

Writing Non-Fiction Well: Have Something to Say

Posted on [March 15, 2010](#) by [Amanda Taub](#)

(I meant to write this post last month, when the blogosphere was alive with advice on how to be a better writer. But alas, my day job writing legal opinions got in the way of my – erm, night job? – writing blog posts about writing, so it was a bit delayed.)

[Much ink](#) -and apparently much graphite too, [if you're Margaret Atwood](#)- has been spilled on the subject of how to be a better writer. And I think I've probably read about 95% of it. Writing is the main thing I do all day: from gchat conversations to legal opinions, I basically spend all my time typing words. So, getting better at it is high on my list of priorities, and I'm always interested in advice on how .

I have a quibble with the genre, however. For the most part, it focuses too much on style, and not enough on content. For fiction, that might make sense. But if you are writing nonfiction, content is the most important part.

In other words, if you are looking for writing advice, I think that you should strongly consider the possibility that your writing problem is not a writing problem. It is a content problem.

The bad writing is just a symptom. Poor paragraph structure? Probably because you don't actually have a strong idea to convey in that paragraph. Flabby prose? It's because you're trying to camouflage the fact that you lack sufficient information to be concrete. Over-reliance on one or two sources that just can't bear the weight? Too little research to confidently synthesize your own structure.

So, my ten rules for writing non-fiction:

1. Do enough research to develop a point of view. The amount required will vary by topic, and by how well you already know the subject matter.
2. Now do enough research to find out if your point of view is correct. This will also vary by topic, but you should assume that

the amount required is “more than you’d expect.” It can be hard to figure out when enough is enough, especially for social science topics, and especially especially for qualitative social science topics. (Law, in case you are wondering, is even worse.) However, I usually find it helpful to think of the topic as a group conversation: once you get to the point where you know who is participating in the conversation, and what their point of view is, you should be able to tell if you are missing anything important. Conversely, if all of your sources cite a paper that you haven’t read, you’re probably not done researching.

3. Take notes on your research, but organize the results research by theme, not by source. It is much better to organize information that way, because it allows you to impose your own mental structure on your information early on, and reveals holes in your research. It will also tell you if you’re over-relying on one source: if you cite a particular book or author under every theme and sub-category, that should tell you that you need to do more research and incorporate more points of view. This process should also tell you which themes aren’t actually important, but seemed that way while you were researching because one of your favorite authors spent a lot of time on them. In my experience, both problems are common among college and graduate students, and people who submit to international law journals.
4. Make counter-arguments your bitches. Identify these, and outline them too: write down each counter argument, the evidence in its favor, why you disagree, and the evidence in your favor. If you have weaker evidence than the other side does, consider getting some more or changing your mind. Strongly addressing counterarguments is one of the most effective things a writer can do. Not only does it convey confidence, it also makes the other side’s arguments fight on your terms. The best readers will think of counter-arguments anyway, so address them and move on. Conversely, don’t skip counter-arguments because you hope no one will notice them. Readers can smell fear.
5. Now outline your paper. If I were you, it would look something like this: first state the question you are answering, and tell the reader why it’s important. (If the answer is “the topic my professor picked when she gave me this assignment,” then that latter bit isn’t as vital.) Then tell your reader what your answer to the question is. Then answer it, presenting evidence and relevant counter-arguments. Then conclude with a summary of the answer.

6. Now write a first draft. If you encounter any serious problems, review steps 1-5.
7. In the first draft, avoid the following things: adverbs, adjectives, the words “several” “some” “many” and “few,” and the passive voice. Stick with simple declarative sentences. This is not because there is no place for such words in good writing, but because they cover a multitude of sins. Do not say “several things happened,” say “at least four things happened” -and then list them. Don’t say that “some commentators disagree.” Say “Amanda and Kate from Wronging Rights both disagreed” (always a safe bet!), and then say why and how. This will force you to convey information as you write.
8. Read your introduction and your conclusion. Does the introduction clearly state the question your paper addresses, and does the conclusion clearly answer it? If not, you’ll probably want to do something about that. The element of surprise is overrated.
9. Read just the first line of each paragraph. This should tell you all the important ideas in your paper. If it doesn’t, (or doesn’t make sense), you’ll probably want to do something about that too.
10. Now make it pretty. You can add adverbs and adjectives now, if you still think that it’s important to know the manner in which something occurred, or if it had polka dots, or tasted good. If you have too much information, or have gotten too specific, take some stuff out (or put it in footnotes, if you’re a lawyer. We do love ourselves some footnotes!). Do all the obvious things, like proofreading for spelling errors, grammar errors, punctuation errors, and formatting mistakes. If you can get someone else to read it for you, do that. Cut anything extraneous. Add jokes, if you’ve got some good ones. Finish.