Like so many who have survived post-graduate education in philosophy, I entered the academy having formal training in neither teaching nor writing. I became a teacher by imitating my professors and through trial and error; I developed as a scholar, and only secondarily as a writer, through countless comments given to me during seminars and office visits as well as in the margins of my papers. Helping me to become a stylish writer never was part of my education, however. I know I have come a long way in both my teaching and scholarship, but I fear my academic writing is as unstylish as that of most academics, including many philosophers.

This led me to pick up a copy of Helen Sword’s *Stylish Academic Writing*, which I have found to be a guide to a kind of writing that never resonated from my well-worn copy of *The Elements of Style*. Indeed, I was fortunate enough to have stumbled upon a book whose author is embarked on a “stylistic revolution” to improve the “reading conditions of all.” Sword’s words send a simple, yet powerful message to us: Don’t forget the reader! By writing stylishly we can take care of the reader, that all important someone who we write for.

Sword neatly divides her book into two parts, along with an extensive bibliography. Part one is based on analyses of journals and writing guides, as well as surveys of academics, allowing us a glimpse of the gap between what is thought to be good writing and what is actually published. Throughout these and other chapters are prompts to cross disciplinary boundaries, to learn to experiment with other ways of writing. This call for interdisciplinarity—what she calls “undisciplined thinking”—is revisited by Sword in her chapter on creativity (fourteen). Although Sword recognizes that changing course may lead some to fear their work will be regarded as less serious and lacking in intellectual rigor, she argues that stylish academic writing can be entertaining — continued on page 2
Review of *Stylish Academic Writing*

and engaging, as well as serious and rigorous. The choice to turn our backs on obscurantism, with its “impersonal, stodgy, jargon-laden, abstract prose,” can be made by early career and established researchers alike.

Part two consists of eleven chapters, each focusing on a particular aspect of stylish writing, such as the title, the use of jargon, and the abstract. Sword makes clear the problems associated with less than tempting titles, “jargonitis,” and abstracts that fail to expose the significance of the research and therefore the worthiness of reading the article.

Just as important, she informs the reader as to how these problems can be addressed. Again, this is indicative of Sword the revolutionary. Each chapter is interspersed with one page inserts titled “Spotlight on Style” in which the work of well-known academic writers is used to make various points of stylish writing come alive. Academics such as the philosopher Daniel Dennett, the legal scholar Peter Goodrich, and the evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins are showcased in this regard. (Not surprisingly, the Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek is nowhere to be found in these inserts! His is the epitome of impenetrable prose.)

Sword’s transformative project is furthered by ending each chapter with “Things to Try,” making *Stylish Academic Writing* a sort of workbook.

My two favorite chapters (four and five) deal with making writing more personal through the use of first-person pronouns, and learning how to use more concrete language and to be mindful of clutter, which, as Sword notes, is “the sworn enemy of the stylish academic writer.” Truth be told, I too am one of those philosophers who has an “addiction to it, this, that, and there.”

All in all, this is an exceptional work. Although I found part one to be occasionally dull due to its statistical focus, and the positioning of the inserts to impede the flow of the text, *Stylish Academic Writing* is a book I enjoyed immensely and one that I hope will help improve my own writing. I suggest you place a copy of Sword’s book next to Strunk and White’s *Elements of Style* in case you choose to make your academic writing more stylish.

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When it comes to language, nothing is more satisfying than to write a good sentence. It is no fun to write lumpishly, dully, in prose the reader must plod through like wet sand. But it is a pleasure to achieve, if one can, a clear running prose that is simple yet full of surprises.

Barbara Tuchman, Practicing History: Selected Essays, 1981