

A PRIMER ON THE PATHWAY TO SCHOLARLY WRITING: HELPING NASCENT WRITERS TO UNLEARN CONDITIONED HABITS

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Abstract

In this article, we identify eight common error patterns of nascent writers when they attempt to navigate the pathway to scholarly writing. We illustrate each error pattern via examples and counter-examples (corrections). We also describe how to identify such patterns, why those patterns might occur and persist, and why each pattern is problematic. In addition, we provide practical advice and resources aimed at changing conditioned habits of nascent and, in some cases, experienced scholarly writers. Finally, we include a diagnostic-prescriptive assessment and feedback activity for use by nascent writers, particularly graduate students, and their faculty advisors and instructors.

Key words: scholarly, writing, error, patterns, habits

Graduate students must write in a scholarly manner to produce research papers, yet Delyser (2003) has reported that many students are underprepared when they write their thesis or dissertation. Our own experiences with graduate students in education, as well as other nascent writers in the social and behavioral sciences, suggest that many of these individuals must unlearn prior writing habits. We believe such habits have been conditioned and reinforced for many years. These habits can present roadblocks on the pathway to scholarly writing. Unlearning and replacing those habits can remove some roadblocks.

In this article, we provide guidance for nascent writers, students enrolled in graduate programs, and faculty who can help graduate

students to navigate roadblocks to scholarly writing. Our approach is diagnostic-prescriptive and pragmatic (Yeany, Dost, & Mathews, 1980). First, we identify eight of the most common writing habits (i.e., error patterns) of graduate students that are not conducive to scholarly writing. Then we suggest how to change these writing habits. We recommend that writers use the information we provide in Table 1 and the activity we illustrate in Figure 1 to (a) self-assess and identify their current writing habits, and (b) replace ineffective habits with habits that are more conducive to scholarly writing.

We have delimited the scope of this article to scholarly writing for social and behavioral sciences that use the *Publication Manual*

of the *American Psychological Association* (2010). Moreover, this article addresses only one of the many skill sets required for scholarly writing. For how to organize a manuscript, how to navigate peer review and editorial processes, and how to synthesize information for literature reviews, methods, results, and discussion sections of journal articles, please see resources such as Bem (1987; 1995), Galvan (1999), Henson (1998), Murray (2011), Pan (2011), Sternberg (1993), and Weissberg and Buker (1990). The eight writing habits and corresponding activities that we illustrate here are quite narrow, but could be part of a comprehensive program or course for teaching graduate students how to write in a scholarly manner (Delyser, 2003).

Navigating Roadblocks to Scholarly Writing

We believe that the pathway to scholarly writing is challenging, in part, because most graduate students must unlearn prior writing habits in addition acquiring new skills. Many of our graduate students have acquired, mastered, and applied specific writing skills for decades. Unfortunately, roadblocks can emerge when previously mastered skills are not conducive to scholarly writing. Many of our graduate students have heard, “You are an excellent writer,” via their former K-12 and college teachers, and have earned excellent grades. At the graduate level, this message begs the question, “You are an excellent writer for what purposes and what audiences?” Some of our graduate students also have limited experience in writing as a process that requires prewriting, writing, and rewriting (Murray, 2012). For these students, a paper was a product followed by a grade and perhaps summative feedback. These students express surprise when we require that they revise and resubmit their papers. Such surprise is understandable in that our students must act on our formative feedback, which directs

them to change writing conventions and habits they had used with success as elementary, secondary, and undergraduate students. Indeed, Goddard (2003) noted that “students who regularly earned As in their English classes often are shocked to receive critical feedback on their psychology papers” (p. 25).

Common Error Patterns and Habits of Nascent Scholarly Writers

So how might graduate students navigate roadblocks to scholarly writing? What can these student and their instructors do to navigate these roadblocks? We suggest that students and their instructors identify the most common error patterns and writing habits that are not conducive to scholarly writing. Based on analyzing students’ written products over the past fifteen years, Table 1 lists six of the most common error patterns of our graduate students. These error patterns include overuse of passive voice instead of active voice, overuse of the article *the*, nominalization, unclear pronoun referents, overuse of third person instead of first person, and use of superfluous common phrases. Table 1 illustrates examples of the six error patterns with corresponding corrections, as well as ways for writers to identify such errors patterns. Table 1 also lists possible reasons why these errors occur, why those errors are problematic (i.e., mostly because the errors inhibit writing clarity), how to remedy those errors, and pertinent resources writers can consult to further address those errors. Two additional error patterns that do not appear in Table 1 are sentences that have too many words and one-sentence paragraphs. We address these two error patterns first.

