

I. An Introduction to Scholarly Writing

The purpose of any kind of writing is to preserve and communicate ideas, feelings, perceptions, and various other personal mental phenomena to fellow human beings. Obviously this can be accomplished by other means than writing, such as pictures, music, paintings, videos, etc. In the past, these other means of communication were more time consuming and costly. Writing was cheaper and long lasting. However, this is no longer the case. Indeed, writing may be at long last relinquishing its position of primacy among the various modes of communication; albeit very slowly.

Question#1: Are online videos eliminating the need for writing? What about written news? Which is more important in effecting change in American society today -- Youtube or the New York Times?

Writing is not always successful in faithfully conveying the intended meaning of the author. In some cases, writing is purposively obscured to enhance the artistic value of the work or to emphasize an extreme philosophical point of view, such as the absurdity of Life. Writing may be slanted to be provocative and may act in service of the author in achieving his or her goals. Writing can often be outright wrong and if maliciously directed at someone can be taken as libelous. Writing can be informative, and at times entertaining. It may incite people to action. But, at all events, writing serves as a fundamental form of communication in our modern society.

Question#2: What is the difference between a phrase and a clause? What do we mean by the phrase "at all events"?

Scholarly writing, by contrast, has a more narrow purpose. Scholarly writings consist of presentations that aim at convincing rational, educated, open-minded people or peers, that what is being asserted is credible. Because scholarly writing is specifically designed to provoke a judgment as to its credibility, it requires the reader to do his or her part in making honest comparisons with what went before and to assess the relative credibility of the work. That is, the reader must already possess a great deal of knowledge of what has been written in the past and must be ready to act on that knowledge. Scholars are not passive individuals. In fact they can argue together very contentiously.

Scholarly writing must be amenable to external credibility assessments. One cannot simply write something down and assume it will be accepted as true based on one's authority or upon the introspection of the writer. As a result of this incredible demand for rigor, the author of a scholarly work must make use of certain literary devices, consensual rules, methodology, conventions, and even styles that afford the critical reader an opportunity to check facts, verify assertions, validate contexts, grade reasoning, and compare data. Above all, the author of a scholarly composition must make strict use of generally recognized facts and impeccable logic. An author must always leave open the possibility that he or she is wrong; all while working hard to convince the reader of the credibility of what is being said.

Question#3: The great English economist Alfred Marshall was fond of saying that *"facts are the bricks out of which reason builds the edifice of knowledge"*. Translate this independent clause into Chinese if possible. Explain the meaning of the clause. Do you agree with his statement? Is there any room to argue with Professor Marshall?

It is this high level of rigor, or what may be thought of as a set of generally accepted practices, which characterizes scholarly writing. Unfortunately, it is also what makes scholarly writing so dry, boring, and often unintelligible to the lay public. It is the ivory used to build the towers that ensconce so many of the world's intellectuals. The rigor of scholarly writing generates a yawning gulf between those who know how to handle it and those who don't. The fact that the rigor itself is a man-made device, having evolved through years of trial and error, as well as the consensus-building of professionals, has fostered a false belief that scholars cannot take seriously matters of faith. However, there is no conflict between faith and science as long as both allow the free exercise of doubt and criticism. By contrast, there will always be a conflict between writings based on blind faith (both religious and secular) and works based on critical scholarship.

Question#4: What is the difference between accepting something on faith and accepting something based on evidence?

It is important to recognize, strictly speaking, that scholarly works are not attempting to find some hidden or unknown reality, though they may in fact do so.

Nothing in academic works (except for perhaps mathematical and logical demonstrations) can be settled beyond all doubts. Instead, what is aimed for is a firm and steady consensus based on the evidence. Despite what is often thought about scientific works, such writings cannot stand alone without professional consensus. One might say that successful science is nothing more than a running consensus which is nevertheless under constant and withering attack. For example, prior to the 20th century, Newtonian mechanics was a significant part of the established consensus of the scientific community. Indeed, there were many scientists at the time who thought that the apparent stability of the consensus imbued classical mechanics with the quality of certainty. Naturally, they were later shown to be wrong. This is true of all academic work – the consensus can be wrong. In some cases, the uncertainty about scholarly work can be very small (e.g. quantum electrodynamics) while at other times the uncertainty can be pervasive (e.g. man-made global warming). Knowledge is a by-product of the constant process of presentation – criticism – consensus-building characterizing academic work within the scholarly community. What we call knowledge today may not be knowledge tomorrow. If all goes well, we approach truth through a series of successive approximations; ever closer, but also never ending.

