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Review Essay

Cross-Disciplinary Approaches to Style

Stylish Academic Writing
Helen Sword

The Sense of Style: The Thinking Person’s Guide to Writing in the 21st Century
Steven Pinker

The experience of reading Helen Sword’s Stylish Academic Writing and Steven Pinker’s The Sense of Style turned my thoughts in an unexpected direction. Until recently, I haven’t taken much interest in composition scholars’ aspirations to disciplinary status, preferring to conceptualize composition studies as an interdiscipline with a focus on teaching. One reason a writing teacher’s career is so satisfying is that writing is by its nature generalist and interdisciplinary: like reading or thinking, it’s everywhere in academia. Our theory and research are interdisciplinary as well, drawing upon ideas and research practices developed in many disciplines—rhetoric, poetics, linguistics, cultural studies, education, psychology, anthropology. I like the idea of composition studies as

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an interdisciplinary field—a large plot of land, very fertile, continually enriched by streams flowing from neighboring fields.

Both *Stylish Academic Writing* and *The Sense of Style* confirm the value of interdisciplinary insights. Sword is an education researcher whose work gains authority from a carefully designed empirical study. Pinker, a cognitive scientist and psycholinguist, is at his best when he looks into the minds of readers, explaining how to craft sentences that readers will process with ease. But the relationship between linguistics and writing is a complicated one. Pinker’s book illustrates the shortcoming in my image of composition studies as a field. I’ve located it in a valley, where all the streams flow toward us. A better image would raise our elevation a bit, so knowledge could flow both directions. *The Sense of Style* is an informative book and a delight to read—and it would be better if it had been informed by knowledge generated in our field, about writing and especially about how people learn to write.

**Style, Styles, and the Teaching of Style**

The central terms in sentence pedagogy, grammar and style, have multiple meanings. In his widely read 1985 article, “Grammar, Grammars, and the Teaching of Grammar,” Patrick Hartwell explains that the term grammar is used in five ways. Grammar 1, he writes, is “the grammar in our heads,” the intuitive knowledge of a language’s rules that native speakers acquire as they grow up. Grammar 2 is “scientific grammar,” linguists’ articulation of those rules. Grammar 3 is usage, or “linguistic etiquette,” the set of injunctions that tells us not to use ain’t, or irregardless, or affect for effect. Grammar 4, or “school grammar,” is the incomplete and often inaccurate description of sentence structure derived from the grammar of Latin or from faux logic (as in “two negatives make a positive”). Finally, Grammar 5 is “stylistic grammar,” or “grammatical terms used in the interest of teaching prose style.” Examples are Francis Christensen’s “generative rhetoric of the sentence” and Martha Kolln’s “rhetorical grammar,” showing writers how to make rhetorically effective choices from the available syntactic options (Hartwell 109–10).

Composition specialists are indebted to Hartwell: we can think more clearly about grammar if we break it down and identify which meaning we have in mind at a given time. I’d argue that the same is true—in spades—for style. And so, in emulation of Hartwell, let me propose a roughly parallel breakdown of style, styles, and the teaching of style.
• Style 1 is individual style. When we say that we admire a writer’s style, we usually mean that we enjoy the sound of his or her voice on the page. Individual style is probably a result of humans’ natural creativity, our pleasure in language play, our wish to be heard and remembered.

• Style 2 is house style. Unlike Style 1, house style has little to do with individuality or play: it is, instead, a set of conventions that become regularized and quite strictly enforced by a community of writers and editors in order to ensure consistency in publications. When we call the MLA Handbook a style guide, we refer to house style.

• Style 3, usage, is identical to Grammar 3. Many books with style in the title will explain the distinction between fewer and less, warn against misusing literally, and offer tips on punctuation.

Together, Styles 4 and 5 cover the same ground as Hartwell’s “stylistic grammar.”

• Style 4 is plain style, a theory of style and an approach to style instruction that privileges clarity and conciseness. Books such as Strunk and White’s The Elements of Style or Joseph Williams’s Style: Ten Lessons in Clarity and Grace encourage the plain style, teaching writers to avoid wordiness, to focus their sentences on actors and actions, and to prefer lean sentences in straightforward language.

• Style 5 is elaborated style, another blend of theory and pedagogy, this one with roots in the tradition of copia. Instruction in elaborated style privileges sentence variety, syntactic dexterity, and artfulness, sometimes taking a linguistic approach and sometimes teaching figures of speech.

