

EXPLORING PROSE STYLE FOR SCHOLARLY JOURNAL ARTICLES IN  
JOURNALISM AND COMMUNICATIONS: DO EDITORS BELIEVE THERE IS A  
NEED FOR CHANGE?

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by  
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The undersigned, appointed by the dean of the Graduate School, have examined the  
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EXPLORING PROSE STYLE FOR SCHOLARLY JOURNAL ARTICLES IN  
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presented by Victoria Clayton-Alexander,  
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and hereby certify that, in their opinion, it is worthy of acceptance.

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This thesis is dedicated to all researchers who dare to bring fingertips to keyboard and express their ideas and research, as well as the pertinent research of all other previous scholars, in one coherent, compelling and meticulously referenced document. I respect your bravery and determination.

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“As soon as we cease having relationships based on power, we have ended a patriarchal model in our own lives. Whenever people gather in a nonhierarchical way, tell the truth of their own experience, and act from that, the world changes.” – author/activist Jean Shinoda Bolen, M.D.

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ABSTRACT

Academic prose style has been criticized by some academics as willfully obtuse, intentionally opaque and impossible for anyone but an academic to understand. This research uses the theoretical lens of critical discourse analysis and framing theory to determine if academic prose style is problematic in journalism and communications scholarly publications. In-depth interviews of 10 academic journal editors show that academic prose is problematic. Editors agree that academic prose is used for power, control and inclusion/exclusion. Perceptions about academic jargon or language, too, suggest that academics use their words for matters well beyond knowledge sharing. Editors desire change, but they don't believe forces such as open access to scholarship will improve academic prose style. Academic culture as it relates to academic writing is studied via editor values and beliefs.

## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

Academic writing in American scholarly journals uses the English language, but it is not merely English. Linguists have determined that there are particular groupings of words (referred to as lexical bundles) that delineate much academic prose from nonacademic prose (Pang, 2010; Hyland, 2012). Others have referred to academic writing as a genre (Bazerman, 2013) or a prose style (Lanham, 2007). And those who teach English as a second language (ESL) have noted that academic prose is largely so distinct from nonacademic prose that it ought to be taught in addition to English for ESL students to become successful scholars (Coxhead & Byrd, 2007).

Some people are not fans of academic prose. A number of academics have written essays and opinion pieces condemning the language of *status quo* scholarly writing (for example: Pinker, 2014; Trimble et al, 2010; Cutler, 2009; Heatwole, 2008; Schulte, 2005; Graff, 2000; Limerick, 1994 and Martin, 1992). Many of these academic-authors have said that overuse of professional vocabulary (commonly called jargon) and unwieldy sentence construction in academic publications mean that only particular academics can understand the work. Some have charged that academic prose is too often pseudointellectual and willfully obtuse. Pinker (2014) wins the adjective contest, referring to *status quo* academic prose as too often “turgid, soggy, wooden, bloated, clumsy, obscure, unpleasant to read, and impossible to understand.” Others have opined that difficult language contributes, in general, to what is known as an academic-practitioner gap (Nyilasy et al, 2007; Nyilasy et al, 2009). That is, a gap between

academic research and awareness/use of pertinent academic research in various professional worlds.

Journalism and communications scholars in particular have also acknowledged that academic prose might be a barrier to understanding research (and, one might presume, using it). One example is Bonnie S. Brennen in her textbook *Qualitative Research Methods for Media Studies* (2001). Brennen, a journalism professor, offhandedly mentions – and makes light of – the problem of some academic writing:

You may find that some of the qualitative research you come across is extremely complex, difficult to decipher and full of theoretical terms and discipline-specific jargon. Over the years, many of my students have expressed their frustration at trying to comprehend some of the qualitative research they encountered and they have wondered why it was presented in such a manner. Just as Andy Dufresne in *The Shawshank Redemption* asks Warden Samuel Norton, “How can you be so obtuse?” I too wonder why all qualitative scholars do not insist on crafting clearly presented, understandable research. (p.14)

Thus far, however, academic prose style in journalism and communications has not been fully addressed. I have not been able to locate a substantial opinion piece by anyone in the field, nor have I been able to locate published research on the subject. There are two movements, however, that make this inquiry particularly relevant now for every field. The first is open access to scholarly journals. That is, more free access to

scholarly articles for anyone who can use the Internet and has the interest, computer access and skills to find the material. It is too early to tell what impact or how common open access (OA) will ultimately be in our field. However, consider this: by 2012, more than 50 funding agencies and more than 100 universities had adopted strong pro-OA policies (Suber, P. 2012). Some agencies and universities simply encourage open access. Others, such as funding agencies Wellcome Trust and NIH, have open-access mandates – meaning they will not support research that is not available open access. Once open access is a widely accepted method of scholarly publishing, a logical next step would be to question if free access to an article is the only aspect of access that begs remediation. It seems only a matter of time before more people start to question the language used in academic journals once a wider audience is invited to view the material.

In addition, a recent change in health communication –another prose style often charged with using too much specialized language– makes an inquiry relevant. A *Wall Street Journal* article by Laura Landro noted a new push to train doctors to write medical reports with language that is understandable and respectful to nondoctors (patients) who are now able to view them online. This supports my suggestion that addressing language is a logical next step once a wider public has access to previously inaccessible texts.

## **Research Area**

Editors of academic journals serve as both gatekeepers to what gets published and as a bridges between academia and scholarly publishers. Because they are gatekeepers, but also academics and authors themselves, they are also good barometers of the culture of academia as it relates to writing. As noted previously, many scholars have opined that

academic prose needs to be overhauled. Nobody it seems, however, has yet addressed the academic publishing gatekeepers. That is, we have not yet determined whether or not the scholarly journal editor sees academic prose as a problem to be solved.

### **Significance of the Study**

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. (Butler, J., 1997)

The passage above is an excerpt of an academic journal essay by Judith Butler, a Guggenheim Fellowship winner and an esteemed professor of literature. Butler also holds another distinction: she was awarded first place in a bad writing contest sponsored by the journal *Philosophy and Literature*.

While Butler's writing is only one example, Schulte (2005) says too many academics besides her write opaque and jargon-filled prose. He charges that, in effect, the

gatekeepers of knowledge are producing academic journal articles that are difficult or impossible for most people to decipher.

Trimble et al. (2010) argues that academics in the United States are, in a sense, working for the public. The U.S. academic enterprise is supported by tax dollars, student fees and private donations by the public. Because of this, he says there is an obligation, a social contract even, for academics to deliver knowledge in a reasonable manner. Indeed, Jakubowicz (2007) says there is widespread recognition that future economic growth will be enjoyed only by those nations that value and share knowledge. And, according to a 2005 United Nations Educational Social and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) report “Toward Knowledge Societies,” our very future depends on sharing: in order for future societies to remain human and livable, we will be required to freely share knowledge.

The research curiosity here is about words, but of course that is not it. This research is about a culture that has the power to erect barriers with words or build bridges with paragraphs. This research is about what we as academics are doing with our writing now and whether that is what we should be doing. And ultimately it is about knowledge sharing.

## **Purpose Statement**

This research examines the values and beliefs of editors of academic journals in journalism and communications, to determine whether they perceive academic prose style as problematic and, if they do, in which ways they desire it to change. Furthermore, the research determines whether these editors believe open access will encourage changes in academic prose.

## **Definitions of Terms**

The following are terms and their definitions for this research:

*Scholarly journals in communications:* For the purpose of this research, scholarly journals in communications is considered certain journals directly connected to Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication and International Communication Association, as well as the journals connected to the membership of these organizations.

*Editor:* The editor or editors include the person or persons designated as an editor by the publisher of the scholarly journal. These names are usually available on the journal's website. These editors also hold academic posts.

*Academic prose:* Academic prose is considered the writing published in or submitted to scholarly journals.

*Jargon:* Technical terminology or a characteristic idiom of academics, especially journalism and communications academics. Or, as Lanham (2007) defines it: terminology serving special groups, interests and activities.

*Values:* A person or group's guiding principles (Bergman, 1998).

*Beliefs*: Opinions and attitudes, usually based on experience. Also: cognitive and evaluative elaborations of an object of thought (Bergman, 1998).

