

WHY ACADEMIC WRITING STINKS

BY
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AND HOW TO FIX IT

10 Tips on How to Write Less Badly

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ogether with wearing earth tones, driving Priuses, and having a for-

Though no doubt the bamboozlement theory applies to some academics some of the time, in my experience it does not ring true. I know many scholars who have nothing to hide and no need to impress. They do groundbreaking work on important subjects, reason well about clear ideas, and are honest, down-to-earth people. Still, their writing stinks.

The most popular answer inside the academy is the self-serving one: Difficult writing is unavoidable because of the abstractness and complexity of our subject matter. Every human pastime—music, cooking, sports, art—develops an argot to spare its enthusiasts from having to use a long-winded description every time they refer to a familiar concept in one another's company. It would be tedious for a biologist to spell out the meaning of the term transcription factor every time she used it, and so we should not expect the tête-à-tête among professionals to be easily un-

which the writer's goal is to satisfy a reader's need for a particular kind of information, and the form of the communication falls into a fixed template, such as the five-paragraph student essay or the standardized structure of a scientific article. The second is a style that Thomas and Turner call self-conscious, relativistic, ironic, or postmodern, in which "the writer's chief, if unstated, concern is to escape being convicted of philosophical naïveté about his own enterprise."

Thomas and Turner illustrate the contrast as follows:

"When we open a cookbook, we completely put aside—and expect the author to put aside—the kind of question that leads to the heart of certain philosophic and religious traditions. Is it possible to talk about cooking? Do eggs really exist? Is food something about which knowledge is possible? Can anyone else ever tell us anything true about cooking? ... Classic style similarly puts aside as inappropriate philosophical questions about its enterprise. If it took those questions up, it could never get around to treating its subject, and its purpose is exclusively to treat its subject."

It's easy to see why academics fall into self-conscious style. Their goal is not so much communication as self-presentation—an overriding defensiveness against any impression that they may be slacker than their peers in hewing to the norms of the guild. Many of the hallmarks of academese are symptoms of this agonizing self-consciousness:

Metadiscourse. The preceding discussion introduced the problem of academese, summarized the principle theories, and suggested a new analysis based on a theory of Turner and Thomas. The rest of this article is organized as follows. The first section consists of a review of the major shortcomings of academic prose. ...

Are you having fun? I didn't think so. That tedious paragraph was filled with metadiscourse—verbiage about verbiage. Thoughtless writers think they're doing the reader a favor by guiding her through the text with previews, summaries, and signposts. In reality, metadiscourse is there to help the writer, not the reader, since she has to put more work into understanding the signposts than she saves in seeing what they point to, like directions for a shortcut that take longer to figure out than the time the shortcut would save.

The art of classic prose is to use signposts sparingly, as we do in conversation, and with a min-

it's hard to know the truth, that the world doesn't just reveal itself to us, that we understand the world through our theories and constructs, which are not pictures but abstract propositions, and that our ways of understanding the world must constantly be scrutinized for hidden biases. It's just that good writers don't flaunt that anxiety in every passage they write; they artfully conceal it for clarity's sake.



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The slow and integrative nature of conscious perception is confirmed behaviorally by observations such as the “rabbit illusion” and its variants, where the way in which a stimulus is ultimately perceived is influenced by poststimulus events arising several

wise we have no idea what really took place. A commitment to the concrete does more than just ease communication; it can lead to better reasoning. A reader who knows what the Cutaneous Rabbit Illusion consists of is in a position to evaluate whether it really does imply that conscious experience is spread over time or can be explained in some other way.

The curse of knowledge, in combination with chunking and functional fixity, helps make sense of the paradox that classic style is difficult to master. What could be so hard about pretending to open your eyes and hold up your end of a conversation? The reason it's harder than it sounds is that if you are enough of an expert in a topic to have something to say about it, you have probably come to think about it in abstract chunks and functional labels that are now second nature to you but are still unfamiliar to your readers—and you are the last one to realize it.

