

Writing geography: Teaching research writing and storytelling in the discipline

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Robert M Wilson

Department of Geography and the Environment, Syracuse University,
Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs, USA

Abstract

Writing is a vital activity for all academic geographers and essential to their success. But few graduate programs devote courses to teaching MA and PhD students how to write even though qualitative and quantitative methods courses are now commonplace. This article discusses some of the major critiques of academic writing and how I have sought to address these criticisms in Writing Geography, a graduate seminar I developed to help students improve their research writing.

Keywords

Writing, creative nonfiction, storytelling, teaching

Nearly two decades ago, Dydia DeLyser discussed an innovative graduate course she taught on social science writing (2003). She noticed that while her graduate students certainly had the writing skills to succeed when they were undergraduates, they were ill-prepared for the challenges of writing graduate theses and dissertations. In many geography programs, graduate students could not find courses to prepare them to write at the advanced level needed to earn a MA or PhD degree. In her graduate seminar, students confronted their own anxieties and mixed emotions about writing while learning techniques to improve their research writing. When she wrote her article, graduate writing courses were quite rare. They still are.

Other scholars and journalists have gone beyond noting the lack of in-depth graduate writing instruction to lament the quality of academic writing in general. “Why should a profession that trades in words and dedicates itself to the transmission of knowledge,” says the linguist and psychologist Steven Pinker, “so often turn out prose that is turgid, soggy, wooden, bloated, clumsy, obscure, unpleasant to read, and impossible to understand?” (Pinker, 2014a, 2014b). Nicholas Kristof, a Pulitzer Prize-winning columnist for the *New York Times*, cries out to university

Corresponding author:

Robert M Wilson, Department of Geography and the Environment, Syracuse University, Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs, 144 Eggers, Syracuse, NY 13244-1020, USA.

Email: rmwilson@syr.edu

faculty “Professors, We Need You!” College faculty are among the smartest, best-informed thinkers and researchers on the world’s pressing issues, he writes, but many professors have marginalized themselves because of their writing and fostered an academic culture that “glorifies arcane unintelligibility.” In doing so, many faculty have rendered themselves irrelevant (Kristof, 2014). The esteemed historian Jill Lepore, who is also a regular contributor to *The New Yorker* magazine, says scholars have grown adept at building “a great, heaping mountain of exquisite knowledge surrounded by a vast moat of dreadful prose” (2013).¹

Geographers have not been immune from this sort of criticism. In a now infamous critique of academic writing, historian Patricia Nelson Limerick singled out Allan Pred—among the most celebrated geographers of the past fifty years—for his writing and not in a good way. “For all their differences, most right-wing scholars and most left-wing scholars share a common allegiance to a cult of obscurity. Left, right and center all hide behind the idea that unintelligible prose indicates a sophisticated mind” (Limerick, 1993). In the 1990s, one of Limerick’s fellow historians, William Cronon, claimed radical geographers had lost readers by embracing “vocabularies and rhetorics that systematically isolate them from the language of ordinary people and ordinary life” (1994: 175).

Although Limerick and Cronon are historians, even some geographers partially agree with their assessment. In *Antipode*, radical geographer Bob Ross notes that “a fundamental stumbling block prevents most revolutionary geographic thought from materializing into revolutionary practice: most people do not read our articulations of geographic thought, no matter how revolutionary they may be.” He adds “our peer-reviewed articles are simply inaccessible to the overwhelming vast majority of the English-speaking (much less non-English-speaking) world” (Ross, 2016: 4). By “inaccessible,” Ross is referring not only to the exorbitant prices for such articles and the paywalls impeding public access but how the writing itself might serve as a barrier between geographers and those outside the academy. He adds “the jargon with which most academic articles are written may be intelligible and sometimes even useful for those in the same field of study but to the rest of the world (i.e. the overwhelming majority of the planet, or most of the people who would be part of a revolution), academic writing is, at best, difficult to get through and, at worst, incomprehensible” (5).

Some geographers might bristle at this criticism. George Henderson, for instance, offered a spirited defense of Pred’s writing, saying at the time “His alterations of normal usage are purposeful and rule-departing, not mindless and rule-forgetting” (Henderson, 1998: 31). Others might feel the academic critics have a point. But their views are widely shared. At least among the public, it is rarely a compliment to call a scholar’s article or book “academic.”

