

4. DEVELOPING THE ACADEMIC/SCHOLAR VOICE

By Kevin Wehr

There are many models for writing in the academic voice. In this chapter I will discuss various approaches to academic writing by using several examples from top-tier Sociology journals from 2019. Styles range from objective, to scientific, to less-formal (but still scientific).

Students may be familiar with the objective, scientific, omniscient style that avoids using direct and indirect articles, uses passive voice, and is complex in tone and structure:

Punitive and disciplinary forms of governance disproportionately target low-income Black Americans for surveillance and punishment, and research finds far-reaching consequences of such criminalization. Drawing on in-depth interviews with 46 low-income Black mothers of adolescents in urban neighborhoods, this article advances understanding of the long reach of criminalization by examining the intersection of two related areas of inquiry: the criminalization of Black youth and the institutional scrutiny and punitive treatment of Black mothers. Findings demonstrate that poor Black mothers calibrate their parenting strategies not only to fears that their children will be criminalized by mainstream institutions and the police, but

also to concerns that they themselves will be criminalized as bad mothers who could lose their parenting rights (Elliot and Reid 2019).

Other approaches take a less scientific tone and yet retain an objective voice:

This study evaluates how authorization status shapes job transitions among Mexican and Central American immigrants in the United States. Specifically, using data from the Survey of Income and Program Participation, we impute legal status and track employment histories for authorized and unauthorized workers, as well as native-born counterparts, in the less skilled labor market. We distinguish job moves based on changes in occupations and employers; and by linking workers' jobs to expected wages in their occupations, we are able to determine whether job transitions result in occupational upgrades or downgrades (Hall, Greenman, and Yi 2019).

Still other sociologists take a more informal tone, employing the first-person singular perspective, while retaining a scientific voice:

This investigation begins to rectify the absence of scholarship on statutory protections of civil rights in northern states

prior to the breakthrough federal laws of the mid-twentieth century. While there is some limited cataloging of the existence of such statutes, their subsequent import is overlooked. I tackle the question by examining state supreme court cases in which these statutes were used by plaintiffs to combat acts of private discrimination in northern states. Using West's Decennial Digest to find all relevant claims/decisions of the first half of the twentieth century, I uncover a modest universe of 56 cases. My aim is to assess whether statutory-based claims were more likely upheld than not, and whether plaintiffs armed with these statutes were more successful than those relying solely on federal or state constitutional provisions (Romero 2019).

The point of these long quotations is to demonstrate that there are a variety of different styles that scholars employ. Be sure to read widely. As you take note of different models, think about which one speaks to you. Take note of the writer's voice when reading sociological work, and think about how your voice might be distinctive. To expose yourself to the best examples and to improve your writing overall, read good writing (especially when reading for pleasure).

Try also to practice good writing in all venues. Even if you are not doing scientific or scholarly writing, try to encourage good habits, even in emails and maybe even in instant/direct message apps. "TextSpeak" is never appropriate for formal writing (unless your topic is a content analysis of digital communication, LOL!).

Writing in the academic voice is not about sounding serious or being overly ponderous. Life is really simple, the saying goes, but we insist on making it complicated. Keep your

prose simple, clear, and to the point. Use short words, and fewer of them. Avoid trying to sound important or complex. In general, don't use the passive voice: Things don't happen by themselves, they are caused, and they have consequences. In addition, avoid repeating the same word, or form of the word, in a single paragraph. If you repeat yourself too much, and sound repetitive, your prose can get tedious. (As the last two sentences illustrate with the word repeat/repetitive!) Lastly, avoid using multiple adjectives to modify a single noun. Keep your prose simple. Don't make it modest, humble, unpretentious, and...you get the point.

WORKS CITED

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