

## **Book Review**

**Sword, H. (2012) *Stylish Academic Writing*. Cambridge, Massachusetts & London, England: Harvard University Press**

**Alke Gröppel-Wegener**

Staffordshire University

Corresponding author: [a.c.groppel-wegener@staffs.ac.uk](mailto:a.c.groppel-wegener@staffs.ac.uk)

### **An oxymoron that should be a tautology?**

If you are reading this, you are probably intrigued by the title of the book reviewed. 'Stylish Academic Writing' – is there really such a thing? Let me say this: this book is not about student writing, certainly not at undergraduate level (although some of the 'Things to Try' might come in very handy if you are teaching academic writing to students). It is about experts publishing their research. The sort of people who read and maybe want to publish in this very journal, or pretty much any other peer-reviewed journal in any other discipline. If, after this caveat, you are still interested, because you are indeed such a person, chances are that you are also quite busy, so do yourself a favour and stop reading this review, get the book and read that instead!

I'm not kidding. I can't come up with a single thing that I don't love about this book, maybe apart from the dust jacket, which isn't that bad either, but after carrying this around with me on several trips it looks slightly worse for wear. I have been carrying it around with me because it has all the advantages a useful book has: it makes fascinating reading, it can be read from cover to cover (on a long train journey), but it can also be dipped in and out of (waiting at the hair dressers), it has tips to try if you want to make your own writing more stylish (great if you are at the reviewing stages of a writing project, or maybe just for procrastination purposes) and it is a relatively thin A5 format, which is a perfect fit for a whole number of my bags. Although I have to admit that it does not give you the same sort of plot you would find in a trashy novel picked up at the airport. In a way it is more like an Agatha Christie mystery: the crime is detected and investigated – how come that so much

academic writing just isn't that stylish, but rather convoluted, dry and (dare I say it) boring to read?

Or is it? Sword asks (and answers) the questions Hercule Poirot and Jane Marple would have posed – is academic writing really that bad, and what sort of guidance is out there? In part I, called 'Style and Substance', she begins with two substantial surveys, one of the writing guides that are available for professional academic writers (beyond undergraduate level) – turns out there are not that many -, and one comparing 500 journal articles from ten different disciplines in order to present a snapshot on academic writing that is cross-disciplinary. Using both the guides and the publications as her starting point, Sword then breaks her second part, titled 'The Elements of Stylishness', into ten chapters, each looking in detail at a particular aspect of (stylish) academic writing. Even her titles make you want to read the chapters: Voice and Echo, Smart Sentencing, Tempting Titles, Hooks and Sinkers, The Story Net, Show and Tell, Jargonitis, Structural Designs, Points of Reference, The Big Picture, and The Creative Touch. Meticulous just as Poirot or Marple would be, Sword investigates her subjects, presents both good and bad examples and also includes page-long 'Spotlights on Style' that feature academic writers that have been recommended to her by their peers. She ends these chapters with a list of 'Things to Try', which frankly will have you reaching for your keyboard because they not only make sense, but also look at lot of fun.

With this book available, there is no excuse anymore for producing academic writing that is inaccessible and laborious to read; from now on academic writing can always be stylish. It is quite like doing research in the first place, as Sword points out it 'is a process of making intelligent choices, not following rigid rules.' (30)