*Writing styles (especially transparent/clear vs. opaque)*: According to Lanham (2007), writing styles “are not neutral, dependable, preexistent objects that everyone sees the same way.” (p. 51) For example, there is no verbal pattern called ‘clear.’ In general, we talk about writing styles by placing them on a spectrum spanning transparent (often referred to as clear) to opaque. But, alas, this is always a subjective call: what is transparent/clear to one person may be somewhat opaque to another. From Lanham (2007):

All depends on context – social, historical, attitudinal. Clarity, then, like style in the American architect Thomas Hasting’s definition, is “the job done.” And it will, in this expanded sense, be achieved only by sensitivity to social situation and verbal surface in their many interrelationships. (p. 51)

## Roadmap for This Paper

The remainder of this thesis includes: a literature review and research theory, methodology and results. The thesis concludes with a discussion of the research and ideas for future research.

## **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

### **Linking Theory: Critical Discourse Analysis**

Critical discourse analysis (CDA) guides this investigation. CDA began as a network of scholars who began collaborating after a small symposium in Amsterdam in January 1991. With support from the University of Amsterdam, Teun van Dijk, Norman Fairclough, Gunther Kress, Theo van Leeuwen and Ruth Wodak met and conceived the roots of CDA. Some of these original founders have moved on, but Wodak, Van dijk and Fairclough remain close to critical discourse analysis and are now counted as just a few of the many scholars around the world associated with it (Blommaert, J. & Bulcaen, C., 2000). Since those humble roots in 1991, critical discourse analysis has become one of the most influential branches of theory dealing with written and/or spoken language. It is problem-oriented and not focused on studying a single unit of language (as linguistics might be) but, rather, it investigates the social phenomena aspects of written or spoken language.

Wodak and Meyer (2001) define CDA as “being fundamentally interested in analyzing opaque as well as transparent structural relationships of dominance, discrimination, power and control as manifested in language” (p. 9). Van dijk (1993) has further defined dominance by saying that it includes the exercise of social clout by organizations, groups or institutions that adds to social inequality.

Using the CDA theoretical lens, Blommaert (2008) found institutions have the tendency to impose language standards: unless you write in a particular way, you will not be read. You will not be allowed to join the club, as it were. In the case of academia, that may mean that academics who do not write in traditional or *status quo* academic style are not accepted as a true scholar. (Martin, 1992; Graff, 2000)

**Why use CDA.** The use of critical discourse analysis in journalism and communications has grown in the last two decades (for example: Allen, 2005; Caravalho, 2008; Richardson, 2007 and 2010). It is ideal for this research because of its interest in the knowledge-based economy (the business of knowledge). CDA proponents have said that one of their most important research agendas is more understanding of the knowledge-based economy on various aspects of our societies (Wodak & Meyer, 2001). In fact, a key idea of CDA is to subject matters concerned with knowledge to critique:

Discourse analysis, extended to include dispositive analysis [analysis of assorted systems/elements contributing to the discourse], aims to identify the knowledge (valid at a certain place at a certain time) of discourses and/or dispositives, to explore the respective concrete context of knowledge/power and to subject it to critique. Discourse analysis pertains to both everyday knowledge that is conveyed via the media, everyday communication, school and family, and so on, and also to that particular knowledge (valid at a certain place at a certain time) which is produced by the various sciences.(Jaeger, S., 2001, p. 33)

CDA also acknowledges that texts are almost never just the work of an author acting alone. Critical discourse analysis aims to take into account the power structure behind the text: In academic journals, that may be the editors, publishers, peer-review committees, the academy, universities and so on. A CDA critique encompasses a critique of all parties with recognition that there can be various agendas and different ideologies involved. In keeping with the tenets of CDA, this research involved interviewing editors (who are academics themselves, but are also publically recognized gatekeepers and representatives of the publishers), rather than any single author-academic.

Critical theories, including CDA, aim to create knowledge that enables humans to emancipate themselves from domination— no matter how small – through self-reflection. For an academic/scholarly journal editor, this may mean coming out from under the tyranny of certain supposed standards of academic writing (i.e. the distaste toward using first person, inappropriate nominalizing, relying on jargon, being intentionally formal, etc.). For the wider public, it may mean demanding that research communication be available in a coherent form and, ultimately, that they have full access to knowledge. Though this research does not touch on the recognized gap between what academics research/publish and what professional practitioners are aware of in terms of this research, of course professional practitioners are part of any wider public and may also benefit from full access to knowledge.

In contrast to theory that is geared mostly toward understanding and explaining, critical theory is employed to critique and change society. While the research is held to the same standards as any research, researchers using CDA make their position, research

interests and values explicit. There is no attempt to hide point of view, though van Leeuwen (2006) says research standards and criteria should be as transparent as possible. Because this research subject could be considered sensitive or perhaps even offensive to some academics, CDA's transparency requirements are welcomed: There is no need to pretend a researcher is without an opinion when using CDA. And so I will not. I agree with much of the criticism of academic prose. However, I also agree with Lanham (2007) who points out that prose style is always a reaction to something. A substantial part of my research curiosity is about finding out, through editors, what that something is and how we might shed light on it.

### **Linking Theory: Framing Theory**

The work here also calls on framing theory, which was initially outlined by Goffman (1974) and later by Entman (1993). Goffman explains framing theory as a public way of bringing forth some perspectives and ruling out others to present a prescribed view. According to Jones (2010), framing theory also describes the ways in which people present themselves in support of a goal or to promote a cause. Jones says language is used both to frame and influence, in that it is used to cast images/ideas in certain ways, drawing boundaries and even limiting challenges. For example, a writer might use language to frame oneself as a scholar. Someone who wants to be taken seriously as an academic will use language in the normative or *status quo* way to conform to current scholarly expectations and reduce opposition. In other words, the writer may opt to emulate the way other scholars use language in peer-reviewed journals as an expedient means to be taken seriously and to advance.

## **Previous Studies on Academic Prose**

As mentioned, Martin (1992), Limerick (1994), Graff (2000), Schulte (2005) Jakubowicz (2007); Trimble et al (2010) and Pinker (2014) opined that academic writing is generally impenetrable for anyone but an academic. Many other scholars and writers have discussed, in fact, issues of comprehension of writing in assorted areas, including law, politics, science, business and government (i.e. Orwell, 1946; Vinson, 2005; Heatwole, 2008 and Cutler, 2009). In mass communications, Greenwald (2003) expressed concern about incomprehensible academic writing. Others, too, have grumbled about it (see previous example, Brennan 2012, p. 14 or Creswell 2013, p. 91).

None of these authors, however, gathered data from editors of scholarly journals in our field. Thus, this literature review examines research and opinions from other fields and on concepts useful to this study.

**Language for control, exclusion and the academic world.** In an editorial titled “Secret Passwords at the Gate of Knowledge,” Martin (1992) contended that the academic world uses language for power and control: If a discipline is to effectively control its intellectual turf, says Martin, it cannot afford to be too easy to understand by outsiders. Martin’s article offers insight into what some scholars say about their profession and hints at opaque or hidden rules that nonacademics would not otherwise

understand.

The notion that language is a tool of inequality, however, is not a new idea. It was an idea advanced by Dell Hymes, the founding father of sociolinguistic ethnography, as well as British sociologist and linguist Basil Bernstein. Hymes (1996) credits Bernstein as among the first to offer such a theory. According to Hymes, Bernstein depicted language as a concrete resource; some people have more of this resource and use it to their benefit. In fact, the various ways in which people use the language resource can lead to differences in the value attributed to what they write. For example, Blommaert (2008) analyzed written witness statements from the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission and concluded that *status quo* writing confers benefits. That is, people come off as more credible when they write in the normative way.

Blommaert (2008), employing the theoretical lens of critical discourse analysis and calling for educators and others in authority to have more awareness of diverse ways of using language, says words and inequality are clearly correlated. Blommaert contends there should be greater recognition of what people do with language. It is not that we simply communicate ideas; we communicate who we are, we impress, we intimidate and, importantly, we join groups. Institutions, says Blommaert, have the tendency to impose language standards: unless you write in a particular way, you won't be read. You won't be permitted admission into the imaginary club. In the case of academia, of course, that could mean you will not be accepted as a scholar.

