Focus
THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

A Guide to Writing Good Academic Prose

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No one wants their writing to be the subject of ridicule and disdain, but that's the lot of many academics, whose turgid, clumsy, lumpy prose is deemed unapproachable by readers outside the halls of academe. What's the harm in writing for the few? Many good ideas that might be of public benefit are cloistered away. The articles in this collection describe what's wrong with academic prose and how it could be improved.

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OPINION

Why Academics Stink at Writing

By STEVEN PINKER

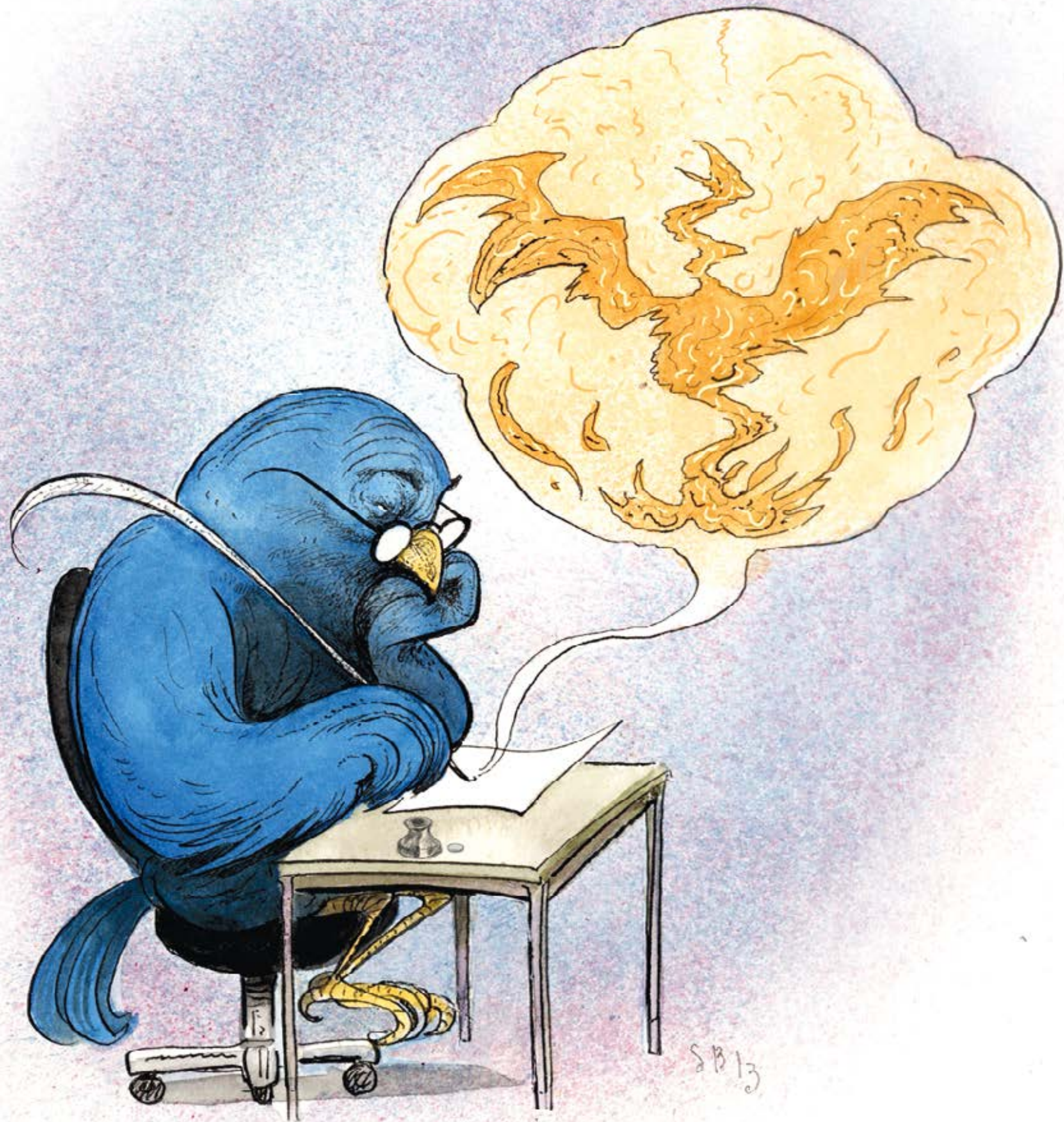

ILLUSTRATION BY STEVE BRODNER FOR THE CHRONICLE

Together with wearing earth tones, driving Priuses, and having a foreign policy, the most conspicuous trait of the American professoriate may be the prose style called academese. An editorial cartoon by Tom Toles shows a bearded academic at his desk offering the following explanation of why SAT verbal scores are at an all-time low: "Incomplete implementation of strategized programmatics designated to maximize acquisition of awareness and utilization of communications skills pursuant to standardized review and assessment of languaginal development." In a similar vein, Bill Watterson has the 6-year-old Calvin titling his homework assignment "The Dynamics of Interbeing and Monological Imperatives in Dick and Jane: A Study in Psychic Transrelational Gender Modes," and exclaiming to Hobbes, his tiger companion, "Academia, here I come!"

No honest professor can deny that there's something to the stereotype. When the late Denis Dutton (founder of the *Chronicle*-owned Arts & Letters Daily) ran an annual Bad Writing Contest to celebrate "the most stylistically lamentable passages found in scholarly books and articles," he had no shortage of nominations, and he awarded the prizes to some of academe's leading lights.