A Challenging Lesson: From “More is Better” to “Less is More”

Many beginning writers have a tendency to construct sentences with too many words (Williams, 1997). We say that these writers lack *clause control*. We have observed three

types of clause construction run-amuck, each based on position of the clause within a sentence. Some writers overuse introductory clauses, phrases, or qualifiers at the beginning of sentences. Other writers overuse such items in the middle or at the end of sentences. Similarly, many nascent writers construct too many sentences and too many paragraphs. We are reminded of our own experiences as graduate students when tasked with writing parts of our first scholarly manuscripts. Feedback from our mentors frequently took the form of “not bad, but cut it in half.”

Why do nascent writers construct lengthy sentences and products? In short, we propose conditioned habits. Many of our students report to us that they learned and thought that good writing required complex sentences with sophisticated words. A corollary is that many of our students thought that good papers required many pages. Our students’ prior school experiences might have conditioned and reinforced wordy sentences and lengthy reports—more is better. These experiences contrast with basic guidelines for scholarly writers to communicate parsimoniously and clearly—less is more.

The primary criteria for good scientific writing are accuracy and clarity... the first step toward clarity is to write simply and directly... not a novel with subplots but a short story with a single, linear narrative link. Let this line stand out in bold relief. Clear any underbrush that entangles your prose by obeying Strunk and White’s dictum, “omit needless words,” ... don’t let your voice struggle to be heard above the ambient noise of cluttered writing. (Bem, 1995, p. 173)

Although we inform our graduate students about the dangers of overusing clauses, phrases, and qualifiers, particularly at the beginning of sentences, consistent with our experiences

with other nascent writers, we find that some students continue to obscure the meaning of their sentences by using too many introductory clauses, phrases, and qualifiers when they write sentences, whereas other students overuse such items in the middle or at the end of sentences, despite the fact that we require our students to use the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association* (2010), which states, “writing exclusively in long, involved sentences results in difficult, sometimes incomprehensible material” (p. 68).

Yes, we hope that you identified our lack of clause control in the preceding sentence. We hope, too, that you noted our wordiness occurred in the context of a one-sentence paragraph. Some of our graduate students intersperse one-sentence paragraphs throughout their papers. Those sentences tend to be wordy. In such cases we direct students to divide lengthy sentences into two, or more, concise sentences. We also remind students about the basic form and function of paragraphs. That is, a paragraph typically consists of at least three sentences that convey a message supported by information or details. Finally, we encourage students to adhere to Williams’s (1997) advice to be clear by being brief:

Keep introductory clauses and phrases short, keep subjects short, create coordinate structures after those short subjects, avoid tacking a clause or phrase of any kind onto another just like it, and especially avoid tacking on a third just like it. (p. 1)

Six Common Habits of Nascent Writers

Table 1 lists six common habits of nascent writers. This list is based on observations of our graduate students’ papers, theses, and dissertations during the past 15 years. Research literature on scholarly writing appears to mention, more frequently, use of passive voice versus active voice compared to the

other five habits. In this section, we address passive versus active voice, in part, because we have found this habit to be very common, persistent, and resistant to change. We refer readers to Table 1 for the other five common habits of nascent writers.

Lingering traditions in scholarly writing, rules governing situational use of passive voice, mixed messages from faculty advisors and published sources, and cultural background might help to explain why many of our graduate students overuse passive voice. In the past, passive voice was preferred and predominated over active voice in many scientific disciplines—and still does in some disciplines. Weissberg and Buker (1990) identified conditions under which writers use passive voice, such as when describing procedures in Methods sections. These authors also noted, however, that writers should be aware of preferences of writing authorities. For graduate students in social and behavioral sciences, important writing authorities include their faculty advisors and the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association* (2010). Our experience suggests that faculty—even those within the same discipline and department—differ somewhat in how they advise graduate students to use active versus passive voice. Moreover, graduate students are likely to see but perhaps not distinguish between appropriate and inappropriate models of voice when they read sentences in journal articles. Imitating inappropriate models can perpetuate overuse of passive voice. Finally, some of our students might be conditioned culturally to use, or prefer to use, passive voice over active voice or vice versa. Some students' cultural or experiential background might predispose them to emphasize actions and avoid placing character (themselves, other individuals, or specific groups) at the forefront of sentences. In such cases, we have observed that students avoid first person and active voice. Instead,

those students use passive voice in which the identity of the individual or character of the sentence is unstated, for example, *Feedback was provided*. Rarely appearing in our graduate students' papers are sentences in passive voice that include a sentence-ending prepositional phrase, such as *by the teacher*, which at least would clarify who executes the action. Unstated or implied identity often translates to unknown identity, leaving readers to wonder, *who provided feedback?*

