

Towards clarity and grace in academic writing

Course leader: Anna Tompsett

Course Objectives: We know clarity and grace when we see them, but they can be elusive in our own academic writing. In this two-day workshop, we will introduce strategies for diagnosing problems with text and making improvements. The course is based on the “Little Red Schoolhouse” approach and draws on the textbook “Style: Lessons in Clarity and Grace” by Joseph M. Williams and Joseph Bizup. The course is designed for advanced PhD students who are working on a draft of an academic paper or a research proposal. We don’t promise you will *achieve* clarity and grace in your academic writing after this workshop. We certainly do not in ours. But we hope to move together *towards* clarity and grace.

Course Outline:

Part I Clarity, focus, and flow, or: How to write sentences and paragraphs.

Part II Framing and structure, or: How to write introductions.

Method of Evaluation: Pass/fail. Three required assignments, as follows. Note particularly that two of the assignments are due **before** the workshop!!

1. Find what you think is a well-written academic paper. You don’t need to motivate or rationalize your choice—just pick a paper that you like and think is well-written. Upload it to the folder on Athena. **Deadline:** 22nd May, 2026, 23.59.
2. Upload a draft of the piece of academic writing you want to work on during the course. This can be a draft introduction to a paper or a research proposal. Papers that are single authored or co-authored with other students are fine. If you have a paper that’s co-authored with faculty that you’d like to work on, check with us first. Having a piece of writing to work on during the workshop is a prerequisite. Email Anna if you’re not sure that what you have qualifies. You must be comfortable sharing this piece of writing with the workshop. **Deadline:** 22nd May, 2026, 23.59.
3. Upload a revised draft of your piece of writing after the workshop, that incorporates the lessons learned in the workshop. **Deadline (tentative):** 7th June, 2026, 23.59

Useful references Apart from the Williams and Bizup book, some useful references are uploaded to Athena. See also “Economical Writing” by Deirdre McCloskey (older editions available online).

Attendance policy This course takes a workshop format. You must attend and participate actively in the workshops. In-person attendance is strongly preferred, but we will make accommodations for remote participation in extenuating circumstances on a case-by-case basis.

Auditors policy You may take this class for credit (3 credits) or not for credit as you prefer. However, all participants must participate actively, implying that they have to complete assignments 1 and 2, share a piece of writing for discussion, and attend and participate in both workshops. This is to put all participants in the workshop on an equal footing.