

# G U I D E P O S T

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## WALKING THE TALK: APPLAUDING AMD'S EFFORTS TO MAKE ACADEMIC WRITING MORE ENGAGING

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I have been publicly advocating for more interesting and accessible academic writing since my time as an associate editor for *Academy of Management Journal* (Grant & Pollock, 2011; Pollock & Bono, 2013), and last year I published a book on how to use storytelling in your academic writing (Pollock, 2021). So, I was thrilled when Erik Dane and Kevin Rockmann issued a call for research written in a more engaging and interesting prose style (Dane & Rockmann, 2021). While other journals have invited more accessible writing in the past, the editorial teams often let reviewers—who were entrenched in old ways of thinking (Dane, 2011), and equated boring with rigorous—outright reject or squeeze the enlivening juice out of submissions when authors tried to write differently while still maintaining methodological and theoretical rigor.<sup>1</sup>

I'm therefore delighted that Erik and Kevin avoided that trap, and have published the first Discoveries-through-Prose article based on their entreaty, Bill Kahn's (2022) "Nobody home: A parallel process investigation of a child welfare agency." This article is an excellent example of high-quality engaged, and engaging, scholarship. Erik and Kevin asked me to write a short introduction to this article, giving me free reign on what to discuss. I elected to focus on how Kahn employs four storytelling techniques that any scholar can use to make their writing more engaging to read: the human face, showing and telling, being conversational, and motion and pacing.

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<sup>1</sup> It is important to distinguish work that maintains high standards of rigor but is written differently from work that attempts to be different in ways that fail to maintain these standards. Authors doing the latter often complain that journals are not open to papers that "break the mold" without recognizing that they broke the wrong mold.

### THE HUMAN FACE, AND SHOWING AND TELLING

Kahn sets his hook early, using an anecdote that describes a child welfare social worker's typical day. Since you may read this piece before you read the article I won't give spoilers, but Kahn creatively employs details describing the scene, using dialogue and active verbs to make the anecdote come alive and illustrate how crappy and dispiriting the job is, both in the field and in the office. He then offers alternative explanations for what we just saw, and incorporates a simile based on medical practice, showing rather than telling us that how we frame what happened leads to different diagnoses of the problem, and that misdiagnoses can let the problem fester and spread, thereby leading us to his article's theme and core theoretical insight.

This is but one example of how Kahn employs these techniques throughout his article. Time and again, Kahn makes excellent use of dialogue, examples, similes,<sup>2</sup> and metaphors<sup>3</sup> to create human faces that help readers understand his arguments and insights, and to show them what he sees, rather than just telling them.

### BEING CONVERSATIONAL

Kahn also wastes no time injecting himself into the story, explaining his involvement with the agency and how this study came about. He uses first-person pronouns (no "the author" here!) to provide information in the first couple of pages that we would more often find 10 or 15 pages in, in the Methods section, to help us understand what he's doing, how this study came about, and what his core theme is. He continues using the first person as he takes us on his own journey of discovery, making himself as much a

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<sup>2</sup> Explicit comparisons that typically use "like" or "as."

<sup>3</sup> Implicit comparisons that do not use "like" or "as."

part of this story as his action research methodology made him a part of the agency's experience, and (mostly) employing simple, accessible language—making readers feel like they are part of a conversation.

### MOTION AND PACING

Kahn also does an excellent job managing his story's motion and pacing. Stories require both action and commentary; motion results from actions that move the story forward, and pacing results from the mix of action and commentary influencing the rate at which stories unfold (Flaherty, 2009). In addition to creating action through the events, similes, and metaphors described above, Kahn uses “turbo verbs” to create action we can see. For example, he describes how a social worker “slipped” her card to a cop, rather than saying she “handed” or “gave” it to him—which would be accurate, but also less evocative of the surreptitious way she did it—and details the way patients “deposit” their experiences into therapists' emotional spaces. Verbs such as “slouch,” “sidle,” and “radiate” not only create motion but also “show” us information about the scene, conveying additional meaning and understanding.

Kahn does a great job varying sentence and paragraph length to create motion and manage pacing, following short sentences and paragraphs with longer ones, and using phrases set off by semi-colons (e.g., “Members felt constantly behind; they lost hope; their morale was low”) to create a cadence that propels readers forward, but at a reasonable pace. Kahn further employs “right-branching sentences” (Flaherty, 2009), where the sentence begins with action and the commentary follows. For example, in the sentence “Effective psychotherapists use transferential and counter-transferential material to inform their work: they intentionally take advantage of people's ‘emotional apparatus,’ the embedded wired broadcasters and receptors by which we and our social systems unconsciously communicate,” Kahn first describes the action psychotherapists take, and then explains what this means.

A final technique for creating motion is employing “to and fro”—moving back and forth from the general to the specific, or from the abstract to the concrete. Kahn deftly intertwines more abstract theoretical discussions of the mechanisms at work—transference, parallel processing and absorptive capacity—with concrete examples and quotes that illustrate these processes operating within the agency, keeping us interested as he unravels the mystery of how the social workers can see parallels between the dynamics in their agency and the troubled families they

deal with, but cannot intuit the reason why these parallels exist. Thus, Kahn carefully weaves his theory and empirical stories together (Bansal & Corley, 2012), pulling readers along for the ride.

Bill Kahn's article is rigorous and an interesting read. It's theoretically grounded; transparent in describing his data, approach, and role in the process; and provides information on the methods he employed (even if relegated to an appendix). It would likely be difficult to publish an article like this in many other top journals; its structure is unconventional, Kahn uses citations sparingly, and it is on the short side, particularly for a qualitative study. However, everyone can, and should, emulate the storytelling techniques Kahn employs in every article they write. These techniques will improve your academic articles, and you can use them regardless of the article's structure or topic. Kudos to AMD's editorial team for encouraging unconventional prose-style articles, and for championing more engaging academic writing. And kudos to Bill Kahn for responding to their call. I look forward to reading more Discoveries-through-Prose articles!

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