These conceptions of style are, of course, interconnected. Except for the many varieties of house style, which are satisfied to occupy their own worlds, the others—Styles 3, 4, and 5—live in service of Style 1. In classrooms and books, we talk about the rules of usage, the virtues of the plain style, and the pleasures of the elaborated style in the hope that the discussion will help writers achieve more effective individual styles.

As every composition teacher knows, it’s a long step from a discussion of style (or, for that matter, of any aspect of writing) to the production of good style. People don’t become good stylists by reading rules or hearing precepts. It takes more—exposure to models, a habit of attention, practice, feedback, more
practice, more feedback—if the precepts are to make a difference. We organize our classrooms with this knowledge in mind; it’s why we work so hard to plan classroom activities and design assignments. It’s why so few of us lecture and so many of us organize workshops.

A book is unavoidably monologic, an extended lecture on paper. Anyone who hopes, in the pages of a book, to share knowledge about style and thereby to help his or her readers become better stylists gets high marks for optimism. Or chutzpah. In *Stylish Academic Writing*, Helen Sword interweaves a compelling argument with teacherly tips and encouragement, doing all that’s humanly possible to overcome the limitations of the medium. Steven Pinker’s *The Sense of Style* is broader in scope, more loosely knit, more prone to missteps. Both writers illustrate advice about style with memorable examples, and their own prose has the wit and verve you’d expect to find in the work of expert stylists.

**Stylish Academic Writing**

In the preface to *Stylish Academic Writing*, Sword spells out her purpose and central point:

> In this book, I argue that elegant ideas deserve elegant expression; that intellectual creativity thrives best in an atmosphere of experimentation rather than conformity; and that, even within the constraints of disciplinary norms, most academics enjoy a far wider range of stylistic choices than they realize. My agenda is, frankly, a transformative one: I aim to start a stylistic revolution that will end in improved reading conditions for all. (vii)

Underlying Sword’s argument is an observation about academic writers: Most of us prefer writing that is well substantiated, accurate, original—and also accessible, engaging, perhaps even passionate, written in a recognizably human voice. Yet much academic writing is obscure, impersonal, and long-winded. Why the mismatch? Because, Sword says, academic writers often believe that they have to write stiff, verbose prose in order to be published. Her mission is to demonstrate that, disciplinary traditions and conventions notwithstanding, academia can accommodate lively, vivid writing.

Sword’s claims are grounded in an ambitious empirical investigation. First, she asked seventy professors from multiple disciplines to name “stylish” academic writers and the characteristics of prose they admired. Second, she analyzed texts by more than one hundred academic authors whose work had been identified as exemplary. She noted specific techniques these writers used both in academic articles and in books written for the general public. Third,
she selected one thousand journal articles—one hundred from each of ten disciplines—and analyzed such features as their use of personal pronouns, their overall structure, their titles and opening sentences, and the frequency of abstract nouns.

The interviews with professors and examination of exemplary texts yielded few surprises. “Stylish scholars, my colleagues told me, express complex ideas clearly and precisely; produce elegant, carefully crafted sentences; convey a sense of energy, intellectual commitment, and even passion; ... tell a compelling story; ... provide their readers with aesthetic and intellectual pleasure” (8). The value of these findings lies in Sword’s move from the general qualities or effects of good writing to specific strategies writers use to achieve them. In the exemplary texts she studied, she saw frequent use of the following:

- interesting, eye-catching titles and subtitles . . .
- catchy opening paragraphs that recount an interesting story, ask a challenging question, dissect a problem, or otherwise hook and hold the reader;
- concrete nouns (as opposed to nominalized abstractions . . .) and active, energetic verbs (as opposed to forms of be and bland standbys such as make, find, or show);
- numerous examples, especially when explaining abstract concepts;
- visual illustrations beyond the usual Excel-generated pie charts and bar graphs . . .
- humor, whether explicit or understated. (8)

Later chapters discuss these strategies in detail.

In presenting the findings from her analysis of journal articles, Sword gets to the heart of her argument. Disciplinary conventions vary. In the sciences, for example, first-person pronouns are used frequently; they appeared in 92 percent of the articles in medicine, 100 percent in evolutionary biology, 84 percent in psychology—whereas only 40 percent of articles in history journals used “I” or “we.” Equally important, Sword observed variation within disciplines. Across the board, the disciplinary conventions were flouted in about 10 percent of the articles. Academics whose careers depend on publication are naturally aware of the dominant practices in their disciplines—but Sword stresses that
“a convention is not a compulsion; a trend is not a law. The signature research styles of our disciplines influence and define us, but they need not crush and confine us” (22). Sword encourages academic writers to be bold, to choose not the most common but rather the most effective stylistic options.

