Study Notes:
Introduction to Scholarly Writing: Finding a Scholarly Voice

As the video program for this topic demonstrates, one of the most common misconceptions about effective scholarly voice is that its strength comes from using an excessive number of letters in a word, words in a sentence, and sentences in a paragraph.

Indeed, there is more than ample support for the declaration that the veracity of that assertion is mired in mythical and canonical absolutes that are at once preposterous, ignorant, bloated, pompous, delusional, and redundant.

Or, better said: *Figure out what you want to say and just say it.* (This advice is from Walden's 2004 Teacher of the Year, Professor Lilburn Hoehn, in the School of Management.)

Still, scholarly writing should not sound like something you might read on the back of a cereal box. After all, you are not writing for children reading the back of a box of Toasted Sugar Bombs.

Clarity, concision, and the appropriate use of precise terms are necessities of effective writing. Long sentences and puffery are not.

Finding Your Scholarly Voice

Here are a few tips to help you find your scholarly voice.

1. **Don't try to impress your reader with polysyllabic fluff** (Becker, 1986). Instead, find the precise word—often a short word, especially a verb—that does a lot of work for you.

   Rather than writing:

   There was a reunification held of the most significant leaders of the governmental body that unites various countries that belong to the Organization of American States (OAS) who met in Panama City to take part in international discussions.

   You might write:

   Key representatives from the Organization of American States (OAS) met in Panama City.

2. **Rely on solid evidence** rather than strong feelings to show the truth of your assertions:

   Rather than writing:

   Many people feel very, very strongly that the federal limits on stem cell research have limited scientists' ability to find new cures for existing diseases.

   You might write:

   A poll conducted by the Union for Concerned Scientists (2004) indicated a strong majority—nearly 85%—of those who responded believed that federal laws prohibiting the use of adult stem cells should be repealed.

3. **Rely on good grammar, spelling, and your style manual.**

   Rather than writing:

   This Web site I saw (www.geraldo.net/discussion/reform) shows that in Minnesota when they allowed people to conceal their weapons. There was not a correspondent rise in murders after the first two years or so.

   You might write:

   The Minnesota Bureau of Criminal Apprehension (2003) showed that after 2 years of enactment, the Concealed Weapons Law had resulted in no significant increase in the murder rate.

4. **Realize that finding your voice is a process—one that does not happen overnight.** Part of this process is learning from the feedback of others and then revising your work—and revising it again—especially if you're new to writing or if you've been away from writing for a long time. Keep in mind that any intelligent reader should be able to understand what you've written, even if he or she has only a little knowledge of your field. And, if someone suggests your writing has room for improvement, it means that you have further to go in the learning process.

5. **Seek help if you need it.** Consult the Walden Writing Center (http://writingcenter.waldenu.edu/) for resources and links to tutors who can help. Read any edition of Strunk and White's *Elements of Style*, a classic, inexpensive writing guide. Don't hesitate to ask your instructor for help. Walden faculty is eager to assist students in developing skills.

A Special Note on the Use of First Person in Scholarly Writing at Walden

In early 2007, the provost of Walden University declared that first person is allowed, as appropriate, in all student work. The policy came about after many years of internal debate among the faculty—and decades of discussion in the broader academic community.

Why the controversy? Traditionally, social scientists wrote in third person as a sign of omniscience and to help mark the objectivity that resulted from such "distancing." Consider, for example, these examples:

1. The children were observed to be playing catch with a Frisbee.

2. Paramedics, including this researcher, rushed to aid the victim of the fire.

By reporting action in third person, one can be seen (or so it has been thought) to be a more impersonal and objective spectator, reporting the "truth" as might a video camera.

The drawback, however, is that overuse of third person has led to anthropomorphism and excess passivity, as in these two examples:

1. The study attempted to distinguish traits of students who scored high on the gross motor skills inventory with those who scored poorly.

2. A ball was tossed by the researcher to the child, and it was struck by a bat, which led to much excitement.

As noted on page 38 in the APA style manual, *studies* cannot attempt to do anything—*people* can. In the overly passive second example, the absence of an actor leads to almost comical confusion.

The editors of the fifth edition of the APA style manual, in sections 2.04 and 2.08, loosened the requirements for first person in APA publications. Thus, these four sentences would now be acceptable at Walden:

1. I observed the children playing catch with a Frisbee.

2. The other paramedics and I rushed to aid the victim of the fire.

3. I designed the study to distinguish traits of students who scored high on the gross motor skills inventory with those who scored poorly.

4. I tossed a ball to the child, who hit it, leading to his excitement.

Danger Lurks

Walden University School of Nursing Faculty, September, 2010

Overuse of first person—or its misuse—can be more than annoying. As noted elsewhere in this week, your role as a social scientist is to be objective, and to ground your analysis, interpretation, and evaluation in the evidence at hand—not on your strong feelings, gut reactions, or whims. Compare paragraphs 1 and 2:

1. I feel strongly that the age at which teenagers should be allowed to receive a driver's license should be 18 years. Statistics show that the highest risk drivers are those between ages 16 and 18, and I have seen in my job as an ER nurse countless cases of young people that age being brought in on ambulance stretchers, with severe injuries that many never recover from. I know the pain that parents feel. And I believe that this tragedy can and should be averted.

2. The highest risk drivers are those between 16 and 18 (CDC, 2006). In fact, a preponderance of evidence in the literature suggests that teenagers who receive a driver's license only after turning 18 years of age are much less likely to be involved in a collision than younger drivers. For example, a report from the American Medical Association (2005) showed that more than 10,000 young people between the ages of 16 and 18 received life-threatening injuries or died as a result of highway crashes in the year 2003.

Simply put, *your reader might well not care what you strongly feel or what your opinion is.* Unless presented carefully, thoughtfully, and purposely, even your experience is as an emergency room nurse, manager, teacher, social worker, caseworker, or firefighter won't carry much weight. Paragraph 2 is no less persuasive than the first paragraph. It might be even *more* persuasive because of its reliance on solid evidence.

The Bottom Line

Using first person is allowed at Walden. Telling your reader, in first person, what you plan to do or what you observed in an experiment or classroom or other relevant situation can make for much easier reading, with no less objectively—but only if done carefully and appropriately.

Rely on the scholarly evidence—not your opinion or gut feeling—to show, rather than tell, what you think.

If you're not sure which way to go, always ask your instructor for guidance.