Martin (1992) says that if an academic does not conform to scholarly expectations it's not merely that he or she risks not being admitted into some imaginary scholarly club. There may actually be some very real benefits at risk. He opines there is a penalty, in

fact, for academics who communicate what is going on inside an academic discipline in a way that just anyone can understand and use:

Popularisers can encounter considerable hostility from protectors of the discipline. There are economists who look down on John Kenneth Galbraith and composers who hold Andrew Lloyd Webber in contempt. Sociologist Paul Starr wrote a book that won a Pulitzer Prize, but was denied tenure at Harvard. Since he wrote for a wide audience, his scholarship was deemed suspect. (p. 16)

Graff (2000) offers another opinion on the matter. He says that academic language is not a result of wanting to exclude. Rather, academics are just trying to live up to expectations. Graff says academics are too often trained to believe that intelligent discourse must be extremely difficult to comprehend. Many academics actually aim, says Graff, to write complicated prose for fear that easy-to-understand writing will equate to “watered down” ideas in the eyes of their peers and superiors.

Trimble et al. (2010) concurs, saying that it is naïve to believe that the sole purpose of academic writing is to convey new ideas and research. In fact, these authors call communicating useful information even merely to academic peers “the ostensible reason” for academic publishing. Arguing that there is a glut of academic publishing, most of it unutilized and even inconsequential, Trimble et al. (2010) says scholarly publishing is not about promoting scholarship. From Trimble, et. al (2010):

We view [the] glut of unutilized and even inconsequential literature as

mostly a function of reward systems in universities, research institutes, and funding agencies. Indeed, scholarly publishing may be more about promoting scholars than promoting scholarship. (p. 278)

These scholars argue for use of a rating system, something they've devised and call the Page Impact Score, when universities decide to subscribe to a journal. Notions about brevity, intention and value of research informed my interview questions, but I do not directly touch on the controversial subject of impact scoring.

Pinker (2014) uses literary analysis and cognitive science to delve into why *status quo* academic prose is turgid. He says that academics fall into self-preservation mode when writing. That is, they are supremely self-conscious, worrying too much that other academics will think them slackers and not enough about the actual ideas they are communicating. The writing, says Pinker, is chock full of hedging, apologizing and other assorted atrocities. Academic training, Pinker says, also causes academics to lose touch with the ability to write in concrete terms. An example: academics turn “call the police” (a concrete act) into “a law enforcement strategy” (an abstract). Pinker, like Graff, makes a strong and direct plea to academics to reform their writing.

Rhetorical scholars have also had plenty to say about academic prose. From them, we get something a little different. Williams (2014), Bazerman (2003) and Lanham (2007) all discuss *status quo* academic prose as an opaque writing style. Bazerman & Paradis (1991) remind us that style has to be considered in context. Lanham (2007) says writing style is always a reaction to something. A criticism of this view, however, is that some rhetorical scholars might present style as if our only choice is to join the discourse

as is or not. Sebberson (1993) says one must remember there is also the choice to challenge it.

**Writing: thoughts on the good, the bad and the ugly.** Trimble et al.'s (2010) Page Impact Score doesn't reward verbosity. The best academic writing is clear and concise, they contend. These authors point out, in fact, that the journals *Science* and *Nature* are two of the best and most useful academic journals in the hard sciences. The journals publish articles that are from two to six pages. In an editorial, Cutler (2009), editor of *Journal of College Science Teaching*, also urges academics to keep their writing concise.

The recent push in health records writing, previously mentioned, is an example of one segment of society calling for less jargon and clearer, more friendly communication. And University of California Los Angeles professor Eugene Volokh (2003) has also written on the subject of clear writing in law and the need to reduce legalese (legal jargon). Volokh's key points are that good legal writing should use everyday English, when possible, and should not use more words when fewer will do. Even the United States Government has launched the Plain Language Action and Information Network (PLAN), a community of federal employees dedicated to promoting clear government communication.

In "A Plea for Scholarly Writing," Harold Heatwole, editor of the academic journal *Integrative and Comparative Biology*, offers examples of bad writing published in academic papers in reputed scientific journals. Heatwole (2008) has pointed criticisms of academic writing. Some of the criticisms include:

\* **Excessive use of nouns as adjectives.** Heatwole blasts freight-training, which is stringing a number of nouns together and using them as adjectives. For example: Pre-flood great crested canopy lizard research methods are described...

\* **Verbosity and redundancy.** Heatwole discourages unnecessary words and clumsy phraseology. He points out that complicated phrases don't make a writer sound more intelligent. That is, "inform you" is preferable to "enhance your knowledge base of."

\* **Ambiguous wording.** In contrast to the point above, Heatwole says academics tend to truncate some sentences. It's likely an attempt to save space, but it ends up as confusing and stiff verbiage. For example: "The evolution of locomotion during prey capture..." when the author actually meant "The evolution of locomotion involved in the capture of prey..."(pp. 159-161)

Pinker and Graff echo Heatwole's writing advice. Both of these authors focus intently on encouraging academics to reduce jargon and create transparent, concrete sentences when possible. They discourage passive voice, needlessly complex sentences and nominalizing.

In 1946, George Orwell predated many of the complaints later made by Maher, Volokh, Heatwole, Cutler, Graff and Pinker. Orwell, writing on political writing specifically and writing generally, cited five examples of bad (what he calls ugly)

writing. Three of the examples Orwell used came from academia. Here are five of Orwell's (1946) pointers for better writing:

Eliminate overused metaphors, similes, or other figures of speech.

Never use a long word where a short one will do.

If it is possible to cut a word out, do it.

Never use the passive voice where you can use the active.

Never use a jargon word if you can think of an everyday English equivalent.

All of these ideas on clear writing informed my line of questioning as well as contributed to data analysis.

**A particular look at jargon.** Schulte (2005) charges that because of the abuse of academic jargon, as well as overspecialization, research is not reaching the number of people it should. He says academics seem to be only writing for other academics and opines that this is morally wrong – especially now that the wider public can access many journal articles online.

One definition of jargon, according to Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary, is “technical terminology or the characteristic idiom of a special activity or group.” (p. 647) Other definitions include: “confused, unintelligible language” and “obscure and often pretentious language marked by circumlocutions and long words.”

The linguistic philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein (1953) proposed that complete understanding of words involves “ostensive definitions.” That is, one can’t comprehend the definition of a word until the general role of the word in the language is clear. Grafting new words into previous knowledge, readers draw their meaning of new words from words already known. Wittgenstein argues that an understanding of the ostensive definition of words requires experiences in which the words are contextualized. While a limited amount of jargon or professional terminology may be expected in an academic paper, more jargon means it is less likely a reader other than another scholar in the particular field will be able to comprehend even the general meaning of the work. When too many specialized words or phrases are strung together, especially if they are strung together in an unorthodox sentence construction, Wittgenstein’s theory suggests there is no bedrock from which to draw meaning for readers other than those steeped in the same academic world from which the writer hails. It bears repeating too that the reader in all likelihood must come from the same academic world. The phenomenon known as the silo effect is an acknowledged problem in corporations as well as academia. Jakubowicz (2007) notes that academic disciplines tend to operate in their own imaginary “silos,” with self-contained or specialized languages. Silos impede wider communications. Jakubowicz shows qualitatively that a multimedia research environment, in which information is shared and research is collaborated on across disciplines, is one answer to the silo problem. Jakubowicz does not specifically say that jargon would be reduced by this approach, but one can intimate that this may be an effect of an environment in which researchers in various disciplines collaborate. According to Martin (1992), jargon is an expedient language with a dark side. “Jargon may serve as a convenient medium for

practitioners, but it simultaneously serves as a way of excluding interlopers, namely those who have not served their time in study and research” (p. 16).

Martin’s comment is another reminder that language can be employed as a method of exclusion. Whether or not it is truly consciously used by academics to exclude interlopers – as Martin seems to suggest—is not the subject of this research. The research here, however, gathers perceptions on this subject.

Graff (2000) takes a different approach to jargon. He calls it “academese” and he says that scholars need to use it sometimes. However, he advises that whenever scholars write in “academese” they should then translate it into vernacular. Graff, in fact, says that many authors are surprised by how this bilingual writing can enrich their points or lead to new insights. Conversely, and just as well for writers, Graff says the bilingual translation can also help them identify vacuous ideas. Pinker (2014) concurs. My favorite view on jargon, however, comes from Lanham (2007), who says that jargon exists for fun and to flatter ordinary reality. That is, jargon is a style technique to make prose more interesting.

