



How I made academic writing work for me[†]

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INTRODUCTION?

At this point of my life, I've been 'in' universities for longer than I've *not* been in universities; as my (seven-year-old) daughter likes to say: 'You've just really never left school!' In a sense, then, the academic 'style' of writing should really feel like it's a native language to me – albeit one that our students frequently find alienating when they first come to university, and one that is regularly derided in the press as being wholly inaccessible.

I don't want to give too much credit to reporting that effectively exists to undermine the worth of academic writing but, if we try to look objectively at a lot of what is published in our disciplines, it's very hard to deny that our output by and large *isn't* accessible to people who aren't already part of the crowd we are writing for: *other academics*. This is generally easy to ignore, because we all do it. But once this hits you, say, because you've come across an article that was discipline-adjacent and you still *really* struggled to make sense

of it, it's hard to forget. I reached a point where I found it very hard to look at the stylistic quirks of my own academic writing and not feel like something uncomfortable was happening: rather than trying to put things in the simplest way possible, to really drive the point I wish to make home, I have to ensure that I'm not overstating my case, that I make very explicit that I cannot possibly be addressing everything in a single article, that I use all the jargon that is expected within my field, and so on.

My native language, in other words, started feeling like an odd dialect that I didn't really *want* to use anymore. This was exacerbated to an extent by the fact that my actual near-native form of English is *American* and, when it comes to general school-related writing, there are significant stylistic differences between the two 'Englishes'. For one, I'd never encountered the passive voice in my life until I started reading primarily *United Kingdom* (UK) academic work, and even now

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* I have attempted to give this reflective piece the structure of a standard academic article, even if I don't really think I have a wholly obvious introduction or a firm conclusion here; consider it a meta demonstration of what I'm trying to talk about – SdM, May 2025.

wonder what British English is trying to signify with it. Is it about *distance* from the subject of the sentence, so it somehow makes the writing less personal? Or is it just generally understood to be the ‘more professional’ way to write?

More generally, American English is blunter in many ways, and that carries over into academic style to an extent, where the active voice is encouraged, and hedging is discouraged. If you are trying to say that, for example, the UK constitution has shortcomings, or there are significant problems with the impacts of European Union (EU) free movement law on women in particular, in American academic writing you would not need to *couch* that by saying that it can be argued that, or it can be perceived that. You can go in hard – and that leaves the audience very clear about what you’re trying to say.

There is a long-standing joke about how the word ‘interesting’, when deployed by someone who speaks British English, actually means the opposite of interesting. My Dutch cultural heritage and knowledge of American English means I find this both hilarious and baffling. *Just say what you mean!* But – as UK-based academics – can we *do* that, and still get published? I have found the answer to be yes – and it’s reawakened my enjoyment of not only doing research but writing it up, and has opened up all sorts of doors for me that have been very enriching both personally and professionally.

HOW I FIRST ESCAPED ACADEMIC WRITING

My daughter exaggerates slightly: I have, in fact, left ‘school’ a few times, and one of the more notable recent times was when I did a two-year stint in the House of Commons Library in the middle of the Brexit process (2018–2020). I’m raising this for two reasons. First, writing *for* the Commons Library forced me to stop being ‘so academic’ about what I was setting out. Second, the reason I ended up working for the Commons Library is because people in Parliament responded positively to the examples of my ‘writing’ that were not *remotely* academic.

We’ll start with a brief chronology of how I ended up in the Commons Library. I applied for an open post of Senior Researcher in the Commons Library (on international and EU law) after being asked to give evidence to one of the Commons Select Committees on issues related to Brexit. There were two reasons I was invited by one of the committee clerks to do this: first, myself and several other colleagues, who I’ve now been co-writing with for over a decade, were putting out policy papers – again, non-academic writing – on how Brexit would impact Northern Ireland. This was an open door, in that the problems seemed fairly obvious to us, but virtually nobody else was writing about it in detail ... or if they were, they were doing it behind the standard paywalls of academic journals, where

their work was more likely than not failing to reach the decision-makers it needed to in order for it to actually have an impact.

Now, we knew what our aim here was – reaching policy-makers – and so we were writing policy papers that were *more or less* academic in style, in that they contained all the footnoting that you'd expect to see in a legal piece that gets published, but they were organised in a similar way to submissions that academic lawyers make to Commons Select Committees. This means shorter, focused paragraphs, lots of subheadings, and a deliberate choice to not overcomplicate our main points and main findings with, for example, an extended theoretical take on *why* we were observing what we were. The output was rigorous – but also accessible.

