Profanity in Academic Writing

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WR 121Z

Writing constructs, as defined here, are a set of unwritten, unbreakable “rules” about writing, specifically academic writing. The five-paragraph essay is the gold standard: cite your sources, use proper grammar, Times New Roman. These ideas are drilled into students’ heads from a young age. But one writing construct is even more deeply ingrained than all the others, to the point that it doesn’t just apply to academic writing, doesn’t just apply to writing in general even; it applies to all aspects of life. From the first time that one was overheard from a bad-mouthed parent, on a TV show, or from a rebellious cousin, the mantra was, “Never use curse words.” They are a set of sounds and letters that seemingly have a vendetta against higher thinking and the goodwill of people. When one is uttered, it almost always brings a spectacular reaction compared to its goody-two-shoes counterparts. So, of course these despicable words should stay as far away from academic writing as possible, or so some would say. This essay will posit that profanity does have a certain place in academic writing, and that its taboo, when embraced, gives writing strength in some situations.

The most pressing issue relating to the usage of profanity in any writing or speech is that it is considered offensive, but in reality it seems this should not serve to entirely restrict its usage. Jacqueline K. Owens posits in her journal article, “Bad Language and Scholarly Publishing: Use It or Lose It?” that “[r]eading about the

evolution of these words, it is not unreasonable to wonder whether any word we may innocently use in its current context might be considered profane sooner or later!" (2). In other words, words shift in meaning over time, and a word that is offensive now may not be years down the line, or vice versa. Therefore, it is prudent to conclude that the goal of avoiding all offensive language in writing, even academic writing, is essentially pointless. Owens goes on to quote editor D. Olson in a personal communication, who states, "Scandalous as it would be to use the words bloody and bugger in 1750, today these get barely a chuckle. Ten years from now, it may again be scandalous" (qtd. in Owens 3). Owens does advise caution and conferring with peers to avoid publishing something truly incendiary, but does not suggest that obscenity is something to blindly avoid (6). I concur with this concept—in my own observation, the words to which people might take personal offense varies based even on context or even where the speaker or writer is located in the world. Effectively, though it may seem that somewhere in a faraway office there is a figure akin to a malicious Santa Claus checking off various forms of obscenities on a list, there is in reality no singular authority for what is and is not profane. Thus, appeasing such an authority is at the very least a poor use of time, if not lacking in reward entirely.

Beyond this is the concept that profanity may actually be beneficial to the quality of prose in writing, and helps to get across various points that typical academic language struggles or fails completely to convey. In his 1970 essay "Slang and Profanity: Their Uses in English Composition," David P. Demarest argues that slang and profanity bring a number of benefits to writing of all types that regular academic language simply fails to convey. Demarest writes that "[t]here can be the gain of writing

qualities that English teachers often preach—simplicity, naturalness, directness, vividness" (76). In simple terms, Demarest believes that allowing — not even necessarily encouraging — profanity allows students to write more in accordance with the qualities that an English instructor might desire in their students' writing, not less, as has been taught for decades. The fact that profanity is often described as "colorful" language is a simple manifestation of this; profanity itself is simply more expressive and elicits a different emotional response than most other forms of language (Stapleton et al. 2). Therefore, Demarest's claim that profanity enhances the quality of writing is perfectly logical. It is clear that profanity can bring unique benefits to writing, and thus, prohibiting its usage means prohibiting an entire category of artistic expression in writing.

Occasionally there is simply no way to avoid the usage of profanity in academic writing, such as in quoted material or colloquialisms. Mychelle Smith professes in her article "Profanity as Pedagogy" that "profanity's role in literature deserves curricular attention. Teachers should embrace profanity as a teachable element of language that can aide in deeper textual analysis" (Smith 63). In other words, the fact that profanity exists in non-academic genres of writing necessitates its existence in academic writing, or else the latter ignores a fundamental aspect of works within the former. For example, when writing a literary analysis of a pervasively profane book or poem, such as Andy Weir's *The Martian,* avoiding or censoring profanity is inherently restrictive of the quality of the analysis. Censorship could be perceived as noble and "puritan," or it could more accurately be perceived as mangling the author's meaning, which is of course the exact

inverse of the purported aim of literary analysis. This necessitates the usage of profanity in at least some academic writing.

This principle also applies beyond literary analysis, such as when writing academically about subjects such as “enshittification” (Timpka 665) or “shitposting”—words that have made their way into standard vernacular despite their inclusion of profane terms. One could not analyze or study these concepts while avoiding their very nomenclature. Therefore, profanity is inevitable in academic writing not in spite of but due to its inevitability in other genres.

Some may argue that the type of expression that profanity allows has no place in academic writing; however, I believe that sparing usage of profanity is reasonable in most contexts. Stapleton et al. conclude in their study on the unique properties of profanity that “swearing shows strong links with emotion,” and that the words themselves are “differently located and processed in the brain compared with other speech activities” (9). Effectively, Stapleton et al. have found that profanity strongly differs from other forms of language in the way that humans process and interpret it, even to the point that swearing activates different parts of the brain than other forms of language. This latter point is specifically worthy of consideration. To use swearing in academic writing is to intentionally induce brain activity separate from that which is produced by academic language; specifically, activity in areas of the brain such as the amygdala, which has a strong association with processing emotional responses (Stapleton et al. 4), are activated, rather than higher-order processing structures. The question must be posed whether academic writing should ever even consider foregoing the areas of the brain that favor higher thinking in order to activate those which produce

basal emotional responses—this concept feels like something more at home in propaganda films than academic writing. Yet it is occasionally the intent of an academic writer to posit a strong, rule-bending argument which stretches the limits of the understanding of concepts within their field, and for this, swearing feels perfectly at home. Thus, I believe that profanity can occasionally be of use in academic writing as a form of emphasis.

In conclusion, profanity has long been strictly forbidden in academic writing—the idea of including it is as fucking ludicrous as writing an essay in Klingon. However, evidence posed by a variety of writers suggests that just the opposite is true—slang and profanity can enrich writing and emphasize arguments.

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Abstract: This essay refutes the premise that profanity should be avoided at all costs in academic writing. It explores the nature of "unacceptable" language and presents relevant uses and contexts for profane language across various forms of academic inquiry.

Bio: I am Kiera Roedel, currently a first-year political science major with a minor in English Studies. A lifelong Oregonian, I wish to eventually work in public administration to help those who need it most. I love music, writing, and old sitcoms.

Keywords: Profanity, Academic Writing, Scholarly Writing, Bad Language, Swearing, Slang, Composition, Correctness

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