

The Complex Varieties of “Good Writing”

So here’s a trick question: Which of the following is the “best writing?”

1. Prices are rising for the black sludge that helps make the world’s gears turn. If you think we’re talking about oil, think again. Petroleum prices have tumbled from their record highs. No sooner was there relief at the pump, however, than came a squeeze at the pot. That jolt of coffee that a majority of American adults enjoy on a daily basis has gotten more expensive and could go even higher this year. . . .¹
2. **U.S. person.** Use Form W-9 only if you are a U.S. person (including a resident alien), to provide your correct TIN to the person requesting it (the requester) and, when applicable, to:
 1. Certify that the TIN you are giving is correct (or you are waiting for a number to be issued),
 2. Certify that you are not subject to backup withholding, or
 3. Claim exemption from backup withholding if you are a U.S. exempt payee.²
3. ‘Twas brillig, and the slithy toves
Did gyre and gimble in the wabe:
All mimsy were the borogoves,
And the mome raths outgrabe.³
4. Abstract: We extend earlier ideas about the appearance of noncommutative geometry in string theory with a nonzero B-field. We identify a limit in which the entire string dynamics is described by a minimally coupled (supersymmetric) gauge theory on a noncommutative space, and discuss the corrections away from this limit. Our analysis leads us to an equivalence between ordinary gauge fields and noncommutative gauge fields, which is realized by a change of variables that can be described explicitly. This change of variables is checked by comparing the ordinary Dirac-Born-Infeld theory with its noncommutative counterpart. We obtain a new perspective on noncommutative gauge theory on a torus, its T-duality, and Morita equivalence. We also discuss the D0=D4 system, the relation to M-theory in DLCQ, and a possible noncommutative version of the six-dimensional (2; 0) theory.⁴
5. I remember vividly the moment that I entered the world of literacy, education, institutional “correctness,” and, consequently, identity. I was demonstrating to my older sister how I wrote my name. The memory comes after I had been literally taught how to do it—which strokes of the pencil to use to create the symbols that equate to my name.⁵

The right answer, of course, is to reject the question—or at least to say that “it depends on the situation.” Clearly the readers of a national newspaper, who would appreciate the lively language and phrase turnings of #1 (“relief at the pump. . . squeeze at the pot”), would dismay at the cautious forecasting and precise repetition of #4 (“noncommutative” appears six times)—and vice versa. Someone looking for precise advice would appreciate the directness of #2 and find off-putting the authorial self-reference of #5, though the style of #5 is completely appropriate and desirable for the readers of the journal in which it appears. And #3? Its purpose is not to impart information or argue a point but, rather, more aesthetic: to create an engaging experience through language. Each of these writings, furthermore, require different kinds of skills; we all know people who can write lively and imaginative prose but flail at report

¹“Joe Economics.” Editorial *New York Times*, January 8, 2007.

² Internal Revenue Service, directions for W-9.

³ Lewis Carroll, “The Jabberwock.”

⁴ Seiberg, Nathan, and Edward Witten. “String theory and noncommutative geometry.” *Journal of High Energy Physics*, 1999. <<http://ej.iop.org/links/r0OcrjXAO/fHGb9M6e2xGu2OqEav5vpA/jhep091999032.pdf>>

⁵ Geraghty, Elise. “In the name of the Father: Self Naming in the Face of Institutional Patriarchy.” *Writing on the Edge* 17 (Fall 2006): 29-37.

writing, and people able to produce concise summaries of information but unable to write a funny after dinner talk. To make the point further, consider the dramatic differences among these assignments:

1. From the observational notes you compiled over the past two weeks, write an analysis of the habits of fourth graders at recess.
2. How does the theory of the carnivalesque explain the island world in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*?
3. After you've completed the experiment, please prepare a lab report in standard format.
4. Compose the CEO's letter for the Twain Corporation's Annual Report to Shareholders.
5. Write a humorous piece for the Arts and Entertainment section of the Sunday newspaper about the state of contemporary American film.
6. Create a web site that explains the services and resources of this not-for-profit agency.

What makes each of these tasks so very different is not only the content knowledge they require but also the formal knowledge and skills. They would differ not only in topic but also in voice, format, structure, purpose, and even syntax and diction.

As the list above suggests, the universe of discourse hardly consists only of academic writing. It may be useful to think of four different broad types of writing that people need to develop in their writing lives:

Academic Discourse is, of course, the language of higher education. It is written by scholars, for scholars and privileges such qualities as explicit citation and documentation, placing a high value on formal reasoning and evidence. Its defining forums are academic journals, which are intended for expert readers who are obliged to read them as part of their professional responsibilities. Undergraduate students are generally not imagined to be writing for professional journals; however, to varying (often tacit) degrees their writings are expected to display several of these qualities. To speak of academic discourse as if it were monolithic and standard across disciplines is, finally, misleading. Compare, for example, the kind of writing valued in a history class versus the kind in a psychology or chemistry. For more on this, see "On Academic Writing and Discourse Communities: A Primer."

Professional or Vocational Discourse is writing in the world of work. Whereas most academic writing prizes what might be called "essayistic literacy," extended and elaborated pieces of connected prose that follow certain documentation conventions, most professional discourse does not. Here, writing is used for various purposes such as documenting events (from case reports to minutes to field notes), establishing or documenting procedures (such as manuals), providing directions (instructions), advertising services or soliciting business (brochures, websites, proposals), conveying information (emails, memos, annual reports), or setting policy (white papers). As a result, the kind of writing someone does in an academic major may bear little resemblance to the kind of writing one does in the work place. For example, an English education major will write a number of critical essays about literary works, but his or her professional work as a teacher will require very little of that kind of writing; instead he or she will write curriculum proposals, notes and letters to parents, assignments, reports for the principal, conference notes, and so on. Professional writing comes closest to academic writing in trade journals or organizational correspondence, but it still differs significantly from them.

Civic or Popular Discourse is a broad category that includes all of the writing done for broader publics or readers. Here I'd include newspapers and magazines, as well as blogs and other websites, even some YouTube videos. Such readers differ in two important respects from Academics and Professionals. First, they don't necessarily possess expert knowledge on a given topic, though they have some interest that brings them to certain readings. Second, they aren't obliged to read anything. (Academic and professional readers/writers are obliged in the sense that, if they don't perform the work of reading and writing, there is a negative consequence: an F, a negative performance review.) As a result, this kind of writing must strike

readers as engaging, meaningful, and interesting or they won't put up with it. Prized equally—or above—the merely rational qualities of academic discourse are a sense of narrative or drama or aesthetics, qualities that make writings interesting to read. The term “civic discourse” emphasizes the kind of writing that seeks to inform opinions and decisions within a citizenry. However, this category also includes the whole range of nonfiction writing on various topics as well as “creative” writing.

Personal and Interpersonal Discourse is writing that mainly serves psychological or interpersonal needs. It is writing that builds connections with other people for the sake of those connections or writing that satisfies an individual's needs for expression. A lot of social networking sites, such as MySpace or FaceBook, exemplify this kind of writing, as do many blogs, fan sites, online reviews, personal emails, IM chats and text messages and chat rooms. In an earlier era, this was the realm of diaries and journals, of letters and cards. It's still the realm of scrapbooks and albums. This sphere is vast and important, the place of tremendous amounts of reading and writing these days. It overlaps with Civic and Popular discourse, obviously, not least because it, too, is self-sponsored and not obliged.