The final explanation of why academics write so badly comes not from literary analysis or cognitive science but from classical economics and Skinnerian psychology: There are few incentives for writing well. When Calvin explained to Hobbes, “With a little practice, writing can be an intimidating and impenetrable fog,” he got it backward. Fog comes easily to writers; it's the clarity that requires practice. The naïve realism and breezy conversation in classic style are deceptive, an artifice constructed through effort and skill. Exorcising the curse of knowledge is no easier. It requires more than just honing one's empathy for the generic reader. Since our powers of telepathy are limited, it also requires showing a draft to a sample of real readers and seeing if they can follow it, together with showing it to yourself after enough time has passed that it's no longer familiar and

marathon a year from now, would you wait for months and then run 26 miles cold? No, you would build up slowly, running most days. You might start on the flats and work up to more demanding and difficult terrain. To become a writer, write. Don't wait for that book manuscript or that monster external-review report to work on your writing.

2. Set goals based on output, not input. "I will work for three hours" is a delusion; "I will type three double-spaced pages" is a goal. After you write three pages, do something else. Prepare for class, teach, go to meetings, whatever. If later in the day you feel like writing some more, great. But if you don't, then at least you wrote something.

3. Find a voice; don't just "get published." James Buchanan won a Nobel in economics in 1986. One of the questions he asks job candidates is: "What are you writing that will be read 10 years from now? What about 100 years from now?" Someone once asked me that question, and it is pretty intimidating. And embarrassing, because most of us don't think that way. We focus on "getting published" as if it had nothing to do with writing about ideas or arguments. Paradoxically, if all you are trying to do is "get published," you may not publish very much. It's easier to write when you're interested in what you're writing about.

4. Give yourself time.

Don't stick too closely to those formulas, but they are helpful in presenting your work to an audience, whether that audience is composed of listeners at a lecture or readers of an article.

7. Write, then squeeze the other things in. Put your writing ahead of your other work. I happen to be a “morning person,” so I write early in the day. Then I spend the rest of my day teaching, having meetings, or doing paperwork. You may be a “night person” or something in between. Just make sure you get in the habit of reserving your most productive time for writing. Don't do it as an afterthought or tell yourself you will write when you get a big block of time. Squeeze the other things in; the writing comes first.

8. Not all of your thoughts are profound. Many people get frustrated because they can't get an analytical purchase on the big questions that interest them. Then they don't write at all. So start small. The wonderful thing is that you may find that you have traveled quite a long way up a mountain, just by keeping your head down and putting one writing foot ahead of the other for a long time. It is hard to refine your questions, define your terms precisely, or know just how your argument will work until you have actually written it all down.

9. Your most profound thoughts are often wrong. Or, at least, they are not completely correct. Precision in asking your question, or posing your puzzle, will not come easily if the question is hard.

I always laugh to myself when new graduate students think they know what they want to work on and what they will write about for their dissertations. Nearly all of the best scholars are pro-

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very discipline has its own specialized language, its membership rites, its secret handshake. I remember the moment when, as a Ph.D. student in comparative literature, I casually dropped the phrase “psychosexual morphology” into a discussion of a Thomas Hardy novel. What power! From the professor’s approving nod and the envious shuffling of my fellow students around the seminar table, I knew that I had just flashed the golden badge that admitted me into an elite disciplinary community. Needless to say, my new party trick fell flat on my nonacademic friends and relations. Whenever I solemnly intoned the word “Foucauldian,” they quickly went off to find another beer.

In its most benign and neutral definition, jargon signifies “the technical terminology or characteristic idiom of a special activity or group.” More often, however, the jingly word that Chaucer used to describe “the inarticulate utterance of birds” takes on a pejorative cast: “unintelligible or

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humanities scholars, dwells on the material pleasures of difficult language, noting that words like

specified.” (psychology)

“By bringing deconstructive techniques to political philosophy, a theoretical discourse of rationality and self-control is forced to come to terms with the metaphorical, catachrestical, and fabulistic materials buried within it.” (literary studies)

These extracts all appeared in articles with “jargoncity ratios” of 1:10 or higher; that is, their authors employ specialized terminology on average once in every 10 words, if not more. Only the first example, a vigorously phrased if otherwise incomprehensible sentence from a computer-science article, stands up to syntactical scrutiny. In the other two sentences, jawbreakers such as “circumflex” and “catachrestical” momentarily distract us from serious grammatical errors: In the psychology article, a singular noun (“set”) is modified by a plural verb (“are”), while the literary-studies extract opens with a dangling participle (“by bringing”—who brings?) and closes with an ambiguous “it” (“philosophy” or “discourse”?). If the authors of those sentences are so intoxicated by big words that they cannot keep their own syntax walking in a straight line, what chance do their readers have?