**How academics currently learn to write.** Hatcher (2011) and Cutler (2009) say that native speaking scholarly writers in America generally teach themselves academic writing by emulation, trial and error and with some advice from mentors and other scholars. Hatcher (2011) says that there is simply not enough writing guidance, however, for academics. He notes that scholarly writing and publishing is a mystifying process. In addition, Hatcher points out that academic writers have little or no external authority requiring or even encouraging certain practices. For example, there is no force encouraging academics to write more transparent prose.

Hatcher and Cutler suggest there is a need for more guidance and support when it comes to academic writing. However, again, I was unable to locate any research that asks academic journal editors whether or not their experiences with academic-authors lead them to believe more guidance and support is needed.

Hyland (2002) argues that a key element of academic competence is the ability of writers to construct a credible representation of themselves and their work through their published work. Hyland says an identity is established through a range of rhetorical and interactive features, but one possible technique is through the use of first-person pronouns and possessive determiners (largely frowned upon in academic writing). My research addresses the policies of journals regarding some of these practices.

**Academic publication future and history.** Some scholars envision a future of publishing academic work that breaks more boundaries than merely using the first-person pronoun. These scholars firmly believe that academics can and should offer up their work in less traditional, even less linear, forms. Jakubowicz & van Leeuwen (2010), for example, compared two versions of an academic publication by the sociologist David Theo Goldberg, director of California's Humanities Research Institute. The two versions both deal with post-Katrina New Orleans, but one is a traditional scholarly article and the other published in an online journal in a non-linear format. Jakubowicz & van Leeuwen note that Goldberg brings a creative writer's sensibility to his analysis. They conclude that Goldberg demonstrates that the intellectual and the emotive can go together even in an academic paper. The online version eliminates something that has become standard in academic writing: the “however,” the “in addition” and the “therefore.” Jakubowicz &

van Leeuwen offer empirical evidence, though, that the online submission makes recognizable contributions to the understanding of racism and the post-Katrina environment. They note that as venues for academic work expand, so will the nature of academic scholarship. Open access publishing has certainly opened up more venues for academic scholarship. I could not locate research, however, on whether open access will impact the nature of academic prose. Given Jakubowicz & van Leeuwen's work, however, it is not too much of a leap to suggest that language could also evolve.

Jakubowicz & van Leeuwen give us a glimpse of the future. A note on the past is also appropriate here. History tells us that academic language is not static. *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly* is the oldest refereed scholarly journal in our field. It was first published as *Journalism Bulletin* in 1924 in America and it has always appeared in English, but it was not until after World War II that English actually became the lingua franca of all higher learning (Henderson, 2002). Up until this point, the majority of scholarly journals focused on the hard sciences and were published in German. So, while more than a few academics over the years have told me that academic prose has always been the way it is now and will never change, history tells us this is simply not true.

## **Research Questions**

There are clear gaps in the literature. Specifically, there is a scarcity of literature on academic prose in journalism and communications. It seems that nobody has established whether or not academic prose is a problem in our field. And, if it is a problem, I have not found research in the field that explores the nature of the problem, ideas about solving it or ideas about outside forces that might insist on change. With this in mind, I put forth the following research questions:

**RQ 1. Are editors of scholarly journals in our field concerned with issues of academic prose style?**

**RQ 2. Do editors believe academic prose style needs to change and, if so, how?**

**RQ 3. Do editors believe that movements such as open access may put pressure on academic prose to become reader friendly for a wider audience?**

## **Chapter 3: Methodology**

### **Research Participants and Interview Process**

After discussion with veteran academics in the field, I decided to interview editors of journals associated with the International Communication Association and the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication, as well as journals connected to the membership of these organizations. It bears noting that not all journals included are directly associated with ICA or AEJMC. But, rather, all journals matter to the membership of these organizations. Editors are the gatekeepers of what gets published, but they also research, write, teach, mentor new scholars and even, at times, serve as peer reviewers and/or editorial board members for other journals. They are highly experienced with academic prose.

In addition to answering my questions, I knew these highly experienced professionals could also bring up a range of important points that I had not considered. For this reason, I used semi-structured interviews. These interviews were one-on-one, in-depth discussions. In-depth interviews incorporate spontaneous exchanges, which empower research subjects (Perks & Thomson, 1998). Since I was performing what I believe to be the first study of this nature in the field, I wanted editors to be able to speak their minds as fully and completely as possible. In-depth interviews are flexible enough to allow this.

On December 9, 2014, I sent the first email interview request to 11 academic journal editors. Within hours, several of the editors responded and scheduled interviews. Only three editors ultimately did not respond to the first email; I sent a second email to these editors on January 6, 2015. In two cases, editors asked that I contact an alternate editor of the journal. In the end, a total of 10 editors were interviewed. Only one journal was not included because the editor failed to respond to three interview requests.

Most of the journals are affiliated with one of several major scholarly publishing companies. Representatives of three of the scholarly publishing companies were also contacted for interviews. One representative responded. After a brief email exchange with this representative, I determined that publishing companies (i.e. Sage, Taylor & Francis, Wiley) do not influence academic prose. Publishers are in charge of myriad details associated with bringing scholarly works to fruition, including product advocacy and innovation, legal rights, bookkeeping, archiving, presentation of material, promotion and much more (Dill, 2002). They do not, however, have a material impact on prose. Discussions with several journal editors later corroborated that publishing houses provide copy editors/reference checkers at times, but these people generally do not influence the prose style per se. Because of this, I did not pursue interviews with publisher representatives.

The first editor interview took place December 10, 2014. The last interview was conducted January 20, 2015. I interviewed seven out of 10 editors via telephone, recording the calls with the online password-protected service Recordator.com. I interviewed the remaining three editors via Skype, recording these conversations with

Ecamm's application Call Recorder for Skype (Mac version). I obtained verbal consent for the interviews and the recordings. Prior to most interviews, as a courtesy I emailed the research subject a list of questions to start our conversation (see Appendix A: Interview questions) as well as the verbal consent script approved by the University of Missouri-Columbia Institutional Review Board (see Appendix B: IRB-approved verbal consent script). In one case, I neglected to email the verbal consent script and questions before the interview. I noticed no impact on the subject's ability to answer questions and speak about the matters at hand. I requested a minimum of 20 minutes, but the interviews lasted longer than expected. The shortest interview lasted 31 minutes and the longest interview took more than an hour.

While editors were overall extremely forthcoming, most also had little desire to be identified. I, therefore, strictly enforced anonymity. I assigned each research subject a number for recording, transcription and analysis. Because this is a small group of editors who could be easily identified from the slightest detail, I intentionally did not collect descriptor data such as the researcher's age, university affiliation, journal affiliation, location or even the type of research published in the editor's journal. I spoke with five men and five women.

I did not ask questions in a particular order. I intentionally let the conversation flow and allowed the research subject to talk freely. While recording the calls, I made separate notes about my impressions of the subject's tone, willingness to answer questions and receptiveness to the interview topics. At times, discussions with research subjects cropped up about academics who speak/write in English as their first language as opposed to those who do not. When this happened, I directed research subjects to respond

based on what they experienced from academics they believe to be fluent in English.

Editor comments, therefore, should be interpreted as focused on writers who are proficient in English.

Once interviews were completed, I sent MP3 files to the transcription service Verbal Ink ([www.verbalink.com](http://www.verbalink.com)). After transcribed, I uploaded the interviews to the password-protected qualitative and mixed methods research application Dedoose ([www.dedoose.com](http://www.dedoose.com)).

