioning,” and instead he freely uses “whatever voice structure the storytelling calls for.”

When asked if he thought there were any social ramifications to the standard scholarly style, he said, “Surprisingly, no,” because he was able “to keep the citations and use of authority pretty much by the book” and still write in his own creative style. For example, he explained that when he wrote about his “citizen’s panel,” he tried to capture the “interplay between individual voices at the panel venue” and to describe the panel’s recommendations. Using this “bottom-up” research approach enabled him to write about the voices of the people. So in addition to no social ramifications, he saw no significant political ramifications to the traditional academic style.

However, he had much to say about his priorities for teaching good academic writing. He tells his students to be “clear,” “persuasive,” “balanced,” and “linear” and to adhere to the scholarly protocols. At the same time, he tells his students “write in whatever ways they wish.” To help students find the right balance between academic expectations and their own voices, he said he will “mark up their early drafts like crazy” to show them “how to find and have their own voice” and still write in a way that will “not get them in trouble with the university they want to graduate from.” This is how, he
said, he can “urge the students to write in ways that will give them the most agency and fulfillment.”

In every course he teaches, he tells students to be clear, persuasive, and “learn how to “make a contribution to the field.” In fact, he urges “all” of his students to learn these five ways to contribute: “(a) suggest a change in practice; (b) present new or modification to or debunking of existing theory; (c) present a new model; (d) advance a new policy; and (e) suggest a whole new way of knowing or epistemology.” By relying on these five points while at the same time remaining “open to learning new ways,” the anthropologist has been able to publish much scholarly writing. The “bottom line in the world of scholarship,” he said is that “if a student can learn to write in their own creative ways—but hit one or more of those five outcomes—s/he will have made the grade of becoming a scholar.”

The Creative Writer:

The creative writer has a Ph.D in English literature from an Ivy League university but has spend his most of his career writing for an audience outside the university. When asked to distinguish academic writing in his field from other fields, he said he imagined they were a similar style to what he learned as a doctoral student in English Literature. Attributes of that style, he said, were the professional, intellectual, objective, neutral tone, and the use of a complex vocabulary that drew from “Latin-derived words as opposed to more Anglo-Saxon derived words.” Another attribute of this style, he added, was that it focused on “themes and ideas” which helped him “in analyzing and understanding literature to a certain extent.”
However, he named many of these same features and attributes as drawbacks. He felt this style was “bland” and even “boring” to read, and he found it “strange that academic critics and literary historians wrote about great literature in a style” that did not “do justice to literature.” When asked what he believed caused that blandness, he said that “in order to make sense of literature, academics focus on themes.” Although he said he understood why academics do this, he explained what was wrong with it: “It’s difficult to write about tone and style and vocabulary and the deep-down, almost nonverbal way literature can affect a reader. So academics focus on what they can take away from a work – abstract ideas. But literature is not abstract. It is concrete.” That abstract, inaccessible “approach to great writing,” he explained, is why he left academia. He did say that not all academics write this way, naming Tony Tanner (1986) as someone who wrote beautifully about Jane Austen” and he described “Ian Watt’s (2009) The rise of the novel as “thrilling.”

When he was a student, his own professors prioritized precision, careful word choice, and the ability “to understand there’s no such thing as 'You know what I mean.’” He learned: “I only know what you write, the words you use.” This concrete and mindful writing—as opposed to abstract and bland writing—helped him “think better.” Nevertheless, when asked if his own professors encouraged him to write for a wide audience, he said, “Hell, no.”

He was equally clear about the need to change certain premises of scholarly writing, such as the use of passive voice. He called passive language “sleep inducing.” He added, “Passive voice makes my brains shoot out my ears.” He felt the same way about the “sanitized, hands-off writing like ‘One can say.’” He wanted to know, “Who is
one? And don’t get me started on ‘in the final analysis.’” So in his view, a removed, passive style interferes with clear ideas.

When asked if he thought there were any social ramifications to this scholarly style, he said it “cuts out most of the population or bores them to death.” When asked about political ramifications, he cited George Orwell’s, “Politics in the English language” to describe how “passive voice, indirect language, and Latinate words can help disguise actions with direct consequences.” He agreed with Orwell that when the language is not clear, the public will struggle to know if they should agree or disagree.

For his own students, he emphasized clear, concrete, concise, detailed language. “When I read student writing now,” he said, “I want to know what color socks the protagonist is wearing.”

The Rhetorician:

The rhetorician, who earned her graduate degree in Creative Nonfiction, focused on active voice and individual style, but as a Rhetoric and Writing professor, she also focused on helping students learn techniques that would transfer to other disciplines, such as the sciences or social sciences. She was able to provide particular insight into the kind of skills Rhetoric and Writing instructors emphasize to help students write across the disciplines.

When asked how she distinguished the writing in her discipline (rhetoric) from the writing in other disciplines, she said she imagined the scholarly writing in other fields to have more jargon. On the other hand, she named attributes of scholarly writing in rhetoric as clarity, professionalism, “concision, precision, ethos,” and “formal (not overly colloquial) but non-pretentious verbiage.”
Drawbacks of traditional scholarly writing, she noted, were that it can “put distance between” the writer and the reader. When asked what might cause this, she said, “Sometimes those who are less initiated to academic writing can misinterpret its execution, compromising clarity with stilted language and verbosity.”

In her own experience, however, in addition to precise prose, her creative writing professors emphasized a “strong vocabulary and thorough research (awareness) of topic.” In addition, she was encouraged to write for a wide readership by using “accessible vocabulary” and “clear presentation.”

Although her own training in creative writing and rhetoric emphasized building a connection with the reader, she did not feel that the writing protocols in other disciplines, such as active versus passive voice, or APA versus MLA format, should change. As she explained it, she believed “the standards of writing can and should shift with time in order to better reflect the spirit and ethos of that period, while still adhering to basic principles that dictate clarity and comprehension.” An example of this, she elaborated, was the shift to “the relative concision of 20th century literature as compared to the 19th century.”

While she felt that academic language has shifted with time to be more precise, she also felt that careless grammar and spelling has social ramifications outside of the university, for “poor grammar and misspelling” can “permeate texting and social media in the same way that misinformation can spread.” Moreover, she felt the practice of unclear or imprecise language had political consequences. Citing George Orwell’s “Politics and the English language,” she said the ramifications of careless language impacts citizens, for “the use of vague, euphemistic writing and speech in politics can
mislead and obfuscate the truth from the public.” In our current political climate, she said, instead of the populace being manipulated by the vague or verbose language Orwell described, she felt many people are drawn to a more direct style. As she put it, “casual and brash directness” has a “superficial appeal for a portion of the country who may have long felt alienated” by the vague, verbose, or circular political language that Orwell described. So for academic, social, and political reasons, she asks her own students to study published works that demonstrate critical thinking and clarity.

Section Two: Generative Themes

The professors’ feedback generated themes about the expectations of scholarly writing, the causes of vague writing, and ways to make this writing more clear. While the students’ feedback provided context for the first two umbrella questions, the professors’ responses largely generated the themes for all three umbrella questions. These three umbrella questions will organize this next section into three major parts. Each part will first present the themes that were generated by the professors and then the students, followed by a brief analysis from this researcher. After these embedded analyses of each theme, this researcher will provide a summary analysis at the end of this chapter.

To isolate themes from the data, this researcher noted overlapping responses, coded them into categories, and aligned them under the three umbrella question. The themes that emerged from each question are listed below each question:

1) What are the priorities for effective academic writing? What features mark that writing as effective?

Emergent themes: features, benefits, challenges, social or political impact of vague writing.
2) What contributes to vague and verbose writing? Where, in university writing, is this style most prevalent?

Emergent themes: professors’ priorities, what previous professors taught them, intended audience, where the language is most vague.

3) What can be done to help students write more concisely and concretely across the disciplines?

Emergent themes: style change, writing techniques, examples of effective writers.

Research Question 1

What are the priorities for effective academic writing? What features mark that writing as effective?

To reiterate, themes generated from Question 1 were the features, benefits, challenges, and political or social impact of scholarly writing. This section will present those themes. To reiterate, to remind the reader that these perceptions come from distinct disciplines and to keep the sequence consistent for the reader, the responses will again follow the order of the historian, the linguist, the psychiatrist, the anthropologist, the creative writer, and the rhetorician. While all of the professors felt a combination of research, structure, documentation, and clarity were essential for effective academic writing, each prioritized distinct features.

Features of Scholarly Writing

According to Professors:

When the historian distinguished scholarly writing in his field from the writing in other fields, he explained that—instead of relying on other scholars to interpret sources—historians use original sources to tell a story. That story is written for other academics as
well as the public. He explained that historians have more “interdisciplinary space” for “a broad reaching style” than disciplines such as English or the social science.

On the other hand, as a professor of the social sciences, the linguist explained that her discipline encourages the citation of other scholars. As she explained it, scholarly writing “requires strong support of evidence and significant facts based on scholarship and research” that has been done before. The psychiatrist also emphasized “specific, proven, scientific information” for most scholarly writing, but she said it depended on the context. When “trying to impart information,” the psychiatrist explained, “one should use expository information, or the technique of explaining or describing.” However when writing a case study, “one should use descriptive and narrative techniques,” and when interpreting or presenting “conclusions about those cases, one should use persuasive writing.” The anthropologist had a more complex answer because he wrote for two different disciplines: educational research and educational anthropology. He characterized both fields as “practice oriented” but described anthropology as more theoretical.

As opposed to the theoretical approach that the anthropologist described, the creative writing professor emphasized concreteness as essential to good academic writing. He felt this clarity helps readers more deeply access aspects of the human condition. Like the creative writer, the rhetorician strives for “concise and direct language.” She considered other scholarly writing to have more jargon, but she also named support and proof as a priority of good academic writing.

While all of the professors named support as essential for good scholarly writing, their priorities differed. The psychiatrist and linguist prioritized previous scholarship and
proven findings. The historian and anthropologist relied on storytelling to explain these findings, but the anthropologist paired that story with abstract theory. The creative writer and rhetorician valued proof and story, but they prioritized concrete detail and direct diction to convey that information clearly.

According to Students:

The most common features, or descriptions, the students named to distinguish scholarly writing from other writing were structured, researched, refined, polished, wordy, complex, objective, and persuasive. Most students prioritized structure, while the fewest prioritized persuasiveness and clarity. To describe structure, the students used words like “standardized,” “thesis-driven,” or “having an introduction, middle paragraphs, and a conclusion that followed a claim.” Common descriptions for research were “scientific findings” or “cited with academic sources.” Many described scholarly writing as refined, using words like “sophisticated,” “knowledgable,” “credentialed,” “formal,” “fancy,” “academic based,” and “intellectual.” The students also felt form was key, using phrases like “properly written,” “perfect grammar,” “driven by rules,” and “formatted.” When it came to the language of scholarly writing, students used words like “articulate,” “wordy,” a “very scientific vocabulary,” and “complex vocabulary.” Students also believed scholarly writing should be complex, saying it was “rigorous,” “involving critical thinking,” was “hard to comprehend,” “confusing” and included “logic that can hardly be understood by normal people, but easy with professionals and scholars.” Many students also felt the writing should be objective, describing scholarly writers as “cautious,” “educating but dry,” “dissociated,” and avoiding the word “I.” Few
students felt persuasiveness was a key feature of scholarly writing. Two students named rhetorical strategies, such as ethos, pathos, and logos.

To contrast scholarly writing with other writing, students used words like “laid back,” “everyday speech,” “conversational,” “informal,” “creative,” and “having less boundaries.” One student said that with other writing, she could be herself. Another student described other writing as “poetic and light,” implying that scholarly writing was the opposite. Other writing was also described as “creative,” “free,” “less structured,” and being “for personal enjoyment like a dinner.”

After reading all 93 responses, this researcher ascertained that the majority of these students saw scholarly writing as structured, formal, formatted, refined, supported, complex, impersonal, and dull. Many claimed it was often hard to understand because of the language. Only one mentioned that writer needed “to understand the topics.” Even though all the students were enrolled in a rhetoric class that focused on concreteness, concision, and persuasion, few described scholarly writing as concrete, concise, or persuasive. Most significantly, while many mentioned other writing as something to enjoy—“like an nice dinner”—they characterized academic writing as the opposite. The rules and regulations, properness, perfect grammar, and protocols seemed to be perceived as constricting, intimidating, and alienating. However, while most students indicated that they did not enjoy scholarly writing, they seemed to consider it an essential part of their education.
Benefits of Scholarly Writing

According to Professors:

Several of the professors described the distinguishing features of scholarly writing in their field as benefits. The historian felt a distinguishing feature of the writing in history was its clarity. As he explained it, history is connected to the humanities, and as historians write about the lives of others, it becomes biography; this “forces” a “writing style” that is more compelling and accessible. This accessibility, he claimed, enables historians to share their insights about common humanity with the larger public.

The linguist also felt a benefit of scholarly writing was that it shared important information. Moreover, she felt scholarly writing can enhance the reader’s vocabulary (for both students and scholars) in a way that other writing does not. The most important benefit for her was the consistent methodology. When scholars “find information through solid methodology,” which she described as an “ethical way of finding data,” then it validates the information and claim and shows that both the information and claim are “supported by significant scholars.” While the linguist valued consistency, the psychiatrist valued that the scholarly writer could use “a number of different styles” in a way that would convey the information without losing the reader’s interest.”

A benefit of scholarly writing that the linguist, the psychiatrist, and the anthropologist all emphasized was ability to help readers learn new research. However, the anthropologist described this benefit in a more philosophical way. He, like the psychiatrist, felt the scholar should tailor the topic to the audience or subject matter, and he especially valued the “open discovery” that the field of anthropology afforded him. Particularly in qualitative writing, he elaborated, this open style allowed him to explore
the “intersubjectivity” and “unfinalizabilty” of things. By not reducing the information to quick conclusion, he explained, people could look at a “lived life” with more dimension and possibility. This “shifting positionality,” he claimed, actually helps promote objectivity, for it leaves the author “less at risk to fall prey to” his or her “own particular world view.” A larger benefit, the anthropologist claimed, is that this type of investigation can help readers perceive “confining structures,” structures that can be “disrupted” with awareness and action. In his view, creating awareness in the reader is the first step toward action.