The second reason I was invited to come and give evidence to a Commons Select Committee is that the clerk in question followed me on Twitter. I asked her why, years later, and she said that I was doing something that many academics failed to do: rather than promoting my academic work, I was actually using Twitter to set out the basics of how, for example, bits of EU law worked, providing a vague form of free public education. The nature of Twitter meant that, by design, I had to keep that kind of messaging very succinct and to the point, but

it also had to be clear, or 'threaded' messages would be basically impossible to follow. She felt, as a non-subject-specialist, that I was doing this naturally in a way that suggested I would also be very successful at conveying the basics of how EU law worked and what the Brexit process would mean for Northern Ireland to Members of Parliament (MPs).

I remember at the time almost doing a double-take, because obviously 'the general public' and 'Members of Parliament' are quite distinct audiences. Or, at least, they were – in my mind. But I've learned over time that actually, they're closer together than we'd think. This is in large part because the job of an MP is spread so thin – across constituency work and then completely unrelated legislative work – that it is almost *impossible* for them to be across all areas of their brief to the same kind of detail.¹ Select Committee membership suggests that the MPs there have a particular interest in an area – but that still does not mean they necessarily have a complete grasp of the (frequently) complex legal frameworks *underpinning* it.

My job, as a witness, was to try and simplify that material – not to the same extent I would, for example, do it for my level 1 undergraduate students, who are trying to keep apart three different European international institutions

1 For more on this, see Isabel Hardman's *Why We Get the Wrong Politicians* (Atlantic Books 2018), which itself is a great example of parsing a very culturally jargon-heavy place in a way that is very accessible.

that all have names with ‘Council’ and ‘Europe’ in them,² but still to a significant extent compared to what I would ever be expected to do when writing to what I’ll call ‘my people’: academics who are reading journals in their specialist areas.

Doing this when giving evidence to a Select Committee was, in my experience, fun – and came quite naturally, because, again, teaching is to some extent simplifying the things we are expert in and passing them along to others. But it made me wonder if there were other ways in which I could engage with Parliament – or *help* do this simplification work ...

... And then a post in the Commons Library came up. I applied, I got the job, and found myself a small part of a great team of people who spend most of their time writing Research Briefings for MPs that are *in many cases* the only real ‘background’ MPs engage with on an issue they are meant to debate and possibly legislate on. My colleagues in the Commons Library might politely protest me describing them like this, but they are world-leading experts in the particular briefs that they cover, just because of the amount of time they have spent focusing on those, the research they have done to ensure they’re on top of them, and the different ways in which they have to try to convey to MPs what is happening in those

briefs. They just don’t *publish on them* the way that academics do because that isn’t their job.

I remember the first few research briefings that I worked on well and was edited quite significantly by my very experienced ‘team leader’ – in large part because I naturally started writing in my awkward, native ‘academic’ style. But that isn’t the point of working for the Commons Library: we produced those research briefings not to show *how well we’d done our homework* and *what original thoughts we had to contribute*, but to ensure that *MPs were prepared for a debate*. Indeed, I regularly got told off (very gently) for making my own opinion on an issue that was being debated too clear in what I was writing: this a standard expectation in academic writing, but an absolute no-goer in writing for the Commons Library, which prides itself on being party-politically neutral, for understandable reasons.

I learned *so much* from my two years at the Commons Library. In particular, I learned about substance, in the sense that MPs and their staff regularly asked (on behalf of constituents or their own work) wholly unexpected questions, which would have never reached me in my capacity as an academic EU lawyer, but that made me undertake some really fun deep dives into UK and EU history. In addition, I learned about *how to*

2 The European Council, the Council of the European Union, and the Council of Europe. No, I don’t know who decided this was a good idea.

communicate. Writing for this new audience was, in many ways, more straightforward than writing for academic purposes, and it made me think significantly about my own academic writing: its clarity, purpose, and the specific audience I was trying to *reach* through it.

This thought process proved instrumental in a separate but related activity that I took upon myself in the late 2010s: writing a textbook on EU law.

‘ACADEMIC’, BUT FOR STUDENTS

Around 2015 I signed a contract with Oxford University Press (OUP) to write a textbook on EU law. My aim at the time was to do what I tried to do in my teaching: write about EU law like it was a *core part* of the British constitution, rather than treating it like ‘foreign law’ that stands alone, as most other textbooks do. The whole pitch was to write about ‘EU law in the UK’, and I managed to persuade enough people at OUP that this was a worthwhile venture and I could make the material hands-on by means of problem scenarios, and so on.

I was excited about doing this because I thought it would connect well with the students, and I got started, and then ...

Well. Let’s just say the will of the people threw a rather sizeable wrench into my plans.

I won’t go over the four years of author-existential angst in any

great detail here. But obviously, in the absence of having a single clue as to what the settled relationship between the UK and the EU would look like, it was quite hard to progress on a textbook that had as its unique selling point that it would cover EU law in the UK. At the same time, I started absolutely drowning in work on *Brexit* that was time-pressed and felt like it might actually matter for the political process the UK Government was engaged in, and so the final first edition of the textbook was eventually drafted in January 2020 and published later that year.

