



Deliberate Practice for Academic Writers *Part 3: A three-step process to improve academic writing*

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May 25, 2021

This is the third post in a series on deliberate practice for academic writers. The first post introduced a specific kind of practice called *deliberate practice*. This practice involves three elements: a goal-directed focus on weaknesses; strenuous, even uncomfortable effort toward the goal; and feedback on what goes wrong and how to fix it.

The second post suggested that we can break down academic writing into three distinct skills: disciplinary mastery, clarity, and writing habits. Though the skills work together to produce a dissertation or a journal article, they are still different, and academic professions interact with them in different ways.

In this post I'll combine ideas from the first two in order to argue that academic writers can develop the clarity of their writing through deliberate practice.

Philosophy buzzword bingo

I started reading a lot of philosophy while preparing my writing sample for graduate school. Imbibing so many articles and book chapters opened my eyes to philosophical writing—arguments, logic, objections, responses, and everything else. My disciplinary mastery started here, working to create an argument of my own.

But my reading also showed me patterns in the writing itself, certain turns of phrase or expressions that popped up in many papers. Authors liked to say that bad arguments didn't "cut any ice," that a position had an appealing

“upshot,” that they wished to “deploy” a concept, or that their work lay at the “intersection” of multiple subfields. I took to these expressions at first and used them in my own writing because they made me feel like a real philosopher. When I wrote that some distinction drew a “bright line” between two things, or I began a reply with the words “It’s not obvious that...”, I felt like a member of a special club.

Over time, though, I came to dislike these ways of writing and talking, for both their pretension and their absence in normal English. They annoyed me so much that I created a game called “Philosophy Buzzword Bingo.” Here’s how you play. Before a graduate seminar or department colloquium, everyone gets a game sheet with twenty-five squares. Inside each square is one of those annoying buzzwords. When the speaker says one, you mark the space on your sheet, and the first to get five in a row wins! I was never bored during bad talks again, and I noticed that the spiffier the speaker’s position, the faster they tended to fill my board.

Buzzword Bingo was my reaction to trite mannerisms in philosophy, but I now see all those expressions for what they really are: overwrought and lazy ways of writing. Instead of communicating meaning, the phrases signal to readers that the author is one of *them*, the member of a club. Writers who dip into these clichés violate Orwell’s prime directive: “What is above all needed is to let the meaning choose the word, and not the other way about.”¹ Buzzwords pick our meaning for us and wrest from us control of our clarity.

We academic writers can do better. And deliberate practice can help us get there.

Deliberate practice in knowledge fields

We have no trouble envisioning deliberate practice for many fields and careers. A lineworker at a power company scales poles, works the lines, trims trees, and does other maintenance tasks. Deliberate practice for such a career involves doing those things over and over again, on both dead and live lines, until you master each part of the job. Deliberate practice is even easier to imagine for athletes, which is why I keep using the example of basketball. It’s easy to distinguish both the skills and the ways to improve, and you can identify success right away.

The picture isn’t so clear in many knowledge-based fields, however, and it may be hard to see how to apply the principles of deliberate practice to writing-based professions in particular. For one, writing doesn’t appear at first to consist of distinct skills. Many people will not realize they can develop each skill in isolation from the rest. Another problem is the feedback. In what circumstances you do receive it? Who gives it? What are you supposed to do with it? And how can you “practice” on your own?

I’ll address those questions in this post, because I’ve confronted them myself in both my academic and non-academic writing. In fact, it was in trying to write fiction that I first noticed my *lack* of a skill *specific* to fiction writing—the skill of storytelling. While I could write clear sentences, I could

¹George Orwell, “Politics and the English Language.”

not tell interesting stories, nor did I have any idea of their structure or common features. I had one skill but lacked another, and so had to design a program for improvement not as a writer in general but as a *storyteller*. My program has me ignoring sentence structure in favor of practicing scene construction, plot development, character arcs, and other aspects of stories.

Most academic writers begin to develop disciplinary mastery in graduate school. If they continue in their profession, their mastery grows as they know more about their field and increase their ability to shape it. On the other hand, the clarity of many academic writers plateaus early in their careers. They become—not clear writers, but clear-*enough* writers. They reach a minimum level of acceptable performance and never go further.

The primary reason is that their professions hold no incentives for writing with greater clarity. As long as they can make themselves more or less understood, they get nothing for learning to write better. They thus have no motivation to improve.

While I cannot change the incentive structures of academia, I think it's a mistake to avoid deliberate practice in any aspect of writing. Our power to understand and explain our fields, and to persuade others of our views, grows with practice. We can only show that power when we learn to write with a clear, engaging, and convincing style. If we refuse to even try and improve, we put an artificial cap on our career potential. We limit opportunities to expand our influence outside of academia, where readers and editors offer more rewards for clarity. We shut ourselves off from audiences we could otherwise reach, were we able to write in different ways.

