

# EthnoScripts

ZEITSCHRIFT FÜR AKTUELLE  
ETHNOLOGISCHE STUDIEN

How to write? Experiences, challenges and  
possibilities of ethnographic writing

Volume 23 Issue 1 | 2021

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Composing Ethnographic Texts: How to Use Stylistic and  
Argumentative Techniques Properly

Ethnoscripts 2021 23 (1): 92-115

eISSN 2199-7942

## Abstract

Being a good ethnographer means, amongst other things, not forgetting the future reader during the writing process. This article discusses one possible approach for crafting reader-friendly ethnographies. I review basic strategies for creating stringent and straightforward texts, drawing on the journalistic canon of Reportage writing, and sketch how I personally apply or modify these techniques when composing an ethnography. I address elements such as clear formulation, coherent argumentation, adequate pars pro toto scenes, vivid language, and the difficult terrain of symbols and metaphors. I also suggest steps for reworking the first draft of the text. I conclude by arguing that cultivating and cherishing a recipient-friendly communication style is vital for the public visibility of cultural and social anthropology.

## Publisher:

Universität Hamburg  
Institut für Ethnologie  
Edmund-Siemers-Allee 1 (West)  
D-20146 Hamburg  
Tel.: 040 42838 4182  
E-Mail: lfE@uni-hamburg.de  
<http://www.ethnologie.uni-hamburg.de>

eISSN: 2199-7942



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## Composing Ethnographic Texts: How to Use Stylistic and Argumentative Techniques Properly

Mira Menzfeld

### Introduction

*Writing to please has something to be said for it.*  
 – Clifford Geertz, *Works and Lives*

Imagine leaning back in your office chair and unpacking a freshly pressed book. The last beams of the setting sun stroke your wooden desk. You are sitting alone in your small working space, which feels cosy and intimate in the fading light. Most of your colleagues have already left for one of the crowded rush-hour buses back to the outskirts. You, however, decided to stay a little longer. Now, at the end of a busy day, you allow yourself some stolen minutes alone with the latest title from a new anthropology series. Today it finally arrived. You smell the paper and ink whilst running through the redolent pages with your thumb. You open the book on a random page, excited to take a peek into all the yet unknown stories that it holds. Then you read: ‘being thrown into the transitive hermeneutics of loosely connected ontologies which have been simultaneously challenged and realigned by representations of phenomena that are yet to . . .’. Your gaze starts wandering. Your open and laid-back posture tightens, your shoulders stiffen. You glance at the clock (already seven!) and put the book away. Your willingness to be captivated is lost, at least for now.

This is the initial disenchantment we provoke if we forget the reader during the process of writing, something we should avoid.

Most of anthropology’s classics shine timelessly in at least one regard: they are written compellingly. I name just a few whose particularities still set the right tone. Margaret Mead not only provided the most novelistic descriptions of field scenes (see, for example, Mead 1928: 14) but also published publicly acclaimed poems and magazine articles (Shankman 2009). Clifford Geertz used words to convince. The light-footed and polished rhetoric<sup>1</sup> in which he clothed his reservations against comparative approaches (see, for example, Geertz 1973: 26) surely played a significant part in contributing to the weak standing of cross-cultural comparisons in anthropology today. Geertz knew how to write and argue, so much so that his views became paradigmatic.

1 See, for example, Geertz’ (1988: 8) more extensive ‘mule’ analogy or the small but effective analogy to romances.

Good ethnographies even charm people who are not anthropologists. Erudite critics of the newspaper *Die Zeit* (Raddatz 2009) as well as random survey participants interviewed by *Le Monde* (Savigneau 1999) counted *Tristes Tropiques* by Claude Lévi-Strauss (1992) amongst the 100 most important books of all times, alongside renowned works such as Homer's *Iliad*, Kafka's *The Trial*, and Augustine's *Confessions*. Lévi-Strauss's opus magnum manages to navigate the paradox of forming a paragon of intellectual heaviness whilst simultaneously captivating lay readers – notably despite, or perhaps because of, the author's notoriously rigid 'rage for order' (Geertz 1988: 143). He succeeded in this delicate balancing act because he composed the text competently: *Tristes Tropiques* impresses with innovative thoughts for its time, colourful field scenes, catchy phrases (just remember his 'I hate travelling and explorers' [Lévi-Strauss 1992: 17]), and a palpable author's persona, as well as surprising and yet coherent insights for the reader. His capability as writer allowed Lévi-Strauss to reach an audience far beyond anthropology departments. His audience did not just *force* itself to read; it wanted to *continue* to read.

One feature unites all great ethnographers: they are polite to the reader. They put a great deal of thought into presenting their ideas in a way that the audience can follow with ease. This politeness – formulating and structuring a well-thought-out text – is worth exploring here and cultivating for oneself as writer.<sup>2</sup>

Of course, writing an engaging text has its own merits, even if not necessarily intended as gesture of courtesy towards the reader. First, it is fun. Second, it saves time and effort whilst garnering more positive responses to our ethnographic texts. Third, and quite bluntly, it helps us pay our rent and keep our jobs. But what is perhaps even more important is that the attempt to write compellingly should be motivated by an intrinsic desire to be read and understood (see also Salazar 2020); otherwise it makes little sense to publish at all. At the same time, I am well aware of course, it is impossible – and unnecessary – to satisfy all potential readers; an audience is not a unified mass of people with synchronised tastes and interests. And we also have other duties to perform, besides impressing recipients with our stylistic skills. Generally speaking, though, it suffices to adopt a writing style that does not scare away the majority of readers by the third page. Clear formulations and tight arguments help a lot in this regard, as I discuss below. And yet, even if we remind ourselves that it is sufficient to compose a readable text and that no-

2 When I argue for readable ethnographies, I do not mean that anthropologists should compete with novelists or that they need to write the next most important book of all times. On the contrary, there are good reasons not to confuse the job of a novelist with that of the ethnographer, as I elaborate later. My argument is rather that it can be of benefit for ethnographers to consider, from time to time, whether their texts are readable for their potential readers, and to edit their writing if that is not the case.

body expects us to win the Nobel Prize in literature with our monograph, attempting to become a reader-friendly writer can prompt unease. This unease can manifest itself in many ways, ranging from writer's block over the fear of being critiqued for writing for public audiences to crises of authorship and representation. However, we should not underestimate the help that dialogue over writing techniques and the sharing of experiences can offer in overcoming writing problems (and maybe other issues too).

