

# Why Do I Have to Write Like That?

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**W**E'VE ALWAYS KNOWN, as Dionne Brand says, that “no language is neutral.” English Studies came into being—in Bengal in the 1830s (Viswanathan)—precisely because of this power of language to act as a discursive technology for the construction of subject minds: “a class of interpreters,” in Macaulay’s chilling phrasing, “between us and the millions whom we govern; Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinion, in morals, and in intellect.” It’s the reason this new technology, our discipline, having proven its effectiveness in the colonial laboratory, then found itself shipped Home to the working-men’s colleges in the 1840s (Doyle) as a way of redirecting Labour’s claim for a participatory role in social decision-making into something less troubling. It’s the reason this extraordinary experiment in packaging and displacing a potential for social unrest again found itself a decade late redeployed into the education of women—English Studies as a surrogate for access to the Classics. It’s part of the reason we still get to bring pedagogy and research into reading and writing. Inalienably, and from the beginning, “English” as a formal process of study has contributed to the manufacture of a curiosity-driven obedience. The present-day salient of that obedience is the literary critical essay.

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I proposed a member-organized panel at the 2007 ACCUTE gathering in Saskatoon on the question of this Readers' Forum and was overwhelmed by the number of submissions. "Literary criticism," I wrote in the polemical Call for Papers,

is a baleful genre, overrun with disinclination and overwhelmed by the dispirited. And what is more, it is institutionally fraudulent. We entice students into our discipline through the lure of pleasurable reading. We then proceed to train them in the manufacture of tortured analytical documents—a perfect example of marketing logic at the level of "bait and switch." For those of us who are employed in the English Studies industry, this fraudulence comprises a necessary self-deception: our careers depend on our ability to write the kinds of books and articles that we would never willingly read. For those of us who are just entering the profession, however—graduate students especially—a hope prevails for the possibility of real professional change. This panel will examine that hope, preferably in the context of actual global practice in the general field of "academic writing" in English Studies. *Can* one write differently in "English"? Who has tried to do so, and under what conditions? What is ventured in the attempt to revolutionize critical commentary in the discipline? What is not ventured? Were we to succeed in writing professional documents differently, who might we seek to address as we proceed?

I wondered if this Call would collapse into two predictable answers: a screed against "theory" or a defense of the merely "difficult." For those of us who teach it know only too well that critical theory's various modalities of stylistic continuance, whatever else they are doing, comprise a kind of disciplinary intelligence test that most of us, and especially students, are always already failing. Instead, what echoed back was a variegated claim for real professional hopefulness. It was a belief that a discipline now partially lost to itself might nevertheless command a genuine capacity for self-rescue and that the diacritic of that capacity might be another way of writing. Heather Murray put this disciplinary capacity for self-rescue into historical perspective: I. A. Richards's hopeful championing of a specialized way of writing that could reflect the difficulty in the literary object itself. T. L. Cowan examined a present instance: her attempt to bridge academic writing to the work of performance artists. Kit Dobson followed the money behind our discipline's banal commodification of thoughtfulness—disciplinary critique as a prelude to change. Les Monk-

man tracked our disciplinary alibi to its institutional home ground, the doctoral dissertation, in order to restate the panel's organizing question in anti-imperative syntax.

These panel presentations evoked spirited, extemporaneous "papers" from the floor, and I asked those on-site masters of academic tumbling—Julia Creet, Diana Brydon, Len Findlay—to translate their conference-session acrobatics into writing for this Forum. I asked all the contributors to write in a voice that corresponded to the language of the session in Saskatoon. This explains the suspension, in most of what follows, of the attributive footnote, the locational qualifier, the back-door "out" clause, the "academic apparatus."

I also asked Camilla Gibb, who two days later presented the Congress's enormously prestigious "Research in Society" Lecture, to lend us her script. Astonishingly, she agreed. The panel's Call had asked for examples of "actual global practice" in writing academic thought differently, and here was an elucidation of why it was that an Oxford-educated scholar in anthropology, positioned at the certain beginning of a distinguished academic career, determined to embrace a difficulty in her own disciplinary object and begin to write fiction. Her lecture appears as the lead article in this issue of *ESC*.

Gibb's essay meditates on what it can mean to find no good answer to this Forum's organizing question. Findlay's essay meditates on what it must mean if a certain kind of answer becomes clear. What holds these several essays together is not a common answer: it is an axiom. And that is that writing differently within the discipline, or after it, should be grounded in something more radical than simple disciplinary reformation. It should aspire to embrace the difficulty of genuine social change.

## Works Cited

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