Question#5: Some people think that science is *not* about consensus – what do you think? Could one program a robot to do science?

It follows from this that scholarly writing must be persuasive to a select group of people. To achieve this goal, such writing must adhere to certain rigorous and generally accepted standards. In addition to these standards, academic work must be written with style and content. The ideal scholarly work is an extended argument which is based on numerous types of evidence and is highly persuasive. The formal study of scholarly argument is known as rhetoric. Hundreds of years ago, rhetoric was taught as a separate discipline. Students were taught how to craft an argument so that it would be persuasive. This was not simply about the packaging of an argument. It was the totality of aspects which bear on the credibility of what is being asserted.

The advent of extensive data collection and the theory of probability and statistics in the late 19th century rendered the use of rhetoric less important. Scholarly arguments became more and more specialized and relied ever more on the use of

statistics, regardless of their actual practical value. Highly structured statistical conventions and presentations arose to replace the more abstract forms of arguments. Numerical arguments were soon seen as the trump cards in any academic discussion, both because they gave the impression of objectivity and because their use was confined to those who had laboriously studied the methodology. The more laborious and taxing the methodology, the readier academicians were to accept the author's conclusions, since enormous amounts of time were required to understand the results – and this in turn validated the reviewer's view that the work was truly of great value.

Question#6: The word "rhetoric" has both a good and a bad meaning. Explain these meanings.

How do we write to persuade the academic community? First, we must recognize that historians will use different methods than physicists, and that economists will use different methods than political scientists. Naturally, all of these scholars will be using facts and logic to arrive at their conclusions. But, the standards that are employed must, by necessity, be quite different. The use of statistics will also be different since the experiments are not controlled in the case of social sciences. John Maynard Keynes has made an excellent statement showing the difference between economics and natural science. However, his words ring true for all of social science and are worth repeating here.

I also want to emphasise strongly the point about economics being a moral science. I mentioned before that it deals with introspection and with values. I might have added that it deals with motives, expectations, psychological uncertainties. One has to be constantly on guard against treating the material as constant and homogeneous in the same way that the material of the other sciences, in spite of its complexity, is constant and homogeneous. It is as though the fall of the apple to the ground depended on the apple's motives, on whether it is worth while falling to the ground, and whether the ground wanted the apple to fall, and on mistaken calculations on the part of the apple as to how far it was from the centre of the earth. (my emphasis)

Natural science requires the close agreement of experiment with theory, if its conclusions are to be convincing. By contrast, social science requires that a relevant set of facts be clearly and logically linked together – which is not usually

through experimentation. Social science is not a body of settled conclusions (like quantum mechanics and relativity), as Keynes says in other places, but rather it is a way of thinking logically about the nature and functioning of society, even as society is in the midst of change. The margin of error in social science is extremely large compared with the margin of error in natural science. This is no doubt why that many of the pronouncements of social scientists are accompanied by widespread skepticism and why that there are so many differing viewpoints in social science.

Question#7: Norbert Weiner once commented that economics was a "two digit science". What do you think he meant by that?

The aim of scholarly writing in social science is therefore to persuade one's peers. It must be logically concise with as much agreement to observables and facts as can be made. It should be free of obvious points and subjective value judgments; to the extent this is possible. No work can be completely free of value-laden statements. For example, the choice between different types of estimators in a statistical study will ultimately involve a value judgment and tradeoffs. However, these judgments should be limited as much as possible and should be fully explained in a completely transparent manner, if the work is to be rigorous.

Question#8: Is there a difference between an "explication" and an "explanation"? Why can't scholarly works prove something? Is there a fixed "truth", or is "truth" something which changes over time? Is the goal of scholarly works to discover the truth? If not, then what is the goal of scholarly works?

Define each of these terms in English:

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| (1) hypothesis | (10) tautology |
| (2) theory | (11) premise |
| (3) model | (12) refutation |
| (4) axiom | (13) proof |
| (5) predicate | (14) probability |

(6) evidence

(7) argument

(8) contradiction

(9) credibility

(15) likelihood

(16) metaphysical

(17) quantitative

(18) uncertain