But the familiarity of bad academic writing raises a puzzle. Why should a profession that trades in words and dedicates itself to the transmission of knowledge so often turn out prose that is turgid, soggy, wooden, bloated, clumsy, obscure, unpleasant to read, and impossible to understand?

The most popular answer outside the academy is the cynical one: Bad writing is a deliberate choice. Scholars in the softer fields spout obscure verbiage to hide the fact that they have nothing to say. They dress up the trivial and obvious with the trappings of scientific sophistication, hoping to bamboozle their audiences with highfalutin gobbledygook.

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 understood by amateurs.

But the insider-shorthand theory, too, doesn't fit my experience. I suffer the daily experience of being baffled by articles in my field, my subfield, even my sub-sub-subfield. The methods section of an experimental paper explains, "Participants read assertions whose veracity was either affirmed or denied by the subsequent presentation of an assessment word." After some detective work, I determined that it meant, "Participants read sentences, each followed by the word *true* or *false*." The original academese was not as concise, accurate, or scientific as the plain English translation. So why did my colleague feel compelled to pile up the polysyllables?

A third explanation shifts the blame to entrenched authority. People often tell me that academics have no choice but to write badly because the gatekeepers of journals and university presses insist on ponderous language as proof of one's seriousness. This has not been my experience, and it turns out to be a myth. In *Stylish Academic Writing* (Harvard University Press, 2012), Helen Sword masochistically analyzed the literary style in a sample of 500 scholarly articles and found that a healthy minority in every field were written with grace and verve.

Instead of moralistic finger-pointing or evasive blame-shifting, perhaps we should try to understand academese by engaging in what academics do best: analysis and explanation. An insight from literary analysis and an insight from cognitive science go a long way toward explaining why people who devote their lives to the world of ideas are so inept at conveying them.

In a brilliant little book called *Clear and Simple as the Truth,* the literary scholars Francis-Noël Thomas and Mark Turner argue that every style of writing can be understood as a model of the communication scenario that an author simulates in lieu of the real-time give-and-take of a conversation. They distinguish, in particular, romantic, oracular, prophetic, practical, and plain styles, each defined by how the writer imagines himself to be related to the reader, and what the writer is trying to accomplish. (To avoid the awkwardness of strings of *he* or *she,* I borrow a convention from linguistics and will refer to a male generic writer and a female generic reader.) Among those styles is one they single out as an aspiration for writers of expository prose. They call it *classic style,* and they credit its invention to 17th-century French essayists such as Descartes and La Rochefoucauld.

The guiding metaphor of classic style is seeing the world. The writer can see something that the reader has not yet noticed, and he orients the reader so she can see for herself. The purpose of writing is presentation, and its motive is disinter-

ested truth. It succeeds when it aligns language with truth, the proof of success being clarity and simplicity. The truth can be known and is not the same as the language that reveals it; prose is a window onto the world. The writer knows the truth before putting it into words; he is not using the occasion of writing to sort out what he thinks. The writer and the reader are equals: The reader can recognize the truth when she sees it, as long as she is given an unobstructed view. And the process of directing the reader's gaze takes the form of a conversation.

Most academic writing, in contrast, is a blend of two styles. The first is practical style, in 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 minimum of metadiscourse. Instead of the self-referential "This chapter discusses the factors that cause names to rise and fall in popularity," one can pose a question: "What makes a name rise and fall in popularity?" Or one can co-opt the guiding metaphor behind classic style — vision. Instead of "The preceding paragraph demonstrated that parents sometimes give a boy's name to a girl, but never vice versa," one can write, "As we have seen, parents sometimes give a boy's name to a girl, but never vice versa." And since a conversation embraces a writer and reader who are taking in the spectacle together, a classic writer can refer to them with the good old pronoun *we.* Instead of "The previous section analyzed the source of word sounds. This section raises the question of word meanings," he can write, "Now that we have explored the source of word sounds, we arrive at the puzzle of word meanings."

Professional narcissism. Academics live in two universes: the world of the thing they study (the poetry of Elizabeth Bishop, the development of language in children, the Taiping Rebellion in China) and the world of their profession (getting articles published, going to conferences, keeping up with the trends and gossip). Most of a researcher's waking hours are spent in the second world, and it's easy for him to confuse the two. The result is the typical opening of an academic paper:

> In recent years, an increasing number of psychologists and linguists have turned their attention to the problem of child language acquisition. In this article, recent research on this process will be reviewed.

No offense, but few people are interested in how professors spend their time. Classic style ignores the hired help and looks directly at what they are being paid to study:

> All children acquire the ability to speak a language without explicit lessons. How do they accomplish this feat?

Of course, sometimes the topic of conversation really *is* the activity of researchers, such as an overview intended to introduce graduate students or other insiders to the scholarly literature. But researchers are apt to lose sight of whom they are writing for, and narcissistically describe the obsessions of their federation rather than what the audi-

ence wants to know.

Apologizing. Self-conscious writers are also apt to kvetch about how what they're about to do is so terribly difficult and complicated and controversial:

> The problem of language acquisition is extremely complex. It is difficult to give precise definitions of the concept of *language* and the concept of *acquisition* and the concept of *children*. There is much uncertainty about the interpretation of experimental data and a great deal of controversy surrounding the theories. More research needs to be done.

In the classic style, the writer credits the reader with enough intelligence to realize that many concepts aren't easy to define, and that many controversies aren't easy to resolve. She is there to see what the writer will do about it.

