

# Why did I stop wanting to sound certain?

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## Abstract

This reflective essay examines the culture of certainty in academic writing and the intellectual costs of equating authority with confidence. Beginning from a personal experience of revising a manuscript into increasingly polished but less honest prose, the essay considers how scholarly communication often rewards statements that sound definitive even when the underlying research process is hesitant, partial, and unresolved. Rather than rejecting rigor, the text argues for a more responsible relationship between knowledge and uncertainty—one that recognizes hesitation not as weakness but as an epistemic condition of serious inquiry. By exploring the difference between clarity and false closure, the essay proposes that uncertainty can function as a legitimate scholarly posture and that reflective forms of writing have a role in making research more transparent, humane, and intellectually trustworthy.

**Keywords:** uncertainty; academic writing; scholarly communication; intellectual honesty; methodology; epistemic humility; research culture

## 1. Why did I stop wanting to sound certain?

There was a time when I believed that the sentence most likely to survive peer review was the sentence that sounded the least afraid. I do not mean merely clear, or well-argued, or carefully supported. I mean a sentence with an impressive posture: a sentence that stood upright, looked no one in the eye, and acted as if doubt had already been handled elsewhere. In my early writing, I admired that tone. I thought it was the sound of real scholarship. If a paragraph hesitated, I revised the hesitation away. If a claim felt too soft, I made it harder. If a conclusion still carried the dust of uncertainty from the desk where it had been written, I polished it until it looked publishable. For a while, this seemed to work. The prose became smoother. The argument became more efficient. It also became less true.

I do not say this dramatically. I say it with some embarrassment. What began as stylistic discipline slowly became a moral discomfort. I noticed that the more “academic” my writing sounded, the less accurately it described the actual experience of thinking. The research process that had produced the paper was full of interruptions, revisions, reversals, and unresolved questions. I had changed my mind several times. Some of my observations contradicted my expectations. Some of my evidence felt persuasive only up to a point. Some of my most important insights had emerged not from confidence, but from confusion. Yet by the time the manuscript reached its final version, very little of this remained visible. The paper did not lie exactly. It simply performed a cleaner intellectual history than the one I had lived through.

At first I treated this as a technical issue. Perhaps all writing, after all, requires selection and compression. No article can preserve every hesitation. No argument can unfold with the exact untidiness of thought itself. But over time I began to suspect that something larger was happening. What troubled me was not only the inevitable simplification involved in writing. It was the degree to which academic culture often encourages scholars to convert uncertainty into rhetorical confidence long before uncertainty has truly been resolved.

This is the point at which my discomfort stopped being personal and became conceptual. Why do we so often write as if conviction were evidence? Why is a claim considered stronger when its tone becomes firmer, even if its empirical or conceptual basis remains unchanged? At what moment did “sounding rigorous” become entangled with “sounding certain”? And why do so many of us learn, very early, that our ideas become more legible to institutions when they appear less fragile than they really are?

I do not ask these questions in order to accuse academia of hypocrisy. The problem is more ordinary and therefore more difficult. We work within systems that reward decisiveness. Journals ask for contribution, significance, implication, novelty, conclusion. Grant applications ask



for objectives and outcomes. Reviewers ask authors to sharpen, tighten, clarify, justify. None of these demands is inherently unreasonable. Scholarship should indeed strive for clarity. But clarity is not the same thing as closure, and rigor is not the same thing as confidence. Somewhere in the ordinary machinery of academic evaluation, these distinctions are often lost.

My own turning point came not from a rejection, but from a revision. I remember looking at two versions of the same paragraph. In the first, I had written that a pattern in my material “may reflect a broader tension that remains difficult to define conclusively.” In the second, after several rounds of self-editing, the sentence had become: “This pattern reflects a broader structural tension.” The revised sentence was cleaner. It was also more publishable in the conventional sense. But when I read it closely, I realized that what had been removed was not clutter. It was the truth of my relationship to the evidence. I did not, in fact, know enough to be so definitive. What I had gained in elegance I had paid for with precision. That realization stayed with me. More importantly, it began to reorganize the way I read other academic writing. I noticed how often uncertainty was hidden behind form. A paper would acknowledge “limitations” in the final paragraph but maintain an air of full conceptual command everywhere else. A theoretical intervention would present itself as a correction when it was really an opening. An empirical study would smooth over ambiguity with the quiet confidence of standardized phrasing. I do not think authors always do this cynically. On the contrary, many probably do it because they have internalized the same lesson I had: uncertainty may be tolerated as content, but certainty is still expected as style. Once I saw this, I could no longer admire that style in the same way.