Some scholars have gone beyond just lamenting supposedly poor academic writing and tried to identify the structural reasons for turgid academic prose. In his insightful book *Learn to Write Badly: How to Succeed in the Social Sciences*, Michael Billig agrees with these sorts of critiques of academic writing but argues that individual scholars are not necessarily the problem. Billig faults the neoliberal academy and the relentless demands to publish, which leads academics to produce “hastily written works” (2013: 5). Good, crisp, and lucid writing takes time, and time is in short supply for many social scientists, geographers included. Robbed of precious time for careful revision, academics “reach for the common technical terminology than to try to clarify one’s thoughts. Hence big words are circulating in decreasingly narrow circles” (6). The result is a noun-heavy style where articles are bloated by too many nominalizations: words that once lived as verbs and adjectives but now lie dead as abstract nouns (Sword, 2012: 112–121, 2016: 17–28; TED-ED, 2012).

Even if one only partly agrees with these critiques, geographers should not find this situation surprising given the way we typically train graduate students. In most geography graduate programs writing is rarely taught. Of course, graduate students take numerous graduate seminars, and lengthy

research papers remain an essential part of the curriculum. But as Dydia DeLyser correctly notes “No one has taught them to write” (2003: 169). She adds that most MA and PhD students have not taken a writing course since early in their undergraduate education. Of course, supervisors provide informal advice on ways students might improve their writing, and they edit and provide comments on thesis and dissertation drafts. For the most part, however, students are expected to imbibe the rules of scholarly writing by reverse engineering the academic articles they read and then write their own work, hoping for the best. Their supervisors can sometimes only offer limited suggestions on how to improve students’ writing because they learned to write the same way (Cameron et al., 2009; Pyne, 2009a, 2009b). While qualitative methods courses are now a staple of many geography graduate programs, writing courses remain uncommon (DeLyser, 2008). Some geographers, however, have developed shorter workshops on writing or incorporated writing exercises into graduate geography seminars focused primarily on other topics (Burlingame, 2019; Cameron et al., 2009).

In response to the lack of formal writing instruction and to these critiques of scholarly writing, I began teaching Writing Geography, a graduate seminar at Syracuse University. The course introduces students to the fundamentals of creative nonfiction and storytelling and how they can use the techniques in theses, dissertations, and articles. Initially, I modelled the seminar on graduate writing courses offered by the historians Stephen Pyne and Marsha Weisiger. Like Stephen Pinker and Patricia Nelson Limerick, Pyne is a critic of prevailing forms of academic writing (Pyne, 2009a, 2009b). He calls his writing seminar a detox program for young academics where they unlearn the bad practices they may have acquired through their education and begin to discover their own voice.

Storytelling is the focus of Writing Geography. Among many academics, geographers probably included, storytelling has a bad rap: it is the sort of activity a parent does with a child at bedtime rather than a skill to teach budding young scholars (Cronon, 2013: 7). Other academics might add stories are what journalists write not what critical scholars produce. Serious scholarship, they might add, entails consciously eschewing anything that might resemble storytelling. Such work should demonstrate sound methods and deft use of theory but certainly not storytelling.

Yet among the authors of academic writing guides, there is unanimity that stories matter, and storytelling is an essential skill for academics to cultivate. Geographer Katherine Burlingame asks, “Where are the storytellers?” and laments that “storytelling is a fading craft” (Burlingame, 2019: 57). Helen Sword writes that “relatively few scientists and social scientists have been trained in the art of crafting a compelling narrative” and even many humanists “bury their best stories under layers of abstraction and critical theory” (2012: 88. See also Sword, 2016, 2017). She encourages academics to craft stories around “characters” such as an institution, a methodology, or technique, or better yet, focus on the scholar’s research journey. More attention to storytelling can even help natural scientists. In *Writing Science*, Joshua Schimel argues that scientists who craft compelling stories in their articles and proposals are more likely to get cited and funded, though to be sure, this is hard to prove (2012. See also Greene, 2013: 12–21).