Shudder quotes. Academics often use quotation marks to distance themselves from a common idiom, as in "But this is not the 'take-home message,'" or "She is a 'quick study' and has been able to educate herself in virtually any area that interests her." They seem to be saying, "I couldn't think of a more dignified way of putting this, but please don't think I'm a flibbertigibbet who talks this way; I really am a serious scholar."

The problem goes beyond the nose-holding disdain for idiomatic English. In the second example, taken from a letter of recommendation, are we supposed to think that the student is a quick study, or that she is a "quick study" — someone who is alleged to be a quick study but really isn't?

Quotation marks have a number of legitimate uses, such as reproducing someone else's words (She said, "Fiddlesticks!"), mentioning a word as a word rather than using it to convey its meaning (*The New York Times* uses "millenniums," not "millennia"), and signaling that the writer does not accept the meaning of a word as it is being used by others in this context (They executed their sister to preserve the family's "honor"). Squeamishness about one's own choice of words is not among them.

Hedging. Academics mindlessly cushion their prose with wads of fluff that imply they are not willing to stand behind what they say. Those include *almost, apparently, comparatively, fairly, in part, nearly, partially, predominantly, presumably, rather, relatively, seemingly, so to speak, somewhat, sort of, to a certain degree, to some extent,* and the ubiquitous *I would argue.* (Does that mean you would argue for your position if things were different, but are not willing to argue for it now?)

Consider *virtually* in the letter of recommendation excerpted above. Did the writer really mean to say that there are some areas the student was interested in but didn't bother to educate herself, or perhaps that she tried to educate herself in those areas but lacked the competence to do so? Then there's the scientist who showed me a picture of her 4-year-old daughter and beamed, "We virtually adore her."

Writers use hedges in the vain hope that it will get them off the hook, or at least allow them to plead guilty to a lesser charge, should a critic ever try to prove them wrong. A classic writer, in contrast, counts on the common sense and ordinary charity of his readers, just as in everyday conversation we know when a speaker means *in general* or *all else being equal.* If someone tells you that Liz wants to move out of Seattle because it's a rainy city, you don't interpret him as claiming that it rains there 24 hours a day, seven days a week, just because he didn't qualify his statement with *relatively rainy* or *somewhat rainy.* Any adversary who is intellectually unscrupulous enough to give the least charitable reading to an unhedged statement will find an opening to attack the writer in a thicket of hedged ones anyway.

Sometimes a writer has no choice but to hedge a statement. Better still, the writer can *qualify* the statement — that is, spell out the circumstances in which it does not hold rather than leaving himself an escape hatch or being coy as to whether he really means it. If there is a reasonable chance that readers will misinterpret a statistical tendency as an absolute law, a responsible writer will anticipate the oversight and qualify the generalization accordingly. Pronouncements like "Democracies don't fight wars," "Men are better than women at geometry problems," and "Eating broccoli prevents cancer" do not do justice to the reality that those phenomena consist at most of small differences in the means of two overlapping bell curves. Since there are serious consequences to misinterpreting those statements as absolute laws, a responsible writer should insert a qualifier like *on average* or *all things being equal,* together with *slightly* or *somewhat.* Best of all is to convey the magnitude of the effect and the degree of certainty explicitly, in unhedged statements such as "During the 20th century, democracies were half as likely to go to war with one another as autocracies were." It's not that good writers never hedge their claims. It's that their hedging is a choice, not a tic.

Metaconcepts and nominalizations. A legal scholar writes, "I have serious doubts that trying to amend the Constitution … would work on an actual level. … On the aspirational level, however, a constitutional amendment strategy may be more valuable." What do the words *level* and *strategy* add to a sentence that means, "I doubt that trying to amend the Constitution would actually succeed, but it may be valuable to aspire to it"? Those vacuous terms refer to metaconcepts: concepts about concepts, such as *approach, assumption, concept, condition, context, framework, issue, level, model,*

perspective, process, prospect, role, strategy, subject, tendency, and *variable.*

It's easy to see why metaconcepts tumble so easily from the fingers of academics. Professors really do think about "issues" (they can list them on a page), "levels of analysis" (they can argue about which is most appropriate), and "contexts" (they can use them to figure out why something works in one place but not in another). But after a while those abstractions become containers in which they store and handle all their ideas, and before they know it they can no longer call anything by its name. "Reducing prejudice" becomes a "prejudice-reduction model"; "calling the police" becomes "approaching this subject from a law-enforcement perspective."

English grammar is an enabler of the bad habit of writing in unnecessary abstractions because it includes a dangerous tool for creating abstract terms. A process called nominalization takes a perfectly spry verb and embalms it into a lifeless noun by adding a suffix like *–ance, –ment,* or *–ation.* Instead of *affirming* an idea, you effect its *affirmation;* rather than *postponing* something, you implement a *postponement.* Helen Sword calls them "zombie nouns" because they lumber across the scene without a conscious agent directing their motion. They can turn prose into a night of the living dead. The phrase "assertions whose veracity was either affirmed or denied by the subsequent presentation of an assessment word," for example, is infested with zombies. So is "prevention of neurogenesis diminished social avoidance" (when we prevented neurogenesis, the mice no longer avoided other mice).

The theory that academese is the opposite of classic style helps explain a paradox of academic writing. Many of the most stylish writers who cross over to a general audience are scientists (together with some philosophers who are fans of science), while the perennial winners of the Bad Writing Contest are professors of English. That's because the ideal of classic prose is congenial to the worldview of the scientist. Contrary to the common misunderstanding in which Einstein proved that everything is relative and Heisenberg proved that observers always affect what they observe, most scientists believe that there are objective truths about the world, and that they can be discovered by a disinterested observer.

