

Reviews

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In *New Perspectives on Academic Writing: The Thing That Wouldn't Die* (2023), editor Bernd Herzogenrath seems to have collated a bold and unconventional collection that questions the fundamental and entrenched norms and backbone of academic writing. This volume brings together assorted voices all united by a shared aim: to alter the shape and purpose of scholarly prose. The metaphor in the title might be familiar to some as it pinpoints the stubbornness, yet inflexibility, of academic writing traditions—often formulaic and slow to change. Herzogenrath and his contributors take aim at this lethargy, hence proposing novel and more dynamic ways of academic writing that are experimental and attuned to contemporary challenges. In a wider framework, as the Series Editors, Bernd Herzogenrath and Tim Ingold, state in the Foreword, “[w]e have to rethink education, less as a ‘home’ to which one dutifully and habitually returns, than as a form of pedagogical nomadism which seeks to create encounters and connections for thinking that are dishabituated from models that already presume how education ought to go” (vii).

This volume draws contributions from researchers from across the spectrum of disciplines—philosophy, education, literature and the arts—each taking on the task of probing into the rhetorical and institutional conventions behind what is known as academic writing, simultaneously presenting innovative approaches that challenge the inherent status quo. But the volume does not just critique from a distance. Instead, it often exemplifies its argument through writing that disrupts the very structures that it examines, offering alternative ways of expressing in scholarly work. This is precisely why this volume could not be better placed in this series entitled Alternative | Education.

The subtitle operates on both a darkly humorous level and a sombre critique: academic writing, despite incessant calls for change, remains in a zombie-like state—a mode of discourse kept alive by rigid conventions, peer-reviewed gatekeeping, insider jargon and often behind a paywall. Herzogenrath's collected volume does not merely highlight this grim state of affairs, but tries to push against it, urging academics to write in ways that speak to our current cultural, ecological and technological zeitgeist.

Comprising fourteen chapters, this volume offers a broad spectrum of reflections, all of which move in the trajectory of the central idea that academic writing needs to evolve. Each contributor's work tests the limits of form and

content, proposing a reimagined scholarly voice. Levi R. Bryant, for instance, explores the structural underpinnings of academic discourse and how they limit thought. His essay “The Structure and System of Academic Writing” (13-24) argues for a mapping of this mechanism of power so that we can become aware of how it functions in our own lives and society and we can begin to build and enact alternatives. He discusses Niklas Luhmann’s sociological theory that any communication system seeks to reproduce itself by finding something new to communicate, and academic communication is no different in this regard. Jessie Beier and Jason Wallin take a radically different approach, rejecting traditional form entirely. Their chapter “Walking on Sunshine” (25-38) reads like a literary performance, woven with collage and poetic fragments. They make a case for valuing creativity over clarity, showing how form itself can become a vehicle for critique and change. To give an example, this is an excerpt from page 27: “Coalescing amongst the myriad practices of ecological intervention is the increasingly popular field of ‘walking research’, which purports to liberate from constituted strata the human sensorium, embodied affect and complex relationality of place drawn and quartered under complex forces of ‘representational’ arrest.” David Burrows and Simon O’Sullivan in “Science Fiction Devices” (39-52) draw on speculative realism and science fiction aesthetics to explore where academic prose might go next. They initially find a link to Immanuel Kant’s notion of an island, declaring on page 39 that they are “specifically concerned with Kant’s ‘Island’ as a fictional device that shelters academic communities on the robust terrain of critique, at a distance from others lost in a fog of dubious metaphysics.” They argue for a writing practice rooted in the not-yet—the imaginary and the unreal—capable of envisioning scholarly futures that have not been invented yet. Kalani Michell’s work, entitled “[Fill in the Blank]” (61-83), discusses how conventions in scholarly texts can nevertheless lead to a repressive conformity in academic writing, more particularly how this conformity in text-image relationships can be avoided so as to become productive and generative, rather than simply illustrative. In their contributions, Julie Vulcan (“Writing the Unwritable: Raveling Worlds,” 109-120) and Anna Gibbs (“Writing In Between,” 121-135) shift the focus towards affect. While the former explores a practice of writing-with, showing how writing with a non-human companion (sharing the human-non-human continua) might draw us out of human-centred patterns into more generative ways of raveling worlds, the latter asks what it means to write from in-between, or as posed on page 121: “What does it mean to be in the teeming midst of something, immersed in the materiality of the writing as doing and making, a thinking-feeling sensation taking shape in action, and then shifting that shape again at the very moment it threatens to fix itself in a recognizable form?”

