

A Stylistic Analysis of Lexical and Syntactic in James Clear's Atomic Habits

Alinmart Paotonan¹, Murni Mahmud², Auliyanti Sahril Nurfadhilah^{3*}

^{1,2,3}English Literature Study Program, Universitas Negeri Makassar

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Abstract: Effective communication in self-help literature relies heavily on clarity, accessibility, and reader engagement, especially when complex behavioral concepts are presented to a general audience. Despite the widespread popularity of *Atomic Habits* by James Clear, limited research has examined how specific stylistic features contribute to its readability and effectiveness, creating a gap between theoretical discussions of stylistics and practical writing strategies in self-help texts. To address this gap, a stylistic analysis is conducted to explore the lexical and syntactic choices that enhance readability and accessibility, as well as the sentence structures that maintain clarity and reader engagement. A qualitative descriptive method is employed, with data drawn from selected excerpts focusing on vocabulary patterns and sentence construction. The findings reveal that the consistent use of simple, repetitive vocabulary, direct second-person address, short sentence structures, and a dominant active voice significantly improves accessibility. The use of parallel structures and clear information flow supports comprehension and strengthens reader engagement. These findings indicate that effective self-help writing depends on strategic linguistic choices that prioritize simplicity, structure, and reader-oriented communication, enabling complex ideas to be conveyed clearly and persuasively to a wide audience.

Keywords: stylistics, lexical, syntactic, readability, *Atomic Habits*

INTRODUCTION

Effective communication in non-fiction writing plays an important role in ensuring that readers clearly understand ideas. This is especially important in self-help literature, where complex psychological and behavioral concepts need to be presented in a simple, accessible, and engaging way (Hollis, 2023; Saunders-Smith, 2009; Wray & Lewis, 1997). Unlike academic texts, which are usually intended for specialized audiences, self-help books are written for general readers with diverse educational and social backgrounds. Therefore, writers in this genre must carefully organize their language to simplify complex ideas

*Corresponding author: auliyantisn@unm.ac.id

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without reducing their meaning. Clarity, readability, and reader engagement are consequently essential factors in determining the effectiveness of self-help texts.

Among contemporary self-help books, *Atomic Habits* by James Clear (2017) has gained worldwide popularity for its practical, easy-to-understand discussion of habit formation and behavior change. The book explains concepts related to identity, systems, and long-term improvement through concise explanations and relatable examples. Despite discussing behavioral and psychological concepts, the text remains highly accessible to general readers. This accessibility suggests that the book's effectiveness is influenced not only by its content but also by the author's stylistic choices.

One of the most noticeable characteristics of *Atomic Habits* is its use of simple vocabulary, direct address, and memorable sentence structures. Statements such as “You do not rise to the level of your goals. You fall to the level of your systems” demonstrate how language can create clarity and emphasis simultaneously (Clear, 2018). Through repeated key vocabulary, active voice, and parallel sentence patterns, Clear communicates abstract concepts in a practical, relatable manner. These stylistic choices make the text easier to understand and help maintain reader engagement. Stylistics is a branch of linguistics that examines how language choices create meaning and influence readers’ interpretation (Leech & Short, 2007). According to Leech and Short (2007), stylistic analysis focuses on the relationship between linguistic forms and their communicative functions. Through stylistic analysis, features such as vocabulary choice, sentence structure, repetition, and information organization can be examined to understand how a text achieves clarity and engagement. Related work in grammar, discourse, and writing studies also shows that sentence form, clause structure, and reader-oriented organization influence how easily text is processed and remembered (Biber et al., 2002; Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014; Langacker, 2008).

Within this broader stylistic framework, lexical features provide an important basis for examining how writers establish thematic focus and interact with readers. Lexical features refer to the use of vocabulary in a text, including word choice, repetition, and pronoun use (Leech & Short, 2007). Leech and Short (2007) explain that repetition of key vocabulary can reinforce thematic focus and improve textual coherence. In addition, the use of direct address, such as ‘you,’ creates interaction between the writer and reader, which, according to Hyland (2005), increases reader engagement and involvement. Reader-oriented writing often benefits from language that makes the audience feel directly addressed and included in the text (Graff & Birkenstein, 2014; Hyland, 2005).