## 2. The performance of certainty in scholarly communication

The expectation that scholars should sound certain is rarely stated openly, but it is widely understood. The forms this certainty takes, however, vary across disciplines: in some natural and social scientific contexts, uncertainty may be muted through impersonal voice, methodological formalization, or statistical presentation, whereas in some humanities and theoretical fields it may appear through conceptual fluency, argumentative confidence, or the performance of interpretive command.

It appears in the architecture of article writing itself: introduction, gap, method, findings, conclusion. This structure has practical value. It helps readers follow an argument and evaluate a contribution. Yet it can also create an illusion that research proceeds with a coherence that it rarely possesses in practice. The article often appears as the record of a linear intellectual movement from question to answer, when in fact most serious inquiry proceeds through detours, failed interpretations, partial recognitions, and moments of genuine bewilderment.

This gap between process and presentation is not merely aesthetic. It has epistemological consequences. When uncertainty disappears from scholarly writing, readers may inherit conclusions without inheriting the conditions under which those conclusions were formed. They see the claim, but not the hesitation that disciplined it. They receive the argument, but not the pressure points that made its author cautious. In this sense, the rhetoric of certainty can obscure the very process by which knowledge becomes trustworthy.

There is, of course, a reasonable objection to this line of thought. If every paper were to preserve all its uncertainty, would scholarship not become unreadable? Would arguments not dissolve into endless qualification? Would intellectual life not collapse into timidity disguised as honesty? I take this objection seriously. I am not advocating vagueness, and certainly not celebrating indecision for its own sake. Hesitation can become a habit, and modesty can become a posture as artificial as arrogance. Not all uncertainty is profound. Some of it is simply underdeveloped thinking. But this is precisely why the issue matters. The alternative to false certainty is not formless doubt. It is disciplined uncertainty: an approach to writing in which authors distinguish clearly between what their work can support, what it can suggest, and what it cannot yet know. Such writing does not abandon argument. It refines it. It asks that scholars resist the temptation to present interpretive reach as epistemic possession.

This distinction may seem subtle, but it carries ethical weight. In many fields, the pressure to sound certain does not affect all scholars equally. Early-career researchers, contingent academics, marginalized scholars, and those writing across languages or disciplines often experience their credibility as especially fragile. For them, the demand for confidence can become not merely stylistic but existential. To sound hesitant is to risk being read as weak. To write cautiously is to fear invisibility. Under such conditions, certainty becomes a survival strategy. In this sense, the ability to express uncertainty is itself unevenly distributed. Scholars who are already institutionally secure may be read as nuanced, sophisticated, or intellectually mature when they write with caution, whereas those with less status may be judged as underprepared, unconvincing, or lacking authority. The problem, then, is not individual failure of courage. It is a scholarly environment in which the performance of authority is often mistaken for authority itself, and in which rhetorical confidence functions partly as a response to unequal conditions of recognition.

The costs of this culture are both intellectual and emotional. Intellectually, it narrows the forms through which insight can appear. Some of the most important scholarly observations begin as unresolved tensions, not finished positions. If only stabilized conclusions are made legible, then emerging understanding must either disguise itself prematurely as certainty or remain unpublished. Emotionally, the culture of certainty teaches researchers to mistrust their own process. It encourages them to treat confusion as incompetence rather than as one of the ordinary conditions of thinking seriously. I have come to believe that this mistrust distorts not only writing but also self-understanding. Many of us begin research because we are drawn to what we do not yet understand. Yet the further we move into professional academic life, the more we are often rewarded for appearing already in command. Curiosity slowly gives way to posture. Inquiry becomes performance. We continue to ask questions, but we learn to ask them in a tone that implies we already know where they will lead. Something is lost in that tone. Not innocence, exactly, but sincerity.

