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## What's Another Name for Bull\*\*\*\*?

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# What's Another Name for Bull\*\*\*\*?

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## Abstract:

Pretension is present in almost every aspect of academic writing. The desire to sound “smart” or professional is a normal reaction that appears when students try to mimic a style that they don’t fully understand. Dealing with academic BS in high-level writing is as much a part of tutoring as flow and conventions. Oftentimes, students need help to recognize the importance of personal voice and author’s intent in “good” writing, as well as the role the audience plays in crafting academic writing.

## Keywords:

Academic Writing, High Level Writing, Personal Voice, Author’s Intent, Good Writing,  
Academic BS

### What's Another Word for Bull\*\*\*\*?

It's two hours before your assignment deadline, and you're in peak procrastinated writing mode. Everything you type is perfectly calculated to either fill the page requirement or use as many words as possible to meet the minimum word count. The assignment requirements have become a distant memory and your sentences are confusing to the point you don't even understand what you're trying to say. Moreover, you are using every SAT word you can pull out of your brain, regardless of any definition it may or may not have, because you are trying to sound "smart" or "academic." In all honesty, it sounds like you regurgitated a thesaurus. We've all been there, trying our hardest to write papers and meet a vague standard of what we think high level academic writing should look like. We're all subscribing to the mantra of college students everywhere: fake it 'til you make it. The result is a slew of formulaic writing that fits a narrow idea of what constitutes as academically "appropriate" writing.

I'm not going to lie; I've done my fair share of what I like to call "high-level academic BS." It's a familiar concept that can be found everywhere, occurring when students are put into challenging environments without a clear idea of what good writing looks like on a personal level. Writing is subjective and good writing is good writing, but not every student has the same writing capability. Don't misunderstand me, every student is capable of good writing; although, good, "appropriate" academic writing will look different for each student. This is not a novel concept and we, as tutors, are intimately familiar with the idea that we have to adapt to the level of the student during a session. I am not here to chat about individuality in writing; rather, I am more interested in counteracting the bad writing habits that students have adopted as characteristics of academic style writing.

Most tutoring sessions have some aspect of high-level BS involved in the writing, but some trends stick out more than others. The student might have used diction beyond their personal knowledge and understanding, or maybe they made their sentences as lengthy they could contrive. Both trends are problematic in the same way: the student is writing to their own misconceptions of “academic writing” and not writing for their audience’s comprehension. There is a tendency among students to use high level word choice, repetitive structure, and convoluted phrasing in an attempt to sound “smarter” or more “professional.” Both the student and the tutor want to appear as an expert during peer tutoring sessions; however, the premise of peer tutoring is a supposition of equality, meaning we will hesitate to admit a lack of knowledge or understanding. We are being judged for what we might perceive as a shortcoming or error. Both the tutor and the student want to be taken seriously, which can affect the flow of the session and the amount of high-level BS present in drafts and revisions. It is important to note, however, that tutors are cognizant of power dynamics and oftentimes work to counter any imbalances.

Academic bullshit is rampant throughout professional writing to the extent that it changes the way people need to look at compositions. The types of BS differ based on the desires and needs of the author, as well as the inherent biases and expectations that are present in academia. To put it bluntly, many students simply do not understand the value of their audience and the relevance of the intent of the author when they attempt academic style writing. They assume that their audience is the professor, or whomever else is grading the assignment, and the authorial intent is to complete the assignment description. Students are taught these basic principles in most English classes; however, something about academic writing completely overrides the ability of students to look beyond an assignment description and connect with the written word.

Not only is the student ignoring the basic principle of writing, but they seem to think that acknowledging bias is basically an admission of guilt that negates any conclusions or ideas reached by the writing piece. Philip Eubanks and John Schaeffer put it best in their article “A Kind Word for Bullshit: The Problem of Academic Writing,” in which they elaborate on the detriments and occasional benefits of academic BS, with the caveat of specific contextualization and metacognitive awareness of the hypocritical nature of the topic. In the case of students’ academic BS, which is arguably the place where we, as tutors, see it most often, Eubanks and Schaeffer note that, “The student has done all that is asked, except to be sincere—about the content of the writing and about his or her presentation of self.” (Eubanks & Schaeffer 386). Writing is inherently personal, to the point that many would call writing an extension of personhood. The direct consequence of writing as a “presentation of self” is that we, as tutors and readers, expect sincerity from writing. We crave the additional knowledge we gain from looking at perspectives other than our own. High-level academic BS more often than not strips the writing of the voice and personality that are essential components of truly good writing, academic or otherwise.

Part of the reason that so many students struggle with writing quality academic style is the idea that one can “fake it till you make it,” an idea that stems from the general lack of knowledge on the part of the student. As I joked about earlier, there comes a point with most assigned writing in which the student can no longer recall what they are writing or why. This is not an attack on students whose papers change direction mid-composition as they figure out what exactly they really want to say. This is calling out the students who freely admit that they could not tell you what their writing was about or what their intent was. There is a greater social problem that revealed itself in the warped elitism of “faking it.” Students perceive high-level

academic writing as what should be the standard for their papers, not realizing the differences in audience and authors' intent. Samantha Elliot et al. in the article "'On the Outside I'm Smiling but inside I'm Crying': Communication Successes and Challenges for Undergraduate Academic Writing" expands on the idea that students struggle in finding a balance when writing academically, especially with the added expectations of higher education. The article states that, "Common areas of concern for all students were meeting the word count, referencing accurately and a sense that the expectations of academic writing were mysterious and unfamiliar..." (Elliot, et al. 1168). Students are floundering in that they fundamentally lack the knowledge of what good academic writing should look like in addition to fulfilling any and all assignment requirements. By "faking it" in an attempt to fit a narrow and elite idea of good academic writing, students perpetuate styles of writing that have virtually no benefit.

At this point, the focus is on what we, as tutors, can do to encourage good academic writing among students rather than a reliance upon high-level academic BS. Unfortunately, we are limited by the constraints of our sessions and there is only so much influence we have on the students we tutor. Some suggestions would be to have the student rewrite or rephrase ideas in the same way that they would as if having a conversation, as well as encouraging the student to exercise their authorial voice in appropriate and applicable ways. Revision processes in general can help fix the majority of the disconnect between writers and their works. One of my personal tips for tutoring students is to help them determine what qualifies as "good academic writing". I have the students talk about writing that they thought was good, regardless of genre or style. This is where I try to impress upon students that good writing is good writing, even if they don't know the reason. We then work together to break down what aspects of the writing stood out to them and how that contributes to making the overall piece "good." Finally, I help them use the

techniques that they thought were embodiments of “good” writing in ways that benefit whatever they’re writing. I will acknowledge, however, that there is only so much a tutor can do to aid students in understanding what constitutes as “good” academic writing and most of the problem lies with them applying those principles to their own work. Regardless, high-level academic BS might be currently present in writing, but it shouldn’t be the backbone of how we write and tutor in academia.

## Works Cited

Elliot, Samantha, et al. ““On the Outside I’m Smiling but inside I’m Crying’: Communication Successes and Challenges for Undergraduate Academic Writing.” *Journal of Further & Higher Education*, vol. 43, no. 9, 2018, pp. 1163-1180.  
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