Lexical choices are closely connected to syntactic organization because vocabulary and sentence structure work together to shape how meaning is presented and processed. Syntactic features refer to the structure of sentences and the arrangement of information within them (Crystal, 2011). Crystal (2011) states that short and simple sentences are generally easier to process and understand. Similarly, active voice and parallel structures contribute to clarity, emphasis, and memorability, making ideas easier for readers to follow and remember (Corbett & Connors, 1999; Tufte, 2006). Sentence design, therefore, plays an important role in shaping how effectively meaning is delivered to readers (Strunk & White, 2000).

The effectiveness of sentence design also depends on whether information is arranged in ways that correspond to readers' expectations. Gopen & Swan (1990) explain that readers understand information more effectively when sentences follow natural information flow patterns. Readers generally expect familiar information at the beginning of a sentence and new information at the end (Gopen & Swan, 1990). When writers organize information in line with these expectations, texts become clearer and easier to understand. This principle is consistent with functional approaches to grammar and discourse, which emphasize how given and new information is organized to guide interpretation (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014).

These principles of lexical accessibility, syntactic clarity, and information flow can be further explained through theories of cognitive processing and readability. Sweller's (1988) Cognitive Load Theory explains that simpler language structures reduce unnecessary cognitive effort and allow readers to process information more effectively. Readability is influenced by factors such as vocabulary familiarity, sentence simplicity, and information organization (Sweller, 1988). Therefore, clear and accessible language plays an important role in maintaining reader comprehension and engagement (Sweller, 1988). Dual coding theory also supports the idea that concrete and familiar language can improve memory and understanding by linking verbal expression to imagery and meaning (Paivio, 1971). Overall, these perspectives show that lexical choice, sentence structure, information organization, and cognitive accessibility are interrelated elements that shape how effectively a text communicates with its readers.

Literary works have indeed dominated stylistic scholarship, while self-help books specifically have been understudied. Macdonald (2002) documents this disciplinary divide directly, noting that "Literary studies has traditionally assigned value to fictional prose" and that "non-fictional styles have been considered less important subjects for stylistic analysis." Neville (2012) confirms this gap for self-help specifically, stating that despite the genre's commercial success worth "\$10 billion in America," it "has yet to receive the scholarly attention that this phenomenon now deserves." Koay (2015) reinforces this, observing that although self-improvement books are "a widely read genre, particularly in the Western world, none to my knowledge has examined the linguistic features of this genre in detail." However, recent scholarship is beginning to address this imbalance, with multiple studies now examining self-help rhetoric and genre structures (Koay, 2015; Macdonald, 2002; Neville, 2012).

Previous stylistic studies have mostly focused on literary works such as novels, poems, and dramas, while non-fiction genres, particularly self-help books, have received less attention. Existing studies on self-help literature also tend to emphasize motivational values and psychological concepts rather than linguistic features. As a result, there is still limited research discussing how lexical and syntactic choices contribute to readability, accessibility, and reader engagement in self-help writing. This gap highlights the importance of examining language use in *Atomic Habits* from a stylistic perspective. Research on readability and effective prose further supports the idea that short, clear, and well-structured sentences improve comprehension and reduce processing difficulty (Crystal, 2011; Sweller, 1988; Tufte, 2006).

In response to this gap, this article analyzes the lexical and syntactic choices in *Atomic Habits* and investigates how sentence structures contribute to clarity and reader engagement. Two research questions below are used to guide the analysis.

1. What lexical and syntactic choices does James Clear employ in *Atomic Habits* to enhance readability and accessibility?
2. How does James Clear structure his sentences to maintain clarity and reader engagement in *Atomic Habits*?

