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# 'NOT I?'
# CREATING A PERSONA IN ACADEMIC WRITING

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**ABSTRACT**

This paper focuses on the question of narrative voice in academic writing, particularly in the field of English Literature, although other subjects (in both the physical and human sciences) are referred to. Several issues are addressed. First, different types of persona are appropriate to different academic disciplines, and so overseas students must learn to create a persona appropriate to his or her chosen subject (s). Secondly, certain disciplines may send extremely confusing signals to learners who are unfamiliar with the academic culture (e.g. English Literature students are expected to master the impersonal construction of a "personal response"). This confusion is in part related to the nature of the academic community. Thirdly, academic writing instruction neglects the development of a "voice" which is acceptable to one's assessors. In this article, the nature of academic "voices" is discussed and tasks suggested.

## Introduction

Overseas students studying English Literature in British universities are often counseled to avoid using the first person pronoun, "I". They are advised, in other words, to create an impersonal voice when presenting a personal response to a work of literature. Many students are confused by this apparent paradox. This paper is an attempt to explore the reasons for the paradox, and, equally, to begin to fill in a gap in the teaching of EAP, namely, teaching English for the study of subjects in the Humanities. When it comes to English Literature (with the honourable exception of Stylistics), this neglect borders on avoidance: we may talk of "Literature with a small 'l" but the capitalised subject is treated with some suspicion. Again, why is this so?

## Socialising ESP

To answer this question directly, it is necessary to draw back and look at EAP in the broader context of ESP. ESP -whether vocational or academic - is still for obvious reasons of clientele and economics focused on scientific and social scientific subjects. Even so, there has been a sea-change in the last

fifteen years in the way that ESP is conceptualised and taught. Earlier waves of ESP theorists and practitioners tended to view *science* as a kind of superlanguage, a symbolic universal code which only required translation from one natural language into another. This view is expressed by Allen and Widdowson, in an early article in which they justify the kind of teaching materials found in *English in Physical Science*, later one of the *English in Focus* series. Here they appeal to the now-familiar dichotomy of "usage" and "use" to justify the teaching of ESP as "communication". Their aim is to teach the language as it is used - but this use is strangely outside a social context:

> We make two basic assumptions. Firstly, we assume that in spite of the shortcomings of secondary school English teaching the students have acquired considerable dormant competence in the manipulation of the language system. Secondly, we assume that they already have a knowledge of basic science. Hitherto, these kinds of knowledge have existed in separation: our task is to relate them.
>
> (Allen & Widdowson 1974; reprinted in Swales, ed. 1985: 75)

This view of ESP was the result of a simple concept of scientific practice and procedure: experiments (or "reasoning procedures") give rise to a representation of nature which finds a "natural" rendering into language. What we need to teach, therefore, is the functional language that accommodates that representation of nature: description, definition, classification, linear and cyclical processes, and so on. If scientific (and academic) writing is purely the representation of nature, then all we need to do is give our students the tools for this representation, and let them get on with it.

A key figure in the move away from this view - or at least a qualification of it - has been John Swales. In an early (1985) articulation of his views he borrows from the sociology of science to chart out the ground that he and others will later begin to map in detail:

> ...it is not only texts that we need to understand, but the roles texts have in their environments; the values, congruent and conflictive, placed on them by occupational, professional and disciplinary memberships; and the expectations those memberships have of the patternings of the genres they participate in, be they monographs, textbooks, lectures, examination papers, memos, minutes, testimonials, case-notes, or presentations at fiftieth anniversary seminars.
>
> (Swales 1985: 219)

In a dichotomy reminiscent of that of "usage" and "use" (even down to the obligatory alliteration), Swales differentiates between the "conceptual structures" of a discipline, and the "conventions of conduct" which organise it. And so the ESP researcher, teacher and learner all turn ethnographer in order to study the rules of disciplinary etiquette. This turn has several consequences for the classroom. Students begin to study the strategic use of footnoting to establish an intellectual genealogy, or they consider the most tactful way of writing reprint requests. Linguistically, we begin to consider what Myers (1989) calls the "pragmatics of politeness in scientific texts". Myers considers, for example, the "face4hreatening" effect of making a knowledge claim in a journal article: if you are refuting the claims of powerful members of the peer community - then you are going to be modest about it. You are, for example, going to use "the results perhaps suggest" rather than "I have definitely proved". Which is all very well if we are teaching our students to survive in the environment of a biology laboratory. What if, like my overseas student, you are trying to survive in the bohemian corridors of the Literature department? What conventions of conduct hold here? And, in particu1ar, how should the student present him or herself in this academic community?