In many academic contexts, jargon functions as a highly efficient form of disciplinary shorthand: phrases such as “non-HACEK gram-negative bacillus endocarditis” (medicine) or “unbounded demonic and angelic nondeterminacy” (computer science) may be unintelligible to ordinary mortals, but they facilitate efficient communication among disciplinary experts (or so they assure me).

Sometimes, however, the line between technical precision and intellectual pretension becomes a fine one.

Take the word “Foucauldian,” which I employed satirically at the beginning of this chapter as an example of potentially off-putting jargon. In my 1,000-article data sample, I found 18 articles from humanities and social-science journals that mention the cultural theorist Michel Foucault at least once within their first few pages. Seven of these articles contain the F-word in its adjectival form, variously invoking: from higher education, “Foucauldian theory,” “a Foucauldian analysis of power,” and “the Foucauldian interplay between ‘constraint’ and ‘agency’”; from literary studies, “a Foucauldian understanding of the operations of power and the repressive hypothesis” and “Foucauldian assumptions about genre as an agentless discourse”; and from history, “the Foucauldian concept of ‘discourse’” and a “Foucauldian direction” of thought.

Four of the articles lay claim to Foucauldian ideas, while the other three challenge Foucauldian paradigms. Only two of the seven articles, however, actually engage with Foucault’s work in any meaningful way: In one, the authors claim that “Foucauldian theory lays the groundwork for the methodological approach used in this investigation,” but it turns out that their understanding of “Foucauldian theory” has been gleaned almost entirely from a 1994 book on Foucault and fem-

its shiny face, however, the demon of academic hubris inevitably lurks in the shadows nearby. Ac-

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hen I watch creative writers perform, I hear a host of mostly unspoken questions. In their body language, self-presentation, jokes, and post-reading interactions, they seem to be asking: Am I boring? Am I funny? Are my sentences flat and flaccid? Is the pacing right? Am I losing the audience? Am I making people feel something? Am

Plenty of people have noticed differences between those who write literature and those who study it. Richard Hugo, a poet who drew a paycheck in an English department, took delight in pointing out the academics. In an essay titled "In Defense of Creative Writing Classes," he wrote: "In much academic writing, clarity runs a poor second to invulnerability."

He tells a story about an academic colleague who, when asked if he liked a movie he had just

her watch and remembering she has to do laundry. When academic authors set out to seduce the reader, their ideas and research have a chance to make changes in the world.

In *Stylish Academic Writing*, a new book from Harvard University Press, Helen Sword analyzes 1,000 scholarly articles from an array of disciplines and comes up with some writing tactics

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t an early stage of your academic writing career, there's a not-in-significant chance that someone—an editor, a reviewer, a trusted peer—is going to tell you that you need to work on finding your voice. This comment will typically be couched in general editorial feedback on something you're trying to publish. You may hear that “your voice” is not coming through on the page, or that “you” are not in the text enough, or that your argument is somehow lost in a cacophony of competing voices or arguments.

For the beginning or early-career author, the instruct6(o)-10.8(F6f25.1(t)3G1(t)3G1(t)394r-17

4. Talk, don't write. Try using voice-recognition software or a tape recorder and talk out your arguments. This is a great way to begin to recognize your own voice by literally hearing it.

5. Share your early drafts. Be open to feedback, even if it's critical. It may hurt, but it's often the best way to mature as a writer. If you think your writing comes across a certain way, but no one who reads your work agrees, you need to listen to them. Readers will let you know how your words sound to them. Gather as much feedback as you can, especially early on in your career. Readers can help you spot your strengths and weaknesses as a writer. Coda: Learn to sort out constructive criticism from feedback that's off the mark.

Which brings us to our last point ...

6. Trust your instincts.