The creative writer felt that academics in literary criticism did the opposite—creating neither awareness nor action. He said the scholars he read as a graduate student would focus “on themes and ideas,” which he described as characteristic of much academic writing. Benefits of this style, he said, were that this focus on themes was “helpful in analyzing and understanding literature” and that this style reflected “lack of bias,” an “intellectual vocabulary,” and a “neutral tone.” This tone, he imagined, was “meant to project professionalism and objectivity.”

The rhetorician said professionalism was a benefit of the writing in her field, but she particularly named clarity and concision. To add context, in her field of rhetoric and writing, the focus is on developing a claim, and these classes draw from Aristotle’s (2009) teachings that the claim is more effective when the author develops credibility—or creates trust in the reader. To build that trust, the writer must find a way to connect, and according to the rhetorician, an important aspect of that connection is being relatable. That relatability, she explained, involves using a “formal (not overly colloquial) but non-pretentious verbiage.” So this style aims to include and respect the reader.
In sum, each professor’s language seemed to reflect the style and purpose of his or her individual discipline, yet they all prioritized clear communication. That meant using a language and manner that readers could understand, for they all believed the purpose of advanced scholarship was to share their discoveries with others.

**Challenges of Scholarly Writing**

According to Professors:

A challenge of academic writing, many of the professors explained, is connecting with the reader. The historian felt many academic disciplines are “infected” with a “tribal” style that is not readable to other academics, students, or the public. The linguist said that scholarly writing tends to include “academic jargon” that can be “challenging for Bachelors or nonacademic readers.” The psychiatrist said that the “expository style can be redundant” and removed, so students rely on “memorizing information that can be easily forgotten if not reinforced with practical examples.” Without those practical examples, she felt the detached or impersonal style of medical journals would not help students learn the material.

The anthropologist also discussed the challenge of connecting with the reader. He said that “many scholarly readers may be turned off by the many facets that appear in a write-up of [his] kind,” which, in his discipline of qualitative anthropological writing, tends to convey abstract or conceptual discoveries. He added that those “accustomed to looking for clarity and final truth in the form of dense and abstract scholarly language” would be challenged by the multiplicity and “lack of finality” of a multilayered (weaving abstraction and story-telling) anthropological approach. Another challenge he shared is
that it can be time-consuming and “physically and mentally tiring” to write in a scholarly way.

The literature scholar/creative writer said a challenge of scholarly writing is that it is “boring much of the time.” He called this type of writing “abstract,” but “literature is not abstract,” he said. “It is concrete. It is art.” The rhetorician also felt that abstract academic writing “can at times put a distance between writer and reader.”

So common challenges described across these disciplines were that traditional scholarly was time-consuming, tedious, confining, and boring. In this way, it had the potential to limit the exploration of the researcher, disconnect the writer from the audience, prevent the reader from learning the content, and reduce the complexity of an idea. As the anthropologist said, looking for “final truth in the form of dense and abstract scholarly language” can stunt one’s ability to see the multifaceted nature or something. The creative writer similarly felt that traditional scholarly writing stunts one’s ability to describe concrete human experiences. As he explained it, when literary theorists try to tackle the complexity of human nature as rendered in great literature, they tend to make sense of it by reverting to abstract academic writing. But, according to the historian, there is a disjunction between the abstract writing in the disciplines (especially for literary theory and the social sciences) and what people outside the discipline can understand.

According to Students:

The most challenging aspect of scholarly writing, said many students, is that it can be confusing. As readers, many described scholarly writing as “overly complex,” “too complex ideas,” not clear, vague, “difficult for some of us,” “confusion,” “hard to
understand,” “challenging to understand and longer,” “frustrating to read,” “readers get confused,” “sometimes misunderstood,” “hard to understand, “lack of details,” and not “informative.”

This caused many students to feel alienated from the subject and writer. Some descriptions were that it "gives people [the] security of feeling smart [by using] difficult language,” “lacks personality in style,” “cold and to the point,” “common people are turned off, won’t be as eager to learn,” “defers the average reader to even touch it,” “not inspiring,” “most people aren’t drawn to this style,” “makes [one] not want to read,” “boring,” “less likely to be enjoyed,” “loses reader with impersonal voice,” “hard for the reader to distinguish whether the writer is actually passionate about the topic,” “not enough detail,” “no connection to the writing topic,” “lacks personality in style,” “cold and to the point,” “loses reader with impersonal voice,” and "normal people would have difficulty understanding them.”

This difficulty with understanding was often attributed to the vocabulary. While many students named complex vocabulary as a benefit of scholarly writing, they also named it as a challenge. Common descriptions were “wordiness,” “too many words,” “jumbled ideas,” “big and complicated words,” “long,” lengthy,” “unnecessarily long paragraphs or pieces,” “too complex ideas, words,” “very difficult language,” and “can sound too technical,” which also made it dull to many.

As writers, many students described the scholarly style as constraining and formulaic. Some descriptions about the vocabulary and style were “your ‘voice’ is lost in all those big words,” “loss of individuality of writer,” “loss of unique style,” “may not allow students to fully express how they feel about the topic because the essay is too
formal,” “so formal that voice” or the “character” of the writer is lost,” “loss of emotion,” “limit creativity,” “more rigid,” “lack of simplicity or fresh thoughts,” “limited room for failure, but also imagination,” “must remain within certain subjects,” “no expression,” “no creativity,” “lots of rules,” “no variety of format,” “limitations of what can be written,” and “no account for personal experience.”

Not only did many students feel disconnected from the reading and writing in the scholarly style but also from the writing process. Some expressions of this were “more than one draft to nail it,” “lengthy,” “hardships of writing perfectly,” “long process of knowing what to say,” “difficult to flow paragraphs,” “smooth transitions are harder,” “ability to just write without being told is ‘too simple writing,’” “preoccupied with all of the tasks needed to complete” the paper, “run out of ideas,” “writer’s block,” “repeating yourself too much,” “more time-consuming,” “not everyone can write well academically.” Efforts to improve as academic writers seemed to be slowed by a general lack of engagement with the style itself.

**Political or Social Impact of Scholarly Writing**

According to Professors:

A lack of engagement, some professors said, can have consequences beyond the university. When asked about the social or political impact of standardized scholarly writing, the professors had diverse responses. The historian, when asked about possible social ramifications of the scholarly style, said, “That’s an academic question!” However, he continued that those who “opt for an academic identity” tend to live in a “bubble,” which creates a “disjunction between who you are as an academic and who you are as a person.” Also, because of this tendency toward an “inside world” instead of a
“outside world,” he felt it becomes “difficult to translate what’s happening to the public,” and that has certain political ramifications.

According to the linguist, some scholars strive to become part of this inside world so they can elevate socially. She gave the example of the scholar, Pierre Bourdieu, whose ideas were profound, but the complexity and abstractness of his writing made it difficult for others to understand his meanings. Abstract language, the linguist explained, can especially exclude undergraduates or those outside the discipline. She suggested that scholars who can translate abstract ideas for others exhibit a higher level of academic expertise in writing. So while she felt complex diction can reflect complex thinking in the academe, and the use of advanced language can advance the reader’s vocabulary, she implied that those who write complex ideas in a clear way are more advanced. In other words, both the historian and linguistic suggested advanced writers convey complex ideas with clear language, and that combination elevates their academic or social standing.

Initially the psychiatrist and anthropologist did not see a social or political impact to the standard scholarly style. According to the anthropologist, it was the method, not the actual writing style, that had the biggest social impact. While, like the historian and linguist, he saw that many academics use lofty language in an attempt to elevate themselves academically, the anthropologist felt social elevation could happen with authentic and mindful action. In this way, he prioritized his methodology to elevate others socially instead of using high language to elevate himself academically.

At the same time, the anthropologist conceded that while “being scientific in a positivist sense may indeed encompass clarity, validity, reliability, and finality,” there were larger ramifications to this focus. In his view, “these outcomes, if worshipped
exclusively,” can “leave out much of the human condition, of lived life itself,” and that can “leave out the fast shifting macro social forces of today that we often do not understand until they have engulfed us.” In other words, he did not want an overly structured approach to constrain the scholar’s ability to understand complex human conditions, for that understanding, he explained, could help humans evaluate larger social structures around them. That evaluation could reveal if and when those structures were oppressive. So in his view, democracy was impacted when constricting protocols—such as prioritizing positivist research—prevented scholars from understanding and describing the complex human condition.

The creative writer also saw the potential for scholarship to overlook and oversimplify the human condition, not because it was too structured but because it was too abstract. Abstract jargon, said the creative writer, can exclude those even within the discipline. He described his detachment as a doctoral student reading literary criticism in English literature. He felt this language lacked authenticity, and it was designed for exclusive academic circles who were experienced in reading boring or careless (meaning not caring if readers could follow) language. In terms of political ramifications, he said this detached language “cuts out most of the population or bores it to death.” So as opposed to the anthropologist who felt his scholarship could empower people, the creative writer felt much scholarly writing does the opposite.

The rhetorician saw both social and political consequences to imprecise writing. This carelessness, she suggested, implies a lack of concern for clear communication. She felt a potential social impact of “poor grammar and misspelling” was that it could “permeate texting and social media in the same way that misinformation can spread.”
The implication was that others can pick up on these careless writing habits and this can cause those habits to become common and cyclical, a concept she drew from George Orwell’s “Politics and the English language.” She said "the use of vague, euphemistic writing and speech in politics” that Orwell described “can mislead and obfuscate the truth from the public.” She even connected this obfuscation to the current political administration.

In particular, the rhetorician looked at the use of direct language having a manipulative impact on the public. She felt the dangers went beyond vague or verbose phrasing to a facade of clear writing: “Currently we see the dangers of political figures taking an opposing extreme—casual and brash directness that has superficial appeal for a portion of the country who may have long felt alienated by the type of political language Orwell references.” In her view, the lack of clear, authentic meaning—whether it be direct or indirect phrasing—posed the bigger danger to an undiscerning public. So the professors saw a connection to vague language and a loss of social or civic power.

Like the rhetorician, the creative writer also cited Orwell to detail the dangers of vague or verbose diction. In particular, the creative writer said politicians use a “Latinate words to disguise actions with direct consequences.” In fact, he described Orwell’s piece was a "great example of direct writing about indirect phony writing.” So both the creative writer felt that direct writing could enhance the reader’s understanding, and that understanding could elevate their engagement in the public discourse. However, he felt “half the populations” was cut out when the language was vague or verbose.

**Research Question 2**

What contributes to vague and verbose writing? Where, in university writing, is
this style most prevalent?

After each professor detailed the features, benefits, challenges, and impact of traditional scholarly writing in higher education, each was asked what potentially caused vague academic writing, where they encountered the most vague writing, what their own professors prioritized, and what kind of audience they were taught to write for. The themes that were generated were causes of vagueness, disciplines with vagueness, their own priorities, what their previous professors prioritized, and the audience they were taught to imagine.

**Causes of Vague Academic Writing**

According to Professors:

When asked what contributes to vague or verbose scholarly writing, the professors offered different and dimensioned reasons. The historian felt one cause for abstruse writing in academia, particularly in certain disciplines, is that these academics are “defensive about their own legitimacy,” and so they try to write in a way that sounds legitimately academic. He added that “identity politics makes it worse.” This causes scholars to say things like, “I am interested in exploring” such and such, and then forcing that “theoretical infrastructure” onto “a set of evidence that doesn’t fit.”

While the historian’s own Ivy League professors taught him to write with a “certain dexterity,” he believed set premises in the university can prevent that dexterity. As he explained it, the “academic world is a process of professionalization,” and that process “inoculates you against any more expansive understanding of human behavior.” So “smart people” get promoted for writing things like “micro histories,” and they “get promoted for doing things that are only understood within the tribe.” That causes the
writing to stay insulated.

What continues to insulate these scholars, he continued, is teaching graduate students. He found that teaching undergraduates “forces you to expand” and teach courses beyond your own field.” Expanding beyond the field makes “you write for the same people you’re teaching,” and “they don’t know anything.” So imagining that the reader does not know the material will help the writer reach a wide audience. However, in his view, professors who focus on graduate students “narrow over time,” and that “pedantic narrowsness,” he claimed, keeps the scholar from “accessing the public.” What further keeps them “trapped in the discipline,” he continued, is that they “don’t know why what they’re doing is unintelligible.” So in his view, it was a “liability to be successful with an academic audience.”

While the linguist believed a scholar should write for an academic audience (which prioritizes methodology, structure, research, and citation), she suggested that clarity is sacrificed when scholars adopt an “overly complex jargon.” This jargon, she suggested, is often used by scholars who want to adopt a traditional academic style.

She traced this academic style to theology. She found that the standardized and orderly structure she was taught to use in scholarly writing linked to structures in The Bible. “The way we structure our ideas and the way we research other scholars,” she found, “is often in favor of people who grew up reading The Bible.” This help them understand “the structure requested such as footnotes, references, citing, structure. The suggestion was that the Bible may have influenced scholarship in a way that made the writing more formal, protocol driven, and standardized.

As stated earlier, the anthropologist felt many academics defer to a standardized
style in a quest to sound scientific. In particular, he believed the disjunction between standardized scholarly writing (focus, form, validity, clarity, and proof) and the layered approach he took to academic writing (weaving conceptual themes and storytelling) reflected the conflict between qualitative and quantitative approaches. To him, the academe prioritizes the quantitative approach.

But, according to the creative writer, it was not just quantitative approaches that causes the scholarly writer to be unclear. Referring to his experience with literary theory, he found that these academics focused “themes in order to make sense of literature.” He said he understood why: “It’s difficult to write about tone and style and vocabulary and the deep-down, almost nonverbal way literature can affect a reader. So academics focus on what they can take away from a work–abstract ideas. But literature is not abstract. It’s concrete.” He said he grew so “tired of the abstract, theme-first–What’s it saying?” kind of writing that he left academics. When he later returned to the university to teach graduate students creative writing, he emphasized the need for concise and concrete language.

The rhetorician, who majored in creative writing, also emphasized concreteness and concision. She found vague and verbose writing to be a mark of academic inexperience. As she described it, “Those who are less initiated to academic writing can misinterpret its execution, compromising clarity with stilted language and verbosity.” Also, similar to the historian, linguist, anthropologist, and creative writer, the rhetorician felt inexperienced academics use a formal and verbose style to include themselves in the scholarly community.
Disciplines with Vague Writing

According to Professors:

Disciplines named as having vague writing were the humanities and social sciences. The historian described the field of literary theory as “infected” with an insular style, saying, “You don’t know what they’re talking about in the MLA association!” However, he felt the political sciences and social sciences were the worst. When it came to the social sciences, he used the term “oxymoron,” suggesting that although the social sciences are meant to study human society and human relationships, they write in “tribal” way that is “only translatable to inside scholars.”