**Academic Tribes**

An extremely useful sociological guide to academia is Becher's (1989) study of what he calls "academic tribes and territories". Becher constructs a model of academic communities which can be classed as "urban" at one end of a continuum, and "rural" at the other. Urban communities have a high concentration of people working on a relatively low number of problems, often in teams. The hard sciences are the prototype of such communities, which share central assumptions about methodologies and procedures and so can communicate in linguistically dense shorthand which presupposes vast amounts of shared knowledge. Rural communities have a low concentration of people working on a relatively high number of problems, seldom in teams. Procedures vary, and methodologies are up for grabs. English Literature is Becher's prototypical example of a rural community. If we grant for the moment that students are socialised into these communities (and only partly by the teaching process), then we might expect this socialisation to occur differently in different disciplines. To categorise crudely, those who study the "hard sciences" tend to be initiated into teams where there is a widespread consensus about methodologies. Those who study "the humanities" tend to be expected to work alone, and methodologies are less explicit and less consensual in nature.

The point I do wish to make is that the conventions of conduct in a rural academic community are bewildering to a novice, especially a novice who is undergoing what Bradford (1984) calls the "double cultural shift" of entering an academic community in an unfamiliar country. Strange as it may seem, many people do survive, and even come to enjoy and appreciate the initially confusing disciplinary conventions of Literature with a capital "L". How best can we, as EAP practitioners, empower our students so that they too can reap the benefits of literary study?

**The Process of Academic Writing**

There is a naive model of literary study that parallels the naive model of scientific procedure, detailed earlier. The naive model would suggest that if you can read, understand and appreciate a literary text, then you can write about it in such a way that will impress your lecturer or tutor. Writing in this model is a kind of natural effusion - whether it is inspired by experimental activity or by the contemplation of an Elizabethan sonnet.

A different view would see the term assignment or exam as a counter in a social game of self-preservation and evolving community relationships. Of course it is more than that - writing is also a process of discovery, of re-evaluation and clarification of ideas - but it is nevertheless (especially for the competitive student) a platform where you market yourself as a worthy community member. If we scorn this aspect then perhaps we are letting our students down.

So, apart from the standard practices (using reference materials, formatting quotes, notes and bibliographies, and dealing with some archaic vocabulary, etc) what can we do to help students create a presentable persona? I have time here to focus only on two main areas, which I hope to illustrate with examples and tasks.

**Developing a voice**

Creating a persona for oneself causes problems even for the most advanced students, particularly when it comes to assessment in an academic context. What kind of voice does the assessor expect? Tentative or confident? Formal or informal? What kind of evidence does he or she expect me to produce?

A possible strategy for students trying to find an acceptable voice in a "rural" academic community is to study and adopt the voice of a particular tribe. Initially, this adoption will again seem like imitation, but with time and practice a personal voice can be developed. The problem is that the assessor might come from a rival tribe: still, if a student's arguments are sound enough, few lecturers, however grudging, will completely discount them. And, indeed, criticism is a good test of the point of view of one's adopted tribe.

In the academic context, then, how can a tribal voice be developed? Part of the process is deciding on one's method of analysis and type of evidence. A further part of the process is learning to present this analysis and evidence. At this point the search for models is useful.

**Exploiting models**

Some EAP teachers might argue that if we are going to use models for academic essays, then these models should themselves be academic essays. I have some sympathy for this view, and it is true that banks of specimen essays are being collated for student use in some universities. But these are not yet widely available.

In the absence of directly-relevant models, I tend to advise students to look at published articles and books for their models of acceptable academic prose. There is a problem in this: the power relationship between writer and reader is different in the case of written publication, and in the case of student-lecturer. Yet there may be parallels: the lecturer and the editor are both "gate-keepers" to the academic discourse community; in both cases the author has to produce work that is passable.