It is one thing to say storytelling matters in academic writing but quite another to teach it. Two authors have proved indispensable for Writing Geography students seeking to better understand storytelling. One is Randy Olson, a Harvard-trained, former tenured biology professor who left academia, graduated from the renowned University of Southern California film school, and became a filmmaker. Olson argues the key to effective communication is what he calls ABT: and, but, and therefore (Olson, 2015). *And* establishes some sort of agreement and stasis. It’s a place for exposition where the writer provides the reader with the lay of the land, so to speak, before the story begins. *But* inserts a problem or contradiction that disrupts this stasis. It is the inciting incident that sets the story in motion. And *therefore* leads to a resolution of the problem.

One can apply this structure to many facets of geography, such as the history of the discipline. Take the birth of radical economic geography. In the 1960s, spatial science became the reigning paradigm in geography *and* quantitative methods and logical positivism provided the means to explain geographic phenomena. *But* the tumult of the 1960s led some geographers, such as David Harvey, Richard Peet, and Bill Bunge, to question this orthodoxy. *Therefore*, they proposed a new type of geography—radical geography, and later, Marxist geography—to overcome what they saw as the irrelevance of previous modes of geographical inquiry (Barnes and Christophers, 2018: 63–65; Barnes and Sheppard, 2019). Indeed, Harvey’s journey from spatial scientist to Marxist geographer is a particular type of story: a conversion narrative (Sheppard and Barnes, 2019). After moving to Baltimore in the late 1960s, Harvey completed *Explanation in Geography* but lost his faith in spatial science amid the revolts in the city and the racism and segregation he witnessed there. Therefore, he searched for a new guide to help him make sense of the world and found Marx. Olson urges scientists and other scholars to anchor their writing in this simple structure. “ABT is the DNA of story,” he writes (Olson, 2015: 17).

The ABT can help students transform the often shapeless, meandering abstracts that begin their theses, dissertations, and journal manuscripts into clear statements of research purpose. Revised versions using the ABT introduce the state of knowledge, the weaknesses, or shortcomings of this knowledge, and how the research in the article overcomes these shortcomings with a new method, theory, or interpretation. The ABT structure works even better for literature reviews, which as graduate supervisors reading student dissertation chapters know all too well, often read as a monotonous list: a geographer said this, then another geographer said that, and later, a different geographer said this. Using the ABT, a student can, over a few pages, summarize a body of work then identify problems with the literature. In this case, the *therefore* is the student’s thesis or dissertation. After reading a literature review with the ABT structure, the reader will see how the student’s thesis and dissertation is an seemingly inevitable outgrowth of a previous body of work and its shortcomings (see also Graff and Birkenstein, 2006; Kamler and Thompson, 2014).

In addition to Olson, another writing expert that offers helpful guidance is Jack Hart, former story editor for the US newspaper *The Oregonian*. While a story editor, Hart worked with talented reporters who were adept at research and interviewing sources but befuddled when trying to shape their work into a nonfiction story. As an editor, Hart had to teach these reporters how to write explanatory narratives, a type of narrative he describes in *Storycraft* (2012: 183–202). An explanatory narrative, as the name suggests, explains how some sort of concept, process, or phenomenon works, such as commodification, globalization, or neoliberalism. The American magazine *The New Yorker* is well-known for publishing articles by authors who use this form such as John McPhee, Michael Pollan, and Elizabeth Kolbert.²

Hart shows the two parts of an explanatory narrative: scenes and explanations. *Scenes* describe something in the world using evocative language. “An explanatory narrative requires close-to-the-ground specificity,” Hart says. “Readers must visualize particular places at particular times” (Hart, 2012: 184–185). Interspersed between these scenes are *explanations* that provide context to the action in a more conceptual or theoretical way. These digressions allow the writer to pull “the curtain on the narrative. Then he [or she or they] goes off on a little exploration of the subject, an abstract explanation that gives depth and meaning to what the reader’s been witnessing in the narrative” (Hart, 2012: 186). Readers find this structure appealing. It satisfies their craving for vivid scenes as well as explanations of the scenes’ meaning and significance.

