



Aalto University
School of Arts, Design
and Architecture

Academic Language

Autumn 2021 Thesis plan orientation
8.9.2021 Eeva Berglund

Today's session

- **Features of academic language**
- **Language use in the design field**
- **Reading academic text**
 - A short exercise

BREAK

- **Writing academic text**
 - Some notes on vocabulary
 - Crafting clear text
 - Some points about writing style and voice

Key features of all academic language

It should be clear

It should be rather formal

It should strive for neutrality and professionalism

It should not be (too) personal

It should speak to the audience for which it is intended!

THERE ARE MANY TYPES OF ACADEMIC TEXT

R

The Routledge Companion to Design Studies



Edited by Penny Spørke and Fiona Fisher

New
Ethnographies

Literature and agency in English fiction reading

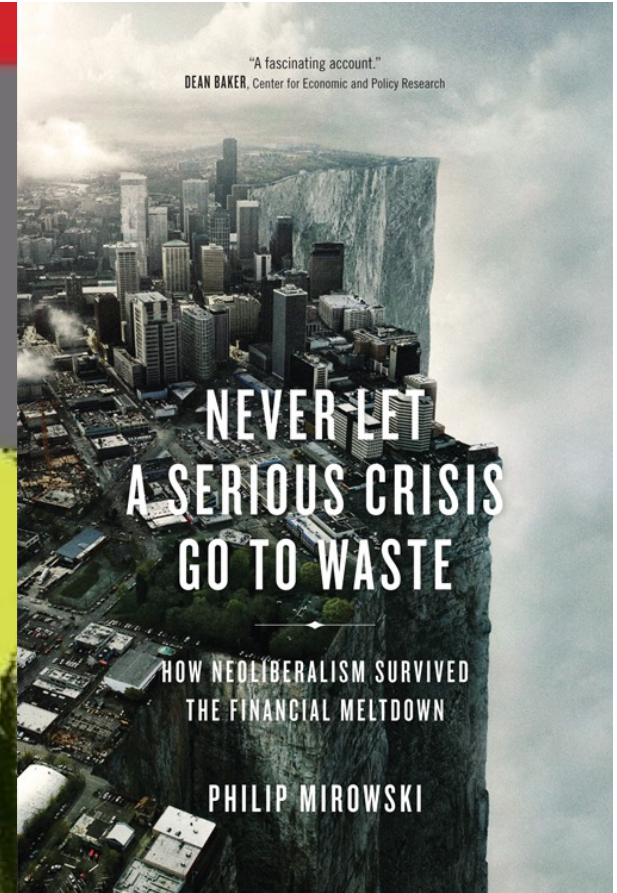
A study of the Henry Williamson Society

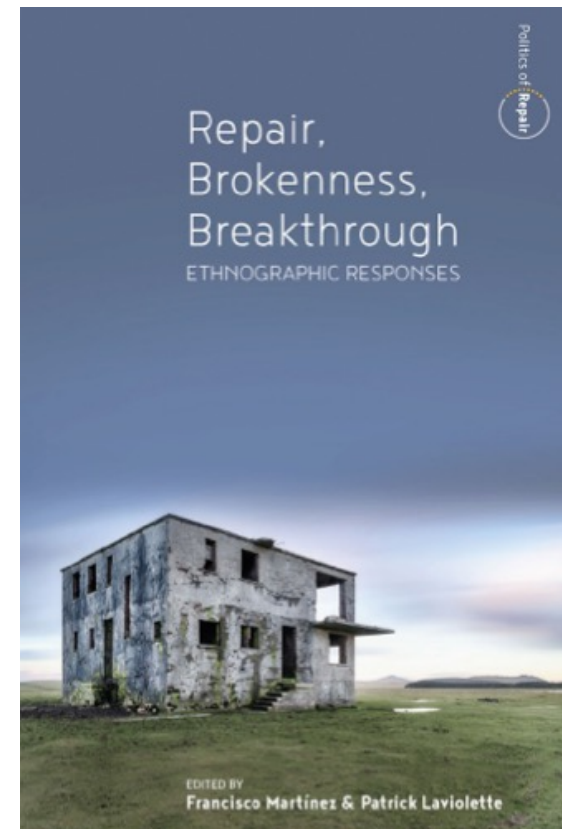
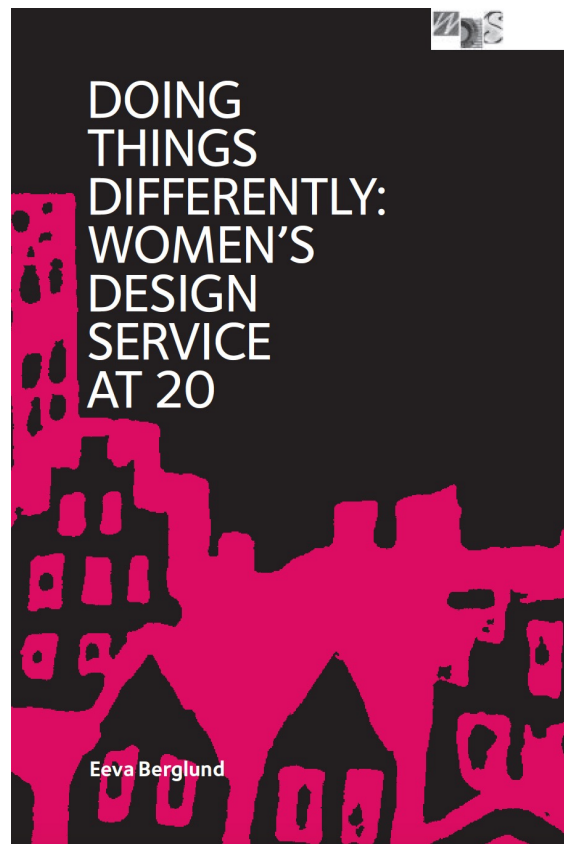
ADAM REED



"A fascinating account."

DEAN BAKER, Center for Economic and Policy Research





Academic language in design

Some features of design writing that I have noticed

- The field is not weighed down by a long academic legacy.
- Design writing tends to be normative, particularly geared to making the world a better place.
- Design researchers write about social and cultural trends that are of concern far beyond just designers and design scholars.
- Research and practice merge into each other.

These together mean that