A particular question that can be asked is how a published author constructs his or her persona. One way of examining this question is to look at the expressions of modality in the model: namely, the use of the first person pronoun, the use of modal verbs and adjuncts, and the use of comment clauses, etc. Paul Simpson (1990) has studied modality in FR Leavis's essay "The Great Tradition". Simpson's critical conclusion is that Leavis's main strategy is to use unmodalised assertions, often with the "inclusive" first-person plural pronoun, "we". Simpson argues that this strategy disguises methodological shortcomings:

> In fact, judging by some of the patterns uncovered by the analysis the tactic seems to be to present potentially controversial information as if it were self-evidently true or part of the shared knowledge between critic and reader, and to present information that is less "risky" by comparison as if it were dubious or likely to cause affront.
>
> (Simpson 1990: 91)

Simpson's analysis is more persuasive than his conclusion. My own limited study of modality in the fields of biology, computing, history and literature suggest that the patterns of modality are different in the Sciences and Humanities. One indication of this is in the nature of the modal adjuncts found in

sentence-initial (thematic) position in three learned articles in these four fields. A summary is given below:

| **Computing** | **Biology** | **History** | **Literature** |
|---|---|---|---|
| In short | In particular | Not surprisingly | Surely (2) |
| In fact (3) | In fact (3) | Of Course (3) | Of course (3) |
| Perhaps | Indeed | Clearly | Naturally |
| In any event | | Obviously | Obviously (3) |
| | | Probably | Perhaps (2) |
| | | Without doubt | Certainly |
| | | Broadly speaking | Actually (2) |
| | | More specifically | At all events |
| | | Inevitably | In short |

This is a rough count of a partial sample, but interesting patterns emerge. All of the fields have thematic adjuncts showing degrees of possibility ("perhaps", "probably"). "Style" adjuncts (eg "in short", "in particular", "broadly speaking"), that is, adjuncts which do not so much divulge attitude as comment on the form of the message, are also found in all four fields, and perhaps reveal a consistent self-consciousness about the construction of academic texts. But it's the differences which are interesting: the Science texts use a relatively high number of verifactive modals (eg "in fact"). These are indicative of hypothesis testing. In contrast, both Humanities texts use presumptive modals: "of course", "obviously", "naturally", "clearly", "surely". The use of these modals suggests a different persona altogether: not the modest experimenter but the persuasive authority: one who is telling us things he (and it is usually he) believes we should already know. The pattern is obvious but not completely clear-cut: there are two verifactive modals in thematic position in one of the literature texts: one literary critic uses "actually" twice when paraphrasing and then rebutting the views of another. Other critics will use "in fact" for similar reasons. The point is that the function and distribution of these items appears to differ in different academic disciplines.

A study of the modality of texts gives us and our students a clue about how powerful members of the academic tribe construct their personae, their voices. Simpson attacks Leavis for creating an authoritative persona on the basis of his own intuition. I am arguing that this strategy is in fact widespread in the Humanities. Of the three literary critical articles analysed (AC Bradley, LC Knights and Terry Eagleton: all writing about *Macbeth*), the most controversial is probably Terry Eagleton's. His rhetorical strategy is very similar to Leavis as described by Simpson. A brief quotation will give the flavour:

> To any unprejudiced reader - which would seem to exclude Shakespeare himself, his contemporary audiences and almost all literary critics it is surely clear that positive value in *Macbeth* lies with the three witches. The witches are the heroines of the piece,

> however little the play itself recognizes the fact, and however much the critics may have set out to defame them.
>
> (Eagleton 1986: 2)

Where Leavis conspires with his readers by using "inclusive" *we*, Eagleton pulls his audience into the circle of unprejudiced readers - but only if they agree with him. Outside the circle are "literary critics" and other prejudiced readers, for example the author of the play. Inside the circle the elite few "surely" see "clearly" that the long-supposed villains are actually heroines. Eagleton goes on to justify his reading but his claims ultimately appeal less to a replicable empirical procedure, validated by a like-minded community, than on intuition and persuasion, delivered with individual authority.