To answer these questions, the study employs a qualitative descriptive approach by examining selected excerpts from the book. The analysis focuses on recurring patterns of vocabulary and sentence structure that contribute to communicative effectiveness. By examining these stylistic features, this article aims to provide a clearer understanding of how linguistic strategies contribute to effective communication in self-help writing.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative descriptive design using stylistic analysis to examine the lexical and syntactic features of James Clear's *Atomic Habits* (Creswell, 2014). Stylistic analysis was selected because it enables researchers to examine linguistic patterns systematically and relate language forms to their functions within a text (Leech & Short, 2007; Manqoush & Al-Wadhaf, 2021). The analysis was primarily guided by Leech and Short's (2007) framework, while Gopen and Swan's (1990) reader-expectation principles and Sweller's (1988) Cognitive Load Theory supported the interpretation of information organization and textual accessibility. Descriptive frequencies and percentages were used to complement the qualitative interpretation of the identified linguistic features.

The primary data source was *Atomic Habits: An Easy & Proven Way to Build Good Habits & Break Bad Ones*, written by James Clear and published by Avery in 2018. The book consists of 20 chapters and 320 pages. The study examined 108 sentences purposively selected from Chapters 1–5, covering pages 1–78. These chapters were selected because they introduce the principal concepts developed in the book and contain varied forms of exposition, including narratives, definitions, explanations, examples, and practical recommendations. The sentences were selected according to three criteria. First, they contained lexical or syntactic features relevant to the research questions. Second, they provided sufficient textual context for linguistic interpretation. Third, they represented different forms of exposition found across Chapters 1–5. Sentences consisting entirely of quotations attributed to other writers or speakers were excluded so that the analysis focused on Clear's own language.

Data collection and analysis were conducted in five steps. First, the three researchers read Chapters 1–5 closely and identified sentences that met the selection criteria. Second, the selected sentences were recorded in a coding table containing the chapter, page number, textual context, and analytical category. Third, recurring lexical items were identified and counted. The lexical dataset contained 123 occurrences of five selected lexical items. Because a sentence could contain more than one of these items, the number of lexical

occurrences exceeded the number of selected sentences. The percentage of each lexical item was calculated by dividing its frequency by the total of 123 occurrences and multiplying the result by 100.

Fourth, the 108 sentences were classified according to their syntactic characteristics, including sentence structure, communicative function, grammatical voice, parallelism, and Given–New information organization. A simple sentence was defined as containing one independent clause, a compound sentence as containing two or more coordinated independent clauses, and a complex sentence as containing one independent clause and at least one dependent clause. Active voice was identified when the grammatical subject performed the action, whereas passive voice was identified when the subject received the action. Parallelism was coded when adjacent clauses or sentences employed equivalent grammatical patterns. Given–New organization was examined by identifying the placement of familiar and newly introduced information within the sentence.

Finally, the lexical and syntactic features were interpreted within their immediate textual contexts using the selected theoretical frameworks. The three researchers served as the primary analytical instruments and used coding tables and textual notes to organize the data. The classifications and frequency calculations were reviewed collaboratively, and differences were resolved by referring to the operational definitions and the surrounding textual context before the analysis was finalized.

RESULTS

A. Stylistic Choices (Research Question 1)

1. Lexical

The lexical analysis shows that James Clear predominantly uses simple, repetitive vocabulary to maintain clarity and reader engagement. The repeated use of key terms such as habits, you, identity, and system reinforces the text's central ideas while creating a reader-oriented communication style.

Table 1. Dominant lexical items in Atomic Habits

Word	Frequency	Percentage
<i>habits</i>	45	36,6%
<i>you</i>	38	30.9%
<i>identity</i>	18	14.6%
<i>change</i>	12	9.8%
<i>system</i>	10	8.1%

Extract 1:

“A habit is a routine or behavior that is performed regularly and, in many cases, automatically” (Clear, 2018, p. 6).

The sentence in the extract 1 defines *habit* using simple and familiar words such as *routine*, *behavior*, and *regularly* (Paivio, 1971). This lexical choice reflects Clear’s strategy of making complex psychological concepts accessible to general readers, consistent with Paivio’s (1971) Dual Coding Theory, which argues that concrete words are processed faster and retained more effectively than abstract ones.