Quantitative, data-based studies of nascent scholarly writers' use of passive versus active voice are scarce. Moreover, studies on prevalence of the other five error patterns listed in Table 1 are virtually non-existent. More typical of the related literature on nascent scholarly writers are studies in which experienced writers, usually faculty, (a) report their perceptions about factors that impact nascent writers or the quality of nascent writers' products (Maher, Feldon, Timmerman, & Chao, 2013), or (b) describe changes in students' attitudes or knowledge of writing and style conventions after completing a discipline-specific writing course (Goodard, 2003; Lutrell, Buffkin, Eastman, & Miller, 2010). A notable exception is as follows. After analyzing 12 experimental studies in speech-language pathology published as journal articles, Riley (1991) found that authors used passive voice more frequently in Methods and Results sections when compared to Introduction and Discussion sections. Riley concluded that this finding suggested:

Passive structures are more appropriate for expository purposes, in those sections where the author's rhetorical role is to describe procedures and present data. In contrast, active structures are more appropriate for argumentative purposes, in those sections where the author is criticizing previous research or advocating a new thesis. (p. 239)

Table 1 Diagnosing and Remediating Six Common Error Patterns of Beginning Scholarly Writers

Error Pattern (with Code)	Sample Error with Error Corrected	How to Identify Error	Why Error Might Occur Frequently	Why Error Pattern is Problematic	How to Change Error Pattern with Suggested Resources
Passive voice overused; active voice underused (PV-AV)	The 12 participants <u>were</u> selected. Teachers selected 12 participants.	Helper verbs (is, are, was, were) followed by ed form of verb, often at end of sentence.	Conditioned habit; imitating poor models; outdated and variable rules for active versus passive voice	Passive voice fails to specify character (often who) executes the action. Sentence begs question, by whom?	Type sentences so that character precedes action: Who does (did, or will do) what. <i>APA Manual</i> , 2010, pp. 73, 77, 81; Sheldrake, 2004; Sigel, 2009; Williams, 1997, pp. 71-9
Nominalization overused (NOM)	<u>Selections</u> of 12 participants will be based on teachers' <u>nomina-tions</u> of students. We will select 12 participants after teachers nominate students.	Use search feature of word processing program to locate <i>tion</i> with verbs	Conditioned habit; sounds appealing like an orator's panache; Demonization is not a justification nor a rationalization for subjugation of our...	Making noun from verb reduces clarity	Monitor, reduce frequency of <i>tion</i> . Reword sentence and use verb (e.g., select) rather than nominalized word (e.g., selection). Williams, 1997, pp. 41-70; <i>APA Manual</i> , 2010, p. 26
Article <i>the</i> over-used (THE)	The participants will select <u>the</u> books from the table. Participants will select books from the table.	Use search feature of word processing program to locate occurrences of <i>the</i> .	Conditioned habit: oral habit of using <i>the</i> carries over to writing.	Using unnecessary words is counter to parsimony	Monitor, reduce frequency of <i>the</i> . Use search feature to delete occurrences of <i>the</i> . Strunk & White, 2000, p. 23
First Person avoided, third person overused (TP-FP)	The researchers will select materials OR Materials will be selected (character omitted altogether). We will select materials.	Virtual absence of first person; zero or few instances of the personal pronouns, I or we	Conditioned habit: imitating poor models (journal articles); outdated APA style or style still used in other disciplines	Unnecessarily distances author from the work. Third person corresponds often with passive voice.	Use personal pronouns, I and we; use personal possessive pronouns, my and our. <i>APA Manual</i> , 2010, pp. 69, 77
Unclear pronoun referents (PRO)	Families of pre-schoolers followed advice of teachers. <u>They</u> were... These families were... These pre-schoolers were... These teachers were...	High frequency use of they, he, she, this, that, their, it, these, those instead of specific nouns. Use word searches.	Conditioned habit oral habit of using pronouns carries over to writing. Writer knows the antecedent and assumes readers do, too.	Reduces clarity. Obscures meaning. Readers not sure which noun or antecedent to which pronoun refers.	Replace unclear pronoun referents with specific nouns. Ensure appropriate pronoun & clear antecedent. Strunk & White, 2000, pp. 60-61; <i>APA Manual</i> , 2010, p. 68