## 3. Uncertainty as a scholarly posture

What would it mean to take uncertainty seriously, not as a weakness to be hidden but as a condition of responsible scholarship?

First, it would require us to separate uncertainty from incompetence. These are not the same. A researcher may be uncertain because the phenomenon under study is complex, because the evidence is partial, because the conceptual vocabulary remains inadequate, or because the existing frameworks do not yet capture what is at stake. In such cases, uncertainty is not a defect in scholarship but evidence that scholarship has reached the edge of what it can responsibly claim.

Second, taking uncertainty seriously would require changes not only in individual writing habits but also in our evaluative imagination. We would need to ask different questions of scholarly work. Not only: Is this argument assertive? Is it novel? Is it conclusive? But also: Is it honest about its limits? Does it clarify the terrain of uncertainty? Does it make visible the pressure under which its claims were formed? Does it resist overstating what the evidence can bear? Such questions do not lower academic standards. They make them more exacting.

Third, we might need to recover forms of academic writing that permit thought to remain alive while still being accountable. This is one reason short, reflective academic formats matter. Not every worthwhile scholarly contribution arrives as a finished edifice. Some come as a conceptual unease, a methodological recognition, a focused doubt that reorganizes how a problem is understood. Short reflective writing can create a space where such recognitions become shareable without being forced too quickly into the posture of finality.

I am aware that this argument risks sounding idealistic. Academic systems are not easily reorganized by appeals to sincerity. Journals still need editorial criteria. Reviewers still need to make judgments. Institutions still count outputs. None of that will disappear because we decide to become more philosophically patient. Yet intellectual cultures are shaped not only by policy but by what they learn to admire. If certainty remains the primary aesthetic of credibility, then even scholars who value complexity will continue to flatten it in order to survive. For this reason, I no longer think the issue is merely one of personal style. It concerns the social distribution of what can count as valid scholarly voice. If only the declarative voice is rewarded, then other modes of serious knowledge—tentative, dialogical, exploratory, self-corrective—will continue to occupy a lower status, even when they are more faithful to the object of inquiry.

To defend uncertainty, then, is not to celebrate indecision. It is to argue that the unfinished, the cautious, and the unresolved may also be legitimate forms of intellectual contribution. In my own writing, this shift has produced no dramatic liberation. I still revise too aggressively. I still worry that a careful sentence will be mistaken for a weak one. I still know the professional temptation of making an argument sound more settled than it is. But I have stopped admiring that temptation. More importantly, I have stopped believing that the highest form of scholarship is the one that appears untouched by doubt. Some questions deserve confidence. Others deserve precision. Still others deserve patience. The task of scholarly writing, as I now understand it, is not to make every sentence sound powerful. It is to make every sentence answerable to the conditions under which it was thought.

#### **4. Conclusion: On writing without pretending to arrive too soon**

I stopped wanting to sound certain when I realized that certainty, in academic writing, is often less a sign of intellectual strength than a sign of rhetorical completion. It gives the reader the comfort of arrival. It suggests that the difficult work has already been done elsewhere and that all that remains is presentation. But much of the time, this comfort is manufactured. The work is not complete. The evidence is still uneven. The concept is still moving. The argument is still becoming itself.

To admit this is not to weaken scholarship. It is to return scholarship to its proper difficulty. If research is genuinely a process of inquiry, then uncertainty is not an accident at the margins of knowledge; it is one of the environments in which knowledge is formed. A scholarly culture that cannot make room for this fact risks mistaking polish for truth and confidence for understanding. By contrast, a culture willing to recognize hesitation, incompleteness, and conceptual vulnerability may produce writing that is not only more honest but also more durable, because it does not ask language to claim more than thought can justify.

I do not imagine a future in which academic writing becomes a confessional literature of endless doubt. That would merely invert one distortion into another. What I hope for is simpler and more demanding: a form of scholarship in which clarity does not require pretense, where caution is not confused with weakness, and where the authority of an argument comes not from how loudly it closes a question but from how responsibly it inhabits one.

Perhaps that is a modest aspiration. But modest aspirations are not always small ones. Sometimes they ask us to give up an entire style of self-protection. Sometimes they ask us to write as if truth mattered more than composure.

That, at least, is why I stopped wanting to sound certain.