In *Writing Geography*, I assign the work of Olson, Hart, and others.³ To make their advice stick, students employ these authors’ guidance in short writing assignments. Each week follows a similar format. Students read selections from writing guides on various topics, such as explanatory narratives or personal narratives. Then, the students read examples of these sorts of writing by professional scholars and accomplished non-academic writers—mostly geographers but not only

researchers in our field.⁴ Initially, I assigned work by a wide assortment of professional geographers. Now I mostly assign work by tenured geographers at top research universities. I do that not because I devalue the work of geographers at other sorts of institutions. Rather, it is to counteract the common and understandable reaction students have had after reading Olson and Hart's books. "Well, the sort of writing Olson and Hart promote is informative and joy to read," they might say, "but you could never write that way and land an academic job." In response, I assign at least a dozen articles and chapters by tenured professors. They accomplished so much in the discipline, and they earned tenure, I argue, because they wrote clearly, inventively, and persuasively not despite it. I encourage the students to use these professors' writing as an inspiration. In doing so, I realize I am partly contributing to the neoliberal academy's focus on high-impact journals to measure a professor's worth (Dufty-Jones, 2020; Dufty-Jones and Gibson, 2021). Nevertheless, I want to demonstrate that this sort of writing is not some sort of aberration but practiced by leading geographers in the discipline in our most respected journals.

By and large, economic geographers do not employ the sort of explanatory narrative I discuss in *Writing Geography*. But they could certainly do so. Throughout the field's history, economic geographers have alternated between focusing either on description (which is akin to scene) and explanation. In the decades after the First World War, economic geographers saw their task as delineating, describing, and interpreting the unique characteristics of economic regions. While description is somewhat similar to scene, the descriptions in regional economic geography typically lacked any sort of narrative momentum. In the mid-1950s, economic geographers began discarding this descriptive regional geography approach and sought to transform economic geography into a spatial science that prized explanation. Later changes in the field embraced critical social theory as a tool for explanation, beginning with Marxist theory in the early 1970s and later feminist and post-structural theory in the 1990s (Barnes and Christophers, 2018: 50–75; Scott, 2000). Despite all these changes, there still remains an opportunity for economic geographers to fuse scenes and explanatory sections together in their writing and hitch them to an overarching story.

An excellent example of a work by a geographer that demonstrates a strong sense of story and creative use of explanatory narrative is Jake Kosek's *Understories: The Political Life of Forests in Northern New Mexico* (2006). While Kosek is a political ecologist, not an economic geographer, his approach is one economic geographers could adopt.⁵ In the chapter "Nuclear Natures," he recounts an early-morning commute of a woman between two small towns in rural northern New Mexico. He uses this mundane journey to provide readers with an evocative picture of the surrounding landscapes and communities. Kosek's purpose is not just to provide a vivid representation of his study site. He also uses this travel log as an opportunity to make periodic digressions where he explains, among other things, the scourge of heroin addiction afflicting nearby towns and the toxic effects of radiation contamination from the Los Alamos National Laboratory. In effect, Kosek uses an everyday trip as the narrative spine for depicting the landscape and explaining its significance while deploying the critical tools at his disposal. In another chapter, "Smokey Bear is a White Racist Pig," Kosek traces the history of the famous forest fire-prevention icon promoted by the United States Forest Service and how it became a hated symbol of colonial oppression among Hispanos in northern New Mexico.⁶ As he did in the "Nuclear Natures" chapter, Kosek skillfully alternates between vivid scenes and in-depth analysis. In the process, he shows the potential for explanatory narratives to engage readers and explain simultaneously.

In the seminar, after consulting writing guides and reviewing examples of different types of writing, students complete short assignments and then submit them online a day or so before the next class. Prior to meeting, the other students read their fellow classmates' work. Then, on the day of class, we workshop their pieces, much as creative writing students would in a fiction writing workshop.⁷ For about 10 min, students critique each classmate's writing using the assigned writing advice and examples to help guide them. One might think this would place students in a

harsh spotlight and leave them vulnerable to unwarranted criticism. But this has never happened. On the contrary, the challenge is coaxing students to provide sharp, constructive comments about their peers' work. By reading each other's writing and by seeing how their classmates wrestle with the same problems, they recognize that other students have similar emotions and anxieties about writing (Cameron et al., 2009; DeLyser, 2003). They also learn which of their classmates' experiments succeed, and if so, consider how they might apply similar techniques in their own work. Over time, the students gain confidence as writers.