It is in this context that I suggest we engage in an intradisciplinary dialogue to explore ways in which we can compose honest and readable ethnographic texts. I open the discussion with a description of my own approach in the hope that it may motivate others to share their techniques – that we may inspire each other and stimulate a broader sensitivity to the importance of clear writing.

### What makes for a 'well-written' ethnography? A personal approach

*Ethnography must be done with grace, with precision, with an eye for the telling detail, an ear for the insight that comes unexpectedly, with a tremendous respect for language, with a compassion for homesickness, and yes, with a love of beauty – especially, of beauty in places where it usually is not looked for.*  
(Behar, 1999: 477)

In this quote Ruth Behar deftly defines the five components of a well-written ethnography. I examine three of these in greater detail: precision, effective details, and well-chosen language. But, first, I briefly explain why I turn to journalistic text-crafting standards when shaping ethnographies.

I was a journalist before I turned to academia – not only for its ethnographies but also because of them. I like them better than two-pagers, just as I like long-term fieldwork better than deadlines that barely allow you to spend more than a few days on a given project. Anthropologists resemble journalists, the 'junkyard dogs of ethnography' (Harrington 2003: 90), in many ways. Both share the difficult task of intruding into people's lives, uncalled-for, to dig out knowledge and experiences worth writing about. Both struggle with and agonise over 'correct' representation, authorship, and honesty (see, for example, Klusmann 2019; Rapport 1990; Atkinson 2013). But there are also striking differences. Anthropologists can dive deeply into a chosen topic and have space to write, even if the issues they deal with can be so voluminous that they are difficult to condense into a book. Journalists, on the other hand, have available a practical hands-on canon for crafting reader-friendly texts, and possess a heightened sensibility for keeping readers involved and interested.

One of the most influential text formats in journalism, often called its supreme discipline, is the *Reportage*, or feature article.<sup>3</sup> Ethnography and the *Reportage* share a common root in travel reports<sup>4</sup> (see Stagl and Pinney 1996; Rubiés 2002). They are siblings, so to speak. They both offer an abundance of surprising and reflection-prompting scenes, with insights into worldviews that would otherwise remain hidden to the reader. There is thus a certain fitting accuracy in this common descent. But because *Reportage* writing has paid more extensive attention to ways of writing, I draw inspiration from journalistic canons (especially Haller 1997) when trying to compose an engaging ethnography. *Reportage* writing influences my way of composing ethnographies in terms of text organisation, stylistic elements, and narrative techniques.

Of course, an ethnography is not a *Reportage*. Ethnographies usually take the form of books, target academic audiences, and rely on an author's deep familiarity with the perspectives and voices they present; readers expect them to present different results than what is offered in journalistic pieces. And there are other valuable techniques besides journalistic approaches that provide useful guidelines for crafting well-written ethnographies (see, for example, Narayan 2007, who draws on fictional storytelling techniques). However, because the writing craft is so carefully examined in journalism, and because it shares the non-fictional approach with ethnography, I here focus on the *Reportage* and how it inspires me when I am writing an ethnography.

### The spine

Whenever I begin writing anything, I am reminded of my former training editor declaring: 'if you *do not know what you want to say*, your text will not be worth the paper it is written on'; or, the more precise and considered the example chosen and the argument made, the more you will catch and convince the reader. And so I begin by defining my main argument, summarising my main findings, and identifying the supporting evidence I will need. Of course, there are a few immensely gifted people who are able to create convincing texts by just starting to write. Most people, however, do better by thinking through what they want to say before beginning the actual writing: for if they do not, they may end up producing impressionistic streams of consciousness (which are horrible to read) instead of considered and compelling texts. I am one of those who need more preparation rather than less. Thus I start with a first, draft list of my main arguments, which at this initial stage means writing down little more than bullet points.

3 I use the German term *Reportage* because it captures more closely what I am referring to here.

4 These roots are sometimes still palpable in *Reportages*, though the latter's inclination to exoticise peoples and places has vanished from today's ethnographies (and fortunately from many contemporary *Reportages* too).

Next, I arrange these bullet points in a coherent sequence; thereby I create the framework for my future text. Sometimes I even look into some basic formal logic to order the arguments. To understand the importance of argumentative structure, we should keep in mind that ethnographies by definition use inductive argumentation; our entire discipline relies on collecting particular impressions to build up a larger picture of what is going on. Even if deductive elements are included – that is, when the author starts from a theoretical point of view and tries to explain particular phenomena through that lens – inductive methods remain the most frequent style of argumentation used in ethnographies. Despite this, we can see why having a well-constructed order of arguments is decisive for a good ethnography: if my argumentation rests on particular ideas that lead to a cumulative conclusion and interpretation, I should order them mindfully so that the reader can follow each step and (ideally) share my final analysis or interpretation. I can, for example, order subsidiary arguments in a linear way: an introduction that sketches where I am leading the reader, observation A, premise B, context knowledge C, and the culmination in conclusion D. Alternatively, I can choose an indirect form of argumentation, saying something like the following: initially I (or colleagues) thought A; this made sense because of B; my research showed C; I can illustrate the rationality of C by D and E; . . . . There are many other ways in which to convince readers. However, it is vital to have *at least an idea* of how one wants to structure one's argumentation. From an ethical point of view, it is crucial to use only those arguments that are most compelling and adequate. Ideally, the way the argument is built up will not only seem convincing but will also be logically valid.

Some people intuitively follow a temporal sequence based on the order when they made their findings and discoveries. This is not always a good idea. For an academic audience, this strategy can even evoke mistrust, sometimes being interpreted as an author's basic incapacity to analyse (see, for example, Hammersley and Atkinson 1983: 212–213). A chronological approach can also be confusing to read and may place too much emphasis on subsidiary questions and marginal discernments and too little on the most important insights. If the line of argumentation meanders too much, only few readers might have the patience to read to the last paragraph where the final insights appear. It is thus likely that many will not get the most important point.