One of the volume’s strengths is that it does not try to neatly tie the bow on the problems that it raises. Instead, it makes breathing room for contradictions. The contributors are not interested in offering easy fixes or how-to guides, rather they are more concerned with pushing boundaries and inviting experimentation in. They approach academic writing as something with a pulse and responsive, not as a static finished product or an archaic tradition. Furthermore, this volume is strikingly interdisciplinary and one would not expect such a multitude of disciplines. By drawing from a wide range of fields, it opens up an abundant and

multi-layered conversation about what academic writing is and what it could indeed become. This diversity is one of the book's main assets, yet it might also pose an inherent challenge because readers unfamiliar with poststructuralist theory or experimental methods may find some of the material dense or inaccessible, having to reread passages to grasp the essence. In fact, it seems that this volume intends to move readers out of their comfort zones.

The balance between innovation and accessibility is a tricky one throughout this volume. While one might want to break free from traditional norms, some works here tip towards abstraction, which may feel unintelligible. But this volume should not be critiqued on these grounds as it does not aim to be universally readable or easily absorbed. Instead, it insists that form and content are inseparable; that writing itself is an aesthetic act. Moreover, this volume leans more towards critique and evaluation than practical advice. While it identifies what is deeply wrong with conventional academic writing, it is much less transparent on how to apply it in practical contexts. There are not many direct strategies for scholars who want to utilise these ideas in the classroom. But this too seems intentional on the part of the contributors as they avoid drafting a blueprint, opting instead to provoke thought and encourage experimentation. Anna Gibbs, on page 121, gives a metaphor: "Form then becomes a flimsy and mobile fabric, always in movement like the loose dress on the dancer, or the curtain in front of the open window." In that sense, this volume works more as inspiration than an instruction guide or classroom handbook. In spite of the absence of concrete solutions, it does not feel like a flaw but rather a refusal to reduce the conversation to checklists. In leaving space for the reader to interpret and respond, this volume resists the usual academic impulse towards mastery of a skill. It asks readers to engage actively and critically, rather than consume passively.

This volume as a whole undoubtedly raises issues that echo broader concerns within the world of academia about the purpose and reach of scholarly communication. In this vein, critics have long noted that academic writing can be overly insular, even elitist and restricted to a limited highbrow target audience. Scholars like Kehinde Andrews have argued for more clarity and accessibility in academic prose, calling out the ways in which complex jargon can alienate. Andrews (2025) urges academics to write with a broader audience in mind, advocating for styles that engage and clarify rather than exclude and obscure meaning, emphasising that true comprehension should be accessible to all, even children. Beyond accessibility, this volume also looks into more profound questions about the role of academia in times of crisis. From climate change to social injustice, scholars are being asked not just to produce knowledge but to rethink how and why they communicate. It is suggested that writing is not just a neutral tool, but rather it is an instigator of imminent societal changes, hence this volume's overarching aim of awareness is to make scholarship more public, more relevant and more accountable. In this context, Herzogenrath's collated volume is an indispensable tool.

To summarise, it is clear that *New Perspectives on Academic Writing: The Thing That Wouldn't Die* is a bold and thought-provoking volume of writings, whose experimentalism will not appeal to everyone, but it definitely contributes to enduring debates about how academics write and why it matters. As

Livingstone (2023, 61) notes, “although this book might appear a bit too avant-garde and high-brow for use in EAP [English for Academic Purposes] classrooms, it should nevertheless provide food-for-thought for advanced students and instructors and a much-needed impetus for continued rethinking and re-evaluating of the entire field of academic writing, particularly in the humanities.” This volume indeed challenges scholars to reconsider the assumptions integrated into their writing and to explore more inclusive trajectories. It invites all the readers to visualise a future where academic writing is not a static and exclusionary practice, but a dynamic, inclusive and transformative force. It wishes to open the gate to conversation and keep us on our toes, having us take creative risks and rethink what academic writing can in fact be. Let us imagine a future in which scholarship is not a gated community.

References

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