By the same token, this guiding image of classic prose could not be farther from the worldview of relativist academic ideologies such as postmodernism, poststructuralism, and literary Marxism, which took over many humanities departments in the 1970s. Many of the winning entries in the Dutton contest (such as Judith Butler's "The move from a structuralist account in which capital is understood to structure social relations in relatively homologous ways to a view of hegemony in which power relations are subject to repetition, convergence, and rearticulation brought the question of temporality into the thinking of structure … ") consist almost entirely of metaconcepts.

For all its directness, classic style remains a pretense, an imposture, a stance. Even scientists, with their commitment to seeing the world as it is, are a *bit* postmodern. They recognize that 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.

The other major contributor to academese is a cognitive blind spot called the Curse of Knowledge: a difficulty in imagining what it is like for someone else not to know something that you know. The term comes from economics, but the general inability to set aside something that you know but someone else does not know is such a pervasive affliction of the human mind that psychologists keep discovering related versions of it and giving it new names: egocentrism, hindsight bias, false consensus, illusory transparency, mind-blindness, failure to mentalize, and lack of a theory of mind. In a textbook demonstration, a 3-year-old who sees a toy being hidden while a second child is out of the room assumes that the other child will look for it in its actual location rather than where she last saw it. Children mostly outgrow the inability to separate their own knowledge from someone else's, but not entirely. Even adults slightly tilt their guess about where a person will look for a hidden object in the direction of where they themselves know the object to be. And they mistakenly assume that their private knowledge and skills — the words and facts they know, the puzzles they can solve, the gadgets they can operate — are second nature to everyone else, too.

The curse of knowledge is a major reason that good scholars write bad prose. It simply doesn't occur to them that their readers don't know what they know — that those readers haven't mastered the patois or can't divine the missing steps that seem too obvious to mention or have no way to visualize an event that to the writer is as clear as day. And so they don't bother to explain the jargon or spell out the logic or supply the necessary detail.

Obviously, scholars cannot avoid technical terms altogether. But a surprising amount of jargon can simply be banished, and no one will be the worse for it. A scientist who replaces *murine model* with *rats and mice* will use up no more space on the page and be no less scientific. Philosophers are every bit as rigorous when they put away Latin expressions

like *ceteris paribus, inter alia,* and *simpliciter,* and write in English instead: *other things being equal, among other things,* and *in and of itself.*

Abbreviations are tempting to thoughtless writers because they can save a few keystrokes every time they have to use the term. The writers forget that the few seconds they add to their own lives come at the cost of many minutes stolen from their readers. I stare at a table of numbers whose columns are labeled DA DN SA SN, and have to riffle back and scan for the explanation: Dissimilar Affirmative, Dissimilar Negative, Similar Affirmative, Similar Negative. Each abbreviation is surrounded by inches of white space. What possible reason could there have been for the author not to spell them out?

A considerate writer will also cultivate the habit of adding a few words of explanation to common technical terms, as in "*Arabidopsis,* a flowering mustard plant," rather than the bare "*Arabidopsis*" (which I've seen in many science papers). It's not just an act of magnanimity; a writer who explains technical terms can multiply his readership a thousandfold at the cost of a handful of characters, the literary equivalent of picking up hundred-dollar bills on the sidewalk. Readers will also thank a writer for the copious use of *for example, as in,* and *such as* because an explanation without an example is little better than no explanation at all.

And when technical terms are unavoidable, why not choose ones that are easy for readers to understand? Ironically, the field of linguistics is among the worst offenders, with dozens of mystifying technical terms: themes that have nothing to do with themes; *PRO* and *pro,* which are pronounced the same way but refer to different things; *stage-level* and *individual-level predicates,* which are just unintuitive ways of saying "temporary" and "permanent"; and *Principles A, B,* and *C,* which could just as easily have been called the Reflexive Effect, the Pronoun Effect, and the Noun Effect.

But it's not just opaque technical terms that bog down academese. Take this sentence from a journal that publishes brief review articles in cognitive science for a wide readership:

> 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 hundreds of milliseconds after the original stimulus.

The authors write as if everyone knows what "the rabbit illusion" is, but I've been in this business for nearly 40 years and had never heard of it. Nor does their explanation enlighten. How are we supposed to visualize "a stimulus," "poststimulus events," and "the way in which a stimulus is ultimately perceived"? And what does any of that have to do with rabbits?

So I did a bit of digging and uncovered the Cutaneous Rabbit Illusion, in which if you close your eyes and someone taps you a few times on the wrist, then on the elbow, and then on the shoulder, it feels like a string of taps running up the length of your arm, like a hopping rabbit. OK, now I get it — a person's conscious experience of where the early taps fell depends on the location of the later taps. But why didn't the authors just say that, which would have taken no more words than stimulus-this and poststimulus-that?

Scholars lose their moorings in the land of the concrete because of two effects of expertise that have been documented by cognitive psychology. One is called chunking. To work around the limitations of short-term memory, the mind can package ideas into bigger and bigger units, which the psychologist George Miller dubbed "chunks." As we read and learn, we master a vast number of abstractions, and each becomes a mental unit that we can bring to mind in an instant and share with others by uttering its name. An adult mind that is brimming with chunks is a powerful engine of reason, but it comes at a cost: a failure to communicate with other minds that have not mastered the same chunks.