The linguist and anthropologist also found abstraction to be most common in the social sciences. The historian described educational anthropology as “somewhat practice oriented” and the general field of anthropology as “more theoretical.” In opposition to what the historian said about history, the anthropologist felt historians “dwell on matters of concept” in their writing “rather than practice or even lived life.” The anthropologist also felt the field of comparative literature was “more philosophical and hardly concerned about practice at all,” and the creative writer concurred, saying literary theorists fail to describe the human experiences rendered reat literature when they lean toward conceptual, abstract, and vague writing.

Priorities of Previous Professors

According to Professors:

When the historian was asked what his professors prioritized for good scholarly writing, he said it was telling a good story. Instead of reporting facts or relying on
others’ accounts of history, his professor told him to read the original sources and “tell the story” those sources revealed. That set up the writing to be relatable and widely read. In essence, it seemed his professor wanted to teach him confidence, not capitulation to set academic styles, and this confidence allowed his writing to be clever but clear.

As opposed to clarity, confidence, or readability, the linguist’s professors stressed the importance of “methodology and consistency.” She was told to keep a removed voice so the research would be the focus, not the researcher. However, the anthropologist said he was taught to prioritize methodology, he said he was surprised when his professors asked him to avoid “too much verbiage that was abstract or theoretical.” Being urged to be more clear, he believed, caused him to “be more persuasive.”

Similarly, the creative writer, who described literary criticism as abstract, said his own professors told him not to write in an abstract way. Instead, they emphasized precision, “to choose words carefully,” and “to understand there is no such thing as ‘You know what I mean.’” He professors told him, “I only know what you write, the words you use.” This is why he believed academic writing helped him think better. The rhetorician was taught to build a “strong vocabulary,” and “thorough research (awareness)” of the topic” and to be concrete.

So there was a disconnect between what these professors read from other scholars and what they were taught by their own professors. Although each professor was trained to write for the needs of the discipline, such as being taught not to use “I” in the social sciences, each was encouraged to be clear for the reader. This was particularly significant because, as the linguist, anthropologist, and creative writer described, much of the scholarly writing in their fields is vague, verbose, or abstract—making it less readable. So
there was a disjunction between what their professors taught them and what their disciplines expected of them.

Professors’ Priorities according to Students:

When asked what their professors prioritized, the students were more aligned in their answers than the professors. Key elements students named were structure, support, flow, and form. One student said his professors emphasized “a good outlined essay,” “proper structure, “a strong thesis” and “good flow. Most of the 93 students named at least one of these elements. For structure, one student named acronyms TCQE and SOAPS as methods his instructors prioritized as well as a “clear thesis that organized the rest of the essay.” Clear structure for many meant filling out the major parts of an essay, “such as intro, body, and conclusion.” These academic papers, one was taught, require a “thesis statement that established a clear answer to the question.” One student said that structure encompassed flow, evidence, and a good thesis,” while most described structure as “keeping to the point,” or presenting an “organized, focused point.” Another student said “structure allows the writing to flow in a way that is strong” and puts “evidence where it needs to be.” Flow was described as an element that kept the structure together, so it was perceived that “good flow and organization” would help “build the argument” or claim.

The thesis of the paper, students learned, needed to be supported with “outside sources, “examples for points made” “reliable sources, “evidence,” cited examples,” “a variety of sources,” “support for the argument,” and the need to mention counterarguments. Students were also taught to prioritize form. This meant “proper formatting,” such as “proper MLA/APA citing.” Other priorities were to have “good
grammar,” “good sentence structure,” and to avoid the word “I.” After form, students mentioned analysis. Some said their professors wanted them to develop “critical and analytical thinking,” “complexity,” and to explain “important and interesting” elements of the text they were analyzing, but they were also taught to “answer the teachers’ questions.” One was taught to develop and present “clarity of thought.”

While clear analysis, concision, and rhetorical strategies were named less frequently, they were described as elements their professors prioritized. Students said they were told that “content” should be “expressed in a clear, concise way,” or the writer should show “clear intentions.” Also, some were told to use “good academic language” and to be mindful of “word usage,” “word choice,” “diction choice,” and to “use as little words as possible to describe a point.” Rhetorical strategies, persuasion, style, voice, and audience awareness were rarely mentioned, implying that students did not feel their professors prioritized writing for a wide audience.

**Intended Audience**

According to Professors:

When asked if they were taught to write for a wide readership, meaning readers outside their own discipline, the participants—professors and students alike—overwhelmingly answered no. The historian was the exception. He said he learned to write for a larger audience, or the public, not for other academics, but his believed this was an instinctive skill that one of his professors brought out in him, not because the academe encouraged that. He said he was glad that he never learned to write “academese.” He found that academese, or the kind of writing that allows tenure, “cripples you as a writer” because the “scholarly audience and the public audience are
different animals.” To reach the public, he said, “you have to unlearn the syntax and vocabulary” of the academe. He believed successful writers are readable and relatable. The rhetorician was the only other professor who was trained “to reach” as “general a readership as possible through accessible vocabulary and clear presentation.” However, when asked if taught to write for a wide audience, the linguist said no, the psychiatrist said no, and the anthropologist said, “Not really.” The creative writer, referring to his graduate training in English Literature, said, "Hell, no.”

According to Students:

When the students were asked if they were encouraged to write for a wide audience in their academic writing, most, like the professors, said no. Many named the teacher or other classmates as their intended audience. Those who said they had been encouraged to write for a wide audience specified that it had been in high school or for creative writing such as poetry. Others seem to have confused the question with understanding different points of view because they answered, yes, that they had read multiple perspectives on a topic. They did not say they imagined writing for multiple readers.

Research Question 3:

What can be done to help students write more concisely and concretely across the disciplines?

The students were not asked Research Question 3. However, to discern what might help students write more concretely and concisely across the disciplines, the professors were asked if they believed any protocols or practices with style or format (such as MLA or APA, active versus passive syntax, or first versus person pronouns)
should change in their or any other academic discipline. They were also asked their priorities and techniques for teaching students effective writing. Generative themes that emerged were style change, writing techniques, and examples of effective scholars.

**Style Change**

When the professors were asked if they believed any protocols of scholarly writing should change, such as the use of APA format or third person, the answers varied. The historian did not see the need for change. He felt scholars need to learn the different styles because there are “rewards set up to do what it does.” To succeed as an academic, he explained, “that’s what you have to do.” When writing his books on history, he explained, he will use first person in the preface and then third person in the book. Part of the dexterity he learned in “the big leagues” of the Ivy League was learning to “how to move from one realm to another,” or “how to straddle both worlds,” as he put it. In his view, it “all depends on what you’re writing.”

Like the historian, the linguist felt scholars should learn and use all of the different protocols, such as APA or MLA format. She explained that in her field, professors teach students not only “to look at different genres” but also “to look at them together because they’re all linked together.” While she felt academics should use “all the various” protocols, she felt the most important thing was to be consistent within the discipline. Her discipline is within the social sciences, which requires APA formatting, and she said she prefers that style because it is “the most accurate.” She felt APA enables more transparent citation, which makes scholars more accountable to attribute words or ideas to the original sources.
However, she preferred more flexibility with protocols of voice. Even though she was taught not to “not to use “I” in the academe, she personally felt that using “I” was appropriate in scholarly writing as long as it was contextualized in an objective way. For example, she would write, “I claim, according to …” or “I argue according to . . .,” so she could attribute ideas to the original sources but still show she was “expressing this claim” with her “own words.” This she believed helped clarify the content for the reader.

Another benefit of this removed style, she explained, it that it protects the writer. By presenting the material in a detached way, the writer does not need to be aligned with a controversial social, academic, or political viewpoint. Also, she explained, this remove protects the scholar from sounding too dogmatic, a personality trait that may hinder one who needs to adhere to the pyramid protocols of the university structure.

While the psychiatrist did not believe there should be any protocol changes, the anthropologist said it was “confounding to keep switching from one protocol to another!” However, because of his experience writing for “anthropology, education research, comp lit, and newspaper editorials,” he said he was “way past the hang-up over “active/passive voice” and “first/third person positioning.” Instead, he will now “freely use whatever voice or structure the storytelling calls for.” Also, like the historian, he used storytelling in his scholarly work despite protocols that encourage scholars to stick to the facts and retain a removed voice.

A removed voice generally entails the passive voice, but the creative writer said, “Passive voice makes my brains shoot out my ears.” He continued that academic prose uses much passive voice, which is not only “sleep-inducing” but also created a “sanitized, hands-off writing like ‘One can say.’” He wanted to know, “Who is one?” suggesting that
this depersonalization creates a lack of accountability. He also thought a removed voice creates a vagueness or emptiness in the writing. “And don’t get me started on ‘in the final analysis,’” he added. So, yes, he would argue for a style change to active voice, first person pronoun, and concrete phrasing.

Even though the rhetorician had training in creative writing, she did not argue for any style changes because she believed these protocols naturally change to meet the needs of the academic community. As she explained it, “standards of writing can and should shift with time in order to better reflect the spirit and ethos of that period, while still adhering to basic principles that dictate clarity and comprehension.” The example she gave for this was “the relative concision of 20th century literature as compared to the 19th century.” At the same time, in her rhetoric and writing classes, she encouraged active over passive voice and first person over third person for effective writing.

**Techniques for Effective Writing**

When the professors were asked what they prioritized in teaching effective writing, the consensus was that the writing should be structured, supported, and accessible. The history professor said there were no techniques to teach great writing: “Some people have it, and some people don’t.” He gave the example of Audrey Hepburn walking into a room as someone who has it. “She didn’t go to school and learn that,” he said. Those who have it, he implied, should use their natural instincts (as he did by weaving story with sources). Someone who doesn’t, he added, will “never be a writer.

They may never be great writers, he claimed, but students could be taught to write more clearly. To do this, he gave the advice his professor gave him: unlearn the “vocabulary and syntax” of the discipline. He also felt that “sheer practice” and reading
the professor’s feedback would help students improve. His own feedback included writing “Huh?” in the margins when the writing did not make sense. Still, the challenge with trying to change someone’s writing, he explained, is that “you’re trying to play with somebody’s syntax,” and that means “you’re playing with their mind, their cognitive processing.” Nevertheless, he said, “they write, you comment.” He also told his students to try to “create and use language in ways that are sonorous.” A way to practice this, he added, is to study great writers such as Fitzgerald in *The great Gatsby*, and try pick up their “rhythm.”

The linguist told her students to be “clear and simple” for the reader. She also felt the writer should consider the reader when citing other scholars, such as rephrasing—instead of citing—the language of abstract scholars for the reader’s understanding. This rephrasing is also important, she added, because of the ambiguity of the words themselves. In her own experience “as a writer and also a reader,” she could “see how the words can be used differently as used by the scholar.” By rephrasing, she explained, the writer can help build the reader’s vocabulary as well as bring “a new understanding to the reader.”

She also felt this understanding could be enhanced by strong structure. As she put it, “Follow the ‘red thread’ to keep the reader captivated.” Keeping readers engaged is important, she explained, so the work can be “interconnected” across the disciplines. This also means writing for a wide audience because, as she put it, “the work we are doing should be shared and not just stay in our library and bookshelves.” By writing more clearly, academics could help share and benefit from important scholarship.

While the linguist felt that structure, rephrasing, and clarity would help readers
understand the writer’s meanings, the psychiatrist—although she stressed clarity in writing—did not prioritize one approach to teaching. She felt the professor should first discern a student’s learning style before deciding on an approach. The anthropologist focused on both clarity in language and clarity in structure. He encouraged his students to be “clear,” “persuasive,” “balanced,” and “linear” in their writing, but at the same time "to write in whatever ways they wish.”

Another technique he uses to help students develop their writing is to “mark up their early drafts like crazy as a means of showing them how to find and have their own voice.” At the same time, he strives to develop their voices “in ways that won’t get them in trouble" with the university “they have to graduate from.” So while he encouraged individuality he, like the linguist, showed his students to follow the methodology of the discipline. Also like the linguist, the anthropologist tells students to “follow the steps in some way that all scholars insist on (background, literature review, methods, results, discussion, conclusion).” Most importantly, however, said he insists” that “all” of his students learn these five ways of contributing to the field: (a) suggest a change in practice, (b) present new or modification to or debunking of existing theory, (c) present a new model, (d) advance a new policy, and/or (e) suggest a whole new way of knowing or epistemology).” He said that if a “student can learn to write in their own creative ways—but hit one or more of those five outcomes—s/he will have made the grade of becoming a scholar. With this multifaceted approach, the anthropologist encouraged his students to find the right balance between voice and structure and “to write in ways that will give them the most agency and fulfillment.” So for him, like the linguist, having a clear voice, following a clear structure, adhering to the protocols of the discipline, and contributing to
the field are essential. The anthropologist, however, encouraged his students to develop an individual style to become masterful writers.

Like the anthropologist, the creative writer prioritized clarity and tone in his teaching, but he also emphasized concrete detail: “When I read student writing now, I want to know what color socks the protagonist is wearing.” The rhetorician teaches her students “clarity and tone” through “the analysis and discussion of other written works.” Most of the professors also believed students could improve their writing if they read established and effective scholars.

**Effective Scholars**

The professors gave many examples of effective scholars. The historian recommend reading Kingsley Amis’ *Lucky Jim*, a satire on academics; Stacy Schiff’s *Nabokov’s daughter*, a nonfiction story; David McCullough’s *Lincoln’s cabinet* (McCullough reportedly learned to write by reading *Sports Illustrated*); and Ron Chernow’s *Alexander Hamilton*—which became the basis for the play. The historian said that even though the book is four times longer than the play, Chernow “knows how digest information in a way that’s artful,” and write in way that is “not elegant but accessible.” Other effective scholars the historian recommended were Walter Isaacson, who wrote about Franklin and Einstein, as well as Lytton Stratchey, who wrote about the Victorian era, which, added the historian, “can never be written” because “we know too much about them.” When we know too much about a people or era, he explained, we cannot write about it all, so the “process of writing is selective.” Ultimately, the advice the historian for successful scholarly papers is write in a way that is selective, story-oriented, sonorous, rhythmic, and clear.
The anthropologist admired the complex style of Bahktin’s (1984) writing on Dostoevsky, and he tried to model Bahktin’s dimensioned approach to writing, which included elements such as “irony, satire, parody, surprise, turning point for the soul, the hero, double-voicedness, polyphony, carnivale, mixing of prosaic and poetic speech, diatribe, freedom from plot” and “decrowning, humor.” The anthropologist acknowledged that these things are “not always easy to add” to qualitative writing “but wonderful if they do appear.”