LC Knights uses a very similar strategy in his attack on Bradley's speculations on the private life of Lady Macbeth:

> Read with attention, the plays themselves supply the clue of how they should be read. But those who prefer another kind of evidence have only to consider the contemporary factors that conditioned the making of an Elizabethan play, namely the native tradition of English drama descending from the morality plays, the construction of the playhouse and the conventions depending, in part, upon that construction, and the tastes and expectations of the audience, I have not space to deal with any of these in detail.
>
> (Knights, 1946: 5)

Here, again, if we disagree with Knights, we are among those who read the play without much attention, and if we are peevish enough to request further evidence then we are referred to historical factors, which Knights apparently knows intimately but is witholding from us. It is interesting to note that Knights does use first person "I" here - however, it is mainly restricted to comment clauses, such as "I take it", and to those clauses which preview the structure of the text, for example "In the next section I shall...". There also seems to be a difference according to period: Bradley uses "I" frequently, Knights seldom, and Eagleton hardly at all.

Should we be asking our students - assuming that they are literary specialists - to write like this? I think the answer has to be yes. If these are successful models, then I think we are justified in asking our students, not to ape the voices, but to replicate their procedures. EAP in the Humanities, then, demands that we teach our students to exploit a combination of their own intuition and some knowledge of the interpretations of others. It demands awareness of the kind of evidence that other (more powerful) members of the discourse community will find more or less legitimate (eg a marxist versus a historicist reading of *Macbeth*), and it demands a familiarity with the language of authority. And that, in many cases, does mean not using "I" but "We", perhaps in opposition to an unenlightened "They". More crucially, it means knowing how to hedge and when, and how to be assertive and when.

The appendices to this article suggest teaching materials which are designed to encourage students to move up and down this rhetorical range. The tasks require students to consider their own response to a literary text, and how this response might be modified by secondary reading. They also demand that students pay attention to the construction of secondary reading - that they read it critically - and that they use the procedures found in it to guide their own responses.

**Towards materials design**

"Worksheet A" is based on Terry Eagleton's inspired rereading of *Macbeth*, mentioned above. I assume that the students have read the play (or seen it performed) - at least that they know the plot. The worksheet is designed to encourage learners to think about the process of making knowledge claims, and in particular the ideological frameworks that secondary reading will use in giving supporting evidence for claims. I have abstracted from Eagleton's argument his main claim (ie that the witches are the true heroines of the Scottish play) and asked them to brainstorm reasons for and against this controversial propostition. Eagleton's own supporting evidence is then added to the broth, and students are asked to rank his arguments in order of plausibility, then to reflect on the ideological position from which he makes his claim (i.e. it is the role of a true hero/heroine to offer a critique of an unjust society). The questions raised by revisionist interpretations of renaissance drama might be raised here: does it matter that Shakespeare was not a marxist?

Section Four considers the form of the claim: Eagleton's rhetoric is filleted, and the learners are asked to reconstruct it in slightly different contexts: I would expect the bold version to echo Eagleton's strong claim; a more tentative version might be more appropriate for someone in a less powerful position.

The final section caters for two levels of ability - or perhaps a fairer word is "confidence". The less confident student might wish to review the strategies by summarising and offering a critique of Eagleton's approach. The more confident student might prefer to apply Eagieton's approach to an equally controversial argument - for example that the Porter is the secret hero of *Macbeth*.

"Worksheet B" does similar things with a more manageable Renaissance text: John Donne's *The Flea*. The first activity is mainly to familiarise learners with the poem by asking them to relate a critic's paraphrase to the original text.

Subsequent activities are designed to build up a critical vocabulary, and encourage students to modify their evaluations of a piece of literature by responding critically to secondary reading. Again the ideological implications of the criticism is highlighted, and, in the second writing task, learners are encouraged to use the secondary reading as models for more or less authoritative "voices".

It is of course the overuse of the first person pronoun which weakens the authority of the literary critic's "voice". And of course it is not enough to train learners to be emptily bombastic. But if we give appropriate weight to the use of appropriate evidence in combination with the development of an authoritative persona, then we are perhaps guiding students down a path which will lead in time both to perceptive literary criticism and successful self-presentation in a difficult discourse community.

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**WORKSHEET A:** Reading ***Macbeth***

**References:**
Eagleton, T. (1986) *William Shakespeare* Oxford: Blackwell.

This worksheet is designed to help you use secondary material when writing an academic essay. (Remember when quoting directly or indirectly from secondary material, you must give the source in the correct format.)