The amount of abstraction a writer can get away with depends on the expertise of his readership. But divining the chunks that have been mastered by a typical reader requires a gift of clairvoyance with which few of us are blessed. When we are apprentices in our chosen specialty, we join a clique in which, it seems to us, everyone else seems to know so much! And they talk among themselves as if their knowledge were conventional wisdom to every educated person. As we settle into the clique, it becomes our universe. We fail to appreciate that it is a tiny bubble in a multiverse of cliques. When we make first contact with the aliens in other universes and jabber at them in our local code, they cannot understand us without a sci-fi universal translator.

A failure to realize that my chunks may not be the same as your chunks can explain why we baffle our readers with so much shorthand, jargon, and alphabet soup. But it's not the only way we baffle them. Sometimes wording is maddeningly opaque without being composed of technical terminology from a private clique. Even among cognitive scientists, for example, "poststimulus event" is not a standard way to refer to a tap on the arm.

The second way in which expertise can make our thoughts harder to share is that as we become familiar with something, we think about it more in terms of the use we put it to and less in terms of what it looks like and what it is made of. This tran-

sition is called functional fixity. In the textbook experiment, people are given a candle, a book of matches, and a box of thumbtacks, and are asked to attach the candle to the wall so that the wax won't drip onto the floor. The solution is to dump the thumbtacks out of the box, tack the box to the wall, and stick the candle onto the box. Most people never figure this out because they think of the box as a container for the tacks rather than as a physical object in its own right. The blind spot is called functional fixity because people get fixated on an object's function and forget its physical makeup.

Now, if you combine functional fixity with chunking, and stir in the curse that hides each one from our awareness, you get an explanation of why specialists use so much idiosyncratic terminology, together with abstractions, metaconcepts, and zombie nouns. They are not trying to bamboozle their readers; it's just the way they think. The specialists are no longer thinking — and thus no longer writing — about tangible objects, and instead are referring to them by the role those objects play in their daily travails. A psychologist calls the labels *true* and *false* "assessment words" because that's why he put them there — so that the participants in the experiment could assess whether it applied to the preceding sentence. Unfortunately, he left it up to us to figure out what an "assessment word" is.

In the same way, a tap on the wrist became a "stimulus," and a tap on the elbow became a "post-stimulus event," because the writers cared about the fact that one event came after the other and no longer cared that the events were taps on the arm. But we readers care, because otherwise 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 putting it through another draft (or two or three or four). And there is the toolbox of writerly tricks that have to be acquired one by one: a repertoire of handy idioms and tropes, the deft use of coherence connectors such as *nonetheless* and *moreover,* an ability to fix convoluted syntax and confusing garden paths, and much else.

You don't have to swallow the rational-actor model of human behavior to see that professionals may not bother with this costly self-improvement if their profession doesn't reward it. And by and large, academe does not. Few graduate programs teach writing. Few academic journals stipulate clarity among their criteria for acceptance, and few reviewers and editors enforce it. While no academic would confess to shoddy methodology or slapdash reading, many are blasé about their incompetence at writing.

Enough already. Our indifference to how we share the fruits of our intellectual labors is a betrayal of our calling to enhance the spread of knowledge. In writing badly, we are wasting each other's time, sowing confusion and error, and turning our profession into a laughingstock.

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Originally published on September 26, 2014

ADVICE

10 Tips on How to Write Less Badly

By MICHAEL C. MUNGER

Most academics, including administrators, spend much of our time writing. But we aren't as good at it as we should be. I have never understood why our trade values, but rarely teaches, nonfiction writing.

In my nearly 30 years at universities, I have seen a lot of very talented people fail because they couldn't, or didn't, write. And some much less talented people (I see one in the mirror every morning) have done OK because they learned how to write.

It starts in graduate school. There is a real transformation, approaching an inversion, as people switch from taking courses to writing. Many of the graduate students who were stars in the classroom during the first two years — the people everyone admired and looked up to — suddenly aren't so stellar anymore. And a few of the marginal students — the ones who didn't care that much about pleasing the professors by reading every page of every assignment — are suddenly sending their own papers off to journals, getting published, and transforming themselves into professional scholars.

The difference is not complicated. It's writing.

Rachel Toor and other writers on these pages have talked about how hard it is to write well, and of course that's true. Fortunately, the standards of writing in most disciplines are so low that you don't need to write well. What I have tried to produce below are 10 tips on scholarly nonfiction writing that might help people write less badly.

1. Writing is an exercise. You get better and faster with practice. If you were going to run a 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.

ILLUSTRATION BY TIM COOK FOR THE CHRONICLE

4. Give yourself time. Many smart people tell themselves pathetic lies like, "I do my best work at the last minute." Look: It's not true. No one works better under pressure. Sure, you are a smart person. But if you are writing about a profound problem, why would you think that you can make an important contribution off the top of your head in the middle of the night just before the conference?

Writers sit at their desks for hours, wrestling with ideas. They ask questions, talk with other smart people over drinks or dinner, go on long walks. And then write a whole bunch more. Don't worry that what you write is not very good and isn't immediately usable. You get ideas when you write; you don't just write down ideas.

The articles and books that will be read decades from now were written by men and women sitting at a desk and forcing themselves to translate profound ideas into words and then to let those words lead them to even more ideas. Writing can be magic, if you give yourself time, because you can produce in the mind of some other person, distant from you in space or even time, an image of the ideas that exist in only your mind at this one instant.

5. Everyone's unwritten work is brilliant. And the more unwritten it is, the more brilliant it is. We have all met those glib, intimidating graduate students or faculty members. They are at their most dangerous holding a beer in one hand and a cigarette in the other, in some bar or at an office party. They have all the answers. They can tell you just what they will write about, and how great it will be.