As soon as I figure out my arguments and how I want to structure them, I shore them up with substantiating evidence. I thus identify descriptions of events and encounters that led me to my arguments and insights in the first place. Such *pars pro toto* scenes<sup>5</sup> – individual scenes used to represent the

5 Different disciplines – photography, journalism, rhetorics, and others – use the expression *pars pro toto* (a part for a whole) when a limited part is used to represent the entire object, person, or situation to which it belongs. An example would be a detailed close-up on Frida Kahlo's eyebrows that a film director uses to remind the audience of Frida Kahlo herself. The part (*pars*) can be,

larger picture – illustrate arguments in many kinds of texts. We also apply *pars pro toto* techniques intuitively in everyday conversations (as when we say ‘living under one *roof*’ and everyone understands that it refers to all individuals living together in the same housing structure). Narrating *pars pro toto* scenes is a basic human communication strategy, which is why they are very accessible and convincing for readers: one tends to believe in reasoning structures that one knows well. Moreover, *pars pro toto* elements expressed as quotes and colourful scenic descriptions perform an especially important function for ethnographers. Many ethnographies alternate dense descriptions of selected ‘usual’ situations, of ‘normal’ proceedings, and of everyday occurrences in the field (an approach that evolved together with the genre of ethnography itself [see Malinowski 1922]) with depictions of special events and portrayals of particularly ‘dramatic’ situations. Even the extraordinariness of these dramatic scenes often highlights a particular process, or basic characteristic, that is an integral part of the sociocultural context in which the scene takes place (see, for example, Turner 1974). Thus, descriptions that seem to bring up supposedly dramatic counterpoints, or scenes that are somehow ‘different’ and special, fulfil *pars pro toto* functions too – because they complete the picture of what the ethnographer wants to tell. Narrative *pars pro toto* close-ups contain, inspire, and reveal authors’ key conceptual ideas (see Atkinson 2020). Ultimately, they are what ethnographies rest on, and will decisively influence the image the readers receive of the field site and interlocutors. Consequently, we have to select with care the particular scenes we consider suitable to justify and illustrate our larger argument.<sup>6</sup>

For me, writing several versions of each possibly relevant scene is a good way to find clarification. I will thus paraphrase field event *\*a* repeatedly, leading to versions *\*a1*, *\*a2*, *\*a3*, and so on. The more often I reword the same

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but is not necessarily, representative of the addressed entirety (*toto*, the ablative case of *totum*). Usually, the part is somehow characteristic of the entirety but not sufficient to be the whole’s main component: Frida Kahlo certainly would have existed without or with differently shaped eyebrows, and her eyebrows say nothing about her style and abilities as a painter. Yet, a look at a picture of Kahlo’s eyebrows will evoke associations with Frida Kahlo, her life, and her works for anyone familiar with her. I use the term whenever I want to explain quickly how ethnographic argumentation works. Scenes within an ethnography will never be sufficient to give a complete picture of our fieldwork and interlocutors. However, if we choose the scenes well, we can dare to let them stand for characteristic aspects of the experiences we had, and of the people we met.

- 6 Sometimes it suffices to identify the one most important single scenario that happened in the field. If sufficiently rich and dynamic, this scene alone can serve as a thread that runs through the whole ethnography. Woven into it, the author can organise all other arguments and contextual information (see, for example, Shah [2018] who constructs her ethnography around the singular core plot of a night walk with Indian guerilleros).

situation, the better my understanding of its potential significance becomes. Each reformulation emphasises different aspects and qualities and reflects different meaning levels. In a next step I compile a single condensed narrative from these diverse versions, drawing on the best parts of each and thus producing account *A*. The procedure of forging forward with only the richest and most accurate parts of each version results in one very usable description of the scene. After proceeding in this manner with every field event that seems potentially relevant to me, I achieve a number of rather well-formulated and cohesive *pars pro toto* descriptions (*A, B, C, . . .*), all ready to be woven into the draft.

This is the point at which I pick up my bullet points again to connect the condensed *pars pro toto* scenes with my main arguments. I often find that *not every engaging field scene is actually relevant* in terms of the overall topic, text message, or argumentation. In order to craft a consistent text, it is vital to include only the most meaningful and appropriate scenes. Weak *pars pro toto* scenes, or quotes forcefully made to be suitable, would at best make me appear like a waffler, at worst a swindler or fool. The main task now is to identify the stories that ‘can’t be left out’ (McGranahan 2020a: 54) and to match them with the arguments they confirm.

Sometimes it is obvious which scene led to, or ‘belongs to’, a specific argument. If so, it is not only the author who rejoices in how smoothly a description from the field blends with a conclusion; it will also be easier for the reader to follow and remember the line of argumentation when observation and interpretation seamlessly and ‘intuitively’ fit together. It is, for example, not only hard to separate Scheper-Hughes’s conceptualisation of mother love as a cultural construct from the situations she describes in *Death Without Weeping* (1992); it is also hard to fundamentally doubt her conclusions after reading the scenes that build up her argument. Being captivated and touched by her experiences in the field, the reader intuitively synchronises with her conclusions, which seem to almost tangibly grow out of the research context.<sup>7</sup>

Yet sometimes the most intriguing event that may have been impressive and spectacular in itself says nothing particular of value in terms of the larger argumentative structure. Similarly, sometimes the catchiest quotes become insignificant when related to the larger topic of the text. Additionally, as we all know, even seemingly unambiguous quotes can acquire a different

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<sup>7</sup> I here chose examples that readers of this special issue are likely to be familiar with. They may be recent ethnographies but may also be classics that possess an individual style which many anthropologists will instantly be able to recall. It is these references to classics that remind us in particular that a ‘twenty-first-century publication date is no guarantee that a text will be livelier or more compelling than something written in the early or mid-twentieth century’ (McGranahan 2020b: 7). Regarding good style and stringent argumentation, even ethnographies written a century ago often appear to have anticipated the stylistic rules that professional writers learn today.



meaning in a different situation.<sup>8</sup> In fact, there are many ways in which a scene or quote may turn out to be useless. To decide whether it should be part of my ethnography, I apply a simple strategy: if I cannot immediately attach it to one of the bulleted arguments, I cut it out. If a field situation does not intuitively relate to any of the arguments, be it by contradicting them or by illustrating them, it should not be part my text.

Whilst matching the most meaningful scenes and quotes with my arguments, I try to *consider all possible readings* of a scene – not only the seemingly obvious ones. If I do this honestly, I will realise that some conversations and experiences do not actually speak to the topic or argument I had initially associated them with. I will find that some interlocutor responses fit better with questions that I posed at different occasions (or that I never thought of in the field) than to the questions they were given in answer to. If I come across such mismatches between my initial understanding of a scene and other possible layers of meaning, I may find the need to readjust my interpretation, my argument, and even the table of contents that I might have already begun to imagine in line with what I now think this scene was *really* about.