1. Consider the following claim:

> **The witches are the true heroines of *Macbeth*.**
>
> In pairs, brainstorm reasons for and against this claim. When you have finished, rank these reasons in order of plausibility:

| Reasons for | Reasons against | |
|---|---|---|
| | | most plausible |
| | | |
| | | |
| | | |
| | | least plausible |

2. Now, consider the following reasons, given to justify the above claim. Rank them in order of plausibility.

a. It is they [the witches] who, by releasing ambitious thoughts in Macbeth, expose a reverence for hierarchical order for what it is, as the pious self-deception of a society based on routine oppression and incessant warfare.
b. They [the witches] are poets, prophetesses and devotees of female cult, radical separatists who scorn male power and lay bare the hollow sound and fury at its heart. Their words and bodies mock rigorous boundaries and make sport of fixed positions, unhinging received meanings as they dance, dissolve and re-materialize.
c. Meek women, military carnage and aristocratic titles are supposed by the play to be natural; witches and regicide are not. Yet this opposition will not hold even within *Macbeth*'s own terms, since the 'unnatural' - Macbeth's lust for power - is disclosed by the witches as already lurking within the 'natural' the routine state of cut-throat rivalry between noblemen.

3. Look again at these three supporting arguments.

a. Compare them to the arguments you produced earlier. Are they at all similar?
b. What is the view here of the function of a hero/heroine?
c. Do you think this would have been Shakespeare's idea of a hero/heroine?
d. Does it matter what Shakespeare thought?
e. Do you generally agree with the views proposed above? Justify your agreement or disagreement.

4. Consider the form of the claim made below: complete the missing text, (a) assuming that you are a marxist critic writing for publication, then (b) do it again, assuming you are a first-year undergraduate writing for a rather old-fashioned lecturer.

> To any _____ reader - which would seem to exclude Shakespeare, his contemporary audiences and _____ literary critics - it is _____ clear that positive value in *Macbeth* lies with the three witches.
>
> Possible missing words
> surely
> almost all
> open-minded some
> perhaps
> unprejudiced

5. Review sections 1-4 and then write a brief essay either agreeing or disagreeing with Eagleton's claim that the witches are the true heroines of *Macbeth*. Be sure to consider *both* points of view in your essay.

*or*

Review sections 1-4 and then write a brief essay, in a similar manner, arguing for or against the claim that the Porter is the true hero of *Macbeth*. Be sure to consider *both* points of view in your essay.

**WORKSHEET B:** Reading ***The Flea***

**References:**
Leishman, JB. 1962. *The Monarch of Wit*. 5th edn. London. Hutchinson.
Ronson, M. 1974. *The Soul of Wit*. Oxford. OUP.
Winny, J. 1970. *A Preface to Donne* . London. Longman.

**1. Paraphrase**
paragraph below is a paraphrase of John Donne's "The Flea", adapted from Winny (1970: 127). Spaces have been inserted for line references. Read the poem, and enter the appropriate line references. The first reference has been entered.

The argument begins and ends with a fleabite. The insect has bitten the lover and mistress in turn [*line 3*], and now contains a mixture of their bloods [ ]. Thus, the flea has brought about the kind of union which the lover desires, yet without raising any moral protest from the mistress [ ]; enjoying them both with no longwinded preliminaries [ ], and growing into a compound being [ ], as they might if the lady would yield to him.

When she threatens to kill the flea, he restrains her [ ]; the insect is now them, filled with their two bloods. It is also the marriage bed in which they were physically united [ ], and the church in which their marriage was celebrated [ ]. Despite hostile parents and the lady's own reluctance [ ], they have become a single being within the flea's body [ ]. Although, hardened by custom, she might think nothing of murdering part of him by killing the flea [ ], that crime would involve suicide and sacrilege [ ]; for she would also kill part of herself and destroy the marriage temple in which they were united [ ].

But she persists in her triple crime; and having 'purpled her nail' in the flea's blood, she refutes his argument about murder and suicide by showing that neither of them is any weaker for having lost the particle of life supposedly sucked from them [ ]. In this momentary triumph, she gives the lover the means of crushing her in a final, unanswerable demonstration by turning her own point against her. She is right, he admits [ ]; and just as she has lost nothing of consequence to the flea, so in surrendering to him [ ], her honour will suffer no more than a fleabite [ ].