Part 2 of Stylish Academic Writing consists of eleven chapters in which Sword suggests how academic writers can make their work more stylish. The chapters cover the use of the first person, “tempting titles,” catchy openings, and so on, roughly matching the list of strategies in the bulleted list above.

Sword’s discussion of “smart sentencing” (chapter 5) can serve to illustrate her approach. She begins with an example of ungainly academic prose that originally appeared in a journal of higher education research:

These deconstructive and theorizing inputs to the conversation are less about finding out how to better (i.e. more effectively) succumb to neo-liberal or economic rationalist discourses of effectiveness and completion, and more about critically exploring, for example, how those discourses may be operative and regulatory, what they make possible and impossible, and how they compete with other available discourses about the course and purpose of postgraduate research and supervision. (48)

Sword dissects the sentence to show where it goes awry: she notes that it has no clearly defined agent or action, that its grammatical subject (“inputs”) is an abstraction paired with a weak verb (“are”). Human beings, she observes, “remain mysteriously absent,” and the sentence’s many nouns are “relentlessly abstract, lumbered with equally abstract adjectives” (49). The analysis leads to her advice for smart sentencing: stylish writers, she says, use concrete nouns and vivid verbs, place subjects and verbs close together, and avoid cluttering their sentences with extraneous words (49).

Perhaps you’re thinking that there’s not much news here: we’ve seen critiques of bloated academic writing before, and everyone who writes about style gives similar advice about nouns and verbs. What makes Sword’s contribution unique is her sharp focus on academic writing and her position as an academic insider, someone who comfortably inhabits the discourse community she’s studying. Trained as a literary critic, Sword now directs a center for faculty development—and like others in that field (and the related field of Writing Across the Curriculum), she appreciates academic work in all its variety. Her critique of flawed academic writing does not descend into disparaging stereotypes. She invokes an audience of colleagues—receptive readers committed to academic inquiry, with a shared interest in making academic prose more reader-friendly.
Sword does what she can to overcome the monologic character of book authorship. The effort is apparent, I think, in her conversational, collegial tone. Additionally, Sword invites her readers to take action, concluding each chapter in Part II with “Things to Try.” For instance, Sword suggests that writers “play around with you,” perhaps using the second person in an opening sentence (“Picture the following scene”) or a conversational aside (“You might wonder why”) (46). In another chapter, she suggests examining the publication list on your CV to identify your article-titling habits (What first impression does each title create? Do you always use colons? Do you need to?) (74). These are easy, practical activities that even the busiest academic writer could try. They illustrate Sword’s teacherly bent, her inclination to give her readers a turn at the keyboard.

*Stylish Academic Writing* is a compact, focused look at a much-maligned discourse. Sword recognizes that academic writing is too often impersonal, wordy, and opaque. But she insists that it doesn’t have to be. Complex, abstract ideas can be expressed with clarity. Academic authors can be artful and still be published. Armed with findings and examples from an extensive dataset, editing suggestions drawn from the Style 4 (plain style) tradition, an insider’s understanding of the constraints academic writers face, and a talent for teaching, she makes a compelling case.

Sword’s book can also be evaluated as an exercise in disciplinary boundary crossing: she is a literary scholar and educational researcher assuming the role of writing teacher. She rarely refers to scholarship in our field. However, that is to be expected: during the last half of the twentieth century, composition specialists neglected style as an area of study, and more recent work tends to focus on pedagogy (Butler, “Out of Style”; Butler, “Style”; Connors; Duncan and Vanguri; Johnson and Pace). Joseph Williams, still the foremost scholar in this area, makes an appearance, as do Peter Elbow, Richard Lanham, Linda Brodkey, and Robert Connors. Connors and Lunsford’s 1988 article, “Frequency of Formal Errors in Current College Writing, or Ma and Pa Kettle Do Research,” is featured as an example of playful “stylistic audacity.”