In the distribution of skills for knowledge fields, we find many people bunched together at the level of basic competence. They have reached the point where they can do their job and collect a check. But this gives writers aspiring to better things a huge advantage. By committing to a program of improvement, you set yourself apart from everyone else and will soon surpass them because they either do not care to improve or do not know how. They are staying just good enough—but you don't have to.

This is as much of a self-interested argument as I can make in favor of deliberate practice for academic writers. When it comes to clarity, most academics write like they are playing pickup basketball, neither seeking nor even desiring progression. They just use whatever techniques they've already acquired. And just as pickup basketball doesn't offer much improvement, neither does writing that way. In order to improve the clarity with which we write, we have to do something different.

Applying deliberate practice to academic writing

In order to make significant improvements to our writing, we need deliberate practice. Since the components of academic writing are independent of each other, we can develop each skill in isolation from the rest—but each requires its own regimen of practice. You can languish in one skill while thriving in another, depending on how you work.

Here, we're focusing on the skill of clarity.

Deliberate practice has three elements:

1. A goal-directed focus on your weaknesses
2. Strenuous, even uncomfortable effort toward the goal
3. Feedback on what went wrong and how to fix it

In order to improve the clarity of our writing, we need to apply the principles of deliberate practice to that specific component. In the next few sections, I'll lay out some ideas for this application.

Deliberate practice for clarity step #1: a goal-directed focus on weaknesses

When we're starting out, it may be tough to see how we can apply this element to the clarity of our writing. What does it mean to take such a focus in our work? How do we write this way?

We can begin by sitting down to write with two thoughts in mind: first, that we have weaknesses in the clarity of our writing; second, that we want to improve.

If we're writing like a game of pickup basketball, then we set the creation of the words to autopilot. Our mind works with our *argument*—by relying on our disciplinary mastery—and then expresses that argument with whatever words our clarity-skill is able to serve up in the moment. Later, we revise our work in order to fix the argument, but most academics ignore the clarity of the writing. That is, once the writing reaches a point where a reader can discern the reasoning, we stop. We think our work is done because the argument is there, as long as the reader pays close enough attention.

Deliberate practice for clarity requires us to set higher goals, and to go beyond our current skills to address the limitations in how we write.

Many writers may need to skip ahead to the third element of deliberate practice, getting feedback, in order to know where to start. That's fine. Have a non-specialist read your work and tell you where they get tripped up. Your reader should be a non-specialist because someone who knows your field is just going to focus on your argument. You're not looking for help on disciplinary mastery, however. You need to understand other weaknesses in order to improve your clarity.

I'll have more to say about feedback below and in the final post of this series.

Deliberate practice for clarity step #2: strenuous effort

At the second step we try to improve by doing. We start to type out words in an effort to make them clearer. Hooray for us!...but how do we actually do that?

One good way to begin is with academic writing's cardinal sin against clarity: the sentences are too long. Like way too long. Like way, way too long.

So start there. Sit down and challenge yourself to write an entire page with sentences of no more than twenty words. When you put a period, stop and count the words. If you have more than twenty then go back and eliminate something. Don't stop until you have filled a full page about your research.

(For reference, the sentences in this paragraph have three, eighteen, ten, twelve, and twelve words, respectively.)

Many academic writers will find it difficult to do this. It's supposed to be difficult, though—it's supposed to be strenuous, even *uncomfortable* effort! To meet your goal, you will have to express things in new ways, and may not be able to rely on tropes or boilerplate from your discipline.

There are many other writing exercises you can do yourself, starting now, in order to improve. Here are a few. Each exercise targets a specific weakness of academic writing in order to turn that weakness into a skill:

- Write only sentences of twenty words or fewer.
- Write only sentences of fifteen words or fewer.
- Write only sentences of ten words or fewer.
- Write only sentences that have a precise subject-verb-object structure at the beginning.
- Write only sentences that have no use of the passive voice.
- Write only sentences that have no -ly adverbs.
- Write only sentences that have no more than one subordinate conjunction.
- Write only sentences that have no subordinate conjunctions.
- Write only sentences that have no connecting verbs (is/are, was/were, etc.).
- Write only sentences with no buzzwords or clichés from your field.
- For a page already written, do two things: (1) if a verb isn't a connecting verb, strengthen it; (2) if a verb is a connecting verb, restructure the sentence so the verb is one of action.
- Write a single page about a topic, but do it several times with different audiences in mind:
 - Indifferent high schoolers (how do you make it interesting?)
 - Freshmen in college (how do you explain the basics?)
 - Majors in an upper-division course (how do you introduce the nuances?)
 - Professionals from another sub-area in your field (how do you communicate the importance of your argument and its connection to other areas?)

I am serious about these exercises. I challenge you to do one right now. Stop and try to write a page under one of these restrictions.

As soon as you begin to write, your first instinct will be to jump into the writing habits you have inherited from your profession—long sentences, jargon, and everything else. You must resist those habits and fight back against them! Many people will find it difficult to write under one or more of these restrictions, and it will take real effort and awareness.