Years pass, and they still have the same pat, 200-word answer to "What are you working on?" It never changes, because they are not actually working on anything, except that one little act.

You, on the other hand, actually are working on something, and it keeps evolving. You don't like the section you just finished, and you are not sure what will happen next. When someone asks, "What are you working on?," you stumble, because it is hard to explain. The smug guy with the beer and the cigarette? He's a poseur and never actually writes anything. So he can practice his pat little answer endlessly, through hundreds of beers and thousands of cigarettes. Don't be fooled: You are the winner here. When you are actually writing, and working as hard as you should be if you want to succeed, you will feel inadequate, stupid, and tired. If you don't feel like that, then you aren't working hard enough.

6. Pick a puzzle. Portray, or even conceive, of your work as an answer to a puzzle. There are many interesting types of puzzles:

- "X and Y start with same assumptions but reach opposing conclusions. How?"
- "Here are three problems that all seem different. Surprisingly, all are the same problem, in disguise. I'll tell you why."
- "Theory predicts [something]. But we observe [something else]. Is the theory wrong, or is there some other factor we have left out?"

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 profoundly changed by their experiences in doing research and writing about it. They learn by doing, and sometimes what they learn is that they were wrong.

10. Edit your work, over and over. Have other people look at it. One of the great advantages of academe is that we are mostly all in this together, and we all know the terrors of that blinking cursor on a blank background. Exchange papers with peers or a mentor, and when you are sick of your own writing, reciprocate by reading their work. You need to get over a fear of criticism or rejection. Nobody's first drafts are good. The difference between a successful scholar and a failure need not be better writing. It is often more editing.

If you have trouble writing, then you just haven't written enough. Writing lots of pages has always been pretty easy for me. I could never get a job being only a writer, though, because I still don't write well. But by thinking about these tips, and trying to follow them myself, I have gotten to the point where I can make writing work for me and my career.

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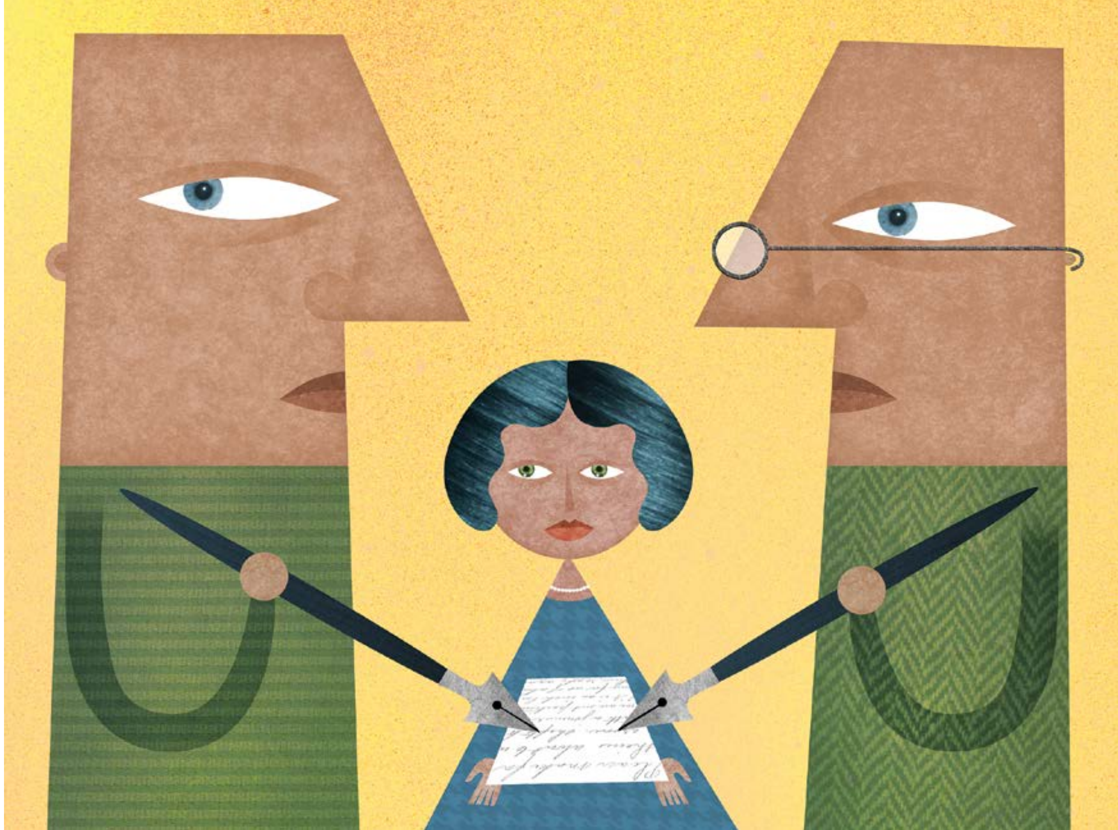
Originally published on September 6, 2010


JOYCE HESSELBERTH FOR THE CHRONICLE

Why Most Academics Will Always Be Bad Writers

No one should be surprised if much scholarly writing continues to be mediocre and confused

By **NOAH BERLATSKY**

Academic writing is bad, and academics should feel bad for writing it. So said Steven Pinker in *The Chronicle* a couple of years back, but he's hardly alone. Academics have been kicking — or, if you prefer, virtually dialectically deconstructing — academic writing for more than a decade.