- Texts can feel preachy or proselytising. **Try to avoid it.**
- There is more freedom than in some disciplines, but sometimes less confidence. This can lead to **fancy or pompous language. Try to avoid this.**
- Good design research is grounded in concrete reality and thus **often includes lengthy descriptions. These can be very helpful.**

An excellent blog post on ‘Researching emerging practices of making/production’ by Aalto researcher Cindy Kohtala makes some very good points about writing as well as about research.

I warmly recommend it.

<https://blogs.aalto.fi/makerculture/2018/01/11/how-to-research-emerging-practices/>

**Exercise: how hard
is it to read
academic text?**



About 25 minutes

Get into groups of four (we will divide you into breakout rooms)

- 1) Introduce yourselves **BRIEFLY** to each other. 3 min.
- 2) Read the passage of text by Arturo Escobar provided earlier. Read it quickly to get a sense of what it is about. How could you approach it? Given your own background, what might you learn from this passage and from the rest of the text?
- 3) Then, examine it closely. Two of you should work on the text on the first slide, two on the second slide. Carefully read through the text assigned to you. Mark out parts that you do not understand, that you find difficult or that are ambiguous or otherwise problematic. Look up unfamiliar words. About 10 minutes.
- 4) Within your breakout room, share your thoughts about the writing, one slide at a time. About 10 minutes.
- 5) Come back to the class to briefly share your reactions.