The findings indicate that the word *habit* appears most frequently, underscoring the text’s central theme of behavioral change. The pronoun *you* is also highly dominant, indicating direct reader engagement and a conversational style. The extract “Your habits shape your identity” demonstrates how concise vocabulary and direct address convey motivational ideas clearly and effectively.

2. Syntactic

The syntactic analysis reveals that *simple sentence* structures dominate the text. This stylistic pattern helps readers process information more efficiently and reduces cognitive complexity.

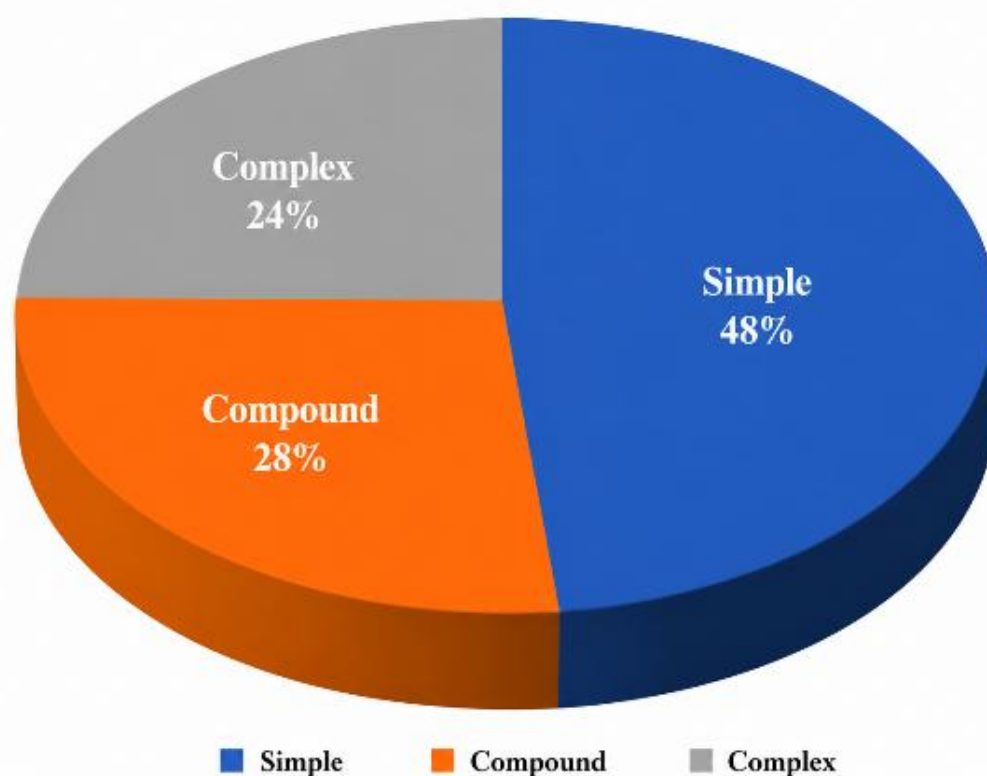


Figure 1. Sentence Type Distribution

The findings show that *simple sentences* are used more frequently than compound and complex sentences. This dominance reflects the writer's effort to maintain clarity and readability for general readers. The extract "Goals are about the results you want to achieve" illustrates the use of a straightforward sentence structure that delivers information directly and clearly. The analysis also identifies the dominant use of active voice throughout the text.

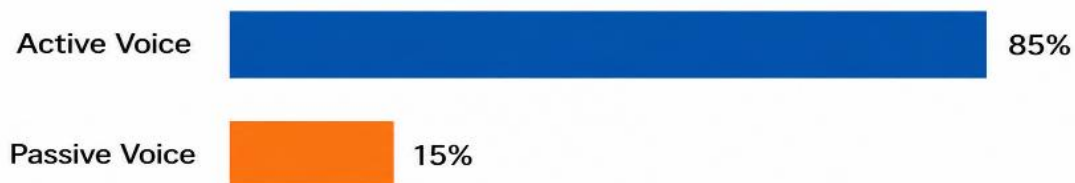


Figure 2. Active and Passive Voice Type Distribution

The syntactic analysis reveals that *simple sentences* are the dominant structure (48%), followed by *compound sentences* (28%) and *complex sentences* (24%). The average sentence length of 12–15 words falls within the optimal range for accessible non-fiction writing. The following extracts demonstrate the dominant syntactic patterns.

