

## CHAPTER 14

### THE CREATIVE TOUCH

Take a gamine teenager, dress her in a sheath frock and elbow-length gloves, thrust a cigarette holder into her hand, and still she will not look like Audrey Hepburn. Some elements of stylishness defy definition or imitation, no matter how hard we try. As novelist Willa Cather puts it:

The qualities of a first-rate writer cannot be defined, but only experienced. It is just the thing in him which escapes analysis that makes him first-rate. One can catalogue all the qualities that he shares with other writers, but the thing that is his very own, his timbre, this cannot be defined any more than the quality of a beautiful speaking voice can be.<sup>1</sup>

Nonetheless, this chapter investigates that elusive *je ne sais quoi* of stylish writing: the cluster of special qualities that make certain writers stand out from the crowd. These include passion, commitment, pleasure, playfulness, humor, elegance, lyricism, originality, imagination, creativity, and “undisciplined thinking”—attributes that are easy enough to recognize (perhaps because they occur so rarely in academic writing) but difficult to define or emulate.

Passion and commitment are stylistic qualities that academic writers often praise in other people’s writing but suppress in their own. Most academics would describe themselves as passionate, committed researchers; they love what they do and undertake