‘Autonomous design and the emergent transnational critical design studies field’

by Arturo Escobar, *Strategic Design Research Journal*, 11(2): 139-146 May-August 2018

This paper examines the seeming repositioning of design as a central domain of thought and action concerned with the meaning and production of socio-natural life. It suggests that critical design studies are being actively reconstituted – perhaps more clearly than many social and human sciences and professional fields — as a key space for thinking about life and its defense from increasingly devastating anthropogenic forces. There is a hopeful recognition of the multidimensional character of design as material, cultural, epistemic, political, and ontological, all at once. Design, in short, is being acknowledged as a decisive world-making practice, even if often found wanting in this regard. The mood seems to be settling in, at least among a small but possibly growing number of design theorists and practitioners, for playing a more self-aware, and constructive, role in the making and unmaking of worlds.

This means that the political character of design is being more readily acknowledged. New design lexicons and visions are being proposed as a result. The first part of this paper summarizes some of these trends, including the uneven but increasingly intersecting geographies from which they arise. Together, they are seen as constituting a transnational discursive formation of critical design studies. The second part shows the tensions, but also potential synergies and bridges, between approaches stemming from the Global South and those from the Global North, broadly speaking. The third part, finally, tackles the question of the relation between design and autonomy, examining autonomous design as a particular proposal within the transnational critical design studies field. While the analysis is offered as a hypothesis more than as a thoroughly substantiated argumentation, the paper hopes to contribute performatively to constructive articulations of the emergent trends.

On critical design studies as an interepistemic and pluriversal conversation

I believe we are witnessing a significant reorientation of design theory and practice at present, and this issue of SDRJ is an instantiation of this auspicious moment. I am not suggesting that previous moments in design history have been immune to change; however, the current phase exhibits features that make this moment particularly transformative, theoretically, practically, and politically. I would highlight three of them:

(i) The growing willingness on the part of a number of designers worldwide, although largely anchored in the Global North, to engage more deeply than ever with the interrelated crises of climate, energy, poverty, inequality, and meaning and the momentous questions they pose. These questions go well beyond the concern with the disappearance of species and the increasingly destructive effects of climate change, to involve the disruption of basic human sociality, the breakdown of social relations, the

proliferation of wars and violence, massive displacement of peoples and nonhumans, abhorrent inequality, intensifying forms of intolerance, and the difficulty young people face today in crafting lives of meaning. I believe many designers are alert to this suffering and devastation and genuinely attuned to the Earth and to the fate of their fellow humans. They are more inclined than ever to consider design as central to the crisis and hence that it may be a crucial factor in confronting it imaginatively and effectively. Notions such as design for social innovation (Manzini, 2015), transition design (e.g., Irwin et al., 2015), design towards Sustainment (Fry, 2012, 2017a; Fry et al., 2015), and redesigning the human are perhaps the most compelling expressions of this critical awareness and disposition.

(...)

Let's take a break

10 minutes

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Writing is hard,
even for authors
who do it all the
time.

From William Strunk Jr. and E.B. White, *The Elements of Style*, Ed.4, 1979, 'Foreword' by Roger Angell



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How we write

Depends on who will be reading our text

Writing *academic* text is perhaps especially difficult – but also rewarding

Specialist and research-based – not supposed to be easy!

