

## Learning to write history

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### Summary

An analysis of the essay writing style of some history undergraduates showed that there was more similarity than difference overall in the writing styles of men and women but that, in addition, men tended to use more bold constructions than women.

### Keywords

Academic writing, gender, history essays, essay style.

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### Background

In recent years, changes in assessment practices in higher education have resulted generally in more recognition being given to coursework essays and less to final examinations. In some disciplines, undergraduates may spend as much as two thirds of their study time writing essays (Hounsell, 1997). Essays are therefore increasingly important and they are frequently used as the basis for authoritative decisions about students' futures. In spite of its centrality to many students' learning experiences, essay-writing is largely neglected in text books on undergraduate teaching. There is a similar neglect of research on essay writing (Hounsell, 1997).

### Academic writing

Like writing in other specific contexts (such as journalism, imaginative literature or bureaucratic prose) academic writing has particular characteristics or rules. These rules are not written down but they must be learned, if the student is to succeed.

Ballard and Clanchy (1988) mention four criteria that are commonly identified as specific to academic writing. These are:

- relevance and adequacy to the topic;
- evidence of wide and critical reading;
- the demonstration of reasoned argument;
- competent presentation.

In their study, 'argument' is the most frequently addressed criterion in marker feedback and the importance of argument in essay writing is also noted by Crammond (1998) and Hounsell (1997).

The term 'essayist literacy' is sometimes used to describe this style of discourse and it is particularly associated with educated people (especially males) of European ancestry. Since this style is primarily acquired as part of formal education, students from less traditional backgrounds are more likely to need to learn it at university. With the increasing diversity of student intake, and the wide ranging life experiences now being brought into the UK higher education sector by students from broader socio-cultural backgrounds, the 'hidden conventions' of essay writing are even more likely to exclude and disadvantage those who remain unaware of them (Lillis, 1997).

Essayist literacy is a particular way of constructing the world and it is just one way amongst many. Neither is it a completely uniform style. What counts as appropriate writing in one academic discipline may not be appropriate in another (Lea & Street, 1998; Bartholomae, 1985; Bock, 1988; Anson, 1988).

Harding (1990, 1991) maintains that academic writing is a masculine mode of discourse. Argument, rationality and 'objectivity' tend to be stressed at the expense of emotion and subjectivity. The conventions place constraints on the use of personal experience and the identification of authorship. Differences in the writing styles of male and female undergraduates have been identified by a number of researchers, including Flynn (1988) who claimed that women's style of argument tends to be affiliative and men's more objectifying or competitive. Tentative constructions, such as hedges (e.g. 'maybe', 'might', 'I think') and qualifiers (e.g. 'nearly', 'sometimes') have also been found to be associated with women's use of language (Holmes, 1984). Other work on gender differences in the use of language is less conclusive; a fuller discussion of the literature is given in Francis *et al* (2002).

The study reported here (and more fully in Robson *et al*, forthcoming) aimed to find out what kinds of academic writing were highly rewarded by history lecturers. We were also interested in discovering whether men and women were equally proficient in adopting this style.

## The study

Four higher education institutions in London were selected, two pre-1992 and two post-1992 universities. One essay written by each of 87 undergraduate history students was analysed. There were 40 men and 47 women in the sample. The shortest piece of work analysed was 2,500 words long and the longest 10,000 words. In order to achieve a basis for comparison the average essay length was calculated and the figures have been adjusted proportionally.

The sentence was chosen as the unit of analysis. The majority of previous work in this area has analysed the minutiae of writing, or the numbers of individual lexical items such as 'hedges' and 'qualifiers'. The researchers wanted to achieve some measure of the overall tone of each essay, recognising that an essay (even a paragraph) can have a confident and 'appropriate' overall tone whilst still containing large numbers of 'hedges' for example.

In order to analyse each sentence we constructed a typology. The categories we chose were 'bold', 'tentative' and 'evaluative'. Following the pilot phase of the study, 'bold' was divided into 'Bold 1' (extreme boldness or over-statement) and 'Bold 2' (straightforward argument or assertion) and 'tentative' into 'Tentative 1' (extreme caution) and 'Tentative 2' (qualification). In addition, a new combined category of 'tentative plus bold' was set up.

## Findings

Figure 1 shows the average use of each kind of sentence by men and women in the sample:

	<b>Bold 1</b>	<b>Bold 2</b>	<b>Evaluative</b>	<b>Tentative 1</b>	<b>Tentative 2</b>	<b>T2 + B2</b>
Male (n=40)	2.85 (94)	41.85 (1590)	2.51 (78)	0.51 (20)	8.95 (337)	5.29 (218)
Female	2.03	37.75	2.53	0.50	7.57	4.30

	<b>Bold 1</b>	<b>Bold 2</b>	<b>Evaluative</b>	<b>Tentative 1</b>	<b>Tentative 2</b>	<b>T2 + B2</b>
(n=47)	(74)	(1607)	(96)	(23)	(295)	(202)
Gender Ratio M/F	1.40	1.11	0.99	1.02	1.18	1.23

**Figure 1: Average use of sentences in each category by gender**

Note: Unadjusted counts are given in brackets.