**Table 1. Conceptually grouped research concepts, research questions and interview questions.**

Research Concepts	Interview Questions
<b>Critical Discourse Analysis and Framing</b>  <b>RQ1.</b> Are editors concerned about the quality of academic prose?	<p>Do you find that academics who submit to your publication generally write in a similar prose style? Do you judge this as generally very good or not? How do you think most academics learn to write scholarly articles?</p> <p>How would you describe academic prose? Do you think of it as a genre of writing? Do you think of it as a style of writing? Do you think of it as having certain rules? (if so, please describe)</p> <p>What's the main purpose of academic writing in scholarly journals?</p> <p>Who is the main audience for your journal?</p> <p>Do you think jargon use and/or</p>

	<p>other prose strategies are consciously used by authors or encouraged by editors as a way to exclude nonacademics?</p>
<p><b>Critical Discourse Analysis</b></p> <p><b>RQ2.</b> Do editors believe academic writing needs to change? If so, how?</p>	<p>Do you or your editors spend a fair amount of time editing articles particularly because of prose issues? Would you say prose is as important as research quality?</p> <p>Do you enforce rules about jargon use, nominalizing, clear writing, etc.? Are you concerned about these prose matters?</p> <p>When laypeople complain that academic prose is opaque, what don't they understand about academic prose or the research process? If you agree that too much of the writing is opaque, why do you think this is?</p> <p>Could you get behind any movement that attempts to make academic prose clearer for a wider audience?</p>
<p><b>Critical Discourse Analysis</b></p> <p><b>RQ3.</b> Do editors believe that movements such as open access or jargon-free health communication may put pressure on academic writing to become reader friendly for a wider audience? Do they invite this?</p>	<p>Do you think the audience for academic journals is changing or could change particularly in light of open access?</p>

## Coding

In Dedoose, I initially coded each transcript for broad themes/topics related to my research questions, as well as my expectations. My expectations were mainly based on what academics in other fields had written about academic writing. These expectations, as well as codes pertaining to my research questions, constituted *a priori* codes. In addition, *in vivo* codes emerged from many interviews. After evaluating the initial coding and reading transcripts closely several more times, I noticed that research subjects were articulating a set of values and beliefs about academic culture as it relates to writing. With this in mind, I second-cycle coded using a method Saldana (2009) refers to as values coding.

**Values coding.** Values coding is particularly appropriate, according to Saldana, for qualitative studies that explore cultural values. The coding reflects a research subject's values, attitudes and beliefs. Often a researcher codes for all three constructs separately (values, attitudes and beliefs), but Saldana notes that it is not necessary to code for all three or differentiate between them even. Bergman's (1998) view is that opinions, beliefs and attitudes should be grouped together and considered one entity. Taking Bergman's lead, I coded for various opinions, beliefs and attitudes under one parent code called "beliefs." A belief, according to Bergman, is a "cognitive and evaluative elaboration of an object of thought" (p. 88). See Table 2 for a list of belief statements; interviews were coded for agreeing or not with these beliefs.

**Table 2. A list of the most common belief statements; some editors agreed with these statements and some did not.**

Belief
My job is to fix prose considerably

Open access is positive
Open access will improve academic prose
Prose is as important as research
Academic prose is generally well written
Academic prose needs to change
Academic prose should be accessible
Prose used for power, control, exclusion
We train new scholars to write well

I used “values” for the second parent code. Bergman defines values as guiding principles for a group or person (p. 89). See Table 3 for the value statements that emerged in editor interviews.

**Table 3. A list of the most common values or value statements that emerged from interviews; interviews were coded based on the presence and perceived strength of each value**

Values
Clear/transparent writing
Academic freedom of expression
Top-level research
Knowledge sharing
Specialist-only conversation (talk amongst ourselves)
Scholarly independence
Academic language (jargon)

Values and beliefs are acquired behavioral dispositions (Campbell, 1963). That is, they are forces that help channel human perception and choice. Bergman says values and beliefs are powerfully influenced by our histories, our group memberships and by our context-dependent experiences.

***Belief and values dimensions.*** Bergman extends an invitation for more methodological rigor by urging researchers to study the relative strength of values and beliefs. Krosnick (1993) refers to this as “attitude dimension.” When I coded for a specific value or belief, I therefore assigned a numerical value (dimension) based on my perception of how strongly or not the research subject conveyed the value or belief. See Table 4 for an example of values and beliefs with dimensions.

**Table 4. Sample coding categories (value and belief statements with dimensions)**

value= guiding principles for a group or person; belief= a cognitive and evaluative elaboration

Value: clear/transparent writing	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 1= no value 10= high value.
Value: knowledge sharing	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 1= No value 10= high value
Belief: open access will improve academic writing	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 1= No/disagree 10= yes/agree
Belief: submissions to my journal are generally well-written	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 1= No/disagree 10= yes/agree

I had the benefit of interviewing extremely articulate and reflective people. Therefore, dimension coding usually was not difficult. At times I had to take into account tone of voice, context, hesitation or many other aspects of the way an answer was articulated in order to assign an accurate dimension. The call was never drastic – say

between a 1 and a 10; It was always a matter of, for example, assigning the coded section an 8 or a 9, a 1 or 2. Of course, though, dimension coding is subjective. I assigned the code based on my perception.

*Why values coding with dimensions is useful in this research.* Again, values and beliefs tell us about culture. In this research, they inform us about academic culture as it relates to academic writing. Dimension coding simply allows for the possibility of a more nuanced analysis and discussion.

*Coding cross-check.* As a validity check on coding, I also did whole interview coding. I performed this step in addition to the previously mentioned two rounds of coding using Deedose. When I whole interview coded, I reviewed the transcript and, using a printed values and beliefs coding chart (see Appendix E: Whole interview coding values and belief chart with dimensions), I coded again for values and beliefs (including dimensions) for each research subject based on the whole of the interview. This was a cross-check measure; I wanted assurance that the parts (individual lines and passages coded and assigned dimensions via Deedose) correlated with my perception of the whole.

## Chapter 4: Results

Table 5 offers a quick look at select results. Individual research questions are addressed in detail following the table.

**Table 5: Select findings**

10 editors of academic journals in journalism and communications were interviewed December 2014-January 2015.

Do editors believe academic prose submitted to their journals is generally well written? 5 editors said it's horrible or quite bad. 3 editors said it's not good. 1 editor said "50/50" – half fine, half not. 1 editor said it's mostly decently written.
Editors fall into two editing camps: 4 editors said they don't edit text much (It's the author's problem or "it's not my job.") 6 editors said they do. (I'm not a dictator, but I try to edit for comprehension.)
Research quality is more important than writing quality for 6 editors. The other 4 said that writing and research go hand-in-hand.
Many editors support open access, but almost nobody believes wide access will force academic prose to improve.
All editors believe academic prose is used for power, control and inclusion/exclusion. It's used as a way for academics to frame themselves, signal alliances and as a means to tenure and promotion.
Should academic prose be more accessible? 3 editors said they don't think so. (Editor 4: "I don't think my journal needs to be understood by the postman.") 7 editors said it should. (An "educated laity" or, more popularly, at least academics in other fields should be able to understand it.)
All editors said that Ph.D.s are not well trained to write. Only 1 editor said that a Ph.D. candidate should be able to write adequately without training. ("I mean, we're talking about a mono-linguistic culture basically... people should be able to read and write in the one language that they have to speak."—Editor 9)

What's the complaint about? 9 editors said they believe incomprehensible academic writing is a valid complaint. One editor believes that when people complain about academic writing, they're really questioning the merit of the research.

## Editor Concerns

**RQ 1: are editors concerned about the quality of academic prose?** My research suggests that, indeed, editors side with Pinker, Graff and others who have voiced extreme concern about *status quo* academic prose and called for all academics to reform their prose by reducing jargon and opaque writing. When I coded the interviews for the belief that submissions to the editor's journal were generally well written, 8 editors scored from 1-4. That is, 80 percent of editors said that submissions to their journals, in general, are not very well written. I didn't define "well written" for them, but rather listened to their reasoning. Editors cited a variety of problems, including basic issues such as spelling, subject-verb agreement and passive voice. Some editors mentioned that it's not unusual to receive submissions that are almost incomprehensible. They cited major problems such as unwieldy sentence constructions, ridiculously long paragraphs and a dependence on academic language to the extent that the text was incoherent to the editor and/or peer reviewers.

Editor 7:           Truth told: Most of [the academics who submit to the journal] are terrible writers. Most of the manuscripts I get are terrible and I have to copyedit them extensively.

Interviewer:       Really? Okay.

Editor 7: Oh, yes...They write in passive tense. They have paragraphs that go on for a page and a half. I mean it's like where was your ninth grade English teacher?