An episode from my PhD dissertation (Menzfeld 2018) may effectively illustrate this issue. Initially I wanted to include a substantive chapter on the final words uttered by my research participants on their death beds. I hoped to connect it to a conversation with a terminally ill interlocutor from Germany named Hermann who had talked extensively about the significance and non-significance of final words. In the end I did keep the scene with Hermann but incorporated it into a discussion about changing perceptions of relevance whilst dying – not one about final words. Indeed, when the section was complete, the ‘last words’ played only a marginal part. By working on the material I began to understand that the topic on the ‘final words’ was much more an obsession of the non-dying (like, for example, relatives, or me) than of my dying interlocutors. And I came to realise that this was something Hermann had already begun to explain to me in our conversations but I had not been attentive enough to hear. When I sensed that there may have been a deeper meaning in Hermann’s words, I double-checked my notes on other conversations on final words and realised that many of them had actually spoken about a dying individual’s perspective on relevance and irrelevance. Yes, the importance or pettiness of words did sometimes play a role, but more often the relevance of final experiences and actions was the crucial underlying topic. Finally, the chapter I wrote dealt with perceptions of relevance con-

8 As a mnemonic aid to remember the importance of context, I like to imagine a person drunkenly slurring ‘I want to marry you’ to a complete stranger and then falling asleep on the last bus of the night, and how this differs from the exact same words uttered in a serious proposal on a secluded beach. The first incident is likely to reveal more about local norms regarding alcohol consumption and the situational tolerance for intoxicated behaviour in public than about marriage and matchmaking.

nected to actions, experiences, and (also) words, woven around the supposed ‘final words’ conversation with Hermann – for this had emerged as the most important layer of meaning (see Menzfeld 2018: 206–210).

Some scenes, however, possess various layers of meaning of equivalent importance. In these cases, we might not have an initial misreading or mis-prioritising of a layer but may have to manage manifold connected meaning dimensions. One possibility is to place the most multilayered scenes into the first chapter, pointing towards the conclusion or towards the way the different layers will be revealed and explained in the subsequent chapters. Alternatively, these scenes can be placed at the end to illustrate the larger conclusions. It would not be clever, however, to place an especially enigmatic scene within chapters that deal with smaller arguments or minor findings. This would make the reader assume that I simply did not understand the multiplicity of meanings inherent in a scene, or was reducing the complexity of the scene in order to veil some of the conclusions that might be drawn. Though these suspicions might be wrong, to write in a way that allows for negative speculations would destroy the author’s in-text credibility as competent and scholarly. In my own work I therefore always consciously read my depictions and analyses ‘against myself’ and modify them if they offer any possibility for misunderstandings.

In the writing process, I also pay attention to the danger of placing scenes near (or connecting them with) arguments that may cast a different or misleading light on them. If I get into a situation where I would have to delete important paragraphs or intra-textual connections because they could be misunderstood in the context they are in, I provide footnotes to explain how such a reading would be inaccurate. But if this requires a long explanation, I prefer to cut the entire scene: in this case the inclusion would definitely cause more misapprehension than enlightenment.

After matching my arguments with key scenes, I weave in references to the relevant literature. Drafting *literature overviews and formulating references* to my colleagues’ theoretical approaches does not have to result in boring or repetitive paragraphs. In fact, re-reading existing texts at this point provides the opportunity to pick out the most outstanding quotes and the clearest definitions, as well as vivid examples that can contrast or match my own field experiences. If I choose carefully, I am profiting as a reference free-rider (in a positive sense) based on my colleagues’ writing talent; this is anything but dull for the reader. It also reads elegantly when quotes are blended well into one’s own (counter)arguments and *pars pro toto* scenes. The same goes with general background information: if woven into a thrilling narrative line of first-hand field scenes, the reader will enjoy even the para-

graphs in which the author situates this field experience in a larger historical or economic context of the area, topic, or persons studied.<sup>9</sup>

There are, however, situations where longer literature reviews may be required. Yet, producing long paragraphs that reproduce what others have said can waste the reader's time (the work discussed may already be quite well known), may portray the author as unoriginal or even slightly incompetent, or may disturb the flow of reading, as it may mean breaking from the writing style used elsewhere. Therefore, when I have to write longer literature reviews, I try to identify cross-cuts and unusual connections between works in order to allow commonly known texts appear in a fresh light. Usually there is much more in a text than the author thematises in the header. It is exciting to read texts under the lens of a different question than the title suggests and discovering hidden aspects than those commonly acknowledged.<sup>10</sup> This strategy enables one to add an unexpected and hopefully interesting half-sentence here and there to an otherwise 'ordinary' literature overview.

As I thus write more and more text, I already engage in rereading my longer paragraphs to check whether they would appear reliable and comprehensible to my future readers. *Reliability* is just as much an issue for the *Reportage* as it is for ethnographies. Both genres describe scenarios and phenomena that are highly situational and dependent upon the persons involved. Moreover, the reported scenes can be far removed geographically, linguistically, and culturally from the readers. As these cannot quickly go to the field site to check up on the facts and interpretations I present to them, proving that my account is reliable and trustworthy is an intrinsic challenge for me as author.

Different disciplines have different ways of building credibility. Larger magazines and news houses have fact-checking departments where specialists double-check what their in-house journalists write. In Germany the debate around the reliability of facts, and the precautionary measures required in high-quality journalism to ensure factuality, has intensified in the wake of the recent Relotius affair (see Klusmann 2019; also see Luncă, this issue). In contrast, honesty and sincerity are an ethnographer's sole means to show that the ethnographic account is valid, specifically when concerned with remote areas or people speaking rare languages. There is no fact-checking unit rechecking ethnographic texts before publication, and it is only the academic audience that appraises an author's credibility.<sup>11</sup>

Even with the fact-checking in journalism, the journalist and the ethnographer are tasked with demonstrating credible first-hand competence of the

9 See, for example, Shah (2018: 204–212) for a nimble embedding of background information.

10 An example would be asking what Inge's (2016) research on Salafi women says about being a person of colour in Great Britain.