Needs arguments and supporting evidence

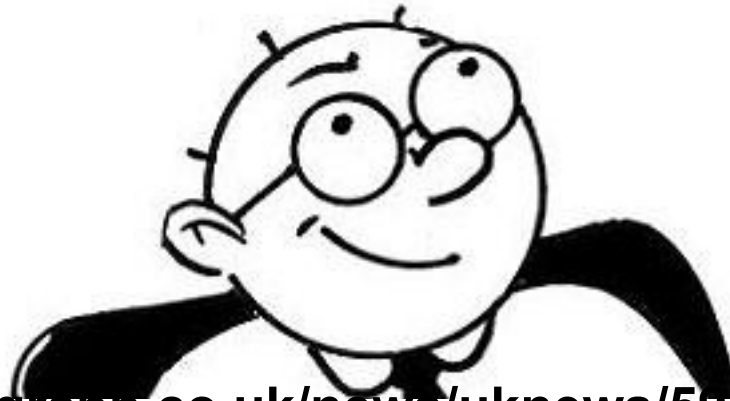
Needs to acknowledge others' work

Should not be trivial, ideally should surprise

Should be interesting

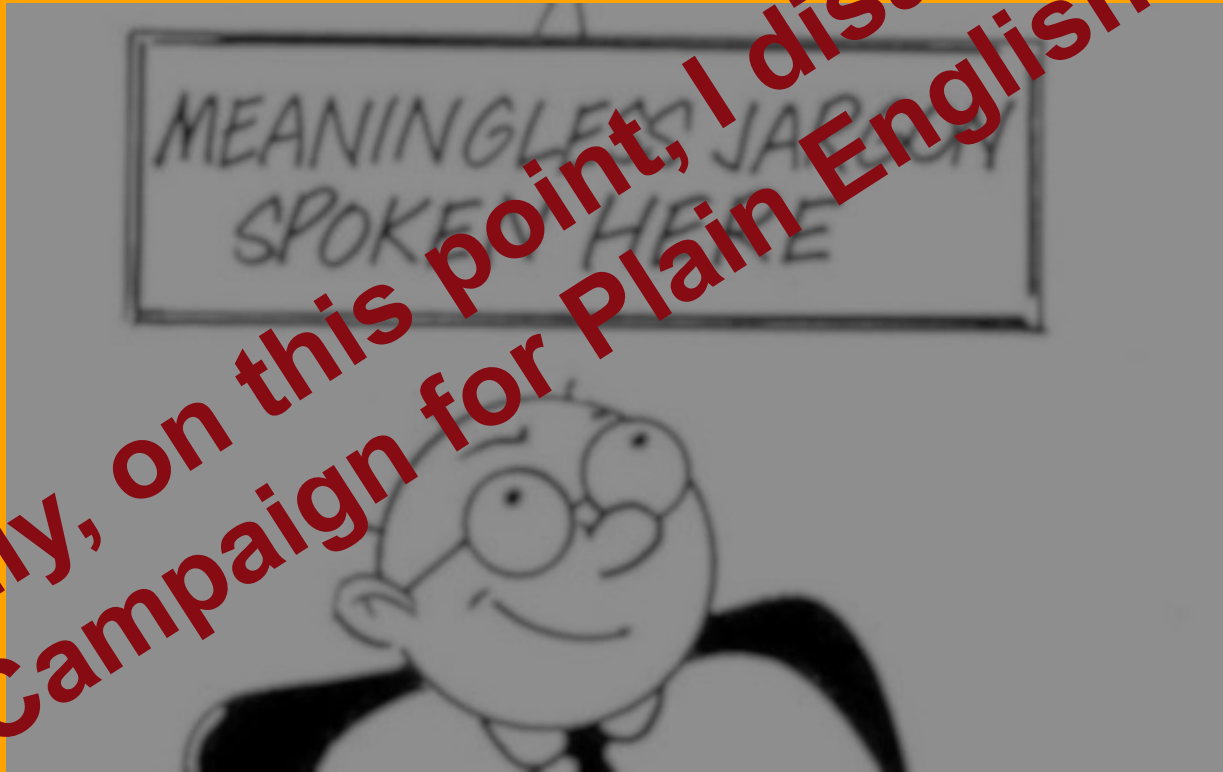
It is not about being pompous or pseudo-intellectual

Writing *academic* text is perhaps especially difficult – but also rewarding



<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/5908061/Technical-jargon-poses-new-threat-to-plain-English-campaigners-say.html>

**Actually, on this point, I disagree with
The Campaign for Plain English**



Research as a conversation can sometimes benefit from jargon

We have to learn some vocabulary and other elements of writing and communicating that are specific to our conversation partners.