Table 1 Diagnosing and Remediating Six Common Error Patterns of Beginning Scholarly Writers (continued)

Error Pattern (with Code)	Sample Error with Error Corrected	How to Identify Error	Why Error Might Occur Frequently	Why Error Pattern is Problematic	How to Change Error Pattern with Suggested Resources
Uses superfluous phrases, words of common parlance, colloquial expressions (SUP)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. <u>There are many studies that support using...</u> Many studies support using... 2. <u>My study will focus on...</u> My study will investigate (or examine, describe, analyze...) 	Use word and phrase searches to locate.	Conditioned habit: oral habits carry over to writing. Viewing poor models.	Reduces clarity. Violates rule of parsimony. When nascent writers invoke “focus,” they do so in purpose statements, but those statements ironically & typically are imprecise.	Eliminate superfluous phrases; replace or remove colloquial expressions and jargon. Use precise action verbs; remind self that “focus” is an action for lenses of microscopes, cameras, and eyes, not for writers or purpose statements. <i>APA Manual</i> , 2010, pp. 67-68

We concur, in part, with Riley’s conclusion. We agree that active voice is suited to literature review and discussion sections of empirical articles and that passive voice, if used, *might* lend itself more so to methods and results sections. We prefer, however, to use the following approach to instruct our graduate students, for the following reasons. We have found that many of our students overuse passive voice and omit the identify of the character that executes action. Passive voice appears very frequently throughout each major section of our students’ papers, theses, and dissertations. Overuse—and now outdated use—of passive voice in scientific writing obscures writing clarity and many writing authorities consider use of passive voice to be an indicator of poor writing (Sheldrake, 2004). Thus, we direct our graduate students, as nascent scholarly writers, to:

1. 1. Use active voice early, often, and throughout each section of your paper—to the point of excluding all or nearly all instances of passive voice.
2. 2. Adhere to basic sentence structure whereby character precedes action in sentences—who does what, who did what, who will do what.
3. 3. Leave readers with no doubts about who executes the action. If that person is you, then use first person terms, such as I or we. If someone other than you, identify explicitly the individual(s), for example, the teacher(s).
4. 4. Search for instances of passive voice before you submit drafts to obtain formative feedback, Change all instances of passive voice to active voice. Two possible exceptions to this directive are as follows. First, if the character in the sentence will be absolutely clear to all of your readers, for example, via a sentence-ending

prepositional phrase, then you may use passive voice. Second, if you have specific and compelling reasons not to identify the character of the sentence, for example, to protect identities of individuals, then you may use passive voice. Even in these cases, however, we prefer that you use active voice and pseudonyms or generic phrases, such as, *the student*.

5. 5. Avoid outdated rules or conventions, as well as imitating poor models (passively constructed sentences) that appear in many published journal articles. Such models imply that you use passive voice in abstracts, methods, and results sections, whereas you use active voice in the other sections of scholarly papers or manuscripts. Precise and clear writing are paramount in scholarly writing. Active voice conveys more clearly and more precisely than passive voice (Bem, 1995). Passive voice weakens scholarly writing (Sigel, 2009). Use resources, such as Sigel, to help yourself identify various examples of passive voice, as well as how to transform sentences from passive to active voice.
6. 6. See Sheldrake (2004) if you remain unconvinced about the merits of using active versus passive voice in scholarly writing.

A Preventative and Diagnostic Approach—What to Do

An initial step for graduate students navigating the pathway to scholarly writing is to assess their own writing habits. Thus, we give Table 1 to our students and direct them to use Table 1 as a writing resource. Then we have our students participate in activities of the type illustrated in Figure 1. We recommend

that students, in collaboration with peers or faculty, assess their writing habits at the beginning of their graduate programs, rather than waiting until they begin to write papers, theses, and dissertations. Nascent writers who identify their common error patterns, sooner than later, position themselves to change their conditioned writing habits. Conversely, writers who do not systematically identify and replace their common error patterns are likely to repeat those conditioned writing habits—habits that likely worked well in the past, but which are not conducive to clear and precise scholarly writing. The former approach, as we have described and illustrated in this article, is diagnostic, prescriptive, and preventative. The latter approach, we believe, relies on feedback from external agents—feedback that can be too generic, too variable, and too delayed if the goal is to change, in an efficient manner, the conditioned habits of nascent writers that we have illustrated in this article.