11 See, for example, Reichertz (1992) on issues of ethnographic credibility and persuasiveness; and Clinard (1970) on academic respectability.

phenomena they write about. Ethnographers do not simply create captivating books that are plausible in themselves: they must also grasp wider, contextual realities. This separates ethnographers from fiction writers and novelists whose created, in-text plausibilities do not necessarily have to refer to out-of-text realities. It does not limit our pleasure of the Karl May adventure stories situated in the American Old West if the author never visited America. It does not diminish the way Lily King conjures up Margaret Mead's research setting in her best-seller *Euphoria* to know that she did not possess a particularly deep understanding of Papua New Guinea (King 2015; see also McGranahan 2020b). However, most readers would be rightfully unsettled and suspicious if an ethnographer appeared sloppy in terms of deep knowledge of their field site or over-fictionalised field experiences. What readers expect is that that ethnography convince them that the author has 'been there' (McGranahan 2020b: 8), in the field; and that the author is able to interpret field experiences plausibly and honestly.

Interlocutors trust ethnographers with their stories, and we have an ethical commitment towards them not to unduly harm or distort their realities and perspectives (McGranahan 2020b). Nevertheless, we also hold the parallel responsibility of writing reliably for our readers. It is an ethical imperative to prove that, and why, they can trust us. To build and maintain this trust, ethnographers should take care to make their methods, and their possible biases, very transparent, elaborate on how they worked, and explain why they interpreted their fieldnotes the way they did. When I as an author explain myself in this regard, I inherently argue for being perceived as an honest researcher, which is crucial for my in-text credibility and my overall credibility as researcher. It is for this that the methodology chapter is crucial.

### Putting flesh on the bones

Once the skeleton for my text seems robust, I begin putting flesh onto the bones. This phase of working on the text is driven by two overriding concerns: to achieve *clarity* and *intelligibility*. It means turning ethnographic texts that, at draft stage, can still be quite obscure or confusing into lucid and accessible narratives.

We often find published anthropological accounts that are still relativistic in nature (not necessarily something bad), vague (problematic though sometimes inevitable), or just obscure (definitely to be avoided). To a certain degree, indefinite and relativistic language simply mirrors the ambiguous, dynamic, and at times paradoxical phenomena we are trying to grasp. After all, anthropologists work with people, and people are neither binary, nor stable, nor definite. I cannot hope to completely prevent myself from using vague or complicated sentences: sometimes this is the only way to express one's grasp of a situation or an experience that is inherently indefinite. Yet

often I find that splitting longer and vague passages into shorter sentences already does wonders in terms of comprehensibility: if sentences have to remain vague on the level of content, it is at least a relief to the reader to be able to read them easily, without having to work out where they begin or end.<sup>12</sup>

But often academics chose unnecessarily obscure formulations: passive voice where active constructions are possible, unnecessarily abstract nouns, useless imagery, clauses that do not add anything, equivocal formulations, and the like.<sup>13</sup> Obscuring expressions and phrases should be identified and altered before a text is published. I try to eliminate them whenever I notice them. A passive and blurry writing style may be quite acceptable to academics and even impress a few readers, but it will never convince a broad audience. It will seldom provide the most honest positioning, let alone the most useful insight for the readers.

In other words, it is *always* a good idea to choose active constructions and direct language, culminating in sentences that are not overly long. In most cases, we *can* communicate complicated realities and arguments in an accessible language, if we but try.<sup>14</sup> Even the small effort of replacing the passive voice with active formulations helps a lot in this regard. Using names makes texts convincing and truthful. A welcome side effect is that active formulations and precise nouns force authors to think through what they want to say. One can easily hide intellectual sloppiness and indifference behind confusing sentences. It is much more difficult to do when using clear words that anybody can understand. Writing without overcomplicating what can be expressed simply takes discipline and is actually more difficult than writing obscurely. However, I often realise that it is indeed possible, even without narrowing down my thoughts. Frankly, most of our thoughts are of a less-than-Heideggerian complexity and do not necessarily require complicated language to be expressed. So why not formulate them in an accessible manner?

At times, I am glad to find that I hardly need to demystify a rather complicated draft passage if I provide vivid examples that illustrate the argument (perhaps by using a *pars pro toto* scene). In some cases, captivating depictions of field experiences fit well into the text and succeed in animating dull, complex theoretical passages. Care must be taken, however, not to become too enthusiastic as it might cause academic readers not to take the text seri-

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12 See Klinkenborg's (2013) persuasive call for the use of short and clear sentences.

13 Howell (2017: 18) gives an excellent example of unnecessarily complicated formulations that look impressive but do not mean much once the awe of the author's linguistic flourish passes. In the end, obscurantism only disappoints and annoys the reader.

14 See Ghodsee's (2016: 84) argument for clarity and against 'academese'. She provides an outstanding guide to comprehensible ethnographic writing and useful examples for straightforward language and argumentation.

ously. A dense clustering of vivid paragraphs, for example, can make a writer look guilty of over-interpretation, exaggeration, or waffling. I do not think there is anything wrong with lyrical introductions or experimental ‘jazzy’ passages. However, I also want to show my audience that I have mastery of a sober and straightforward writing style. Therefore, I try to balance a factual tone with a lyrical appeal: the *overall* style should be as vivid and comprehensive as possible to captivate the reader whilst being as sober and precise as necessary to be truthful.

When I read, I enjoy styles of formulation that are *rich in contrast*, with smooth transitions, and endeavour to apply this in my own writing. It is possible to employ contrasts on different levels: for example, I try to narrate indifferences and ambiguities whilst remaining clear and accessible at the linguistic level. I interweave my own arguments with anticipated counterarguments that could relativise them, resolving the tension by giving a detailed account of why I prefer my own interpretation. I strive to alternate between a detached, factual tone and vivid depictions, whenever appropriate. Usually, it makes sense to blend the two, so that the text reads as if it were cut from one piece even though it may contain contrasting styles and tones. A brilliant example of a contrast-rich text that never loses its inner stringency whilst oscillating between cool, academic language and vibrant, immediate scenes is *Coming of Age in Samoa* by Margaret Mead (1928).