**The Flea**

Marke but this flea, and marke in this,
How little that which thou deny'st me is;
It suck'd me first, and now sucks thee,
And in this flea our two bloods mingl'd bee;
Thou know'st that this cannot be said
A sinne, nor shame, nor losse of maidenhead
Yet this enjoyes before it wooe,
And pamper'd swells with one blood made of two

And this, alas, is more than wee would do.

Oh stay, three lives in one flea spare,
Where wee almost, yea more than married are.
This flea is you and I, and this
Our marriage bed, and marriage temple is:
Though parents grudge, and you w'are met,
And cloysterd in these living walls of Jet.
Though use make you apt to kill me,
Let not to that, selfe murder added bee,
And sacrilege, three sinnes in killing three.

Cruell and sodaine, hast thou since
Purpled thy naile, in blood of innocence?
Wherein could this flea guilty bee,
Except in that drop which it suckt from thee?
Yet thou triumph'st, and saist that thou
Find'st not thy selfe, nor mee, the weaker now;
'Tis true, then learne how false feares bee;
Just so much honor, when thou yeeld'st to mee,
Will wast, as this flea's death took life from thee.

**2. Evaluative vocabulary**

After having read the poem, decide which of the following words do/do not describe it (in your opinion). You may wish to add words of your own.

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| witty | shocking | irreverent | romantic | funny |
| outrageous | trivial | mysoginist | contrived | sincere |
| preposterous | original | cynical | admirable | ingenious |

| Column A | Column B | Column C |
|---|---|---|
| The poem is.... | The poem is not... | I am not sure if the poem is... |

When you have finished, compare your answers with those of a partner. Justify your choices. Are the words chosen for Column A *positive* or *negative* in meaning?

**3. First Writing Task**

Imaging that you are describing and evaluating this poem to a group of compatriots who are unfamiliar with English poetry. Write three paragraphs summarising the main points of the poem, giving your evaluation of it, and justifying your evaluation.

**4. Secondary Reading**

Look at the following quotations, from three critics writing about "The Flea". Look in particular at the way in which they use the *italicised* words to indicate whether their argument is speculative or obvious:

> There are *of course* no grounds for reading the poem as an indication of Donne's private morals, much less for supposing that it represents an argument used in some actual attempt at seduction. (Winny 1970: 126, emphasis added)

> The poem was *no doubt* partly impelled by a current fashion for writing elaborately learned treatises on things of no importance, which in 1579 had produced a book proving 'that baldness is much better than bushy hair'. (Winny 1970: 127, emphasis added)
>
> The modern reader has often assumed incorrectly that the humour depends primarily on the theme itself, the ludicrous incongruity of building upon so insignificant a creature as a flea a case for the passionate consummation of love. *In fact*, Donne's readers at the time of the poem's circulation in manuscript had read dozens of variations on this erotic 'flea' theme, of which the medieval 'Carmen de Pulice', ascribed to Ovid, was the model. (Ronson, 1974: 109, emphasis added)
>
> Why was this poem so admired? *Certainly not* for qualities which many modern critics have taught us to look for and value in poetry - self expression, self-revelation, sincerity and so forth. It was admired, *I take it*, for its sheer wit, for the astonishing fact that Donne had been able to write three stanzas, twenty-seven lines, of close-kit and consecutive argument on such an apparently unpromising subject as a flea-bite... (Leishman, 1962: 165, emphasis added)

What differences do these writers imply between modern and renaissance readers and critics? Do you think it is true to say that, in order to appreciate older literature, we must try to understand and share the values of the period?

**5. Second Writing Task**

Return to the paragraphs that you wrote about "The Flea", and revise them in the light of the secondary reading. (Note that it is not necessary to change your evaluation of the poem, but you might wish to defend it further against counter-arguments found in the secondary reading. Alternatively, the secondary reading might give your own evaluation further support.)

Take care to consider whether you wish to present your arguments as speculative or obvious. Be as authoritative as possible where you think your arguments are strong; where they are weaker, you may wish to indicate this by using "perhaps", or a comment such as "I take it".