More disappointing is the absence of a strong theoretical foundation. Academic disciplines are discourse communities, and they do their work by means of characteristic genres. When Sword describes discursive features...
common to academic articles, you can’t help wondering about the genesis of those features. When, how, and why have they developed? How do they serve the communicative purposes of the community? Observed differences across disciplines raise the same questions. Of course, Sword could hardly be expected to explain the stylistic practices of ten disciplines in a single, slender volume with an agenda of its own. But *Stylish Academic Writing* would make a more valuable contribution if, in addition to reporting the patterns she observed, she had begun to explore them in light of the theories that have animated composition studies for the last three decades.

**The Sense of Style**

Steven Pinker’s work in *The Sense of Style* is similar to Sword’s in many respects. Both authors write in a lively, personable style; in Pinker’s case, I think the right word is *jaunty*. He seems to be having a wonderful time: he tells jokes, shares cartoons, pokes fun at grammar sticklers, and quotes witticisms by everyone from Calvin Trillin to Dolly Parton to Dr. Seuss. Pinker understands the power of good examples, and he offers them by the hundreds—beautifully crafted sentences as well as truly funny “bloopers.”

Like Sword, Pinker is on a mission. He writes affectionately of other style guides, recalling his early acquaintance with *The Elements of Style* and placing writing guides among his “favorite literary genres” (1). But, he writes, too many style manuals are not informed by linguistic science. As a result, they offer traditional, inaccurate analyses of syntax, and they uncritically reproduce “rules” that are out of step with the practice of accomplished writers. Today, we can do better:

> We have an understanding of grammatical phenomena which goes well beyond the traditional taxonomies based on crude analogies with Latin. We have a body of research on the mental dynamics of reading. . . . We have a body of history and criticism which can distinguish the rules that enhance clarity, grace, and emotional resonance from those that are based on myths and misunderstanding. (6)

As a cognitive scientist and psycholinguist, Pinker is in a position to offer advice based not on “dogma about usage” but on “reason and evidence” (6). He promises to forego dictates, substituting explanations of stylistic principles that writers can use to make informed decisions.

However, understanding concepts is one thing, and writing better prose is another. Pinker is aware of the difficulty of teaching writing by means of precepts, no matter how scientific the precepts may be. He begins chapter 1
with a quotation from Oscar Wilde: “nothing that is worth knowing can be taught” (11). When Pinker asked friends and colleagues which style books had helped them become good writers, they said “none.” They had learned to write naturally, presumably by picking up stylistic moves from the books they read. Good writers, Pinker concludes, “have absorbed a vast inventory of words, idioms, constructions, tropes, and rhetorical tricks . . . the tacit sense of style which every honest stylebook, echoing Wilde, confesses cannot be explicitly taught” (11). On the next page, Pinker makes the opposite point: “I would not have written this book if I did not believe, contra Wilde, that many principles of style really can be taught” (12). This isn’t exactly a contradiction—it can be true that some principles are teachable, and simultaneously true that writers’ development depends mostly on reading—but it indicates uncertainty about how writers learn and foreshadows problems in the chapters ahead.

Much of Pinker’s advice comes from the Style 4 (plain style) playbook. He describes his ideal of lean, clear prose in terms of the relationship between writer, reader, and reality. Borrowing a term from Francis-Noël Thomas and Mark Turner’s book Clear and Simple as the Truth: Writing Classic Prose, Pinker recommends “the classic style”:

The guiding metaphor of classic style is seeing the world. The writer can see something that the reader has not yet noticed, and he orients the reader’s gaze so that she can see it for herself. The purpose of writing is presentation, and its motive is disinterested truth. (28–29)

In one of the book’s strongest sections, Pinker identifies pitfalls that prevent writers from achieving the classic style. He mentions excessive signposting (“First I will show X; then I will argue Y”); hedging; abstract language; nominalization; avoidance of personal pronouns; unnecessary use of the passive voice.

Like Sword, Pinker offers a charitable analysis of murky academic writing. It’s not that academics are showing off, or shutting out those with less formal education, or camouflaging trivial ideas with two-dollar words. Chapter 3 names the source of the trouble: “the curse of knowledge.” Professors who have spent years learning the foundational concepts of their disciplines will find that those concepts, along with a specialized vocabulary and discipline-specific habits of mind, come to feel natural. So academics have to exert deliberate effort to remember how much information that appears obvious to them is unfamiliar and difficult for newcomers to the field, erring on the side of explicitness.