There are several techniques that authors can draw on in their writing to create contrast-rich texts. I discuss five here: suspense; verbs and nouns; adjectives; rhythmic formulations; and symbols, analogies, and metaphors. The first technique, suspense – thus describing something that initially remains mysterious or unresolved and is deciphered only later – works well for some ethnographies. Following van Maanen (1988) and his three-fold categorisation of ethnographic styles, suspense falls under the storytelling-heavy characteristics of what he calls an impressionist writing style.<sup>15</sup> It is a classic tactic to captivate the audience. If I describe an event or practice that at first confuses or contradicts the reader’s intuition and offer an explanation or interpretation only at a later point, I create a narrative structure that is thrilling and insightful at the same time. By not immediately revealing how particular conclusions or scenes contribute to the larger puzzle can make longer monographs gripping and exciting to read. However, the reader’s intuitive focus on getting a release from tension, or their longing for the author’s explanation, can also distract the reader from questioning if a provided interpretation is likely or correct. Because of this potential for manipulation, suspense tech-

15 Van Maanen (1988) identifies three main narrative conventions followed by ethnographers: *realist* tales try to convince the reader that emic perspectives are being ‘authentically’ presented; *confessional* tales highlight the personal situatedness and feelings of the author; and *impressionist* tales try to bring both subjective and objective perspectives together by employing a novelistic, story-focused style.

niques should be applied mindfully. If an author masters that, as, for example, Alpa Shah (2018) does in her nightmarch account, recipients will feel as if they are being thrown into the middle of a captivating story rather than a dry academic book.

Strong, surprising verbs and nouns, the second technique, animate texts: they cannot be applied often enough. They specify and characterise ideas, theories, things, persons, actions, intentions, and (assumed) feelings better than all-purpose terminology (see Klinkenborg 2013; Haller 1997) – not only when it comes to precise definitions but also when it comes to field scenes. Because of this, I repeatedly rework the verbs I use to describe scenes; the aim is to put as much meaning into my verbs and nouns as possible. For instance, ‘she cherished having a room all to herself within the cottage’ says more than, ‘she liked her own room’.

Adjectives (and adverbs), the third techniques, specify and enrich sentences. But they are also risky to use. When used or even over-used in the wrong places, they can clog a text. Appraising adjectives that assess the quality or a person or event can plant disparaging subtexts in the reader’s mind, whether intentionally or not, and, when clumsily placed, can make the reader feel patronised. The overuse of appraising adjectives in fact-based passages can undermine the aim of writing in a manner that readers take seriously. Eliminating adverbs and adjectives, but using strong verbs, has thus become something of a gold standard of ‘good’ writing, especially in English-speaking contexts.<sup>16</sup>

And yet, adjectives (and adverbs) animate field scenes and strengthen statements. Certainly it is due to my enculturation in German-language journalism that I pay such attention to using as few appraising adjectives as possible, but I am also not comfortable with condemning adjectives and adverbs altogether.<sup>17</sup> If I use descriptive – and, much less, appraising – adjectives considerably and precisely *when* I use them, it is likely that the reader will understand a particular field scene better (or even follow the implicit evaluation I am expressing). This is the reason why, when I rework my drafts, I do not simply delete as many adjectives as possible, as many native English speakers might do, and retain more than they might feel comfortable with. But my judgement is guided by the knowledge that descriptive adjectives are

16 Ghodsee (2016) makes a strong argument against the use of adverbs and adjectives whenever a strong verb expresses just the same, or more.

17 German journalism makes a useful differentiation between descriptive and appraising adjectives. They consider as useful and acceptable descriptive adjectives that capture facts (as in ‘she greeted each client with a *firm* handshake’), but try to avoid appraising adjectives (as in ‘the *open-minded* saleswoman’). See Haller (1997) for strategies of how to check a *Reportage* for its stylistic quality, which includes considering the issue of descriptive and appraising adjectives; see Schnibben (2007) for a hands-on checklist that contains questions on the use of adjectives.

most suitable for colourful field scenes or qualifying specifications, and that appraising adjectives, if employed at all, should be used when creating explicitly subjective impressions, or in hypotheses that I intend and allow to be criticised and questioned.

Our fourth technique, rhythmic formulations (often including accumulations, alliterations, and the like), are an effective but also crafty technique to make an argument sound appealing. Structural variety, syncopation, and a palpable pulse energise even seemingly dull paragraphs (Claus 2020: 41). However, rhythmic formulations' good or ill depends on their placement and the integrity with which they are used. Usually, at least the title of an ethnography should possess some rhythm. A subtle pulse instantly glamorises a heading, and more people will want to read the text it introduces. An easy way to check the beat of a text is to read it out loud. If the tongue stumbles, or if there is no rhythmic or memorable alternation between stressed and unstressed syllables, it is unlikely to capture the reader's attention. Good examples for titles with a rhythmic quality are *Coming of Age in Samoa* (Mead 1928), *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors* (Turner 1974) and *Death Without Weeping* (Scheper-Hughes 1992). The ethical aspect has to be kept in mind in the use of rhythm, however. Well-crafted abstruse statements can seem as compelling as proven facts if their metric patterns stick easily in the reader's head. On the other hand, rhythmic formulations can also make a text appear dishonest or over-simplified because they may bear a resemblance with propaganda or advertisement claims. However, if embedded carefully and prudently, rhythmic formulations can jazz up ethnographic texts and help good ideas stay in people's minds.

Symbols, analogies, and metaphors, the last technique we consider here, evoke feelings of consistency and approachability in a reader. I write 'feelings' as a catchy metaphor or analogy can clearly also be used to pseudo-verify an inconsistent argument. Yet a sincere analogy can deepen a reader's understanding of what the protagonists experience. The seemingly simple knack of repeatedly addressing a broken cup, for example, can help concentrate an interlocutor's sentiments, global historical contexts, the suffering and hopelessness of the many, and even an ethnographer's compassion: We find an example in *Patterns of Culture* (2005 [1934]: 22) where Ruth Benedict describes a scene in which her interlocutor Ramon uses broken dishes as figure of speech. He begins talking about preparing corn soup, but suddenly switches to reflections on life's meanings and lost futures. Benedict, clearly a careful listener, keenly noted Ramon's metaphor. Paying attention to and interpreting interlocutors' metaphoric inventions is a safe way not to misplace metaphors, which happens easily when ethnographers rely on their own associations instead of their research partners' ideas and contexts. In my own work I avoid applying self-invented symbols, analogies, and metaphors. If I consider using them, I reflect carefully on how they may be misleading (in



fact, many metaphors and analogies fall short when one takes a closer look). If I then still feel the need to use them, I make sure to match them with the situational, cultural, and geographical context I am writing about – for unconsciously misplaced metaphors, analogies, and symbols are the easiest ways to make a text sound ridiculous.<sup>18</sup>