The creative writer said that while many literary historians used “a bland style” that does “not do justice to the “great literature” they are discussing, it is possible to write literary criticism in a compelling way. For example, he said Tony Tanner (1986) was able to do this when he wrote about Jane Austen, and he described Ian Watt’s (2009) The rise of the novel as “thrilling.” Both the creative writer and the rhetorician felt Orwell’s (2012) writing was clear, structured, and provoking. The key elements these professors valued in reading and teaching scholarly writing are clarity, concreteness, consistency, adaptability, structure, story, and voice. The question is: Is this translating to their students?

**Summary of Findings**

When the participants were asked about the characteristics, attributes, and drawbacks of scholarly writing, significant themes were generated that helped distinguish what professors are teaching and what students are learning. For example, there was a disjunction between the professors’ and students’ perceptions of what characterized scholarly writing. While most of the participants named research, support, and structure as distinguishing elements of academic writing, the perceptions diverged when it came to
complexity, language, purpose, format, form (meaning proper spelling, grammar, syntax), clarity, and audience.

Most of the students described the benefits in the same way they described the features of academic writing. They noted that this style is structured, supported, cited, formatted, grammatical, and sophisticated. They also appreciated that scholarly writing could help them learn new words. Complexity of ideas and the ability to be persuasive seemed less important. Few described the connection to or impact on the reader as a benefit. The least mentioned benefits of scholarly writing were persuasion, voice, concreteness, and concision. So while the the students valued clear form and complex language, the professors valued complex ideas and clear language.

There were also notable differences between the professors’ and students’ perceptions when it came to the purpose of scholarly writing. Many of the professors felt the purpose of scholarly writing was to convey content (with, for example, the use of story, concrete detail, concise writing, paraphrase, and audience awareness). Many of the students implied the purpose of scholarly style (such mastering formality, format and form) was to demonstrate academic achievement. It was implied that high achievement reflected high intelligence and, consequently, later success. Looking at this syllogistically, the students implied that they were in college to become successful, and mastering a scholarly writing style would facilitate that success.

While the students linked sophisticated language with high intelligence, the professors did not. The participating professors felt the ability to convey complex ideas in a clear way was a sign of intelligence. However, the participating professors noticed the tendency for other scholars to equate high language with high intelligence, and it was
suggested this was motivated by the need to belong to, reflect, and advance in their individual academic discipline. The historian said an insulated style signals the scholar is “part of the tribe. The disciplines the professors named as having the most insular, vague, or verbose writing were the humanities and the social sciences. The social sciences were called “the worst.”

The historian, linguist, and anthropologist also suggested scholars adopt this abstruse style because it is an academic tradition. From the Foucauldian lens that the linguist and anthropologist offered, the unconscious acceptance of certain premises and protocols also contributes to vague or verbose academic writing. Still, few of the participating professors were interested in changing certain protocols of the discipline, such as APA to MLA. There was, however, interest in changing to active voice and first person pronouns.

Passive voice, said the creative writer, created a “bland style” that bores the reader and “cuts outs the majority of the population.” He felt this has both political and social consequences, for an audience that cannot access the language may not only be excluded from the material but also from the top tiers of education. He suggested that if this abstruse language is transferred from the university to politics, then many will be excluded from civic discussions.

This exclusivity of academics was apparent from the participants’ feedback. Nearly all of the professors and students said they were not encouraged to write for a wide audience. Students said they wrote for their teachers, and that may be why they prioritized the rules such as proper format, citation, spelling, and grammar over more dimensioned elements such as content, creativity, or reader connection. The professors
themselves prioritized intellectual discoveries and sharing those discoveries with others. However, most said their own professors had not taught to write for a broad audience.

These professors suggested they learned, perhaps instinctively, to care about the reader. The rhetorician felt the way to create that connection is to “be thorough” but also consider the audience. The historian said, “we’re all connected,” and he, as well as the creative writer and anthropologist, felt scholars need to explore human issues and write in a way to make those discoveries clear. That meant using clear language, concrete examples, or narrative elements to help the reader understand.

To recap, there was a disjunction between what students perceived as effective scholarly writing and what the professors perceived as effective scholarly writing. What the professors said they prioritized in teaching students to write was different from what the students said they prioritized in learning to write. Several students reported that their professors prioritized concision but few students named concision as a distinguishing feature or benefit of scholarly writing. Instead the students’ answers focused on form and formality.

Also significant were the disjunctive levels of enjoyment. This was no surprise. The professors seemed to enjoy the scholarly writing process, while the students did not. The students described scholarly writing as constraining, laborious, and boring. Perhaps this impacts the prose. A question here—and even a possible answer to what causes imprecise writing—is this: How likely are students to invest extra time to delete unnecessary words or insert more concrete words if they dread the writing process and feel disconnected from the material and reader?

An implication from the professors was that a writer’s connection to the writing
strengthened the connection to the reader. Also, concrete detail and direct prose were elements the professors felt helped connect the readers to the content. Several professors suggested, in addition to marking up student papers, to study academic writers who follow the rules of the discipline but still connect to a wide range of readers. Some particularly relied on using story in their own writing to create that connection. This historian was told from his Ivy League professor, “Don’t depend on what others said.” The implication is that top educators teach students to write with confidence—instead of capitulating to the style and syntax of the discipline. With that confidence, the historian learned to tell the story and connect with readers within and beyond the university.
CHAPTER V

SUMMARY, DISCUSSION, CONCLUSIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

This chapter is divided into four sections. The first section summarizes the first four chapters of this study: Chapter 1: the problem, purpose, and theoretical framework; Chapter 2: the literature review; Chapter 3: the methods; and Chapter 4: the findings. The second section discusses the implications of those findings in light of the literature review and theoretical framework. The third section draws conclusions from the implications. The fourth section offers suggestions for future practice and research before ending with personal closing remarks.

Summary of the Study

This qualitative study aimed to understand the causes and cures of unclear scholarly writing. In particular, this study stipulated (defined) unclear scholarly writing as vague, verbose, or abstract. To investigate this problem, both the literature review and the methodology relied on the theoretical framework of Discursive Psychology. Discursive Psychology was especially useful in framing issues of language and power. Because this study looked at the connection between language and power (or lack thereof) in the university, it drew from literature that branched from Discursive Psychology, such as psychology, poststructuralism, and linguistics in addition to literature in critical pedagogy, rhetoric, and academic writing.

Many academic writing experts complain that scholars tend to write in “academese” (vague and verbose language) to show that they are intellectual (Derounian, 2011) or that they are part of an exclusive academic discipline (Lakoff, 2004). However, experts found that more often, academese is used to disguise missing content (Cutting,
2012; Parini, 2005) or a weak command of the material (Pinker, 2014; Trimble, 2011). Not only can this style seem like a “weak handshake,” said Trimble (2011, p. 51) but also those who write with needless complexity are regarded as less intelligent (Oppenheimer, 2005). Still, many claim academese is an inherited and bureaucratic tradition that creates a bland style (Trimble, 2011; Lanham, 1983). Orwell (2012) said that "orthodoxy of whatever color, seems to demand a lifeless, imitative style” (p. 534). That style cements into a premise that other academics read, repeat, teach, publish, and expect from other scholars (Toor, 2017; Lanham, 1983). This style also creates a distance between the writer and the writing. But this distance, said Pinker (2014), can disconnect readers both inside and outside the discipline. This in turn prevents collective exchange, which goes against the professed aims of the university.

Others say vague or verbose language has negative consequences beyond the university. Linguists find that wordiness conveys weakness. Lakoff (2004) found that those who use filler words, emphatic words, or repeated words show insecurity. Females, she found, tend to be wordier because they are encouraged to do so as children (with gendered patterns are usually set by age ten) (Tannen, 1990). This loquaciousness, claimed DeBeauvoir (1989) has been conditioned by patriarchal societies that have encouraged woman to be subordinate. However, linguists (Holmes 2011; Lakoff, 2004; Mindell, 1995) argue that, even today, women unconsciously use an indirect speech style that reflects and reinforces subordination.

Psychoanalysts say our language styles are developed unconsciously. At the same time, said Chomsky (2008), studying language is a way to study our unconscious minds. Lacan (1968) claimed that language determines certain social roles, roles that are set even
before we are born. The moment we learn language, he explained, we begin to learn the
codes of the community. Freud (1909) believed we learn these codes as we transition
from the Phallic to the Real stage. In the Real stage, Freud theorized, notions of what is
normal assimilate into our minds. Lacan believed notions of what is normal start with
language. Lacan (1968) called this stage the Symbolic Order (similar to Freud’s Real
stage). As we develop language, explained Lacan (1968), we develop our sense of our
role within the Symbolic Order. He believed these codes are assumed and reinforced
collectively.

Our unconscious notions, said poststructuralist Foucault (2008), are often
supported by premises that are collectively inherited and repeated. These premises,
Foucault explained, are in turn reinforced by the people around us (by friends, neighbors,
and teachers) and by the structures around us (schools, prisons, hospitals). Foucault
described these structures as designed to be divisive, for it is easier to manage a populace
(with less manpower) and to increase productivity (by creating factory-like systems)
when people are divided from each other (as opposed to uniting as a collective whole).
Division, then, is conducive to social hierarchy. Poststructuralists feel that to disrupt this
pattern of inequity (Ruti, 2006), we have to take a macro look at the larger structures that
constrain us. That includes questioning premises (premises we adopt unconsciously) that
hold those structures in place. Constraining premises, felt Foucault (2008), are especially
inherent in institutions such as schools.

Critical pedagogy looked at how certain premises adopted in schools might
constrain the individual by limiting critical thinking (Freire, 2010; Gatto 2012; McLaren
2009). However, instead of looking at premises of language, this field looks at premises
of teaching. For example, critical pedagogy examines how sophistic teaching styles (when students are trained to regurgitate instead of questioning material) can prevent students from becoming questioning citizens.

What can help foster a questioning citizen, argue rhetoricians, is the study of rhetoric (Nussbaum, 2015). Using indirect language to obscure the audience’s understanding, Plato (2015) demonstrated, can be a deliberate type of sophistry. This sophistry, Orwell (2012) argued, allows politicians to disguise a misalignment between aims and actions—or when one’s true intentions conflict with one’s professed aims. In politics, said Orwell (2012), what disguises such a conflict is vague language. Vague language, he explained, makes it difficult for the audience to know if they should agree or disagree. As dangerous as this is, he showed that academics are guilty of normalizing—and even revering—this vague style. That is why Orwell believed that clearing up language (making it concrete and concise) was the first step to political regeneration. Academic scholars (Achebe, 2015) have cited Orwell to connect the vague language in politics to the vague language in the academe.

In essence, this literature review included the perspectives of academic writers, linguists, critical pedagogists, poststructuralists, and rhetoricians to examine the connection between language and power in the university. To help citizens discern political platforms, argued Nussbaum (2015), schools should emphasize the study of rhetoric. While classic rhetoricians like Plato characterize vague or verbose language as manipulative, Aristotle believed studying rhetoric could help one discern an argument’s premise before accepting a conclusion. Poststructuralists claim we need to evaluate the premises around us to see if they are serving us, for often premises of what is normal are
inherited, assumed, and reinforced unconsciously. But in Orwell’s lens, the premise has to be clear not just at the philosophical level but also at the language level for us to discern if it is serving us. Linguists believe that indirect language does not serve us, yet this literature showed that advanced scholars often promote indirect language in the university. This conflicts with the common university goal to promote collective exchange and individual agency. Clear language, as Orwell said, can help reveal the gap between one’s aims and one’s actions.

This study aimed to fill a gap in the literature by looking at the intersection between language and power in the university. To do this, this study evaluated if the premises of scholarly language are promoting individual and collective power. Studies of Critical Pedagogy have examined premises that can limit one academically, studies in linguistics have examined premises that limit one socially, studies in rhetoric have examined premises that can limit one civically, and studies in poststructuralism have examined how we might inherit these premises unconsciously; however, there is a gap in the literature when it comes to the combined academic, social, and civic impact of traditional language premises in the university. This study aimed to fill that gap by taking a micro view at specific causes and cures of unclear scholarly writing as well as a macro view at how this style might be inherited and reinforced in the university. The findings of this study, which mirrored but added to much of the existing literature, concluded that certain premises contribute to an unclear writing style that diminishes both collective exchange and individual empowerment, which is in conflict with the goals of higher education.
Because this study aimed to fill a gap in the literature by looking at causes and cures for unclear language in the university, its methodology relied on the theoretical framework of Discursive Psychology as well as literature that extended from that framework. The research questions were accordingly drafted to question traditional premises of scholarly writing. Those questions were approved by six experts in the field of academic writing. Ten of those questions were used to interview six professors who were purposefully selected to represent diverse disciplines (history, linguistics, psychiatry, anthropology, creative writing, and rhetoric), and five of those questions were used to question ninety-three students (in a second semester required rhetoric and writing class) in short written responses. The students responded in the classroom, taking ten to fifteen minutes to jot down phrases of their impressions of scholarly writing, and the professors responded through phone interviews or in emailed answers, taking an average of thirty to sixty minutes to write full responses. The feedback from these ninety-nine participants was collected, verified, categorized, coded, and analyzed from the ground up to generate themes. Those themes were then presented as the finding of this study.

**Summary of Findings**

Significant findings from the data are enumerated under the following three italicized umbrella questions: 1) the priorities and features of effective academic writing; 2) the causes of vague academic writing; and 3) ways to make academic writing more clear and concise.

**Question 1: What are the priorities for effective academic writing? What features mark that writing as effective?**
When the participants were asked about the priorities of effective academic writing, there were several disjunctions between what the professors and the students prioritized.

The students generally prioritized features such as structure, support, citation, vocabulary, format, and form (things like proper punctuation, spelling, and syntax). Many of the students also described distinguishing features of academic writing as benefits. Many named structure, vocabulary, form, support, and manner as benefits of this style. In fact, structure was the most commonly prioritized feature. The students used words like “organization,” “multiple main points leading to one consensus,” “properly laid out and outlined,” “logical connections,” “organized information,” “well-thought out,” or “developed” to describe strengths of scholarly writing.