Pinker’s discussion of coherence also stands out as an example of sound, well-considered advice, and his expertise in cognition makes his explanations
uniquely engaging. For example, to show the importance of establishing a topic up front, Pinker presents a paragraph that makes no sense on a first reading (“The procedure is actually quite simple. First you arrange things into different groups depending on their makeup. Of course, one pile may be sufficient depending on how much there is to do . . .”) (qtd p. 147). The passage was written by psychologists for a study of comprehension and recall. Most of their research subjects could neither understand nor remember the paragraph. When subjects were told prior to reading that the paragraph was about washing clothes, the level of recall doubled. When they were told the topic after reading, it made no difference. Here, Pinker does exactly what he has promised: he explains a lesson about writing (identify your topic up front) not as a dictate but as a choice writers make for a reason, to accommodate readers’ needs. As a result, the lesson is more engaging, more authoritative, easier to comprehend and recall.

**Linguists’ Grammar and Writers’ Style**

As I hope I’ve shown, Pinker can bring his expertise in linguistics and cognitive science to bear on a discussion of writing to good effect. As a disciplinary boundary crosser, however, he is considerably less successful than Helen Sword. One problem is that when he presents himself as a teacher of writing, he doesn’t seem to be aware that the field he’s entering is already occupied, or even that it exists as something separate from his own discipline. Of the six chapters in *The Sense of Style*, two are seriously flawed. While cross-disciplinary exchange would not have prevented every blunder, the book would be more effective if it were informed by scholarship in composition studies as well as Pinker’s own disciplines.

In the prologue to *The Sense of Style*, Pinker makes a provocative analogy:

> I like to read style manuals for another reason [besides their being well written], the one that sends botanists to the garden and chemists to the kitchen: it’s a practical application of our science. I am a psycholinguist and a cognitive scientist, and what is style, after all, but the effective use of words to engage the human mind? (2)

Perhaps most botanists are good gardeners; perhaps most chemists are great cooks, and most linguists great writers. But I wouldn’t bet on it. While it is certainly true that what happens in the kitchen depends on chemical reactions, there is no reason to think that knowing about chemistry has much relationship to knowing *how to* cook. If I wanted to teach someone to cook, I would bring him or her directly to the kitchen; I would not be tempted to stop first in the laboratory. Similarly, when I want to teach people to write, I engage them in the
activity of writing, or perhaps in conversation about writing, without stopping first for a course in linguistics or cognitive science.

Moving too hastily from linguistics to writing, Pinker makes the mistake that generations of back-to-basics school reformers have made, imagining that the way to improve writers’ sentences is to teach them grammar. Composition scholars know that the relationship between an understanding of grammar and an ability to write healthy sentences is not so simple. While some approaches to sentence study—what Hartwell would call Grammar 5 (stylistic grammar) and I would reclaim as Style 5—do appear to have a positive effect, instruction in formal grammar is a different matter. Decontextualized lessons in Grammar 2 (scientific grammar), Grammar 3 (usage), and Grammar 4 (old-fashioned school grammar) have been shown, over and over and over again, to have little effect on writers’ performance (for overviews of the research, see Braddock; Connors; Hartwell; Hillocks).

In the fourth chapter of The Sense of Style, Pinker provides an extended lesson in formal grammar. He explains sentence structure by drawing syntax trees, beginning with the sentence “In Sophocles’ play, Oedipus married his mother.” In my experience, syntax trees are not intuitive; they are illuminating only after the student of linguistics has climbed a steep initial learning curve. Pinker gamely forges ahead, following his first tree with this explanation:

[T]he words at the bottom (like mother) are grouped into phrases (like his mother), which are grouped into larger phrases (like married his mother), which are grouped into a clause (a simple sentence like Oedipus married his mother), which in turn may be inserted into a bigger clause (the whole sentence). (82)

More trees appear as Pinker explains subject-verb agreement, coordination, the advantages of right-branching sentences, and the gap in relative clauses.

As a quick (rather too quick) introduction to the structure of English sentences, the chapter has merit. As advice to writers, it is not useful. Consider, for example, the contrast between Pinker’s comment on subject-verb agreement and the same point as Andrea Lunsford explains it in The St. Martin’s Handbook:

Take agreement between the subject and verb: we say The bridge is crowded, but The bridges are crowded. . . . But the “subject” and “verb” that have to agree are defined by branches in the tree, not words in the string. [Two syntax trees
illustrate that a verb agrees with a noun phrase, not necessarily a single noun."

\[\ldots\]

But thanks to tree-blindness, it's common to slip up and type *The bridge to the islands are crowded*. If you haven't been keeping the tree suspended in memory, the word *islands*, which is ringing in your mind's ear just before you type the verb, will contaminate the number you give the verb. (Pinker 89–91)

Make sure the verb agrees with its subject and not with another noun that falls in between.