To help students learn more about the writing process, I invite visitors to the course, and professors by and large have been eager to come. For an hour or so, they share their views on academic writing and answer students' questions. While they have free rein to discuss what they want, I also send questions beforehand for them to consider:

- How did you learn to write? Did you receive any formal guidance on writing in graduate school?
- Which writers—academic or non-academic—have influenced you the most? Are there books or other resources you would recommend for students to help them improve their writing?
- What is your writing process? How do you begin writing? What do you do when you sit down to write? How do you revise and edit drafts?
- How can you write eloquently and effectively using theory or about theory?

Not surprising given the visiting professors' diverse academic backgrounds, the guests have provided a variety of answers. Some of the social scientists and many of the natural scientists visiting the course follow the IMRaD format common in the sciences to structure their articles: introduction, methods, results, and discussion. Yet even though they follow this tried-and-true format, they emphasize the need for clear, well-crafted introductions where the researchers define a problem, note a gap in knowledge, and explain their research approach. Other visitors stress their efforts to write with clarity and grace despite the constraints of academic publishing. One prominent environmental historian who visited the seminar is also an avid mystery novel reader, and this has influenced her scholarly writing. Her books are crafted like a mystery where she identifies some sort of environmental problem in the present, and then through her research and writing, uncovers the root of the problem. In these books, she plays the role of a detective leading the reader through her thinking process as the roots of the mystery become clear. Comments such as hers show the benefits of reading widely and how students can find inspiration in unexpected sources.

How to use or employ critical theory is one of the main challenges students in Writing Geography face. Many of the writing guides I assign criticize the frequent use of nominalizations in academic prose—neoliberalism, governmentality, postmodernism, and the like (Billig, 2013; Sword, 2012, 2016). But the students note that scholarship in their sub-fields is rife with such words. Of course, specialized terms and nominalizations are indispensable to geographers and other academics. Yet what the assigned readings and many of the course visitors advise is for students to use such language sparingly and with intention and to recognize that piling-up multiple nominalizations in a sentence or two can confuse readers. Other visitors said they try to use more verbs and minimize the abstract nouns that cloud academic writing and seek whenever possible to illuminate complicated ideas through stories.

Besides having other professors visit the course, I also invite non-academics to share their perspectives on writing. Since the course focuses so much on creative nonfiction, I have sought out the sorts of writers who publish in newspapers and magazines. One of them was Steven Featherstone, an acclaimed long-form feature writer who has published in leading American magazines such *Harper's*, *The New York Times Magazine*, and *The New Republic* (Featherstone, 2011, 2015, 2017). Another non-academic visitor was Erica Goode, former leader of the climate environmental reporting group at the *New York Times* and current managing editor of *Inside Climate News*. Some

students have used the insights and guidance of Featherstone, Goode, and other seminar visitors to publish their work in prominent online venues.

I have said relatively little about economic geography, the writing problems economic geographers face, or the ways professors and instructors might teach economic geography writing differently at the graduate level. From my experience, the external pressures shaping graduate student writing and the writing difficulties students face are similar among all human geography students—even similar to some degree even among human and physical geographers.

Since I began teaching Writing Geography a decade ago, the sorts of students taking the class have changed. Initially, only women geography MA and PhD students took the seminar. Over the years, however, more men have enrolled in the class while fewer students from geography have taken the course. Some of the students arrive from other programs in the social sciences. But even more students take the course from non-social science fields: earth science, engineering, food studies, and business administration. These students have complained about the lack of writing courses in their programs and voiced their frustrations with how little training there is at the university on ways to improve their research writing. This suggests that some of the shortcomings in writing instruction that exist in our field are common in many other disciplines.