OR

Editor 9: ...a lot of academics aren't the very best of writers. So instead of saying something in a succinct or concise fashion, they'll say something in a more longwinded fashion. And thereby not necessarily help the transparency of whatever it is they're trying to say.

One editor (Editor 6) answered that submissions were "50/50," meaning that he believed half of the submissions to be suitable and the other half unsuitable (this editor was coded '5' on the belief dimension scale). From Editor 6: "Half of the manuscripts we receive are pretty well written, and the other half is – well...[they are] poorly written to various extents." Only a single editor rated a 10 on the scale. Editor 1 estimated that "95 percent or more" of submissions to his journal were decently written. I did not attempt to link the type of journal (i.e. qualitative, quantitative or mixed methods, etc.) or any ranking of the journal with the answers provided by the editors. Since this was a small group of editors, I did not want to jeopardize anonymity by identifying research type or journal ranking here.

#### **What do editors think about submission quality?**

- 8 editors said that submissions are not, in general, well written.
- 1 editor said submissions are "50/50."
- 1 editor said submissions are generally decently written.

The editors speculated why submissions too often were unacceptably written. Most mentioned carelessness or time constraints. They noted that academics are expected to produce research and publish results, but they are usually also juggling many other responsibilities. For example, one editor (Editor 7) reported supervising seven Ph.D. students in addition to teaching, editing an academic journal and researching/writing.

We can also look to other comments, values and beliefs for additional clues about why academic writing is, overall, problematic:

***The nature and purpose of academic writing.*** Academic writing is a genre or style of writing, according to most editors. This genre generally has numerous content requirements that make the writing task more about meeting those requirements and less about being an impressive wordsmith. For example, research generally includes literature review, theory and methodology sections. These are essential to academics who use them to judge their colleague's work, but editors said they also mean the writing can come off as dry or even tedious at times. From Editor 9: "I mean I think academic writing is what it is. It's academic writing. It's written for a certain peer group. And it's like legal writing. Legal writing is probably, for the most part, read by lawyers who understand the legal terms and so on. I think academic writing is much the same. So it is what it is."

Editor 3 explained that the need for academic writing to be deeply logical and conservative is also essential, but inhibits the prose. An article from a newspaper or magazine is written with more certainty so as not to confuse readers, this editor said. "[A general press article] is easy to understand, just like [when you're dealing with] children.

It has to be simple, no confusion, no gray area.” Academic writing, Editor 3 pointed out, needs to be more complicated and cautious, which burdens prose style.

And Editor 2 said academic writing is not about “beautiful” writing: “No, what we’re trying to do is to convey ideas, to raise questions, and writing is an important tool to do that. [But] it’s not the main thing that we do, it’s not the main goal.”

***Low value placed on writing.*** Perhaps because “it is what it is,” editors said that they believe many academics simply do not care about writing well. From Editor 2: “...there is not a strong interest...in getting better at our writing, or at least I don’t know too many academics who really pay attention to that as a priority. The priority is somewhere else.” As this editor explained, we can all become better writers, but the process is labor intensive. Academics feel pressure to research and publish more, not to write in a more appealing manner. Furthermore, all editors said that schools and departments put almost no effort into specifically training new scholars to write well. Editors said scholars usually learn by emulating the work of other scholars, too much of which should not be emulated. Editor 10 explained that bad habits such as “trying to sound smart” with prose – that is, making the prose overly complicated to try to upgrade the impression of the writer on the reader – are generally acquired in graduate school, are never corrected and only get worse with time.

***No clarity mandate:*** Clarity was an issue that came up time and again. Lanham (2007) defends opacity as a style. Williams (2014) primarily swore allegiance to clarity/transparency. Scholarly journal editors have taken in both of these views and remixed them into a nuanced belief when it comes to clear writing. Mostly, they swear personal allegiance to clarity and yet defend opacity as another scholar’s right. Writing is

a form of freedom of expression or scholarly independence. We can understand it this way: I strongly prefer transparent writing, but I don't demand it – a sentiment reflected in 8 of the interviews. Editor 7 explained it this way: "I mean I have my own preference for my own writing style, but I do not by any means impose that on the writing that comes through my journal's doors."

The two dissenters from this opinion said that they both prefer clarity/transparency and demand it. Their views on clarity centered on professional jargon.

From Editor 1: "I want transparency, and I think if we need to use specific terms, then in my journal, as an editor, I'm going to insist that they be defined clearly so that anybody can read it. Well, anybody with let's say with a high school education can read it and appreciate it." This editor said that if academics were not sharing knowledge *widely* they were not doing their jobs. And this from Editor 10: "... I think that if something is well written, even if it's got key terms that are specific to the field, it should be accessible to an intelligent laity." Again, however, this was not a majority view. Most editors said they did not have firm rules about jargon use or transparency.

***Writing is used for power, control and exclusion.*** Two editors (Editors 1 and 10, cited above) believe that, in effect, when an academic article is well written, any educated person can understand it. Then there is the majority opinion, best epitomized by this statement by Editor 8 (when asked whether or not academics should minimize jargon so nonacademics can understand their work): "It's like you pick up a Russian magazine and you complain that you cannot understand it because it's written in Russian; the Russians cannot do anything about it."

Editors freely acknowledge that the masses are not their intended audiences and that, yes, this means their language often excludes. From Editor 8: “I mean we are often talking in terms of concepts that have been researched by other scholars before, and so we cannot always go back to first principles and try to define everything, because then that would take forever and it would take much more space than is available in journals. Plus it would not be of interest to most academic readers because there’s a common understanding of those concepts, and so there’s no need for you to kind of, you know, unbundle that and try to explain it as if you’re explaining to a school child what that concept means.”

Many brought up the role of the translator. They said they valued journalists, health communicators and public relations people as experts in translation. From this view, academics are doing their jobs by sharing knowledge with fellow academics in scholarly journals; It is the translators who must turn the Russian into common English, or whatever language others need it in.

This quote from Editor 2 sums up a fairly common belief that academic language/jargon works harder than typical language: “I mean, jargon is a way in which you sort of differentiate yourself from others, but at the same time you signal that you belong to a certain group of academics interested in certain concepts or theories or questions. So jargon is inevitable.”

I cited Editors 1 and 10 as advocates of a no-translator-needed version of academic prose. But even these editors are not advocates of a jargon-free version of academic prose; both acknowledged that jargon can be legitimately used by academics as, for example, a demonstration that they have been professionally trained. The issue of

jargon and professional vocabulary tended to be an emotionally laden aspect of the interviews. Every editor placed high value on the specialist conversation – that is, that many journals serve as a venue to have this conversation. There is also the collectively held belief that using the language of an academic is a hard-earned right. Even Editors 1 and 10 agree with this, it's just that they seem to have a firmer stance about how to ethically use jargon. This exchange with Editor 5, however, is more typical of how editors explain jargon use and audience exclusion:

- Interviewer: Other people have written about the concept of using less professional jargon so that anybody who wants to read a journal article can actually understand it pretty much. What do you think about that?
- Editor 5: Well, I think that's nonsense. Anybody can't read a professional journal article and understand it. There's a reason we go to graduate school for all those years and put [forth] all that time and effort and money. Because we need to have that background, that education, that socialization.

## **Editors Want Change**

### **RQ 2: do editors believe academic writing needs to change and, if so, how?**

All editors agreed that academic prose is in need of improvement. Seven out of 10 editors said academic prose should be more accessible. As stated previously, however, the majority of these editors believe prose should be more accessible to the extent that academics in other fields can read and use it. Just two editors believe it should be accessible to the extent that any educated person can read it.

The primary reason why editors would like academics to be more attentive to their prose, however, is because there is a sizable group of submissions that they believe have good research but are nonetheless rejected primarily because the writing is incoherent. That is, the writing is so riddled with overly complex sentences, highly specialized academic jargon or other writerly tics (i.e. nominalizing, passive voice, etc.) that the editor feels it is impossible to clearly understand. From Editor 6: “These are actually the kind of manuscripts that I hate to reject because I think... we lose something here.” Sometimes editors do try to salvage good research poorly written by sending submissions back to the authors and asking them to work on the prose and resubmit. At times, the editors even said they might accept a submission with the caveat that it needs to be heavily edited. “Obviously, that’s a lot of work and also it takes a certain degree of receptivity in the author. I’ve had some quite defensive pushback from authors...” (Editor 10).