For me, Eeva, this has meant gradually learning vocabularies and styles of writing and arguing from

- **anthropology, geography, environmental studies, political sciences, feminist and activist research, design research, material culture studies, history ...**
- **To learn to write for them I must READ**

**There's no
substitute for
practice: so read
and write without
fear**



Ask yourself: How easy is this to understand?

For the reader in your area

- **This takes time and it feels difficult to achieve when we are involved in multiple conversations, as we often are in the design world**

For anyone who reads English (or other language you might write in)

IS IT CLEAR?

How to be clear



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Words need not be long or fancy



*Circumlocution or going around things rather than getting to the point
(From Charles Dickens' book, Little Dorrit)*

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**There are many
writing guides out
there**

The Writer's Diet

[home](#) [test](#) [blog](#) [about](#)

The Book

Is your writing flabby or fit? If your sentences are weighed down with passives and prepositions, be-verbs and waste words, [The Writer's Diet](#) is for you – a practical, punchy introduction to good writing.

[buy the book](#)

The Test

Use the online [WritersDiet Test](#) to identify paunchy prose, then follow the no-nonsense advice in the book to strengthen and tone your verbal muscles.

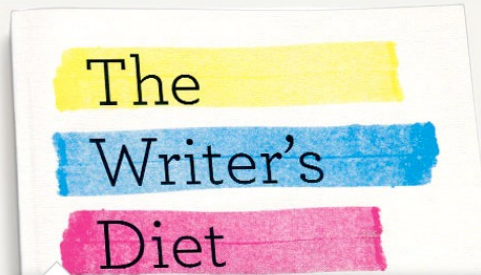
[take the test](#)

The Author

[Helen Sword](#) is a Professor of Humanities at the University of Auckland and an international writing consultant. Visit her Resources for Writers website at helensword.com.

[meet the author](#)

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Who says nutritious material must be bland? This short book is packed with excellent advice on writing, offered with charm and good cheer.

– **Steven Pinker, Johnstone Professor of Psychology, Harvard University, and author of *The Sense of Style: The Thinking Person's Guide to Writing in the 21st Century***

Concise, punchy, engaging, practical, effective, Helen Sword's instant classic has become even fitter in this new edition.