Many "academics (and especially younger ones) tend to confuse incomprehensibility with profundity," Stephen Walt declared in 2013. "Call me simple-minded, call me anti-intellectual, but I believe that most poor scholarly writing is a result of bad habits, of learning tricks of the academic trade as a way to try to fit in," Rachel Toor argued in 2010. "Obscurity creates an aura of importance," said Martha Nussbaum as part of a lengthy takedown of the feminist theorist Judith Butler in 1999. You can go back further to find people making the same case if you're so inclined.

For at least a generation, academics have elabo-

rately and publicly denounced the ponderous pedantry of academic prose. So why haven't these ponderous pedants improved, already?

The critics would say the ponderous pedants are doing it on purpose. Academics supposedly indulge in pettifogging to obscure their own muddled thinking. Or, in a more generous reading, professors write obscurely because they know obscurity is expected of them, and they fear for their jobs if they phrase their insights with populist clarity. In either case, these critics say, a clotted style is a sign of a clotted soul. Didn't Orwell link "staleness of imagery" and "lack of precision" to cultural decadence and Communism? Likewise, Pinker warns of "relativist academic ideologies such as postmodernism, poststructuralism, and literary Marxism" that reject, with convoluted fervor, both objective truth and beautiful prose.

For people who possess a lucid prose style, there's an undeniable appeal to equating lucidity with virtue. As a professional writer myself, I admit I'm tempted to endorse that worldview: You mean I'm a paragon because I can say "I'm a paragon" and have most people understand? Great! The path to purity and awesomeness is easier than I thought.

Unfortunately, I'm not actually a paragon — or at least, if I am, it's not because of my prose style. There is, to my sorrow, no necessary correlation between integrity and the ability to write clearly. Hemingway, famed for his brief sentences and manly clarity, was equally famous for being a massive jerk. Bill Cosby wrote in a way that was accessible to everyone — and yet. On the other hand, you can be a lovely human in most respects and

Academics are primarily researchers and teachers; there's no reason those talents should necessarily overlap with writing.

still write "An anatomo-politics of human and non-human bodies is sustained by accumulating and classifying such necroliths in the museum's observational/expositional performances."

Bad prose is ugly, but it's not necessarily a sign of spiritual ugliness. Often it's just a sign of incapacity. If I tried to build a chair, the chair would be lopsided, unstable, and an embarrassment to carpenters everywhere. But the badness of my chair wouldn't be a sign of elitism or creeping socialism. Nor would it be a sign that I had rejected scientific truth. My chair would simply be bad because I'm bad at building things. And also because I don't know how to make a chair.

Writing is a skill, and — as any editor will tell you — it's not one that everyone possesses. Academics are primarily researchers and teachers; there's no reason those talents should necessarily overlap with writing. To my mind, the real surprise isn't that so much academic writing is bad, but that so much of it is comparatively well written and entertaining. Take this quote from Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's marvelous 1990 classic of gender theory *The Epistemology of the Closet:* "An assumption underlying the book is that the relations of the closet — the relations of the known and unknown, the explicit and the unexplicit around homo/heterosexual definition — have the potential for being peculiarly revealing, in fact, about speech acts more generally. It has felt throughout this work as though the density of their social meaning lends any speech act concerning these issues — and the outlines of that 'concern' it turns out are broad indeed — the exaggerated propulsiveness of wearing flippers in a swimming pool: the force of various rhetorical effects has seemed uniquely difficult to calibrate."

"Exaggerated propulsiveness." I love that.

Sedgwick is just the sort of writer — steeped in Foucault and Freud and postmodern queer theory — at whom Pinker et al. are wagging their fingers and/or flippers. It's certainly true that Sedwick's sentences are not short and punchy; she writes more like Henry James than like Orwell. She qualifies and interrupts herself, she embellishes and vacillates, so that that enthusiastic, goofy "exaggerated propulsiveness" emerges with an almost audible "whoosh!" from the foam of carefully parsed uncertainty. So is Sedgwick a bad writer? Or is she a good writer — with a better feel for language, and what it can do — than the anti-academic advocates of clarity?

To me, at least, as a writer, "good writing" doesn't necessarily mean "clear information transmission." Good writing includes humor, love of language, fitting style to content. That can sometimes mean clarity and a lack of clutter. But, as writers like Slavoj Zizek demonstrate, it doesn't have to. Remember that in *1984,* totalitarian newspeak is created not through elaborate sentences and jargon, but through cutting words out of the dictionary and simplifying grammar. Clear, transparent writing can be used for propa-

ganda purposes as easily as can convoluted prose — and maybe even more easily.

Steven Pinker himself has on occasion simplified his message in unfortunate ways. In his hugely successful 2011 volume *Better Angels of Our Nature,* for example, Pinker puts forward the thesis that humankind has become less and less violent. To support this argument, he writes: "The worst atrocity of all time was the An Lushan Revolt and Civil War, an eight-year rebellion during China's Tang Dynasty that, according to censuses, resulted in the loss of two-thirds of the empire's population, a sixth of the world's population at the time."

That is a perfectly clear and precise sentence. It's also misleading to the point of being an outright falsehood. As Pinker says, he's extrapolating from census data. But you can't treat 8th-century censuses as some sort of straightforward registry of wartime death tolls. One expert on the population statistics of China notes, "Even if such a huge loss were conceivable, it would be naïve to suppose that an accurate count could be carried out in the midst of the ensuing chaos." Other researchers have tentatively placed the death toll at something more like 13 million — though even that's very dicey. The truth is we don't know for sure how many people were killed in the An Lushan rebellion. To be accurate, Pinker would have had to have been vague. The rage for clarity led him astray.