At the time of writing this piece, my textbook needs an update that once more I have not found the time to focus on, but I anticipate that setting out what was enjoyable about this writing process, and what it taught me about my ability to communicate, will spark something again.

I went into the textbook thinking that I wanted to deliver EU law from a slightly different angle, but I also recognised that many of the ‘classic’ EU law textbooks that I used when I was a student were still there, and absolutely great. But those books were written at what I can only call an ‘academic level’ and seemed to present a struggle for my modern-day students. These books were pitched in a way that made EU law feel ‘remote’ – a type of foreign law that students seemed to find incredibly difficult to get to grips with. I can only speculate as

to why a book that I had managed to work my way through suddenly felt almost like an unscalable mountain for undergraduates a decade and a half on. But the feedback and my own experiences of what I needed to cover in teaching them – which was usually *the same material*, but grounded in a UK viewpoint, with a deliberate focus on making the material as accessible to them as possible – suggested that something was just not clicking with the students.

Almost naturally, I wrote in a wholly different *style* from those textbooks. Much of my drafting took place during the time I wrote a lot of policy papers, some lengthy research reports for the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission and the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland, working for the Commons Library, Twitter posts and blogs, and so on ... While I was also still publishing standard academic writing, *most* of my day-to-day writing was for other purposes. Consequently, I slipped out of my awkward ‘serious academic’ voice and into my far more natural writing voice, which I’ve been told is virtually identical to what I sound like when I actually speak. This only became clear to me when samples of book chapters went out for review and fellow academics wrote back about how they were surprised because I’d managed to make really typical/traditional material – like the history of the EU – somehow read in a way that they described as

‘fresh’ and ‘gripping’. My editor pointed out to me that mine was one of the easiest books for her to edit because, even though she didn’t know *much* about EU law, I was making it very approachable.

I suppose I could look at this feedback and conclude that, aha, I must be an *amazing* writer! – but the reality is I got into the habit of writing for non-academic audiences through work-adjacent activity, and that carried over into my writing of this textbook in a way that, as it turns out, people actually really *like* in textbook writing.

Many students politely suffer through EU law – my favourite bit of feedback I’ve ever gotten was from the kid who simply said ‘Well, it’s a bit like going to the dentist, isn’t it, it’s not fun but you’ve just got to do it’, or if you will, ‘EU law: just like a root canal!’ Students don’t usually have much enthusiasm for the subject, but I’ve found that their enthusiasm *does* respond to their confidence, and I’ve managed to improve their confidence by using my own textbook.

Up until a few years ago, I received a few questions every year asking after alternative textbooks, because whichever one or two we recommended, they didn’t click with all the students. Perhaps they’re just afraid to ask if I can please recommend an alternative *to my own book* these days, but I like to think that something about how I’ve written the text is making a fundamental difference.

Even if that's not true, however, I genuinely did *like* writing about EU law when I was working on the textbook, in that I got to study things that I either hadn't studied for ages or got to write up the things I am an expert on in a way that felt natural – and that's an experience I've not always had when writing up research findings for an academic audience.

By the time I finished writing the textbook, however, I realised that I wasn't happy accepting that as the *status quo* anymore: I would try to find a way to make the 'for other academic experts' material work better *for me*.

'NEW-STYLE' ACADEMIC SYLVIA

I'm no longer 'new' to academia, as my daughter would happily confirm; the times when I could apply for funding as an early career scholar are many years behind me at this point. This matters less than you'd think, however, when it comes to having *confidence* as an academic writer. Every new submission is another dive off the deep end, where your prior performance doesn't matter at all: peer review is always anonymous, so my writing always has to speak for itself, even if the fact I'm the author might be more or less obvious.

I don't think I consciously stopped working very hard on adopting a proper academic voice until the last three or four years or

so, and, even then, it was daunting. Sometimes it involved compromise, largely because I co-write with others a lot, and obviously having one very 'casual' writer next to one that adheres to the 'academic style' script may make the end result harder to understand. But I managed to produce a couple of pieces that I wrote just as *I would have articulated them out loud*, and then went through and polished them to hit the baselines of academic writing; these were mostly to do with formatting and referencing, but not much actual changing of the text itself.

I have never been hit with the typical Reviewer 2, who seems to get their joy in life out of making other academics feel small, and I know I'm very lucky for it. I was genuinely surprised, however, that even pieces that I wrote in what I now think of as 'freehand' were not getting picked up on for how casual the language was *in most places*. Fifteen years in academia have made me about as 'un-precious' as I can be about getting my work published, and if any colleague therefore thinks I need to change a few words here and there in order to be properly 'academic', I am happy to do that as part of revisions. It doesn't change that the original writing process felt pretty freeing and allowed me to consider my future audience as a mixed one: not *only* could academics read what I was doing and get something out of it, but perhaps with a few questions they'd like to follow up on, so could

policy-makers, politicians, those working for non-governmental organisations, and perhaps even members of the general public.