Many of these students from non-geography disciplines speak English as a second language. Because of this, they perhaps express even more anxiety about writing than native English speaking graduate students do, and they are frustrated by the lack of advanced writing instruction in their own programs. Syracuse University, like many universities in North America, enrolls more students from abroad than it did a decade ago, especially students from China. For instance, between 2005 and 2018, Chinese student enrollment in US universities skyrocketed from 10,000 to nearly 150,000 (Ma, 2020: 2–3). Chinese students are in the words of sociologist Yingyi Ma “ambitious and anxious.” They are driven to excel in their graduate studies, but face the reality, as do economic geographers whose native language is not English, that “English has become hegemonic within the global academy” (Dufty-Jones et al., 2022: 377; Hassink et al., 2019). But they are worried, too, that as non-native English speakers in an English-speaking university, whether they have the necessary writing competence to finish MA theses and PhD dissertations. Writing Geography attracts so many of these students because they cannot find such courses elsewhere at our university, which is in stark contrast, for instance, to the many research methods classes departments offer. Given this situation, they are willing to risk enrolling in Writing Geography even though the course is taught in a field different from their own.

Although the course has enabled at least some students to improve their writing, it is not an all-purpose solution to the writing challenges they face. Natural science students, such as physical geographers, might benefit less from the class than human geographers and environment-society geographers do. The principles of storytelling as outlined by Randy Olson help the scientists write clearer abstracts and introductory sections in their articles. But the other skills taught in the class, such as writing compelling characters and crafting oral research-related stories, is perhaps less useful. Certainly, developing an ability to tell pertinent anecdotes at the beginning of a class lecture before explaining scientific concepts and the results of experiments will do wonders to enliven their courses. Also, honing their ability to write effective project narratives in grant proposals—in effect, marshalling the power of story to convince a funding agency to award them money—will serve them well.

Yet perhaps the greatest benefit of the seminar and the writing workshops championed by other geographers is that they offer spaces for students to experiment with different writing styles, take risks, and hone their craft (Cameron et al., 2009; DeLyser, 2003; Dufty-Jones and Gibson, 2021). Indeed, seeing writing as a craft worth nurturing might enable students to view it as a skill to cultivate rather than just a means to finish their degrees, draft articles for publication, and advance their careers. Decades ago, the historical geographer Cole Harris called historical research more a habit

of mind than a research method (Harris, 1978). In a similar way, Writing Geography strives less to teach specific writing techniques and formulas than to cultivate storytelling as a habit of mind among young academics. Doing this might not quell the strident critics of academic prose. But the course and the habit of mind it cultivates can foster the writing skills students need to succeed as well as help soothe their writing anxieties.

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1. On the problems with academic writing and possible solutions, see Sachs (2010, 2016), Rothman (2014), and Ball (2017).
2. For examples of explanatory narratives, see Pollan (2007) and Kolbert (2021). One of the masters of the form is John McPhee who has published frequently in *The New Yorker* over the past 50 years and has written numerous works of creative nonfiction. On his writing process, see McPhee (2017).
3. Sword has written several invaluable books about academic writing (2012, 2016, 2017). I assign many chapters from them in Writing Geography. Also, Joseph Williams and Joseph Bizup's *Style: Lessons in Clarity and Grace* (2017) is a classic writing guide that should be part of every student's writing library. Indeed, I encourage students in the course to start their own writing library of articles, books, and links to writing web sites for them to consult as they write their theses and dissertations.
4. DeLyser (2003) uses some of the same sorts of writing assignments and a similar class structure in her writing course.
5. On the relations between economic geography and political ecology, see McCarthy (2012).
6. Surprisingly given Kosek's focus on the sordid legacy of colonialism in the US Southwest, the chapter is often quite funny. Among other things, we learn that the Forest Service depicted Smokey Bear on posters and TV ads as a symbol of benevolent, virile, masculine authority. But the real Smokey Bear—rescued as a cub after a forest fire—was cantankerous and impotent. Humor is a seldom used but potentially powerful tactic geographers or other scholarly writers could try more often. On humor and academic writing, see Bartlett (2014).
7. This is how Pyne teaches his writing seminar (2009a) and similar to the way DeLyser teaches hers (2003). In the decades after the Second World War, creative writing programs and workshops proliferated. In Writing Geography, I have employed some of the techniques writing professors use in these courses. Enrollment in these writing seminars is often restricted to MFA creative writing students and such courses typically focus on writing novels, short stories, or poetry. If geographers want their students to take advanced writing courses, they will probably have to teach such classes themselves rather than rely on seminars in creative writing programs or other disciplines. On the development of MFA programs and creative writing workshops, see McGurl (2011) and Bennett (2015).

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