Extract 2:

"You do not rise to the level of your goals. You fall to the level of your systems" (Clear, 2018, pp. 27–28).

These two simple sentences form a parallel antithetical pair that are structurally identical yet semantically opposite. The repetition of the pattern *You [verb] to the level of your [noun]* encodes the conceptual contrast between *goals* and *systems* in a rhetorically powerful and memorable form, consistent with Corbett and Connors' (1999) finding that syntactic parallelism significantly enhances memorability and rhetorical force (Corbett & Connors, 1999).

3. Active vs Passive Voice

Active voice is strongly dominant at 85%, consistently positioning either the reader (you) or the author (I) as the grammatical agent of action. Passive voice (15%) is used selectively for definitional statements that require a neutral, universally applicable tone. The following extracts demonstrate this distribution.

Extract 3:

"You have the power to change your beliefs about yourself" (Clear, 2018, p. 41).

This active declarative sentence places the pronoun *you* in the subject position, followed by the active verb *have* and the object phrase *the power*. The infinitive phrase *to change your beliefs about yourself* further represents the reader as the agent capable of initiating personal change. Through this combination of active construction and direct second-person address, Clear assigns agency to the reader and presents behavioral change

as an action within the reader's control. This example illustrates how the *active voice* contributes to the book's direct and reader-oriented style.

In addition to active constructions, parallel structures are frequently used to organize and emphasize key ideas. For example, "You do not rise to the level of your goals. You fall to the level of your systems" employs the repeated pattern *You [verb] to the level of your [noun]*. The balanced construction strengthens the contrast between *goals* and *systems* and makes the statement more memorable. Overall, the syntactic accessibility of *Atomic Habits* is supported by short sentences, active constructions, parallel patterns, simple vocabulary, and direct address.

B. Sentence Structure and Reader Engagement (Research Question 2)

1. Sentence Patterns

The analysis identifies four recurring sentence patterns: simple sentences, parallel structures, balanced constructions, and antithetical contrasts. These patterns consistently present key arguments in structurally predictable and rhetorically effective forms.

Extract 4:

"Outcomes are about what you get. Processes are about what you do. Identity is about what you believe" (Clear, 2018, p. 29).

This three-part parallel series defines the three layers of behavioral change using an identical template: *[Subject] are about what you [verb]* (Clear, 2018). The repetition of the grammatical structure across all three sentences creates a logical progression from surface to depth. At the same time, the parallelism ensures that all three definitions carry equal syntactic weight and remain easy to compare and retain (Corbett & Connors, 1999).

2. Information Structure (Given–New)

The analysis of *Given–New information structure* reveals that Clear consistently places familiar information at the beginning of key sentences and reserves the sentence-final position for new, emphasized arguments. This pattern ensures that readers receive the most important claims when they are cognitively most prepared to process them.

Extract 5:

"Habits are the compound interest of self-improvement" (Clear, 2018, p. 16).

The sentence opens with *habits*, the most frequently repeated and familiar term in the text, in the topic position as *given information* (Gopen & Swan, 1990). The new conceptual metaphor "compound interest of self-improvement" is placed in the sentence-final stress position as *new information* (Gopen & Swan, 1990). This structure ensures that readers approach the sentence on familiar ground and receive the new argument precisely where their cognitive attention is most concentrated, directly applying Gopen and Swan's (1990) Given–New principle (Gopen & Swan, 1990).

3. Readability and Reader Engagement

The readability analysis confirms that *Atomic Habits* achieves high accessibility through the convergence of five reinforcing stylistic strategies: *average sentence length of 12–15 words*, *second-person address*, *simple declarative sentence structure*, *contrast*, and *conversational tone*. The following extracts illustrate how these features work together.