But that effort *is* the deliberate practice! The effort is what deliberate practice demands in order for you to improve. *The strain you feel in resisting clichés and other inherited patterns of writing is the strain of deliberate practice working.* It's like the pain a weightlifter feels when he puts up a personal best on the bench press; it's like the pain a basketball player feels after she spends

an intense one-hour session with a personal trainer. *It is the strain of developing a new writing skill.*

You might look at my list of exercises and think, “That’s unrealistic. No one writes like that.” That’s true—no one writes an article with no subordinate clauses or adverbs. That would be dumb. But the point of this strenuous effort is not to produce an article, it’s to *develop a new skill*. Suppose you write a page with very short sentences, all under fifteen words. You’ll never write a full paper like that. But after writing one page, you will be better able to produce shorter, clearer sentences when you write an article in the future. The *clarity* of your writing will have improved, because of the practice you did. The same goes for all the other exercises.

Imagine walking onto a basketball court and seeing a player practice free throws in an empty gym. You wouldn’t say, “Hey, there’s no crowd here! There are no opponents! Why are you practicing like this?” She’s practicing in those conditions so that she develops a skill she can rely on *later* when there *are* crowds and opponents. We practice with the clarity component of our writing in the same way. This is what deliberate practice in writing is for.

If you write like you always have, you’ll get the clarity results you always do. You must make a change in order to improve. That change might be difficult, but if you persist, you will increase your clarity stat and become a better writer.

Deliberate practice for clarity step #3: feedback

The third element of deliberate practice says that we need feedback. We have now attempted to write with more clarity; we need someone to tell us whether we have succeeded.

Sometimes we can give ourselves this feedback. If we try to write a page of sentences with no connecting verbs, we can check for ourselves how well that went. We can do the same thing for many of the exercises I listed above.

Other times we will need feedback from other people, and here we must be careful. We must seek out someone who already has the skills we’re trying to gain, or at least is trained to look for the techniques we are practicing.

In many cases we will find the best feedback from someone who doesn’t work in our field. When philosophers read philosophy papers, they tend to focus on the philosophical content and on the arguments. When literary theorists read papers on literary theory, they tend to focus on the literary analysis. The feedback we need for deliberate practice in clarity is *not* about the content or the argument; those are aspects of disciplinary mastery. If we never receive any other type of feedback, we will not be able to improve our skills as much as we could have, and we won’t ever make significant gains. It’s that simple.

The most important event in developing the clarity of my own writing was when I joined Toril Moi’s “Writing Is Thinking” class in fall semester 2015. I had heard about Toril from other students and wanted to take a course with her, but I already felt like I was a decent writer. A few of my undergraduate professors had told me that I wrote well, and their comments made me feel like I knew something.

It turned out I knew little. Toril gave friendly feedback, but she withheld nothing, and my first two-page assignment came back to me covered in red pen. Each mark was something I had done wrong or could do better—not to become a better philosopher, but to become a *clearer writer*. That was the whole point of the course. Toril didn't care what we wrote about, as long as we tried to improve our clarity. She understood the difference between disciplinary mastery and clarity, and how we can improve one without worrying about the other.

Although I didn't have these concepts at the time, it's now obvious that Toril's course was session after session of deliberate practice. We identified our weaknesses, both by observing our own writing and with her help; we then worked to address those weaknesses in new writing; Toril would then give us a new round of feedback, and we would start all over again. The "Writing Is Thinking" method was just deliberate practice for academic writers.

As we receive feedback, we begin the process of deliberate practice over again. The feedback sheds new light on our weaknesses and strengths, and we retool our plan. Then we give a strenuous effort to implement the feedback and improve. When we're done, we get more feedback and the cycle goes again. Each time we gain new skills, hone old ones, and increase the clarity of our writing.

Deliberate practice for clarity in academic writing

Most academic writers focus on improving their disciplinary mastery. Their focus isn't wrong; the incentive structures in their fields encourage them to take that approach to their work.

But disciplinary mastery is only one component of academic writing. Clarity is another, and writing with clarity is a skill in itself. And because clarity is a skill, we can target it with a program of deliberate practice. If we do, we will make major gains in our ability to communicate well. We will make major gains in how others see our work. We will make major gains in the precision and impact of our ideas.

In this post I've laid out a framework for thinking about deliberate practice in writing. I've applied the three elements of deliberate practice to the skill of clarity in particular. The exercises I suggested are just examples; you can think of others, and other ways to challenge yourself.

Writing is so different an experience from playing basketball or doing other activities that we sometimes forget it is a *skill*. Writing with clarity is not a natural endowment or innate ability. It is a skill in which we can wither or flourish. As a skill, it is subject to the principles that govern the development of all skills. The more we apply those principles—the principles of deliberate practice—the more we will improve.

In the end, if our writing is unclear and others have not grasped our meaning, we only have ourselves to blame. The clarity of our work is always within our control.