The second most mentioned benefit was the use of complex vocabulary. Common words the students used were “complex sentences,” “SAT/ACT words,” “diction,” “full sentences,” “complex sentence structure,” “dense paragraphs filled with academic language,” “specific diction,” “diction is challenging,” “good vocabulary,” “big words,” “wordy but not confusing,” “elevated language,” “scientific vocabulary,” and the “ability to learn new words.”

Students also felt form was a benefit, including descriptions like “format,” “transitions between ideas,” “correct grammar,” “properly written,” “syntax,” “average complexity of sentence structure,” “proofread,” “edited,” and “longer than other writing.” Support was also named as a benefit, with students including words like “research,” “data,” “evidence, whether it be numbers or surveys,” “specific, strong examples,” or “detailed with facts proven by researchers.” Students also described the formal, objective
manner of scholarly writing as a benefit, with scholars using words like “one would think,” as opposed to the word “I.”

Named less often as a benefit was complexity. Some students said academic writing included “complicated ideas,” “complicated analysis,” “assessment of literature,” and showing the “big picture.” One said it “connected the main topic to the outside world,” and another said it “forces you to think.”

Lower on the list were rhetorical strategies, attention to audience, and storytelling. Rhetorical elements, such as “ethos, pathos, and logos” were referenced, and some mentioned “taking a position,” or claim, which is an element of logos. Some mentioned appealing to the reader’s emotions, which is a division of pathos, but none named storytelling as a feature or benefit of scholarly writing. The students who mentioned rhetoric as a benefit described ethos in terms of the writer’s credibility. By credibility, they meant “someone who studied the subject for many years,” had “knowledge about a certain study,” or knew “the subject well.” They did not refer to other elements of ethos, such as the ability to relate to the audience. In fact, aside from the three that said it “hones in to reader,” “questions or connects to the reader,” or "draws the reader in with hooks,” audience awareness was hardly mentioned.

While many students named structure, research, sources, form, scholarship, complex vocabulary, and complex analysis as both features and benefits of scholarly writing, they had much more to say about the challenges of this style. The most common challenges named were that scholarly writing is confusing, constricting, and distancing. Many felt limited by the rules, topics, and voice of this style, which left them disconnected from the material they were writing.
The professors, on the other hand, generally prioritized features such as investigative scholarship, analysis, discovery, and sharing those discoveries with others. Still, the specific priorities differed among professors. The historian, the anthropologist, and the creative writer valued analysis and detail; the linguist valued research, citation, and methodology; the psychiatrist valued proof and the ability to choose the right approach for the right purpose or audience; the rhetorician valued thoroughness and precision.

The professors were fairly aligned in naming clarity as a priority of their own writing and teaching so that the scholarship could be shared with readers. Clarity was rarely mentioned as a feature, benefit, or challenge of scholarly writing, which suggested this was not a priority for them to master—even though several students said their professors told them to focus on clarity. In fact, while concision was a high priority for the professors, it was lowest on the list for students. Only one student said the language should be concise. While the students equated ornate language with advanced education, the professors predominately regarded this style as a sign of lower proficiency.

When overly complex language extends beyond the academe to political discourse, suggested the creative writer, it “cut out a large part of the population,” and therefore prevents them on from engaging in civic discussions. On the other hand, the rhetorician suggested that the current population may be attracted to direct brashness because they are tired of rhetoric that is vague and verbose. Both the creative writer and the rhetorician reiterated Orwell’s view that those who accept vague or verbose language in the academe are likely to accept that style beyond the academe.
Question 2: What contributes to vague and verbose writing? Where, in university writing, is this style most prevalent?

The participants' perceptions of effective scholarly writing elucidated possible causes of vagueness or verbosity. Several of the professors felt that academics who use unnecessarily complex language are reflecting insecurity or an insulation of the discipline.

That insulation, it was suggested, develops an inside jargon. As aspiring scholars strive to be recognized as intellectuals within a community, said the linguist, they tend to adopt a lofty or longwinded style. The rhetoric professor felt those “less initiated” to the academic world adopt this style to fit in, and the historian found that academics use abstract, insulated language to be a “part of the tribe” and to prove their way to tenure. However, “to write successfully in the discipline,” the historian elaborated, “means writing unsuccessfully outside the discipline.” The linguist and anthropologist also described an specialized jargon that develops with distinct disciplines. The creative writer felt literary scholars, as a group, “defer to themes” (when they lack the ability to account for great literature in a concrete way), and he felt thematic writing leads to abstract writing. Nevertheless, as the data indicated, many students perceived long words and phrases as a sign of sophistication and they seemed to want to learn complex vocabulary.

The students also suggested they were trying to learn scholarly writing protocols. Some students indicated they were trying to learn these various styles, some of which had competing protocols. Still, the students seemed to regard most scholarly writing as restraining. Some suggested that the rules of format and voice (i.e. having to avoid “I”) in scholarly writing limited their creativity. One student described other writing like
“having a nice dinner,” while scholarly writing was not. Other common descriptions for scholarly writing were “time-consuming,” and “boring. Students also expressed a lack of connection to the material and audience.

Another key finding about what may cause unclear scholarly writing is a lack of audience awareness. The majority of the participants—both students and professors—said they were not trained to write for a wide audience. Students said they learned to write for the professor, and the professors said they learned to write for scholars in their own discipline. The linguist felt scholars should write for other scholars at that same advanced level (not “reduce it to newspaper” writing) because this protected the complexity of ideas and encouraged the acquisition of precise vocabulary. However, other professors described the writing, even in their own disciplines, as inaccessible.

Overall, the social sciences were imputed to be the least accessible. While the historian and creative writer thought literary theorists were unnecessarily abstract, the historian described the social sciences as the “worst.” The anthropologist and linguist (both in the social sciences) felt the philosophical or conceptual nature of social science material led to abstract writing, which led to discussions about what could be done to encourage more concise and concrete writing across the disciplines.

**Question 3: What can be done to help students write more concisely and concretely across the disciplines?**

Most of the professors encouraged their students to write concretely and concisely, but they emphasized different techniques. Some encouraged the use of story to connect to the material and clarify the prose. Looking at the original facts and “telling
the story from there,” the historian explained, makes the writing more purposeful, direct, and accessible to the public. The anthropologist also emphasized the use of story to help his readers follow abstract concepts.

While the historian felt there were “no techniques” to make someone a great writer, he felt a professor could help a student become a good writer by pointing out where the writing was vague. He did this by writing “Huh?” in the margins. The anthropologist said he “marked up drafts like crazy” to show his students how to be concrete yet “not get into trouble with the institution they want to graduate from.” The linguist told her students to write as simply as possible. The creative writer asked his students to be concrete (“I want to know what color socks the protagonist is wearing”), and rhetorician emphasized thoroughness and precision.

The professors also recommended studying scholars (such as Bakhtin or Orwell) who could convey complex information in a clear way.

Discussion

**Question 1: Priorities, Benefits, Challenges, and Impact of Scholarly Writing**

The professors seemed to enjoy writing academically, while the students did not. This seemed connected to their priorities as academic writers. The data indicated key disjunctions between what the professors and students prioritized. The professors seemed to prioritize intrinsic goals of writing, such as their own intellectual discovery and sharing those discoveries with others. Conversely, the students seemed to prioritize extrinsic goals, such as mastering academic protocols (of tone, structure, citation, and format) to earn good grades from the different professors. This meant mastering the writing style of the particular discipline.
Because the professors seemed to value intrinsic goals of writing, such as intellectual discovery and the ability to share those discoveries with others, they also seemed to value internal features of scholarly writing, such as the quality of the ideas, method, research, and references. As readers, the professors seemed to welcome the challenge of working through complex scholarship—meaning complex ideas, not overly complex language—for their own enrichment. They especially valued writers who conveyed complex ideas in a clear way.

Because the students generally prioritized extrinsic goals of writing, such as learning protocols that would lead to good grades, they seemed to prioritize external features of writing, such as form, format, grammar, and complex vocabulary. Although some students mentioned analysis or complexity as priorities, they did not describe analysis or complexity in the same way the professors did, such as the ability to evaluate the human condition or to expose oppressive social structures. In fact, the students seemed to equate complexity with confusion or difficulty. In their responses, few students distinguished complex ideas from complex phrasing, which suggested that perhaps they did not know how to negotiate the difference or that they lost interest in the ideas when the words worked as a barrier. In other words, while the professors knew how to read through complex language to get to complex ideas, few students seemed motivated to push past complex phrasing to get to complex ideas. Also, in contrast to the professors, the students seemed to feel that complex ideas needed complex language.

That may be why the students valued complex language. While many students described feeling confused or bored by the lengthy and complex wording of many scholarly publications, they seemed determined to learn this style not only to get good
grades but also to be considered scholarly, or erudite. This extrinsic motivation to use high language perhaps impacted their ability to say things simply. On the other hand, because the professors seemed to be intrinsically motivated to connect to the reader, they seemed to value readability over erudition. Each professor had clearly mastered the discipline’s distinct and appropriate protocols yet developed an individual style (except the professor who left literature because he could not stand the abstract style). This style seemed to enhance the clarity of their writing.

Whether it be for academic standing, academic understanding, social elevation, or political discernment, the professors felt concise, concrete, and careful language was a powerful tool. This reinforced the literature that vague or verbose language can diminish one’s academic (Oppenheimer, 2005) social (Lakoff, 2004) and civic (Orwell, 2012) power. Orwell (2012) claimed that when the language is vague, it is hard to comprehend one’s political intentions.

While the professors also felt overcomplicated sentences can stunt the reader’s comprehension, some warned of the social and political ramifications when scholars oversimplify information. The rhetorician felt that in our current political climate, people are attracted to brash directness. The anthropologist suggested that oversimplifying research can prevent people from thinking more critically. While he thought the methodology was the most important factor to drive transformative action, he also felt the exclusive quest to sound scientific could obscure—instead of elucidate—the deeper nature of people. If we fail to evaluate the human condition, he elaborated, we may fail to recognize the “fast shifting macro social forces” around us “that we often do not understand until they have engulfed us.” In his view, prioritizing protocols over discovery
can impede insights that can potentially empower the marginalized. In other words, the anthropologist did not want set premises to eclipse critical thinking, and therefore, to diminish democracy.

This view links to the poststructuralism explored in the Literature Review. Foucault (2008) claimed that subtle, invisible, unconscious premises that people—or institutions such as schools—inherit, repeat, and reinforce may not be in the service of equality. In fact, the anthropologist’s view aligned with that of Foucauldian scholar Aaron Kuntz (2015), who described the typical researcher as adhering to set protocols instead of working for transformative justice. Kuntz (2015) warned about researchers who take material from context and categorize people in a way that overlooks or oversimplifies the margins in between. Similarly, in the view of the historian, anthropologist, and creative writer, as opposed to using higher education to understand human nature—and possibly change inequities—the focus on positivistic, or scholarly-sounding reporting, can leave out important details of people or past events that may illuminate human patterns.

That illumination may ultimately promote individual agency, for understanding our patterns, said poststructuralist Mari Ruti (2006), is the best way to disrupt them. According to the literature related to Discursive Psychology as well as the professors’s feedback, these illuminations can best be better understood by the reader when the language is concrete and concise. However, instead of concrete and concise writing, vagueness and verbosity pervades scholarly writing.

To summarize distinct perceptions or scholarly writing, the professors and students alike said that effective scholarly writing needs to be structured, supported, and
professional. But when it came to the priorities of scholarly writing, the answers differed. Many of the professors emphasized intrinsic elements, such as complex ideas, clear content, clean communication, and concise vocabulary, but they warned against oversimplifying material. Most of the students, on the other hand, emphasized extrinsic elements, such as structure, standardization, support, form, format, and an elaborate vocabulary. Because concision was low on the list of priorities for students, this brought questions about what students were learning in the classroom.

Most of the participants—students and professors alike—said their professors told them to be concise. The participating professors said they prioritized concision in their own writing and teaching (meaning they asked students to write concisely), and many students said their professors told them to write concisely. Some students indicated they were taught to use as “few words as possible.” However, many of those same students described the features and benefits of scholarly writing as having big words and long sentences. This disjunction between professors’ teaching and students' gleaning seemed to elucidate key causes for vagueness.

**Question 2: Causes of Vagueness**

When it came to what contributes to vague or verbose language, a key factor seemed to be inconsistent perceptions of effective scholarly writing. While the professors generally prioritized concision and shared scholarship, they described many scholarly publications as verbose and insular. The participating students seemed motivated to emulate the language of published scholars, and for many of them, that meant learning an exclusive style. That style seemed to be impacted by the desire for membership in the academe, insulation, division, inherited premises, positivistic protocols, competing
protocols, an inconsistent sense of flow, style, story, and syntax, an ambient awareness of effective writing, and a disconnection from the audience. These factors seemed to lead to inaccessible language.

**For Scholars**

**Membership:** The professors indicated that inaccessible language is primarily motivated by the need to belong to, reflect, and advance in an academic community. Often as scholars advance in the academe, said the linguist, they develop a style that displays their education. Lakoff (2004) felt scholars use an exclusive style to signal superiority and to show that they are part of an elite circle. Toor (2017) felt graduate students adopt this style (which she described as “overwritten,” “self-consciously clever,” “show-offy,” “ornate,” and “baroque”) to prove that they are worthy of these circles.

**Insulation:** The quest to belong to a distinct discipline seemed to be another common cause of unclear writing. While certain protocols can create consistency within a discipline (which allows for easier assessment and comparison), insulation and professionalization can prevent scholars from reaching across the disciplines, said the historian. To get tenure, the historian explained, scholars use the diction, shorthand, and jargon of that field. While this specialized language may reflect specialized training, Vargas Llosa (2002) felt that specialization encourages communities to focus on separate branches instead of the whole tree. In terms of the academe, these divisions can hinder the connections that are essential for comparison and critical thinking. According to Critical Pedagogy, critical thinking is essential to equality, for what is conditioned in school likely extends to larger social structures.
Divisions: As discussed in the theoretical framework and literature review of this study, Poststructuralism describes division as a factor that suppresses critical thinking. Two of the professors, the looked at the academe from a macro view, seemed influenced by Foucault. Foucault (2008) theorized that institutional structures—such as schools—create norms that shape societies. Oppression more likely occurs in societies that allow a few to manage the masses. This top down structure depends on dividing the lower sections from each other. That division, explained Foucault, prevents a conscious, collective awareness of the premises that guide them. In this way, institutional divisions help maintain an inherent, and ultimately hegemonic, power structure. And yet the university—which aims to empower people—is described to support this divisive structure.