A *vase* of flowers **makes** a room attractive.

Many *books* on the best-seller list **has** have little literary value. (Lunsford 614)

Lunsford’s explanation is simple; it is likely to be clear and helpful to writers. Pinker’s involves a complex apparatus designed to advance the work of linguists who *describe* language, not speakers and writers who *use* it. Patrick Hartwell made the point clearly and forcefully in 1985, and others have made it before and since: gaining metalinguistic knowledge is one thing; learning to write well is another. Confusing the two leads to misguided instruction. Pinker is, I believe, correct in thinking that some principles of style can be taught, but not like this.

The final chapter in *The Sense of Style* is “Telling Right from Wrong: How to Make Sense of the Rules of Correct Grammar, Word Choice, and Punctuation.” The chapter begins with a spirited critique of grammar fussbudgets. Grammar purists, Pinker writes, “also known as sticklers, pedants, peevers, snobs, snoots, nitrickers, traditionalists, language police, usage nannies, grammar Nazis, and the Gotcha! Gang,” have tried to safeguard the language by upholding all the traditional grammar “rules,” however cockamamie or outdated they may be (188). Pinker’s goal in this chapter is similar to Edgar Schuster’s in *Breaking the Rules*: he wants to help writers distinguish between the legitimate grammatical rules or stylistic principles that good writers observe and the “mythrules” that have found their way into the lore of Grammar 3 (usage) and Grammar 4 (school grammar).

Immediately, a key question arises: how can a writer know which rules are valid and which are bogus? “The answer is unbelievably simple: look it up” (198). Pinker, a former chair of the *American Heritage Dictionary* Usage Panel, explains that dictionaries and modern usage guides are compiled by scholars “with careful attention to history, literature, and actual usage” (198). He lists several reference books that writers can trust. Having equipped his readers to make informed choices, Pinker has fulfilled his promise and, I think, performed a successful teacherly move. He could have stopped there. Instead, he marches
into the quicksand of Grammar 3/Style 3, devoting the last third of The Sense of Style to a commentary on a hundred prescriptive rules that frequently cause confusion or contention.

Pinker's usage guide is surprisingly idiosyncratic: sometimes he simply presents the judgment of the Usage Panel, while other times (as, for example, in distinguishing between "stanch" and "staunch," or in a two-page diatribe about the serial comma) he makes a case for his personal preference. In short, Pinker's usage guide too often disregards his principled advice, substituting the opinions of yet another self-anointed maven.

The Sense of Style calls attention to the uneasy relationship between linguistics and composition studies. Linguists are often impatient with English teachers. To some extent, their impatience is understandable: when teachers talk about sentences, we inevitably use grammatical terminology, and most of us use a simplified vocabulary relying on syntactic analyses that linguists no longer recognize.

However, English teachers are not uniformly ignorant of advances in linguistic science, and few of us are traditionalists or purists. Pinker occasionally makes inaccurate generalizations about the profession. “Among the many dumb rules of paragraphing foisted on students in composition courses,” he writes, “is the one that says that a paragraph may not consist of a single sentence” (26). Do you teach that rule? I didn’t think so. Or, because they place a comma between the subject and verb phrase, “Jane Austen and the framers of the American Constitution would get poor grades from composition teachers today” (289). No, they wouldn’t. I wish Pinker were better informed about what actually happens in composition courses.

I do not want to minimize Pinker’s achievement. The Sense of Style deserves a place on writers’ bookshelves. At the same time, the book’s flaws are real, and they demonstrate why composition needs more visibility as a discipline. Not only would we like a little respect, but we have generated knowledge about writing, and about how people learn to write, that would be of value to scholars in related fields. In his 2008 monograph Out of Style, Paul Butler argues for more public scholarship, especially more public scholarship, on style:

In its neglect of style as a topic of serious scholarly inquiry (as well as grammar and literacy, to varying degrees), the discipline of composition and rhetoric has ceded the discussion to others outside the field. … It is time for composition and rhetoric to take back the study of style—to redefine the way the conversation is being framed and to rethink that concept in the public sphere. (122–23)
Writers inside and outside of academia are interested in grammar and style. Ideally, that interest will be addressed by accessible scholarship from the fields that nourish composition studies, and from our field as well.

Works Cited


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