This brings up the philosophical differences regarding the role of an editor. In essence, there are two camps. One camp believes an editor’s job is to spend considerable time cleaning up prose, the other does not believe it is an editor’s job to fix someone

else's writing. Even the editors who spend the most time fixing, however, do not rule with an iron fist. When they believe that something needs to be rephrased because it is needlessly opaque or contains too much professional jargon, they suggest this to the author. In many cases, though, authors argue the point. "Occasionally I will get a piece that uses [redacted for confidentiality] theory and there definitely are some places where it could be clarified. Sometimes I will check with the authors and they will do it or they will say to me, 'Look, if I do what you [want] it will lose its analytical force or whatever,' and I go, 'Okay.'" (Editor 7)

This can be explained because editors reserve the very highest value for top-level research rather than clear/transparent writing. Six out of 10 respondents said they believe top-level research is more important than writing. From Editor 2: "I don't believe in wonderful, beautiful writing by itself...I think that [writing is]...a tool to express certain ideas that you think are important...But, I mean, the main thing that we care about is basically whether or not ideas are original, innovative, sort of defy conventional wisdom. That's ultimately what good scholarship is defined by." Not, he said, by writing.

The remaining four said that solid research and solid writing are intertwined, as epitomized by this comment from Editor 8: "I think [writing is] integral. I think it's almost so integral that I don't separate the writing from the thinking, and so I feel like we all pay, at some level, attention to the writing quality, and we are all swayed by the writing quality. And good thinkers often write clearly. I mean they may not write in the most entertaining way, but certainly... they'll convey their ideas quite powerfully and persuasively."

While I did not code for the type of research the editor's journal generally published, it is interesting to note here that the first quote above is from an editor who usually deals with qualitative research. The second quote is from an editor who usually publishes quantitative research.

Editors furthermore believe that authors can legitimately use academic writing to create public, professional faces (in other words, frame themselves). To this end, each author remains accountable for himself or herself. Editor 10 expressed the idea like this: "Some editors believe 'If the person doesn't write well, then this is [his] responsibility. [He]'ll be in public with this in the form that it's in.'" Editor 4 explained it this way: "...[some editors] just think that the writing is the writing, and they don't think it's part of their responsibility to deal with it."

If editors could make one major change to academic prose, then, they would not necessarily institute hard and fast rules about jargon, nominalizing or even passive voice. It is not that they like the overuse of any of these common academic writing strategies and tics, but they very often accept them as an individual academic's choice or perhaps part of what that academic is trying to do with his work. Their big change is pretty simple: Let us start by getting rid of the egregious problems. Editors say writers should always have a colleague or editor read their work and give feedback on the writing (not just the research) prior to submitting it to a journal. Editors believe many problems could be avoided if academics simply had an attentive prose-oriented reader in their back pockets and a willingness to listen to that reader.

## **Open Access and Prose**

**RQ3: do journal editors believe open access will put pressure on academic writing to become reader friendly for a wider audience?** Editors expressed concerns about the sustainability of open access publishing and how quality would be maintained, but they were overwhelmingly in favor of the broad idea that research should be widely accessible, as epitomized by this exchange with Editor 6:

Interviewer: In your ideal world, though, would [open access] be the norm?

Editor 6: Sure, sure, because why should access to my research findings or to my research that is mostly publicly funded be restricted by anyone and especially by a private corporation? So in an ideal world, our research findings and our research in general, because it is publicly funded, should be accessible by the public. And I'm actually still waiting for the moment when the larger public demands this free access to the research they fund.

As a taxpayer, I would argue or I could argue that, "Hey, this research has been funded from my tax money. Why am I not allowed to read it?" That's actually a very reasonable argument. But one has to make it, and there is no lobby at this very moment to channel these demands. But there might be at some point.

Will access do anything to promote more accessible prose though? Nine out of 10 editors said that they don't believe it will. Four of the editors, however, said they wished it would.

"I would like to think that [OA] would make people more attentive to making [language] accessible to people outside the field or outside of institutions, but I have a feeling that that won't happen." (Editor 10) Five of the editors expressed fear that as OA increases, the number of poor-quality academic journals will also increase. With this,

they believe academic writing quality could decrease. Several editors voiced concerns similar to the following comment from Editor 4: "...it doesn't mean that something that is good can't be published in an open-access journal. It just means there is gonna be a lot of very marginal stuff, and so I really fear that...there will be much that's not well edited and not well written that will be published. There will be journalists... who will look at these bad journals and say, 'Look how stupid academics are.'" One editor (Editor 1) was the lone, optimistic wolf: he said if OA became increasingly popular and increasingly accepted by most scholars, he could envision language also changing toward wider accessibility.

Wider access brought up issues of audience. In effect, no editor can really imagine anyone other than an academic wanting to read scholarly journals. "For many people that actually should read what we produce, academic journals are sort of off-putting. They just hear the words 'academic journal' and they shudder because they think that it's dry, boring writing." (Editor 2)

The logic was circular: Editors did not believe easy access to journals would change academic language because they did not believe that anyone would access their journals due to the language. And if the language didn't dissuade the lay reader, everything else would.

Editor 9: And I'm not too sure that many lay people would read through a 25-page manuscript. And if they did, I'm not too sure that most lay people would understand the methodology and so on.

Interviewer: Or care about it?

Editor 9: Or care about it, correct.

No editor viewed this as a “Field of Dreams” issue. That is, nobody believed if they built a journal focused on accessibility, people outside of academia would come.

## **Chapter 5: Conclusion**

### **Research Limitations and Future Research**

This research is a collection of values and beliefs regarding academic culture as it relates to prose. Bergman warns, however, that these values and beliefs are merely statements. These interviews are just what the editors were willing to tell me with reference to certain questions and the given situation. To what degree these statements reflect reality is another issue. In fact, future research should investigate this. For example, editors said they placed high value on writing that is, in their opinions, clear/transparent. Future research might test this by comparing whether or not papers of equally valid research written in different styles (more transparent vs. more opaque) get different responses from editors. Are editors truly not impressed with fancy words and complicated sentence construction? In addition, more research is needed to determine whether the expressed values and beliefs in this research are idiosyncratic or shared by a larger group of academics. Bergman notes that values and beliefs are most beneficial when studied across time and within a particular group. If we look at larger numbers of editors or peer reviewers would we also find the values and beliefs found here? My research did not code interviews by the type of research published in the editor's journal. A larger study, however, could determine if opinions vary considerably with the editors of quantitative, qualitative or mixed methods journals. More interesting could be exploring possible generational differences. According to the Survey of Earned Doctorates (2013), the mean age for a doctoral degree recipient is 31.8 years. Mason (2012) says the average age of

people earning Ph.D.s is about 34 years old. We can safely say, then, that the majority of people earning doctorates today were born after 1980. That means the odds are great that they grew up amid a swirl of transparency and knowledge sharing debates. They may come to academia with well-formed values and beliefs about transparency and opacity, as well as the role they wish to play in knowledge sharing. Future research should look into this: will naturally shifting values and beliefs, rather than anything such as open access, improve academic prose? And we cannot ignore the vast number of non-native speaking/writing researchers who submit to English language academic journals. All editors told me that they receive a substantial number of submissions from non-native writers. Researchers such as Clyne (1987), Mauranen (1993) and Blagojevnic (2004) have all pointed out that there are stylistic differences between native and non-native academic writers, some of which may have implications on whether or not research is published. Opacity and transparency issues for non-native academics writing in English is an area for future research. We should know how *status quo* academic writing influences their writing.

Moreover, the Latin question *Cui bono?* comes to mind. Who benefits from *status quo* academic writing anyway? After speaking with editors, who have professed to preferring more transparent prose over opaque and who have also told me that they believe transparent writing leads to not only a better chance of getting published but also a better chance at other academics later citing a work, it remains puzzling why academics would not all write directly and simply. Or at least attempt to learn how to do it. Academics, after all, hold several degrees; they've proven that they can learn. Clearly, however, the majority of academics have not been made to see the logic of the editors. So

who benefits from keeping the majority of academics playing (or, rather, writing) by a misguided rulebook? Pinker (2014) suggests academic training simply gets in the way of transparent writing. Future research, however, might also look at twigging, a known phenomenon in academia and academic publishing. That is, every branch or specialty produces new, more specialized branches or subspecialties. As Dill (2002) says, language is used as an expedient way to show membership in the elite learned pursuit, but also quickly and easily group research curiosities, methods, knowledge gained or other factors. And, of course, specialized language also helps justify niche journals. What else does specialized language justify? Future research should look into these matters.