A confident and skilled writer can even use the paradoxical effects of consciously misplacing metaphors or analogies. In this way sarcasm can be used to draw attention to an argument, for example. The author can also try to familiarise the reader with unfamiliar meaning contexts by using analogies or terms from the reader's everyday life against which to explain what is going on in the field. Geertz (1983: 243; 256) used this strategy when he creates parallels between elements in Balinese cockfights and topoi used in Hollywood movies or with cricket. We also see its use in Malinowski's *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (1922): the term 'argonauts' evokes associations with seafarers in an audience familiar with Greek mythology, even though argonauts have nothing to do with any Kiriwana meaning webs. Such parallelisms and analogies are, by definition, misplaced and often meaningless within the field context. Yet, this circumstance does not necessarily corrupt their aim, as they are specifically employed to take up the recipients' supposed world knowledge for an immediate intercultural translation of otherwise hardly accessible scenes from the field. Concretely, comparisons with Hollywood movies and cricket mean something to the anticipated reader, not to audience of the Balinese cockfight; but within the text, these analogies are supposed to serve as a shortcut, offering the recipients access to what a cockfight might mean for Geertz' interlocutors. It is advisable to employ such stylistic tightrope walks only if the author knows that the impact and side-effects of such ironic or deliberately unsuitable metaphors can be controlled. Not everyone finds intercultural comparisons such as Geertz' parallelism between Hollywood motion pictures and Balinese cockfights suitable. It is hard to say if they can ever be illuminating enough to become a truly justifiable part of an anthropological text – or if they are more often than not a paternalising instrument that reveals more about the author than the interlocutors' experiences.<sup>19</sup> In my own work I prefer not to use intentionally mismatched symbols and metaphors; the practice has too many side issues to fit into the genre of the ethnography.

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18 It would be embarrassing, for example, to describe a child's dress as 'white as snow' when the context described does not know snow, or where white is not associated with purity but death and decline.

19 See, for example, Rosaldo (1989) for a broader discussion of these issues, combined with a call for interlocutors to verify anthropological interpretations.

### The final makeover

In the final makeover, I read and rework the full draft. My first read is concerned in particular with the following question: Did I take anything for granted? Usually, I will find passages that lack some *contextual knowledge* that the reader requires to understand. This is where I insert additional explanations. At this point, I also add necessary information on myself as ethnographer, paying attention to describe relevant context knowledge about me as carefully as I would describe contextual knowledge from a field that a reader is not familiar with. I take this approach simply because I cannot easily anticipate what contexts my readers *will* be familiar with.

My second read then shifts to consider this question: Is the text consistent and convincing? Once I am confident that this is the case (or at least more or less), I then insert explanations on questions that I left unanswered (which is usually much easier to do than formulating what one knows and is convinced of). Whilst there are always many things I do not know about my research site, I here focus on those questions that readers are likely to pick up on – for example, that it would have been interesting to visit X, but that I did not get access to it. Admitting and reflecting on the weaknesses of one's own work is part of writing with integrity. It is useful to keep in mind, however, that readers usually want to know what an author *did* find out and not what did *not* work out, so I generally try to keep these considerations as succinct as possible.

I then re-read my text a third time, to check if I managed to distance my private impressions and feelings from my descriptions of the interlocutors' points of view. There is nothing wrong with a few strong subjective opinions that reveal the author as a person,<sup>20</sup> and it is indeed necessary to 'write the author "into" the ethnographic text' (Atkinson 2013: 26). However, an author's perspective should not dominate the text unless this is designed to be about the author. My aim is usually to write an ethnography, not an ego-graphy (see also Atkinson 2013 on 'sentimental realism'). I aspire to make it easy for the readers to, for example, distinguish my own opinions from the perspectives of my interlocutors. Endeavouring to create a readable text, I also try to burden my recipients as rarely as possible with epistemological struggles. The problem of turning fieldwork experiences into insights that are at least more or less detachable from me as a person is *my* riddle to solve, and not one to pass on to the reader. Most recipients will justly expect a structured and reliable ethnography that presents findings without hiding insecurities and ambiguities. They will not, however, be interested in a painfully detailed presentation of an anthropologist's dilemma.

A fourth read is then necessary to smooth out the text and blend the shifts between different topics. Here I attempt to *reduce hard breaks* that do not have any particular meaning within the text structure. This means filling

20 Or rather *persona*, as Narayan (2007: 132) puts it precisely.

in the missing links between statements and paragraphs. Of course, leaving out conceptual bridges between paragraphs, arguments, and topics can be used as a stylistic tool (for example, when summing up or providing a list of definitions such hard breaks can make a text appear more factual). More often than not, however, hard breaks may point to an incomplete chain of argument or an incomplete smoothing of the steps between arguments. The good or bad use of hard breaks depends on the frequency and deliberateness with which they appear: they may contrast refreshingly with a writing style that has general flow but may disrupt the reader if used too frequently.

The last read presents a particular difficulty: deleting any words and parts that are not vital. This makes particular sense for articles with limited word counts but, counter-intuitively, applies even more when writing monographs with a potentially infinite number of pages. The longer the text, the less can an author risk boring the reader. In my own work, I sometimes delete up to a third of the entire text at this point. Because cutting always means letting go scenes or paragraphs that I had cherished, I usually place them into a separate document as collection of excerpts that I can draw on for later articles.

Before I submit my final draft to the publisher, I usually request one of two experienced colleagues to give me feedback. After having rewritten the text repeatedly, I can often no longer see the wood for the trees and the opinions of other readers can be very insightful, especially when it comes to the structure of the text and the final choice of scenes. At the same time I find it important to be circumspect with the evaluations I receive: too many opinions can distract me from my own line of argumentation (though I really enjoy critique *after* publishing as it inspires me for future texts). What is very important to me is always to have my texts reviewed by at least one person who has *absolutely nothing* to do with anthropology. Every sentence they do not understand is reason for me to rethink content, argumentation, and formulation. Even if I (rarely!) leave as is a passage that such a lay reader has heavily critiqued (for example, because it addresses a highly discipline-specific discussion which cannot be reasonably paraphrased), the critique usually provides an opportunity to improve the disputed paragraph on other terms, perhaps by formulating shorter sentences, using stronger verbs, and so on.