Pragmatically, nascent writers can use the search function of word processing programs to locate within documents that they have typed most of the error patterns listed in Table 1. Some of our graduate students are surprised by how frequently and habitually they repeat specific errors. Figure 1 includes a practice exercise that we use with graduate students. This exercise illustrates one example of how nascent writers can assess their own writing habits with the help of their faculty advisor, other instructors, or fellow graduate students. In closing, we encourage you, whether a nascent or experienced writer, to do the three tasks in the practice exercise in Figure 1 and to compare your responses to the answer keys. The error patterns we have illustrated in this article appear not only in our graduate students' papers, but also in many journal articles authored by experienced writers and subjected to peer review and the editorial process (Riley, 1991).

Figure 1. Practice Exercise for Identifying Error Patterns and Changing Writing Habits

Directions: We selected the following paragraph from a paper you submitted recently. The paragraph includes about 30 errors that reflect six common habits, that is, error patterns of nascent scholarly writers. Your task is three-fold. First, within the paragraph, italicize words that illustrate error patterns presented in Table 1 and type the corresponding code in CAPS immediately after those italicized words. See the codes that appear as letters in the first column of Table 1. Second, tally the number of errors for each of the six error patterns. By tallying your errors, you will know which error patterns are most prominent in your own writing and, thus, which actions you should take to change those writing habits. Third, re-type the paragraph with each error corrected. See the second column in Table 1 for examples of how to correct errors. When finished with these three tasks, please compare your responses to the answer keys that we have provided here. Then please submit this document to your instructor.

Paragraph from a Paper You Submitted Recently

There are many studies that indicate that antecedent-based behavioral techniques promote students' academic productivity. In this researcher's proposed study, an antecedent technique will be implemented during the fall semester. Data will be collected during the fall semester and evaluated during both the fall and the spring semesters. The seven students will be selected based on the recommendations of the teachers at the Ono Elementary School. The researcher's determinations about which students will participate in the study will be based on the recommendations of the teachers. Then they will begin the study after the researcher sees verification of the consent of the students' parents. [N = 103 words]

Tally: THE = PV-AV = NOM = SUP = TP-FP = PRO =

Answer Key for Task 1: Identifying Errors & Error Patterns

There are SUP many studies that SUP indicate that antecedent-based behavioral techniques promote students' academic productivity. In this researcher's FP proposed study, an antecedent technique will be implemented PV-AV during the THE fall semester. The THE data will be collected PV-AV during the THE fall semester and evaluated PV-AV during both SUP the THE fall and spring semesters. The THE seven students will be selected PV-AV based on the THE recommendations NOM of the THE teachers at the THE Ono Elementary School. The researcher's FP determinations NOM about which of SUP the THE students will participate in the study will be based PV-AV on the THE recommendations NOM of the THE teachers. Then they PRO will begin the study after the researcher TP-FP sees verification NOM of the THE consent of the THE students' parents.

Tally: THE = 13 PV-AV = 5 NOM = 4 SUP = 4 TP-FP = 3 PRO = 1

Answer Key for Task 2: Rewrite Paragraph

Many studies indicate that antecedent-based behavioral techniques promote students' academic productivity (*Mhust-Sight, 2014; Moore, Thanwon, & Zite, 2014). In my proposed study, I will implement an antecedent-based technique. I will collect data during fall semester and evaluate data during fall and spring semesters. Teachers at Ono Elementary School will recommend students. Then I will select seven students to participate in the study. Students will begin the study after I collect consent forms from students' parents. [N = 75 words]

If you typed TP-FP more frequently than what appears in the answer key, you probably did so because you noticed multiple instances of passive voice rather than active voice. Writers who use passive voice tend to overuse third person and underuse first person. Conversely, writers who use active voice tend to use first person proficiently.

* = Did you notice that citations should have appeared here in the original paragraph given this factual claim in the first sentence? Even with these two citations, the corrected paragraph in this answer key has 75 words - considerably less than the 103 words in the original paragraph. The corrected paragraph is clearer and more concise than the original paragraph. Less is more.

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