The linguist linked the structure of the academe to theology. She described the pyramid-style structures of divided departments and department chairs as mirroring the structures she saw in the Bible. Another possible parallel to The Bible—which also mirrors Foucault’s theory—could be the account of the Tower of Babel, in which the collective whole was divided by their inability to understand each other. In the university, when scholars use language that is not easily understood outside their division, they are mirroring this breakdown of the collective whole. This breakdown can stunt collective exchange, for it slows one’s ability to absorb the discoveries of diverse disciplines. The hinders the development of the whole person, which Nussbaum (2105) and Tagore (2015) felt were vital for individual and collective empowerment.

Inherited Premises: In Foucault’s view, divisive structures are supported by smaller premises. In the university, this division seems to be supported by easily
accepted premises. Toor (2017) described a natural adherence to protocols and premises when she wrote that graduate students tend to repeat the traditional academic style without questioning if it is a good style. It seems the more scholars exchange abstruse language, the more they validate the premise that this language signals advanced thinking. The linguist linked the scholar’s psychological adherence to protocols as conditioned by those who studied the Bible (she mentioned many priests have their Ph. D’s, which are doctorates in philosophy). Traditionally, in religion, being good or decent means abiding by—and not questioning—set codes. In Foucault’s view, inherited codes dictate what is normal; in Freud’s (1909) view, adhering to what is normal shapes one’s success in one’s community; in Lacan’s (1968) view, this starts with the incipience of language. Modern linguists explain that the language we learn and use reflects our role in society. Psychologist such as Pinker (2014) showed that in the academe, the normal language is academese. Orwell (2012) showed this orthodoxy creates an unclear style that becomes customary in political discourse and confuses the average citizen, but Lanham (1992) described a bureaucratic system that conditions the average academic not to question set protocols.

**Positivistic Protocols:** One of these protocols, theorized the anthropologist, is positivistic research. The sole quest to sound scientific, he felt, interferes with the latitude to write in a clear yet complex way. This supports those who claim that neoliberalism can limit the scholar. Kuntz (2015) claimed that scholars prioritize protocols, evidence, structure, and validity to get bottom-line results, and they do this to get publications and grants. Kuntz (2015) felt this conditions scholars to categorize people instead of reflecting them accurately. This categorization, he felt, leads to an oversimplification that
hinders transformative justice, for it interferes with “parrhesia” or truth-telling (p. 59). This describes how universities— which are meant to ensure accuracy, objectivity, and advanced analysis—can be constrained by their own protocols. Foucault would describe these premises as a symptom and source of confinement, exclusion, and control. In other words, certain academic premises and protocols conflict with the mission to empower individuals within and beyond the university.

**For Students:**

**Competing protocols:** Beginning scholars, however, can be confused when they find academic protocols to be in conflict. In their responses, teh students described competing and conflicting contexts, publications, disciplines, professors, and premises. An inability to feel centered in one’s writing may be a possible cause for imprecision. It could be that students focus on learning to code-switch and master the unfamiliar and disparate protocols as opposed to relying on their own instincts of natural communication. This was indicated by the fact that most students prioritized structure, support, form, vocabulary, and flow more over concision, concreteness, and style. It seems that negotiating these conflicting academic styles can override a student’s natural instincts of communication, and hence a natural sense of style and flow.

**Flow:** The students also worked from inconsistent premises about flow in writing. Most of the students felt flow was important. However, their descriptions implied that flow meant linking separate paragraphs together, as in transitions, not necessarily the flow within or between sentences or even the larger ordering of paragraphs. Perhaps they needed more training in mapping out an essay and smoothing
out sentences. Perhaps it is challenging to achieve a natural flow while maintaining a removed voice and mastering disparate protocols.

**Style and Story:** This lack of center seemed to stymy the development of style. Few students mentioned style. One student mentioned being taught to have “no error of style,” but how does one have an error in style? Perhaps the student did not understand what style is. This suggested that perhaps elements of style were not emphasized. Instead, style seemed to be perceived in terms of format and citation. Also, while several professors explained that story can help convey complex ideas, few students mentioned using story in their writing, which indicated they did not consider this an important element of scholarly writing. Instead, the students emphasized the importance of an unbiased tone, or a scholarly voice.

**Syntax:** The students also seemed challenged by the conflicting calls for voice and syntax. For example, some disciplines encourage active voice, while others encourage passive voice. For disciplines that encourage passive voice, a common premise is that scholars should avoid “I” to spotlight the content not the writer (like a model who avoids smiling so the audience will focus on the outfit, not the person in the outfit). However, according to an academic handbook that explains how to write across the discipline (Soles, 2005), passive syntax often leads to imprecision. Scholars in the social sciences customarily avoid the first person, and this may generate more function words (words that lack content, such as “of”) than content words (words that show content, like “book”). The social sciences—the discipline imputed to have the most abstruse language—also use the APA style. While this might suggest that the APA style is not conducive to clear writing, it may, as the linguist claimed, facilitate accountability.
Although the creative writer felt avoiding the first person allowed one to avoid accountability, the majority of the professors had no issue with APA format or passive language. They felt a scholar should use whatever style is accepted in a distinct discipline.

**Ambient awareness:** While negotiating through those conflicts seemed to stress the students’ own style, the students seemed to have a consistent sense of how a scholar should sound. The students in this study indicated they wanted to learn sophisticated language so they could write in a sophisticated way. This suggested they wanted to enter elite academic circles and to be considered intellectual. While one student said “normal people would have difficulty reading” this style, many students indicated they wanted to learn it. This ambient awareness of scholarly writing may encourage students to use more words than necessary—even though they said their professors told them not to.

It could be that professors are telling their students to be concrete and concise but assigning readings that are not. More likely, students are drawing from a larger body of published work that is not concise, and so their gut sense of how an academic should sound overrides what their professors say about concision. That may be why students named complex vocabulary and long sentences as both distinguishing features and benefits of scholarly writing. The need to sound “fancy,” “complex,” and “sophisticated” (all words the students used) may discourage students from using plain language and considering their audience.

**Disjunctive Perceptions:** It could be that professors are telling their students to be concrete and concise but assigning readings that are not. More likely, students are drawing from a larger body of published work that is not concise, and so their gut sense
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**Narrow audience:** Another cause for unclear writing was that the professors and students alike said they were not taught to write for a wide audience. While the students said they primarily wrote for the teacher, the professors mostly learned on their own (not from training) to write for a wide audience. The historian, anthropologist, and the creative writer used story to connect to their readers, but this seemed to come from individual instinct. While the creative writer said, "Hell, no!" when he was asked if his studies in literature encouraged him to write for a wide audience, the rhetorician, who was trained in creative writing, said yes. Perhaps this tells us something about the impact of creative writing on scholarly writing.

To summarize key causes of vague scholarly writing, the data showed that a combination of motivations, traditions, and perceptions impacted one’s writing style. While there were many points of alignment regarding structure, support, and form, the professors and students mostly described disjunctive perceptions of effective scholarly writing. The professors—even though they were from diverse disciplines—were consistent in telling their students to write simply. Despite this, most of the students wanted to write complexly. This illustrated a conflict between what the professors were teaching and what the students were gleaning.

As students read scholarship across the disciplines, many develop an ambient
awareness of how a scholar should sound. So even if they are told to be concrete and concise, they are also reading published scholars who are not. This lack of clarity seems compounded by competing protocols of the disciplines and inconsistent notions of flow, style, story, syntax and audience. The students also seemed to be guided by inherited, repeated, and reinforced traditions that put distance between the writer and reader. While the goal of the writer should be to enlighten the mind of reader, it seems many readers in the academe draw from the premise that they should work hard to read the minds of the writer.

Perhaps the scholars writing these publications have significant and compelling research but not enough training in writing (and that is working from the premise that training in writing is not the same as practicing writing—many years writing as an academic). Perhaps fear of sounding biased creates a distance that conditions a removed voice. But it seems more likely this remove is motivated by the desire to become an exclusive member of a given discipline. The data suggested that disparate disciplines tend to adopt an insular language that—though intended to be a shorthand—excludes others. In fact, wrote Pinker (2014), this style not only excludes those outside the circle but also those within the circle. This means readers will take more time to learn less.

Also, while several students mentioned they were encouraged to be readable, few mentioned how they did this, such as using story to engage the reader. Few mentioned techniques for concision or concreteness, which suggests that lessons in these skills could have been more compelling or memorable. Moreover, the data suggested that professors of other disciplines rely on the core rhetoric and composition classes to teach these skills.
Question 3: Cures

Because many students prioritized complex phrasing over clear communication, it seems lessons in clarity could be practiced more in rhetoric or composition classes. However, because students often meet the college writing requirement in one year, this might not be enough time to hone skills of concreteness, concision, and audience connection. An ambient awareness of dispassionate scholarly writing, a desire to enter the scholarly community, and the stress of mastering disjunctive protocols may override a student’s natural instincts for clear communication. Before they cement a disconnected style, it seems many students could benefit from more training in audience concision, concreteness, and audience connection.

Story: The best way to connect to the audience, said Nobel Laureate E. O. Wilson (2002), is to use story in scholarly writing. This, he explained, can help scholars share their discoveries with others. The historian, the anthropologist, and the creative writer all relied on elements of story to explain complex concepts in way a wide audience could understand. If the skill of storytelling promotes collective exchange and it transfers well into diverse disciplines, then perhaps creative writing classes, which teach the skill of crafting stories (as well as concise phrasing and concrete detail) could benefit scholarly writers—at all levels.

Creative Writing: According to the creative writer, many literature classes, which are about stories (and important for close reading and critical thinking), do not encourage writers to use story or to be concrete in their literary analysis. This could mean that classes in creative writing promote more compelling writing than classes in English literature. An inference from this study is that that rhetoric classes (but keep in
mind this researcher teaches rhetoric), which emphasize ethos (clarity and credibility), pathos (connecting to readers with elements such as story), and logos (logic and support), can best train students across the curriculum to write clear scholarly writing.

**More Core Classes:** In light of the included literature, the participants’ feedback, and the inferences shaped from the ground up (a foundation set by the theoretical framework of Discursive Psychology), this study found that unclear writing stunts collective exchange. While this suggests professors of core academic writing classes might revise their lessons in concreteness, concision, and audience connection to encourage more retention and application, it seems that college students need more than one year (or one semester) to develop these skills.

**Reliance on Writing Professors:** Perhaps taking an advanced rhetoric, composition, or creative writing class could help more students develop a sense of confidence, concreteness, story, concision, and reader awareness. This training could be recommended for all university students, including those in the social sciences (as the social sciences were imputed to have the vaguest writing).

**More Support for Professors of other Disciplines:** In addition to this curriculum change, professors across the disciplines could be more mindful to practice precise prose in their own writing. They could also benefit from clear and concise handbooks that teach students how to write concretely and concisely, yet still stay within the style of the discipline. The could also assign readings by scholars who know how to do this, such as George Orwell.
Conclusions

Orwell (2012) felt vague or verbose academic and political language has been inherited like a tradition, and that is a tradition of mindless, rote, detached writing with filler words and passive syntax. Experts in academic writing (Derounian, 2011; De Button, 2017; Pinker, 2014; Sword, 2012; Lakoff, 2004; Trimble, 2011; Parini, 2005; Lanham, 1992) also described a tradition of language that is removed, recondite, repeated, and reinforced. In the university, this tradition seems to have solidified into a premise of effective writing. That premise is praised, published, and used for promotion within the scholarly community.

It seems that the publications students read across the disciplines shape their sense of appropriate writing, and this overrides any reminders for clarity. In fact, this ambient awareness seems to encourage students to use more words than necessary. Many continue with this style into graduate school. Graduate students then learn a specialized language that is repeated and reinforced by individual disciplines. To advance professionally within a discipline, the historian explained, academics master a diction that does not translate well to the public. However, this diction becomes a mark of scholarly erudition. And as stated before, this erudition becomes published, awarded, normalized, and taught to the next generation.

While some traced this tradition back to the Bible and neoliberalism, language styles also seem to be shaped by one’s motivations. Several of the professors expressed intrinsic motivations to write clearly, such as content sharing, connection to the writing, and concern for the audience. On the other hand, the students expressed extrinsic motivations, such as high grades and high regard, and that meant mastering the
academe’s protocols of format, style, and syntax, such as a distant voice and passive language. But are the protocols of distance aligned with the maturity that comes with de-centering one’s own view and considering others' views?

According to the literature and participants of this study, these protocols lead to disinterest. For one, passive language creates a distance that removes the subject from the content. Instead of saying “I think,” the creative writer complained that academics say “one would think.” This disconnects the writer from the writing. The students characterized scholarly writing (as dull, detached, standardized, and constraining) in a perfunctory way, and this disinterest seemed to impact the clarity of their writing. An inference is that they would be less likely to block off time to write and rewrite and revise and revise again for concreteness, concision, and the reader’s comprehension. This also means they would be less likely to refine the sentences, as Orwell (2012) advised, such as deleting repeated words, replacing function words with content words, activating phrases, creating mental images, or rewriting vague phrases with concrete examples. In Orwell’s view, questioning the premise that a writer must be distant from one’s writing could be one step towards preventing dull writing.

Dull writing, as characterized by students and professors alike, is a chore to read. The students expected to read scholarly writers who maintained a certain remove. However, that distance, while safe, seemed to translate to less investment in reading, rereading, discerning, and absorbing the content. This poses more questions: Should scholarly material feel like a chore to read? As readers, is tackling an arduous style a necessary growing pain that helps one advance intellectually? Even if it advances one’s vocabulary, does it advance one’s knowledge? Does it facilitate collective exchange?
The findings of this study show this inaccessibility does the opposite.

This has implications beyond the university. In the professional world, according to Palmiera’s (2015) study, those who are indirect are considered less competent. This is especially true for women, found Mindell (1995) and Holmes (2011). While many the participating professors felt that passive syntax leads to indirect, ineffective writing, most learned to adjust, or code switch, to the established protocols of the different disciplines. Only one felt it necessary to change this practice.