– **Brian Boyd, Distinguished Professor of English, the University of Auckland**

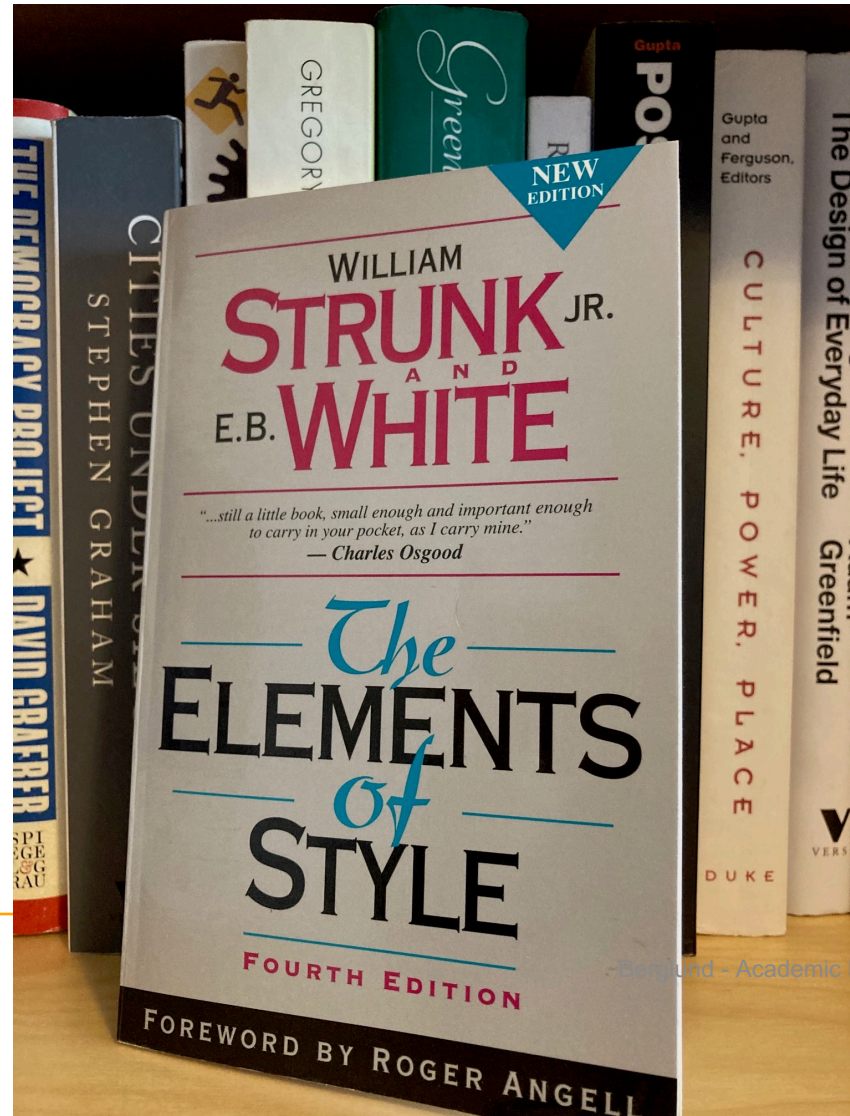
Even the leanest and most muscular stylists can end up with jiggly bits in their prose. With Sword as your coach, you can slim down, tone up, and become a more energetic, engaging, and lively writer.

– **Rachel Toor, columnist for *The Chronicle of Higher Education* and associate professor of creative writing at Eastern Washington University**

**Writersdiet.com
by Helen Sword**

William Strunk Jr. & E.B. White *The Elements of Style*, 1979

A book for our times of
volubility – *New York Times*
endorsement on the back
cover



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Keep sentences short

Telling stories involves rules of usage (syntax, grammar, etc.)

Clear sentences have a:

subject – who is acting or doing?

verb – what is the action?

object – who/what is affected?

From Escobar:

‘**This paper** **examines** the seeming **repositioning** of design as a central domain of thought and action.’

Telling stories involves rules of usage (syntax, grammar, etc.)

Interesting and precise prose has appropriate adjectives and adverbs

TIP: use a Thesaurus or dictionary to avoid repeating the same words

Adjectives and adverbs to describe.

From Escobar:

‘There is a **hopeful** recognition of the **multidimensional** character of design as material, cultural, epistemic, political, and ontological, all at once.’

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Use paragraphs,
one idea per
paragraph

Arguments and evidence

To be persuasive you need to lead your reader through your thinking.

You need reasoned and logically consistent arguments:

Provide relevant facts and demonstrate awareness of other points of view.

Supporting evidence:

Illustrative examples, case studies, research findings from others.

Authoritative sources:

Clarity about who is saying what. Use academic references to give credit to predecessors and to show you have done the work.

**You do not need
fancy words or
pseudo-intellectual
waffle**



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**Is it interesting?
How can I make it
so?**

Write about concrete things and give specifics

In Finland, children start formal schooling at the age of seven. Before that, children mainly attend play-based education in kindergartens.

In brief, the riddle is about the thunderstorm spirit Ukko losing control of the weather.

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**Is it persuasive?
How can I make it
so?**

Say it clearly and back it up

With references:

In qualitative research, researchers achieve understanding through proximity to the reality of the case (Flyvbjerg, 2006).

With your own competencies:

I have been studying the connection between play design and education for sustainability for at least seven years.