### Concluding remarks

To close, I want to turn to the question of why it is good to write ethnographies. Ethnographies are author-friendly in nature. Anthropology's signature format offers considerable stylistic and thematic liberties. We can customise it according to our research topics and outcomes. An ethnography provides numerous opportunities to convince and captivate the reader. It allows us to

educate, entertain, and make people think. As ethnographers, we have the privilege of possessing relevant and stimulating first-hand insights. And an ethnography's length allows us to engage in a detailed and careful examination of our data, doing justice to the long duration and intensity of our fieldwork, much better than any short article could.

Clearly, we do not always manage to turn our author-friendly signature format into reader-friendly texts. Many authors do, but some do not, and it is the latter that I am concerned with. One reason for producing reader-hostile texts might lie in the author's uncritical and unmerited admiration for scholars who curate undisciplined obfuscation as their distinct writing style (in other writing professions, of course, the same behaviour is rightfully decried as narcissistic and leads to contract termination).<sup>21</sup> Abstruse texts may also originate from an author's fear of peer critique, as obscure formulations are rarely subjected to sharp criticism. Furthermore, anthropology's traditional timidity to formulate insights clearly and boldly may also play a role (a reservation rooted in the honourable, but also potentially inhibiting, concern with the risk of misrepresenting people and phenomena in writing).<sup>22</sup>

I think it more likely that it is ignorance that leads authors to write unclearly. I am quite certain that most reader-hostile texts are not deliberately created as such. It seems more likely that authors do not consider (or have never learnt to pay attention to) a text's clarity and comprehensibility as crucial criteria for evaluating quality of writing. Many of us rarely discuss with colleagues how to craft texts or how to recognise infelicitous writing, thus implying that the issue of how to communicate insights is of little importance. Why should any scholar reflect on their own unreadability unless they hear and experience that comprehensibility matters, especially since they often have to figure out on their own how to achieve such readability?<sup>23</sup>

Causes of (frequently unintentional) abstruse writing, as well as the effects of such texts on our discipline, should be debated intensely. Yet, as long as such writing and bad communication are not widely recognised as an obstacle to the wider circulation of cultural anthropology's insights (and I think they are indeed an obstacle), many will continue to ignore readability as a critical quality of their ethnographic texts. This means significantly fewer readers for texts that have the potential of being of interest to a much wider audience.

Our lack of interest in the relevance and techniques of composing accessible ethnographies strikes me as particularly paradoxical in times when neighbouring disciplines seem very keen to appropriate our working style

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21 See Ghodsee (2016) for an elaborate critique of unreadable ethnographies.

22 See Ghodsee (2016) on the issue and how to overcome it.

23 In German-speaking academia, for example, it is quite possible to become a senior researcher in anthropology without ever having received specific training in ethnographic writing and/or in advanced writing techniques.

and writing formats (or at least what they imagine these to be).<sup>24</sup> It seems that there is too little visibility of and knowledge about ethnographies to prevent academics from other disciplines from misunderstanding our very specific monographic style. Anthropologists do not communicate often and clearly enough about what we want our signature format to be, so that we are beginning to lose sovereignty over defining what an ethnography is.

Even more astonishing, we find it hard to imagine how important it is *in general* to communicate anthropological insights comprehensibly, and to a wide public.<sup>25</sup> The result is that we still play just a small part in public discourses that should be co-shaped by anthropologists because they touch on its core research fields (such as global health, supposedly religious conflict, or transmigration). There are a number of new initiatives that aim to change this condition. Some ambitious anthropological online channels deserve respect and acclaim for publishing relevant multimedia content quickly.<sup>26</sup> These channels are a pure gain in terms of anthropological reach. Nevertheless, communicating towards an audience that is actively looking for anthropologically inspired writing is not enough; we also need to reach those who do not yet know the anthropological approach.

There are only few anthropologists amongst the experts in the public eye who claim to be explaining cultural specificities,<sup>27</sup> which frequently results in an underinformed or even misinformed public opinion.<sup>28</sup> Yet as academics we have the duty to actively and comprehensibly inform the public about what we know (see also Ghodsee 2016). If we do not want our voices to echo only in limited social bubbles, we have to step up our efforts to be visible in the media and in public debates.<sup>29</sup> I suggest that developing a heightened

24 See Howell (2017) on the core characteristics of ethnography and anthropology, and how necessary it is that we delineate them clearly.

25 See also Schönhuth (2009) on the relevance and accessibility of anthropological insights.

26 See, for example, the *Witnessing Corona* blog, a joint initiative started in 2020 by Medical Anthropology/Medizinethnologie, Curare, the Global South Studies Centre Cologne, and *Boasblogs* to reflect on the coronavirus pandemic from an anthropological perspective (Boasblogs n.d.).

27 There are remarkable exceptions, scholars who take the risk of engaging the media and the public book market (see, for example, Rauner 2009). The German media landscape also shows centralised public relations offices increasingly connecting journalists with anthropologists (see, for example, DGSKA 2020).

28 Media debates about migrants or Islam often misuse and instrumentalise terms such as 'Kulturkreis' or even base arguments on essentialising phantasies of the supposed characteristics of male refugees (see, for example, Güntner 2016). Contributions like these even make their way into renowned newspapers but are rarely challenged by anthropologists.

29 Schönhuth (2009) and Antweiler (1998, 2005) make comprehensive pleas for a 'public anthropology' in the German context, initiating several prominent initiatives.

sense for strategies of communicating clearly, beginning with intensifying intradisciplinary debates on what we want our gold standards of writing to be and how to achieve them, would in themselves already make anthropological knowledge more visible. For a discipline whose signature method is to relate to people outside the ivory tower for *gaining* insights, it should not be an insurmountable obstacle to relate to people outside the ivory tower for *sharing* insights as well.

Public and academic debates would benefit if we developed more enthusiasm for writing and communicating in an accessible manner. ‘It is evident that ethnographers write’ (Kalthoff 2013: 272), but let us talk more about *how* we write, and let us not forget *for whom* we write. We write not solely for, but also not least for, the recipients, who deserve the respect of being offered a readable text. Our insights are too valuable to be circulated only amongst ourselves.

### Acknowledgements

For this article, I received immensely helpful feedback from Julia Pauli and two anonymous peer reviewers. I thank them cordially.

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