Foucault (2008) believed that agency comes from questioning unconsciously inherited premises to see if they are serving us. He believed that larger institutional structures that maintain an imbalance of power are supported by smaller unquestioned premises. What keeps these premises from being questioned, Foucault theorized, is division, acceptance, repetition, and reinforcement. In the university, division occurs with insulated language, acceptance happens as aspiring scholars accept protocols, repetition happens as writers cement a style, and reinforcement happens as this style is awarded by publications, tenure, and prestige. Changing the structure starts with questioning those premises. A key finding from this study is that the university, which focuses on collective and individual empowerment, might start by reevaluating the premise that high scholarship needs highbrow language.

If we switch to the premise that high scholarship needs to be concrete and concise, then it seems that training in precision should have more weight. Perhaps we could question the need for passive voice. Perhaps more filtering from blind readers and editors who select the published scholarship might slow the cycle of vagueness. However, it seems the best time to catch the tendency for longwinded writing might be
while students are in the process of forming their own standards. That is usually when they are taking required academic writing classes, transferring those skills, and developing their own style. Catching vagueness early might curtail it before they become published scholars or blind readers. Catching vagueness early might also prevent it from fossilizing into a normal style that becomes adopted by the next generation. Professors across the disciplines could also filter the readings they assign their students so students learn to model a concrete and concise writing style.

According to Bermann and Zippernick (2007), the participating students in their study focused on learning the standards of the different disciplines. In fact, they found their rhetoric or composition teachers “meddlesome,” indicating that their required academic writing classes did not transfer well to other disciplines (p. 132). Similarly, a study by Wardle (2009) concluded that the skills taught in required freshman classes do not easily transfer into other disciplines. As a result, she recommended that academic writing should instead be taught by the professors of the different disciplines because they were more qualified to teach that distinct genre.

This study came to the opposite conclusion. According to the literature and diverse professors that participated in this study, writing should be clear across the curriculum. They suggested that if teachers can find a way to inspire a connection to the topic and to the audience, then the writing will naturally be more concise and concrete. However, this study found that for many scholars and students alike, it is not a priority to take the time to step back from the writing and see if it would be clear to the reader.

While the participating professors from the non-writing disciplines said they told their students to be concrete and concise, none mentioned integrating classroom exercises
on concreteness and concision. Only the anthropologist said he “marked up drafts like crazy.” But that does not mean the others did not do this. Still, many professors seemed to rely on core rhetoric and writing classes to teach clarity and concision. The participating students had already completed one rhetoric class and had started another, yet few students named clarity as a priority of academic writing. While this suggested that exercises in clarity could be more common and memorable in core writing classes, it seems these students needed more training in writing.

A conclusion from this study is that the burden falls on the rhetoric and writing professors to help students write successfully across the disciplines and beyond the university. If this is the case, this prompts a practical question: Are the two required rhetoric and writing classes enough to prepare students to write across the disciplines and beyond the university? The findings from this study suggest that two semesters are not enough.

Based on this investigation, five consistent factors emerged that elucidated the causes and cures of unclear scholarly writing:

**Causes:**

1) Concreteness, detail, concision, and story a low priority for students
2) Structure, support, form, and format prioritized by professors more than audience connection
3) Tribal mentality (tenure)/Jargon for shorthand/associate lofty language with lofty thoughts
4) Disjunctive and constraining protocols
5) Over-reliance on first-year, required academic writing classes
Cures:

1) Take a creative writing class
2) Include narrative segment in rhetoric or composition classes
3) Exercise (the professors themselves) and emphasize (in text selection) clear writing
4) Allow more flexibility with style and protocols to allow connection to content
5) Require advanced rhetoric or creative writing class for concreteness and concision

Future Research

Based on the findings of this study, an opportunity for future research would be the cost and opportunities of requiring additional rhetoric or creative writing classes for all college students. To add these classes, what would have to be given up? Should these writing classes be required or recommended? More importantly, what might be the direct impact on a student’s academic writing?

Also, more studies could evaluate the connection between clear writing and clear communication beyond the university. Within the university, more research could show the impact of loosening protocols of using third person pronouns or the need for in-text APA citation. Because the embedded publication information can interrupt the writer’s style and reader’s concentration, one might investigate the impact of going back to footnotes. The MLA style, the model preferred in the writing disciplines, prioritizes the idea, not the publishing data. What would be the logistical impact of allowing MLA in the social sciences? It seems that more research could be done on the impact of APA versus MLA format so that scholars are mindfully working from purposeful formatting and effective premises. Questioning premises, which is a form of critical thinking that scholars from Aristotle to Foucault encouraged, could make higher education more
transformative. Transformative Theory (Creswell, 2009, p. 67) or Pattern theory (Creswell, 2009, p. 64) could be the theoretical framework to drive that study.

Most significantly, it seems that more research could be done to support professors who are teaching writing in diverse disciplines. This is a double burden. But perhaps more short, fun, and current supplemental texts could help students negotiate the disparate disciplines yet drill concision, concreteness, and audience connection.

**For Future Practice**

Based on the findings of this study, lessons in concision, concreteness, and audience connection can be eclipsed by the need to follow scholarly protocols or showcase sophisticated language. However, according to the literature review and participating professors of this study, overly complex writing does not promote reader comprehension, and that disconnection can diminish collective exchange. Required classes in rhetoric and writing are designed to teach clear prose and attention to audience, but the participating students did not name those features as priorities of scholarly writing. Perhaps this is because the lessons in clarity need to be more compelling, frequent, and reinforced. But this reinforcement may be difficult when curriculums allow students to test out of the first semester and complete the writing requirement by the second semester. Professors of other disciplines seemed to rely on the required writing classes to cover and inculcate clear writing, but since there is sometimes only one required academic writing class, perhaps that is putting too much of a burden on the rhetoric or composition instructors.

The data of this dissertation led to five recommendations to encourage clear writing across the disciplines:
One, academic writers could benefit from a creative writing class, which develops
detail, story, and precision—all elements the professors named as important for clear
writing, and all elements that were low priorities for the students.

Two, if taking a creative writing class is not possible, then rhetoric and writing
teachers could include a narrative assignment in the academic writing classes. A
narrative component is often included in composition classes but rhetoric and writing
classes tend to start with a rhetorical analysis. This can create the stress that leads to
stilted writing. If professors would start their courses with a short narrative or descriptive
assignment, that might help students craft concrete, concise descriptions, as well as a
commitment to the writing and a connection to the reader. This could potentially
condition the prose to be more precise in other academic disciplines.

Three, professors of all disciplines should exercise (in their own writing) and
emphasize (for their students) clarity, for the data of this study indicated that intellectual
discoveries are more easily shared if writers care about the reader’s understanding.
Perhaps, instead of relying on core writing instructors to drill a direct writing style
(because learning precision is a continual process—not easily mastered in two semesters),
professors of other disciplines could assign accessible documents from the given
discipline so their students could study proper protocols in conjunction with audience
awareness.

Four, this connection with the audience may be enhanced by loosening
protocols—including protocols that discourage the first person, contractions, or personal
tone. Bogdin and Biklen (2007) and Creswell (2009) encourage scholars to use the first
person in qualitative writing. Perhaps this flexibility could extend to other scholarly
writing, such as in the social sciences, a field that purportedly suffers the most from verbosity and vagueness.

Five, it seems that all university students could benefit from an advanced rhetoric and writing class (not a writing class for the discipline) because rhetoric and writing professors have more specific training in teaching writing. Professors of diverse disciplines might include quick exercises in clarity but, as this study indicated, they also rely on writing teachers to drill this clarity. As those who teach English as a second language know, just because someone knows English does not mean he or she can teach it. Similarly, just because one knows how to write in a scholarly way does not mean he or she can teach this. Those who teach English as a second language learn pedagogical techniques to train learners, those who teach literature learn techniques to teach close reading, and those who teach academic writing learn techniques to teach clear writing. Most trained writers work from the premise that advanced writing is clear writing.

Departments such as the social sciences might benefit from this revised premise. For example, when Andrew D. Cohen (2017), a widely cited linguist, published a paper for budding scholars to be published, he described his purpose in his abstract: “This chapter is meant to be of particular benefit to those scholars for whom getting themselves published has been a challenge” (p. 1). Professors of academic writing would not consider this phrase “is meant to be of particular benefit” effective. Trimble (2011) said that “if we think in terms of phrases, we’re only half-conscious of words” (p. 48). What if Cohen instead deleted the “to be” form and three prepositions and turned the noun “benefit” into a verb? We’d have: “This chapter should benefit scholars who struggle to get published.” A professor of any discipline might know how to tighten that sentence
instinctively, but a professor with training in syntax and style would know how to explain the revision, just as he or she could explain other potential revisions in student writing. Many scholars of diverse disciplines seem to be published more for their content than their writing skills, yet writing professors are trained to purposefully select course readings not just for their content but for their clarity.

In conclusion, as this study found, unclear language can limit collective exchange, civic awareness, and individual agency. Perhaps five options—training in creative writing, a narrative segment in rhetoric classes, clear reading models, more flexible protocols, and more training from writing experts—could facilitate collective exchange and empower students beyond the university.

The university aims to develop the individual and the collective whole, and yet the curriculum design (students often skip a second semester of rhetoric or composition to take a writing class in a different discipline) and writing practices (inherited protocols) can hinder that aim. What may cause this inverse effect is the unconscious acceptance of the premise that high language reflects high education. In the academe, this language can sound vague and verbose, supercilious, superficial, or insecure. That insecurity, as Lakoff (2004) explained it, creates an inside circle that elevates them and excludes others. That is why it is important to challenge premises that promote unnecessarily complex language.

The literature and findings of this study show that caring about the reader’s understanding conveys confidence, and that confidence—not high language—can reflect high intellect. As explained earlier, diglossia means there is a high, standardized language (H), and a low, vernacular language (L) in social hierarchy. Neither works for a
broad and integrated audience. “If the notion of diglossia is to be expanded to include not only separate languages, but style-shifting as well, then there is further reason to relax the binary” (Fassold, 2006, p. 52). This is true with academic language, too. Fassold (2006) described high language as the kind of language used in schools. But this can lead to formulaic language. Form is good; formulaic is not. Form, support, connection, and care is what most writing professors are trained to teach their students.

Each professor has an enormous job of teaching a particular subject—that is why professors become masters of that field and college curriculums coordinate those fields to educate the whole person. Educating the whole person, claimed Nussbaum (2015) and Tagore (2015) is what empowers that person to think critically, and that critical thinking, they argue, is essential for democracy. But it takes separate trained specialists to educate the whole person. The onus should not be on a history or linguistics professor to teach academic writing; the onus should be on the writing professors. However, two semesters of core academic writing do not seem to be enough.

That is why this study recommends that all university students take an additional rhetoric, composition, or creative writing class, for these classes drill the importance of concise, concrete, connected writing. Until that happens, professors of various disciplines should select and assign texts that are challenging for their ideas but written clearly for their readers. It seems that scholars can be objective and connected at the same time. This connection can be a tool of power. The university should teach that tool. In particular, writing experts should teach that tool.
Closing Remarks

As someone who has negotiated the competing protocols in the fields of literature, creative writing, rhetoric, linguistics, and social justice, I became the 100th participant of this study. I have learned about the power of precise and personal language. I have also experienced the drudgery of dull and detached language. In this dissertation, I have struggled to avoid the first person and adhere to APA protocols. As a student and instructor, I have seen how personal tone can reflect bias and short phrasing can reflect simplicity. But, in my experience, using “I” and writing in MLA allows my writing to have more concreteness and concision. It seems to me that if we release certain premises and revise certain protocols about effective academic writing, academics might write with more connection to the topic and care for the audience. This can empower the writer and also enlighten the reader, and this clear connection is conducive to collective exchange, which is the aim of higher education.
REFERENCES


Derounian, J. (14 November 2011). Academic writing: why does it have to be so dull and

network/blog/2011/nov/14/academic-writing-dull-stilted.


APPENDIX A: Consent Forms

FOR PROFESSORS: CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN A RESEARCH STUDY:

Below is a description of the research procedures and an explanation of your rights as a research participant. You should read this information carefully. If you agree to participate, you will sign in the space provided to indicate that you have read and understand the information on this consent form. You are entitled to and will receive a copy of this form. You have been asked to participate in a research study conducted by Marlene Mahony, a graduate student in the School of Education at the University of San Francisco. This faculty supervisor for this study is Dr. Sedique Popal, a professor in the Department of Education at the University of San Francisco.

WHAT THE STUDY IS ABOUT:

The purpose of this study is to explore the causes and cures for vague or verbose academic writing. In particular, this study is designed to gain insight about the priorities of good academic writing and what can be done to make this writing more effective and accessible.

WHAT I WILL ASK YOU TO DO:

During the study, you will be audio taped by Marlene Mahony during in-person interviews or written responses, in which you will be asked about your perceptions and experiences with academic writing. A follow-up audio recorded in-person interview may be requested to clarify or expand on information collected in the first interview. After the interviews are completed, written transcripts will be created and you will be offered the opportunity to review the transcripts for accuracy. Audio taping and other notes collected during the interviews are beneficial to capture exact wording for use in qualitative research analysis. This will ensure the best accuracy in any information collected from you.

DURATION AND LOCATION OF THE STUDY:

Your participation in this study will involve one in-person interview, which is estimated to take from twenty to twenty-five minutes. Additionally, the optional review of the transcripts could take up to thirty minutes to review. Your total participation time for this study is one hour.

POTENTIAL RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS:

The research procedures described above may involve the following risks and/or discomforts: Questions in the interview may make you feel uncomfortable (you are free to decline to answer any questions and stop participation at any time); the in-person interview(s) will last about twenty to twenty-five minutes either through Skype or at a
mutually convenient time and place on my university campus, during which time the
participation time allotments required may make you become tired or bored. If you wish,
you may choose to withdraw your consent and discontinue your participation at any time
during the study without penalty.

BENEFITS:

You will receive no direct benefit from your participation in this study; however, the
possible benefits to others include expanded knowledge about how to make academic
writing more effective.

PRIVACY/CONFIDENTIALITY:

Any data you provide in this study will be kept confidential unless disclosure is required
by law. In any report I publish, I will not include information that will make it possible to
identify you or any individual participant. Specifically, I will use pseudonyms for your
identity. This includes during the use of direct quotes from interview notes, and
recordings, collected documents, and notes and recordings from observations. All
electronic files, recordings, and physical documents will also use a pseudonym in place
of your identity. A master list with your identity and contact information will be kept
separately from the collected research data in a password protected file. All electronic
data will be kept in password protected software, files, and folders. Physical documents
will be kept in locked file drawers. Electronic documents will be deleted upon completion
of the research. Physical documents with links to your identity will be shredded upon
completion of the research. Audio recordings will be kept electronically in a password
protected folder and deleted upon completion of the research. Consent forms will be
destroyed approximately three years after the completion of the research per IRB
requirements.