Extract 6:

“Make it obvious. Make it attractive. Make it easy. Make it satisfying” (Clear, 2018, p. 54).

These four sentences simultaneously combine all five readability measures identified in the analysis: *optimal sentence length*, *implied direct address*, *simple imperative structure*, *contrast across elements*, and *a conversational register* (Crystal, 2011; Hyland, 2005; Sweller, 1988). The convergence of all stylistic strategies within a single unit of text provides the clearest evidence that the readability of *Atomic Habits* results from a systematically integrated stylistic design rather than an incidental feature of the content (Leech & Short, 2007).

The findings indicate that readability in *Atomic Habits* achieves readability through a combination of short sentences, simple vocabulary, active voice, and direct address.

Table 2. Readability Indicators

Measure	Results
Average sentence length	12–15 words
Dominant pronoun	<i>you</i>
Dominant sentence type	<i>declarative</i>
Vocabulary type	<i>Simple and concrete</i>

The findings show that the text consistently employs concise sentence structures and familiar vocabulary. Direct address through the pronoun *you* appears frequently throughout the text, creating a conversational tone and maintaining reader involvement. The analysis also identifies the use of *Given–New information structure*. *Familiar information* is generally placed at the beginning of sentences, while *new information* is introduced at the end for emphasis. This organizational pattern contributes to textual coherence and clarity.

DISCUSSION

The findings show that the accessibility of *Atomic Habits* is produced through the interaction of lexical repetition, direct reader address, simple sentence construction, active voice, parallel structures, and predictable information flow. These stylistic features allow Clear to present behavioral concepts in forms that are relatively easy to understand, remember, and

relate to personal experience. This supports Leech and Short's (2007) view that linguistic choices should be interpreted according to the communicative functions they perform within a text. In self-help literature, this relationship is particularly important because readers are expected not only to understand an idea but also to evaluate its relevance and consider applying it to their own lives.

At the lexical level, the recurrence of *habits*, *identity*, *change*, and *system* creates thematic continuity across the selected chapters. These words function as conceptual anchors that repeatedly connect individual explanations to the central argument of the book. By returning to a limited set of key terms, Clear develops familiarity without requiring readers to process an extensive range of technical terminology. The frequent use of *you* further strengthens the interpersonal quality of the text by positioning readers directly within the discussion. This supports Hyland's (2005) argument that explicit reader reference reduces the distance between writer and audience. It is also consistent with Fialkoff and Pinchevski's (2024) analysis of bestselling self-help books, which shows that the genre depends not only on the advice being offered but also on the textual manner in which authors communicate it. In *Atomic Habits*, repeated thematic vocabulary organizes the argument, while direct address makes general behavioral principles appear personally relevant.

These findings can also be compared with recent research on motivational writing. Bhat (2024) found that strategic repetition, direct address, and imperative expressions in *Think and Grow Rich* strengthened thematic emphasis and created a sense of personal connection with readers. The present study identifies a similar pattern in *Atomic Habits*, although Clear's approach relies strongly on the interaction between thematic keywords and reader positioning. The repetition of central concepts maintains coherence, while the pronoun *you* frames behavioral change as something the reader can personally initiate. Nevertheless, the effect of direct address should not be treated as automatic. Gwynne (2024) demonstrates that self-help readers actively select, interpret, adapt, and sometimes resist the advice they encounter. Therefore, Clear's use of *you* may invite readers to participate in the discourse, but it does not guarantee that all readers will understand or apply the advice in the same way.

The syntactic findings further explain the accessibility of the text. Simple sentences form the largest category in the analyzed data, and active voice is more frequent than passive voice. These patterns reduce structural complexity and make the relationship between the grammatical subject and the action more explicit. Crossley et al. (2023) similarly show that readability is influenced by several interacting linguistic dimensions, including lexical sophistication, syntactic complexity, cohesion, and discourse organization. The accessibility of *Atomic Habits* therefore cannot be attributed to sentence length alone. It results from the combination of familiar vocabulary, relatively short constructions, clear grammatical relationships, and coherent information sequencing. The dominance of active voice is particularly important because it frequently places *you* or *I* in the subject position. When readers are represented as grammatical agents, change is presented as an action they can initiate rather than as a process beyond their control. Thus, the grammar supports the motivational message by linguistically constructing readers as active participants.