I wrote a ‘freehand’ case note on a particular Court of Justice decision in 2023, as part of my long-running campaign to become a household name on the very niche subject of the EU concept of ‘comprehensive sickness insurance’. One of the most memorable moments of my career came when a random member of the public emailed me to let me know that this had proven very helpful to her in trying to figure out what she needed in order to apply for British citizenship. I’ve gotten less surprising, but equally worthwhile, emails from practitioners – long gone from the ‘academy’ – who wanted to follow up with me on my reading of that case and related developments.

Now, case notes aren’t exactly the ‘height’ of academic writing – we can’t submit them for the Research Excellence Framework (REF), which automatically devalues them – but they are still definitely a valuable form, indeed, one that I cannot think of as having a *purely* academic purpose. We, as academics, are usually watching the law as observers – we are *rarely* the people dealing with it in practice. The fact that those who would actually be dealing with the consequences of this judgment got something useful out of my academic writing about it is therefore extremely rewarding. Just as rewarding as when one of the EU’s Advocate-Generals cited

an *actual* academic article I wrote in their advisory opinion for the Court of Justice of the EU. But it was significantly more surprising, since I wouldn’t expect a member of the general public to read my writing, or even those in practice, who tend to have their *own* strand of professional journals, and have no real reason to engage with our much more theoretical stuff.

ON WRITING FOR ‘AUDIENCES’

Some of you might read this and think that what I’m actually saying here in this article is: I like writing policy papers, briefings for the public sector and textbooks *more* than I like writing academic articles, and that’s fine, but they are very different things and they can stay that way.

I think that’s almost a fair take on what I’ve tried to articulate here, but it nonetheless misses my ultimate point. Yes, our writing for different audiences normally looks and feels a little different – but *those differences do not have to be exaggerated* in the way that I find they are between peer-reviewed published journal articles and everything else I write. We do not need to be ultra-verbose, technical or jargony, and ultimately just showing off how much we *know* and *think* to make a very solid and thoroughly academic contribution. If this is something we enjoy doing, by all means! But if we don’t enjoy doing it, we can borrow style from

other types of writing and reach different types of audiences.

There is, in other words, more than one way to be an academic. And if your current approach to being an academic does not always make you feel like you're achieving what you want to, or enjoying what you are doing, why not think about the writing you would *like* to be doing, and what that would look like?

CONCLUSION?

Much of what I have written about in this reflection has flagged the unintentional impact that Brexit has had on my development as a writer. An underlying theme there is that Brexit-type work has a potentially very broad audience because (at the time) there was a tremendous amount of public interest in what was happening – but what was happening also frequently involved the highly technical jargon of two different legal jurisdictions in the form of draft texts. People, not just academics, wanted to know what to *think* about Brexit developments – and while I was in a position to help with that (alongside my frequent co-authors), that audience would not have benefited from me taking the 'lawyer speak' in these draft texts and turning them into 'academic speak' instead.

Working on these types of rapidly moving current events makes the 'academic writing' conundrum stand out all the more: here, not only because the *style* isn't what most of our potential audience is interested in, but also because academic publishing tends to be slow to enable peer review and editing and so on, meaning that a 'quick comment' on current legal developments is likely to not see the light of day for several months.³

Trying to write about these kinds of developments in the normal 'academic' style is therefore a misfit on several levels, and what I found ended up working best is to treat my contributions as taking place in two distinct steps. First, I worked to quickly parse new developments to try to get that broader communication out in the shape of a blog post, policy paper or research briefing; and that non-academic report could then form the foundations of a later, more 'classic' academic analysis. This, too, made the latter easier to produce – the bones of any further article were already there, and fleshing it out into a more academic piece meant *expanding* on that material, while keeping as much of the original 'accessibility' as possible.

In sum, the moral of my story, insofar as there is one, is not purely that there *can* be more to academia

3 I will here give an unsolicited shout-out to the *Northern Ireland Legal Quarterly*, whose editorial team have been absolutely fantastic at getting 'current affairs' legal commentary out with the smallest delays I've experienced during my 15 years in academia.

than just ‘academic writing’ – and, indeed, ‘impact’ as per the REF pretty much demands that there is! – but that ‘academic writing’ itself can also be *more* than what we traditionally expect of it and are likely trained to do. In my experience, we don’t *have* only to be talking to other academics when

we publish; the less we stick to our disciplinary expectations and styles and write about *what we know* with the aim of *reaching as many people as we can*, the more rewarding our academic writing becomes.