COMPENSATION/PAYMENT FOR PARTICIPATION:

There is no payment or other form of compensation for your participation in this study.

VOLUNTARY NATURE OF THE STUDY:

Your participation is voluntary and you may refuse to participate. Furthermore, you may
skip any questions or tasks that make you uncomfortable and may discontinue your
participation at any time. The researcher has the right to withdraw you from participation
in the study at any time. Nonparticipation or withdrawal from the study will not affect
your employment at the University of San Francisco.

OFFER TO ANSWER QUESTIONS:

Please ask any questions you have now. If I have any questions or comments about
participation in this study, please contact the principal investigator: Marlene Mahony at
mimahony@usfca.edu. For questions or concerns related to the rights of research
participants please contact the University of San Francisco Institutional Research Board
office by calling 415-422-6091 or through email at, IRBPHS@usfca.edu.
I HAVE READ THE ABOVE INFORMATION. ANY QUESTIONS I HAVE ASKED HAVE BEEN ANSWERED. I AGREE TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS RESEARCH PROJECT AND I WILL RECEIVE A COPY OF THIS CONSENT FORM.

PARTICIPANT'S SIGNATURE                                      DATE
______________________________________      ______________

FOR STUDENTS: CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN A RESEARCH STUDY:

Below is a description of the research procedures and an explanation of your rights as a research participant. You should read this information carefully. If you agree to participate, you will sign in the space provided to indicate that you have read and understand the information on this consent form. You are entitled to and will receive a copy of this form. You have been asked to participate in a research study conducted by Marlene Mahony a graduate student in the School of Education at the University of San Francisco. The faculty supervisor for this study is Dr. Sedique Popal, a professor in the Department of Education at the University of San Francisco.

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During the study, you will be audio taped by Marlene Mahony during in-person interviews or written responses, in which you will be asked about your perceptions and experiences with academic writing. A follow-up audio recorded in-person interview may be requested to clarify or expand on information collected in the first interview. After the interviews are completed, written transcripts will be created and you will be offered the opportunity to review the transcripts for accuracy. Audio taping and other notes collected during the interviews are beneficial to capture exact wording for use in qualitative research analysis. This will ensure the best accuracy in any information collected from you.

DURATION AND LOCATION OF THE STUDY:

Your participation in this study will involve 1 in-person interview that will last from ten to fifteen minutes. Additionally, the optional review of the transcripts could take up to fifteen to thirty minutes to review. Your total participation time for this study is thirty minutes.

POTENTIAL RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS:
The research procedures described above may involve the following risks and/or discomforts: questions in the interview may make you feel uncomfortable (you are free to decline to answer any questions and stop participation at any time); the in-person interview(s) will last about ten to fifteen minutes at a mutually convenient time and place on my university campus during which time the participation time allotments required may make you become tired or bored. If you wish, you may choose to withdraw your consent and discontinue your participation at any time during the study without penalty.

BENEFITS:

You will receive no direct benefit from your participation in this study; however, the possible benefits to others include expanded knowledge about how to make academic writing more effective. Contributions to the body of literature regarding effective academic writing.

PRIVACY/CONFIDENTIALITY:

Any data you provide in this study will be kept confidential unless disclosure is required by law. In any report I publish, I will not include information that will make it possible to identify you or any individual participant. Specifically, I will use pseudonyms for your identity. This includes during the use of direct quotes from interview notes and recordings, collected documents, and notes and recordings from observations. All electronic files, recordings, and physical documents will also use pseudonyms in place of your identity. A master list with your identity and contact information will be kept separately from the collected research data in a password protected file. All electronic data will be kept in password protected software, files, and folders. Physical documents will be kept in locked file drawers. Electronic documents will be deleted upon completion of the research. Physical documents with links to your identity will be shredded upon completion of the research. Audio recordings will be kept electronically in a password protected folder and deleted upon completion of the research. Consent forms will be destroyed approximately three years after the completion of the research per IRB requirements.

COMPENSATION/PAYMENT FOR PARTICIPATION:

There is no compensation for participating in this study.

VOLUNTARY NATURE OF THE STUDY:

Your participation is voluntary and you may refuse to participate. Furthermore, you may skip any questions or tasks that make you uncomfortable and may discontinue your participation at any time. The researcher has the right to withdraw you from participation in the study at any time. Nonparticipation or withdrawal from the study will not affect your employment at the University of San Francisco.

OFFER TO ANSWER QUESTIONS:
Please ask any questions you have now. If I have any questions or comments about participation in this study, please contact the principal investigator: Marlene Mahony at mimahony@usfca.edu. For questions or concerns related to the rights of research participants please contact the University of San Francisco Institutional Research Board office by calling 415-422-6091 or through email at, IRBPHS@usfca.edu.

I HAVE READ THE ABOVE INFORMATION. ANY QUESTIONS I HAVE ASKED HAVE BEEN ANSWERED. I AGREE TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS RESEARCH PROJECT AND I WILL RECEIVE A COPY OF THIS CONSENT FORM.

PARTICIPANT'S SIGNATURE          DATE
_________________________________  __________________________
APPENDIX B:

Sample Solicitation Letter

Dear ________,

My name is Marlene Mahony. I’ve been an adjunct professor for the last twenty years, and I’m back in school to get my doctorate in education at the University of San Francisco. I’m doing my dissertation on the causes and cures for vague academic writing, and I was wondering if I could get your opinion. I know you must be swamped, but I only have ten questions, which you can answer in the way that’s easiest for you. You could type in your answers (no need to write full sentences), answer by phone as I take notes, or do a Skyped, recorded interview—at a time that works for you. Your answers would be completely anonymous, but they would be a valuable part of my study. Whatever your response, I thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Marlene Mahony
APPENDIX C:

Coding Sample: Questions for Students in RHET 120

1) How would you distinguish scholarly writing from other writing?

Codes:
FL=formal/professional; FT=format, rules; FM=form (grammar, syntax, polish);
ST=structure/organization; SP=support/citation; CX=complex/difficult ideas;
CV=complex vocabulary or language; BR=boring, dry; DT=detached, scholarly
RT=rhetorical strategies;

R1: very formal, persuasive, serious language, not laid back language FL CV
R2: more complex than other writing, sometimes unnecessarily complex, professional,
articulate in style. FL FM CX BR
R3: means there is depth to it; they want to wake you up to stop and think about what
you’re reading and want to ask questions. CX
R4: very formal, not a lot of personal opinion, some broad and some specific ideas. FL
DT
R5: harder to read, more wordy and complex CX CV
R6: intro, these, topic sentence, body paragraphs, conclusion, flowy, MLA format.
FT ST
R7: more in depth and take more time to understand CX
R8: more theories and years of extensive research SP
R9: more difficult to understand CX
R10: more about using writing techniques to get a point across
R11: detailed long sentences, simple sentences, “academic” tone FL CV
R12: organized ideas, author is trying to convey a point or accurately describe
something ST
R13: format, words that are used, where to source comes from, author FT SP CV
R14: includes research, in-depth analysis and lengthy diction, written by someone
with PhD/other writing is casual, easier on the eyes and can be written by anyone.
SP CX CV
R15: usually boring and hard to comprehend. I often have to reread paragraphs or start
over all together to understand what is being said. CX BR
R16: in “proper” English, or more formal. FM FL
R17: more formal and structured with all rhetorical strategies included; on the other
hand, other writing can differ as writing in text, conversation or informal. FL ST RT
R18: more clearly defined than other writing
R19: author has a PhD, a certain kind of diploma and you can research them and find
them easily. Other writing anyone can be the author.
R20: more formal/ have to be cautious of how you come across and build a clear
claim using evidence. FL SP
R21: invokes research, knowledge about the topic, and learning the topic
R22: harder to comprehend CX
R23: mindfulness, critical thinking, rhetoric, taking consideration of the audience, research, credible sources, citation
R24: has to sound fancy vs. everyday language FL CV
R25: George Orwell
R26: has specific topic and a well written argument
R27: more proper and flows together FM ST
R28: more sophisticated, well-thought out, uses more complex vocabulary, much more refined than, say, in-class essay, or journal entry FL CV
R29: wordy and confusing/other writing descriptive, poetic, light CX CV

Group 2: Description of scholarly writing
R30 scholarly-formal, providing a point; other writing—bias, takes personal stance FL
R31 intellectual writing/properly written according to certain guidelines, used to educate FT FM DT
R32 professional wording, well-structured ST CV
R33 format your ideas, make it easy to understand, portray your overall image/other writing is to put your ideas down on paper FT
R34 academic vs. nonacademic
R35 thesis, organized, supported details, conclusion, well-thought out argument/other writing —none of these
R36 more research and objectivity, sources, format, rules FT FM SP
R37 intellectual, analytical, critical thinking CX
R38 centered on thesis
R39 more formal than other writing, more rigorous FL
R40 more formal and has very scientific vocabulary, no “I” or first person used, dissociated/other writing sounds more connected FL
R41 content, syntax, diction, proper use of grammar FM CV
R42 well-developed paragraphs, clear ideas, well-developed, arguable essay
R43 more formal and well-structured/other writing more casual and not in good order FL ST,
R44 expressed more formally and personal experience is articulated in a professional manner FL FM DT
R45 specific intelligent vocabulary and grammar form FM CV
R46 more academic based, while other writing can be just for personal enjoyment like a dinner
R47 interesting and educating at most, but can be dry from time to time BR
R48 much more nomenclatures and logic that can hardly be understood by normal people, but easy with professionals and scholars. CX CV BR DT
R49 writing in a standardized way which requires grammar checking, correct citation and simplicity FM
R50 use of concise academic language
R51 much more adequate and professional than regular writing/shows what we have learned, the type of person one is and how we express ourselves on paper FM
R52 cited academic sources, complex commentary, some sort of structure, scientific findings, statistics that are pertinent, accurate ST SP CX
R53 engages students to a more standard type of writing/other writing more informal FL FT R54 formal, correct grammar/other writing informal, free-writing FL FM R55 structured (prompt)/other writing more creative, less structured ST R56 incorporates literature, shows you understand the text R57 formal use of language, perfect grammar, deep knowledge and understanding of the topic FL FM CV R58 more formal, certain outcome from the start FL R59 format and sources used/the subject of the writing FT SP

Common words to describe scholarly writing: (Group 1)
Scholarly: formal, sources, structure, standardized writing, cited academic sources, scientific findings, perfect grammar, properly written, understanding topics, thesis, critical thinking, intellectual, educating but dry, logic that can hardly be understood by normal people, but easy with professionals and scholars, more formal than other writing, more rigorous, very scientific vocabulary, no “I” or first person used, dissociated, academic based,

Other writing: creative, less structured, other writing can be just for personal enjoyment like a dinner, free-writing, takes a personal stance

Common themes to describe scholarly writing: (Group 2)
Scholarly: very formal, sophisticated, refined, fancy, articulate, wordy, complex, cautious, not much personal opinion, structured, clear claim, researched, cited, knowledgeable, credible, Ph, D. academic, in depth, rhetorically strategic, persuasive, flows, confusing, hard to comprehend, challenging diction
Other writing: poetic, light, laid back, everyday speech, conversational, informal

My assessment: Most common responses were that scholars writing is sophisticated, refined, structured, supported, knowledgeable, formal, complex, and impersonal. Many claimed it was was often hard to understand because of the language, but some also described it as persuasive.

Group 3: Description of scholarly writing
R60 formal and usually talks about a current events, argues a point of view/other writing casual with no format, support, evidence of any sort! FL FT FM R61 language more formal and has various sources, heavy on ethos category FL SP RT R62 distinguished through references . . . if published for educational purp. SP R63 non-biased, credible, resourceful, strong, fluent, apprehended by all, and most importantly, grammatically correct FM R64 more objective, formal, professional/information included must be cited and carefully researched FL DT R65 more professional academic language in a formal writing/other writing informal FL
R66 case studied, research-heavy, complex/other writing not directed at an audience, most social media (ex) “had a bad day” “got my car washed” etc. SP CX
R67 vocabulary, diction, concepts CV
R68 academic language and tools learned in classes/other writing informal and based on your own standards
R69 clearly thought-out, researched, and very put together, the reader can clearly understand and gain knowledge from SP
R70 grammar is harder, more sophisticated, more academic tone to it FM FL DT
R71 more citations and evidence to back up any arguments or claims held in the paper SP
R72 structural more ST
R73 more analytical and not for pleasure, supposed to further knowledge intellectually BR
R74 is assigned or needs to be done. It must be completed for a grade. It also should meet a certain criteria.
R75 academic language, formal FL
R76 less personal and more serious tone FL
R77 vocabulary, syntax mostly CV
R78 descriptive, easily flow from paragraph to paragraph, showing evidence SP
R79 with the purpose of explaining/expanding on a concept, educating, or being considered in academic circles
R80 included critical thinking, reliable sources, great overall writing skills/other writing not SP CX
R81 author background, premise, nonfiction, explanations are what makes something scholarly
R82 higher vocabulary, well-structured, cites credible sources ST CV
R83 has firmer structure to it, requires paying more attention to grammar/free writing less boundaries FM
R84 more formal, goal to inform on certain topics FL
R85 sophisticated, put together, formal, well-thought out FL
R86 polished, involves critical thinking FM
R87 very formal in tone, not conversational, “didacticful” FL
R88 more structured, more logical. Furthermore, my school writing usually follows the professor’s criteria ST
R89 nonfiction, argues, researches, or discusses a certain topic, has thesis, written in academic language SP
R90 intent to educate, yet scholarly writing is less written for personal reasons and more with the intention of maintaining their work as “scholarly.” /other personal narratives, less structured, written for themselves ST FM DT
R91 formal language and included sources to back up relevant material FL SP CV
R92 usually clear, stronger vocabulary, more organized than regular writing ST CV
R93 usually an assignment rather than something you’re writing to write (not to say people can’t get excited for assignments) BR
The protocol 947. My Research Protocol has been reviewed by the IRB chair and found not to require further IRB review or oversight.

Please note that changes to your protocol may affect its exempt status. Please contact our office to discuss any changes you may contemplate.

Sincerely,

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