Parallel structures, contrast, and Given–New information organization further strengthen clarity and memorability. Balanced patterns enable readers to recognize relationships between ideas quickly because similar meanings are expressed through similar grammatical forms. Contrasts such as *goals* and *systems* also condense broader arguments into concise formulations that are easier to retain and repeat. This supports Corbett and Connors' (1999) account of parallelism as a source of rhetorical emphasis and Tufte's (2006) view that patterned syntax helps readers identify conceptual relationships. Similarly, Clear's tendency to place familiar information before new or emphasized information corresponds with Gopen and Swan's (1990) reader-expectation principles and Halliday and Matthiessen's (2014) explanation of information structure. Familiar concepts provide an accessible point of entry, while new interpretations are introduced in positions where they receive greater emphasis. These patterns allow readers to move from recognizable ideas toward more complex meanings without disrupting the flow of the text.

The interaction of these stylistic strategies may help explain the broad appeal of *Atomic Habits*. Repeated keywords make its central concepts recognizable, direct address increases personal relevance, active constructions emphasize agency, and parallel statements make key ideas easier to remember, quote, and share. Fialkoff and Pinchevski (2024) similarly suggest that successful self-help discourse depends partly on how advice is transformed into an accessible and engaging form of written communication. Clear's style lowers linguistic barriers for readers from varied educational and professional backgrounds and presents behavioral ideas as practical rather than highly technical. These characteristics may support recommendation, quotation, and circulation beyond the book itself. However, commercial success cannot be attributed solely to linguistic style. Marketing, author visibility, publication timing, digital circulation, and public interest in personal development may also influence the book's popularity. The present study, therefore, identifies stylistic accessibility as a plausible contributing factor rather than the sole cause of its commercial performance.

CONCLUSION

The analysis shows that the accessibility of James Clear's *Atomic Habits* is supported by the interaction of several lexical and syntactic features. Within the selected chapters, the repetition of key terms, the frequent use of direct second-person address, familiar vocabulary, simple sentence structures, active voice, parallelism, and Given–New information organization contribute to a clear and reader-oriented style. These features allow behavioral concepts to be presented in concise, coherent, and memorable forms while positioning readers as potential agents of personal change.

The findings suggest that the communicative appeal of *Atomic Habits* is shaped not only by the ideas it presents but also by the manner in which those ideas are linguistically organized. Its use of accessible vocabulary, direct address, predictable sentence patterns, and clear information flow may help make the text relevant to readers from varied educational and professional backgrounds. These stylistic qualities may also contribute to the book's broad appeal by making its central messages easier to understand, recall, quote, and share.

However, the study does not establish a direct causal relationship between linguistic style and the book's commercial success.

This study has several limitations. The data were purposively selected from Chapters 1–5 and consisted of 108 sentences; therefore, the findings cannot be assumed to represent every lexical and syntactic pattern found across the complete book. Purposive sampling also involves the researcher's judgment, which may affect the selection and classification of data. In addition, the study examined textual features without collecting evidence from readers, such as comprehension tests, interviews, or surveys. Consequently, claims about readability, engagement, and reader response are based on linguistic interpretation rather than direct measurement of readers' experiences.

Despite these limitations, the findings have theoretical and practical implications. Theoretically, the study demonstrates the usefulness of stylistic analysis for examining non-fiction and self-help discourse, a genre that has received less attention than literary texts. Practically, the results suggest that writers and editors of self-help and other reader-oriented non-fiction may improve accessibility by using consistent terminology, direct but appropriate reader address, manageable sentence structures, active constructions, and clear information sequencing. Future research could analyze the entire book, compare *Atomic Habits* with other self-help texts, employ a larger or systematically sampled corpus, and incorporate reader-response data to examine whether the identified stylistic features actually influence comprehension, engagement, recall, and perceived usefulness.

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