Rules and principles of clear writing from Strunk and White

- **Usage**
 - Rules of grammar to help the reader
- **Composition**
 - The skeleton that shapes the writing
 - Follows the writer's thoughts, but not necessarily in the order in which those thoughts occurred
 - How the text is structured, for instance into paragraphs and sections
- **An approach to style that has withstood the test of time**

“Use the active voice” and “put statements in positive form”

“This thesis examines fashion...” not “In this thesis fashion is examined...”

“I will argue that design activism can be both conservative and politically radical.”

... is preferable to:

“The argument will be made that there are both conservative and politically radical aspects to design activism.”

“Use definite, specific, concrete language”

“German foresters of the later eighteenth century ... replaced diverse woodlands with militarily aligned columns of a single tree species.” (from Charles Tilly, 1999)

is more vivid and memorable than something I might have written, such as:

“Modern resource management meant the simplification of previously diverse ecosystems.”

Although this has its uses too. Should we discuss them?

Other good tips from Strunk and White

“Avoid a succession of loose sentences”

“Omit needless words”

“In summaries, keep to one tense”

About the process

“Revise and rewrite”

“Do not overstate”

“Make sure the reader knows who is speaking”

“Avoid fancy words”

EB adds: avoid repeating the same words

Eeva's essay-writing tips

Essay writing is a skill, and it takes practice to do it well.

Do what you have been asked to do. Usually this means answering a question. As you write, stop from time to time to think about whether you are still on topic.

A good essay/thesis will present a well-organized argument.

Even if you are not making a grand theoretical point, your text should have a message, and it should be made clear to the reader.

- Think about your reader. Be clear, and do not leave the reader to guess at what you mean.
- You can use subheadings to give structure to the essay and guidance to the reader.
- Do not over-generalise or exaggerate and do not use moralising language.
- List sources as you would in an academic journal or book. Usually you do not need more than a few references. Format your references systematically.
- **Do not copy text from electronic sources without attributing it! Websites and other media sources must be fully acknowledged and quoted text placed inside quotation marks (“...”). Include the date they were accessed in the references.**

**Things are always
changing and
staying the same**

MAX LIBOIRON



In 1956, Lloyd Stouffer, the editor of the US magazine *Modern Packaging*, addressed attendees at the Society of the Plastics Industry meeting in New York City: “The future of plastics is in the trash can. . . . It [is] time for the plastics industry to stop thinking about ‘reuse’ packages and concentrate on single use. For the package that is used once and thrown away, like a tin can or a paper carton, represents not a one-shot market for a few thousand units, but an everyday recurring market measured by the billions of units.”¹ Stouffer was speaking at a time when reuse, making do, and thrift were key practices reinforced by two US wars. Consumer markets were saturating. Disposability was one tactic within a suite of efforts to move goods *through*, rather than merely *into*, consumer households.² Today, packaging is the single largest category of plastic production, ac-

- 1 Hello, Reader! Thank you for being here. These footnotes are a place of nuance and politics, where the protocols of gratitude and recognition play out (sometimes also called citation), where warnings and care work are carried out (including calling certain readers aside for a chat or a joke), and where I contextualize, expand, and emplace work. The footnotes support the text above, representing the shoulders on which I stand and the relations I want to build. They are part of doing good relations within a text, through a text. Since a main goal of *Pollution Is Colonialism* is to show how methodology is a way of being in the world and that ways of being are tied up in obligation, these footnotes are one way to enact that argument. Thank you to Duke University Press for these footnotes.

For this first footnote of the introduction, we have a simple citation: Stouffer, “Plastics Packaging,” 1–3. Don’t worry. They’ll get better.

- 2 Packard, *Waste Makers*; Strasser, *Waste and Want*; M. Liboiron, “Modern Waste as Strategy.”

There are plenty of rules involved in academic writing

... but there's no
substitute for
practice: so read
and write without
fear



**ENJOY, AND
THANK YOU!**



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