## **Significance of Findings and Discussion**

Language is a uniquely human power, central to our experience of being human (Boroditsky, 2010). Academic language, the stuff that academic prose is built of, is central to the experience of being an academic. It transforms person into academic; it forges alliances, builds reputation and helps create a career. Publication of knowledge is the work product of research and intellectual analysis. It's evidence of an academic's competence (Henderson, 2002). Yet academic prose is also the elephant in the academic's office (and perhaps heart and mind, too). Many editors told me that incoherent writing is a subject they complain about to other editors, but one they almost never discuss with colleagues. I still don't fully understand why. Professing to be in favor of knowledge sharing and access to knowledge, while putting up roadblocks when it comes to accessible language, is also nothing short of perplexing. I'm not suggesting that

the majority of academics bamboozle people with obscure words, though. I'm suggesting, rather, that in many ways academics may be victims. The promise or threat of something seems to have steered many to write in what is surely an inauthentic voice. What is the cure to this? Let us start by turning on the lights and having a conversation. As one research subject mused: "It's interesting that we have health communication. We have interpersonal communication. We have organizational communication. Is there a field of communication called 'academic communication?'" Indeed, it's rather unconscionable that journalism and communications scholars dedicate their lives to the study of other people's communication systems, effects and methods and yet seem to have almost no interest in their own.

Besides talk, though, we need action. For example, we can rethink curriculum focus. We should not be training students to be top-level researchers, to the exclusion of top-level writers. It's a reality now that not all Ph.D.s, perhaps not even the future majority, will obtain careers in which they have the luxury of talking amongst themselves (Mason, 2012). My research subjects told me that one of the things a Ph.D. buys is a research vocabulary. That's fine, but doctorate degrees are rather expensive even just in terms of time and effort. It has become outdated and untenable –not to mention, frankly, a lousy deal– to suggest that one gets a vocabulary that only allows you to communicate with other specialists. The Ph.D. offer must include more – for example, the ability to translate that specialist language into coherent prose. I agree with Editor 10: "We have to offer Ph.D. students more than specific training in a particular field in a particular topic area and a particular 'whatever your dissertation may be on.' I think the most obvious things that we can do is give students really good research training and writing skills,

because those are the things that are transferable.” This would seem also to be in any program’s best interest: imagine how powerful a program would be if it turned out not just the best researchers, but also the most effective writers about their research.

My research indicates that editors desire change, yet no editor is on a mission to change the academy. Editors of journals are full-time academics moonlighting as essentially unpaid part-time editors because they believe in service to their field. One can assume that they already have their hands full. And, besides, for an editor there is one silver lining to our writing problem: incoherent writing makes rejection easier. Editors admit that they have far more submissions than they have space in their journals—no more than 20 percent of submissions are accepted and, for some journals, that number is less than 5 percent. Editors may be the gatekeepers, but no single editor – nor a small group of editors – will be the change maker. So how will change ever happen? People such as Pinker and Graff have encouraged academics to do it on their own. They’ve supplied us with brilliant writing advice. We would all be better writers if we followed this advice. My findings are clear, though: values and beliefs –that is, academic culture—need to change. Academics in leadership positions at associations and schools/programs are the only people who are powerful enough to elicit a cultural change. These people must address the issue of academic prose. Imagine what could happen if there was a clear consensus among leaders that the current *status quo* academic writing style is not acceptable and, furthermore, will not be rewarded with entry into prestigious programs, tenure, promotion or other perks. My work here simply raises these issues, however. Now for the real work: getting leading academics in the field to take the issue of academic prose seriously.

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## **Appendix A: Interview Questions**

1. How would you describe academic prose? For example, do think of it as a genre of writing? Do you think of it as a style of writing? Do you think of it as having certain rules? (if so, please describe)
2. What's the main purpose of academic writing in scholarly journals?
3. Do you enforce rules about jargon use, nominalizing, clear writing, etc.? Are you concerned about these prose matters? Do you think jargon use and/or other prose strategies are consciously used by authors or encouraged by editors as a way to exclude nonacademics? Do you or your editors spend a fair amount of time editing articles particularly because of prose issues or would you say your main focus is primarily on the content of the research rather than the prose?
4. Who do you think the main audience is for your journal? Do you think this audience is changing or could change particularly in light of open access? Could you get behind any movement that attempts to make academic prose clearer and invite a wider audience?
5. Do you find that academics who submit to your publication generally write in a similar prose style? Do you judge this as generally very good or not? How do you think most of them learn to write scholarly articles?
6. When laypeople complain that academic prose is opaque, what don't they understand about academic prose or the research process? If you agree that too much of the writing is opaque, why do you think this is?

## **Appendix B: Verbal consent script approved by University of Missouri-Columbia Institutional Review Board**

My name is Victoria Clayton-Alexander and I'm a Missouri School of Journalism graduate student. I'm conducting a study titled "Exploring Prose Style For Scholarly Journal Articles in Communications: Do Editors Believe There is a Need For Change?" My research curiosity focuses on academic prose in journalism and mass communication scholarly journals and I'm interested in your experiences as an editor of one of these journals. The purpose of the research, which is entirely voluntary, is to understand your perceptions about certain aspects of academic prose and how it may or may not change in the future. If you decide to be involved, your participation will entail one informal interview that will last about 20 minutes. This research has no known risks. The research will benefit the academic community because it will help us to further understand how and why academics write for scholarly journals.

Please know that I will do everything I can to protect your privacy. Your identity or personal information will not be disclosed in any publication that may result from the study. Any material generated from our interview (i.e. an audio file, transcript or notes) will be stored in a secure location. The Campus Institutional Review Board at the University of Missouri-Columbia can be reached at (573) 882-9585 or by email at [umcresearchcirb@missouri.edu](mailto:umcresearchcirb@missouri.edu). The Campus IRB mailing address is: 483 McReynolds Hall Columbia, MO 65212

Campus IRB Approved Date 12/2/2014  
Project Number 1214437

**Appendix C: Beliefs identified in interviews and coded for with Dedoose computer application**

<b>Belief</b>	<b>Dimension</b>
I fix prose considerably	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 NO YES
Open access is positive	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 NO YES
Open access may improve academic prose	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 NO YES
Prose as important as research	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 NO YES
Prose generally well written	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 NO YES
Prose needs to change	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 NO YES
Prose should be accessible	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 NO YES
Prose used for power, control & exclusion	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 NO YES
We train Ph.D.s to write well	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 NO YES

**Appendix D: Values identified in interviews and coded for with Dedoose computer application**

<b>Values</b>	<b>Dimension</b>
Clear/transparent writing	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 No Value      High Value
Freedom of expression	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 No Value      High Value
Top-level research	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 No Value      High Value
Knowledge sharing	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 No Value      High Value
Pro-only conversation	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 No Value      High Value
Scholarly independence	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 No Value      High Value
Academic language (jargon)	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 No Value      High Value

## Appendix E: Whole interview coding values and belief chart with dimensions

<b>VALUES</b>	
Professional language (jargon)	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 No Value      High Value
Professional-only conversation	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 No Value      High Value
Freedom of expression	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 No Value      High Value
Knowledge sharing	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 No Value      High Value
Top-quality research	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 No Value      High Value
Top-quality writing	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 No Value      High Value
Scholarly independence	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 No Value      High Value
<b>BELIEFS</b>	
The submissions to my journal are, in general, well written.	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 NO      YES
Academic writing should be more accessible.	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 NO      YES
Open access, in general, is a positive	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

movement.	NO	YES
OA will improve academic prose.	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 NO	YES
My job is to clean up or fix an author's prose as much as possible.	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 NO	YES
Academics use scholarly journal publication as a way to obtain tenure and promotion.	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 NO	YES
Academics use language as a way to signal they belong to a specialty, subspecialty or group.	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 NO	YES
Ph.D. candidates in communications are trained/mentored adequately to write for academic publication.	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 NO	YES