Firstly, there appears to be more similarity than difference in the writing styles of men and women. The marked gender differences in writing which are reported in the literature (e.g. Rubin and Greene, 1992) are not found in our study. The use of 'Tentative 1' and 'Evaluative' statements, in particular, is almost identical for men and women.

Rubin and Greene (1992) point out that academic style, because it is formal and follows specific conventions, is less likely to elicit gender differences than, for example, expressive or more 'personal' writing. Our findings suggest an equal understanding of academic conventions by both male and female students; the implications for an understanding of the gender and achievement debate are discussed more fully in Francis *et al* (2002).

Secondly, the writing we analysed was characterised by a predominance of 'Bold 2' statements. The results lend support to the view that the assertive and confident expression of argument may be a marker of academic discourse; in contrast, the use of over-statement, or rash and unsubstantiated assertion ('Bold 1' type sentences) which is not considered appropriate in academic discourse (Francis, 1998), is used far less often here by both men and women.

After 'Bold 2' statements there is a large drop to the next most frequently used kind of statement which is the 'Tentative 2'-type (the qualified and/or mildly tentative). Just as a measure of 'boldness' appears to be a key characteristic of the students' writing, so too, some 'tentativeness' is apparent; use of extreme boldness or extreme tentativeness, however, occurs far less frequently.

An investigation into the relationship between the use of the various categories of statement and the marks awarded for the essay produced the results which are shown in Figure 2:

<b>Grade awarded</b>	<b>Bold 1</b>	<b>Bold 2</b>	<b>Evaluative</b>	<b>Tentative 1</b>	<b>Tentative 2</b>	<b>T2 + B2</b>
1st (n=8)	1.67	42.42	1.29	0.59	5.61	4.98
2:1 (n=32)	1.77	35.68	3.12	0.76	8.50	6.19
2:2 (n=38)	2.29	41.93	2.12	0.39	8.25	4.17
3rd (n=8)	6.13	41.76	3.58	0.00	8.97	1.96

## Figure 2: Average use of sentences in each category by essay grade

Figure 2 suggests a relationship between mark and style of undergraduate history essay writing. Of particular interest is the apparent tendency for work to be less well-rewarded the more 'Bold 1' sentences it contains. This lends support to the suggestion by Francis (1998) that writing very boldly (in the form of overstatement, without evidence to support claims) may lead to penalties and lower marks being awarded.

A similar (if uneven) trend is observable with regard to the use of 'Evaluative' and 'Tentative 2' type sentences which appear to be used more frequently in essays receiving third class marks than in work of a first class standard. Thus, while both types of construction appear (from Figure 1) to be characteristic of academic writing in history, some constraint in their use may be a feature of more highly graded work. The fairly consistent use of 'Bold 2' sentences across all levels of achievement further supports the view that this kind of linguistic construction may be a key characteristic of academic writing. Finally, the last column suggests that in our sample, writers who combine both tentative and bold elements in one sentence (T2 + B2) tend to be graded more highly.

## Conclusions

Though on the basis of this study we cannot give a conclusive description of the nature of undergraduate writing in the field of history, nor identify categorically which styles are best rewarded, it seems clear that 'good' writing in history is a very finely judged thing. The predominance of 'Bold 2'-type sentences suggests that students must learn to write assertively, but the greater occurrence of 'Bold 1'-type sentences in work with lower grades suggests that they must not write too assertively. The frequent use of 'Tentative 2' (or mildly tentative) statements, especially in comparison with more extreme tentativeness, suggests that students must also show caution in their writing; however, the greater occurrence of mildly tentative statements in work receiving lower grades suggests that they must not show too much caution. Further, the figures for the use of evaluative statements suggest that they must be able to balance and evaluate arguments (but should not do too much of this). The use (especially by more successful students) of a combination of 'bold' and 'tentative' features within one sentence (T2 + B2) was an unexpected finding and it helps to illustrate the complexity of tone that students are struggling to capture in good essay writing.

Our study suggests that good essay writing in history may be equally difficult for men to achieve as for women. As teachers, we need to be precise and helpful about what is required, about what tone is appropriate and what we mean when we ask for 'argument', for example. The views of students are also important and further research is needed into their expectations and understandings of what it means to write in various academic contexts.

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