Writing well is hard. Celebrate those who have mastered it, and have some sympathy for the rest of us, laboring for competence one keystroke at a time.

I'm not trying to impugn Pinker: Anyone can make a mistake, especially when writing a book like *Better Angels of Our Nature,* which attempts to synthesize a vast amount of information from a wide variety of fields. But that's exactly the point. It's not easy to communicate complicated data and ideas with precision, style, and a modicum of propulsive punch. Many professional writers stumble into infelicities and inaccuracies. Why should academics be any different?

Of course academics should try to write as well as they can. They might even work to write better than they can, by hiring (ahem) wonderful professional writers to edit their manuscripts before they send them to press.

But no one should be surprised if much academic writing is mediocre and confused. Academics don't need to be elitist, careerist, or corrupted by postmodernism to write badly. Most people, most of the time, write badly. Writing well is hard. Celebrate those who have mastered it, and have some sympathy for the rest of us, laboring for competence one keystroke at a time.

Originally published on July 11, 2016

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OPINION

Professor, Your Writing Could Use Some Help

By JEFF CAMHI

How well do faculty members write for the general public? As part of a larger research project on college outreach, I sought the opinions of writing experts. The following three statements represent the range of the opinions obtained:

- "The authors we typically work with — academics — have difficulty writing for a trade [i.e., public] audience. To retrain them to write for a wider audience can be quite excruciating." (editor at a major American university press)
- "Academic writers often struggle to find the 'trade voice.' Though it may sound perverse to say so, most scholars know too much to write well for a trade readership." (former editor in chief of a major American university press)
- "The writing of most professors is just so boring." (former editor in chief of a prominent division of Random House)

ILLUSTRATION BY KATHERINE STREETER FOR THE CHRONICLE

There are exceptions, of course, even great ones. But I kept hearing similar comments from experts on publishing's front lines. Nicholas Lemann, dean of Columbia University's Graduate School of Journalism at the time, spoke of the need for public writing " ... to develop a narrative with richly descriptive scenes, realistic dialog, and an arc that builds and resolves tension." He continued, "Most university faculty haven't a clue about these things. Writing for the public is a craft, and learning it takes a tremendous amount of time and hard work. It's like learning the violin; you have to practice hard every day, and after you've learned it, you need to keep practicing or you lose it."

These comments made sense to me, given how young academics typically learn to write about their field of research. They compose the Ph.D. thesis and submit it to their faculty adviser or advisers, from whom they receive critical comments for editing. Those advisers, in their time, did the same. But who among them has taken the equivalent of Lemann's violin lessons? Who, for instance, might have taken an intensive course in the writing of creative nonfiction, and then kept practicing so as not to "lose it"?

Some academics argue that they are meant to write for other academics, not for the general public. Clearly, though, both types of writing are possible. Because faculty members are the world's outstanding experts in a wide range of fields, surely some effort can — and should — be

made to inform the world, and to do so in a manner that the world would find engaging.

Here is a simple way that a significant improvement in faculty writing for the general public could come about at any college: Develop a night course in creative nonfiction writing, specifically for professors.

Such a course might meet weekly for a period of two years — enough time to perfect the necessary writing skills. The subjects might include the writing of popular articles, books, even scripts for radio, television, and film. The best writing coming out of the course could appear weekly as a column in the campus newspaper, a local paper, or a blog. The course would be taught by faculty members already on campus, in departments of English, fine arts, writing, journalism, or communications, or by editors at a university press.

How might such courses, if offered by a number of American universities, affect academe's outreach to the public? One might expect within just a few years a noticeable increase in the number and quality of publications sharing academic knowledge with a broad readership. By the end of a decade, the campus-to-public bridge might have become significantly strengthened. This would not only constitute a generous gift to the nation but also would very likely give back to academe in the form of increased public respect, and perhaps even public support.

Originally published on October 26, 2015

Unaware whether such courses already exist, I asked faculty members in departments of English, fine arts, and writing at Cornell, Stanford, Yale, and the Universities of Iowa and North Carolina if they knew of any such program at any university. None of the 53 respondents had ever heard of such a program.

One said, "Universities tend to assume that faculty no longer need help with writing, or perhaps that no one outside their fields is qualified to provide such help." Another wrote, "My gut instinct is that if I were to suggest that any professor of whatever discipline could benefit by having his prose improved, it would spatter all over the fan."

Many colleges have writing centers where students, including those finishing Ph.D.s, can obtain advice and guidance. In some of these, faculty members can drop in for advice. For example, in Australia, the Writing Centre for Scholars and Researchers, at the University of Melbourne, operated by one writing instructor and one assistant, trains about 60 Ph.D.s, postdocs, and faculty members per year in writing for the public.

So we know it can be done. Now we just need to get more colleges to actually do it.

Jeff Camhi is a professor emeritus of biology at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. He is the author of A Dam in the River: Releasing the Flow of University Ideas *(Algora Publications, 2013).*

ILLUSTRATION BY MARK SHAVER FOR THE CHRONICLE

Coming Down From the Clouds: On Academic Writing

We want scholars who mainly write for each other; that's how they come up with something worth saying to everyone else

By JOHANN N. NEEM

On February 11, a team of scientists announced that they had recorded the sound made by two black holes colliding. Despite all the noise in the universe, their sensitive equipment found evidence of ripples in space-time, a core element in Albert Einstein's general theory of relativity. It was an amazing testament both to the power of the human imagination and to the daily work of basic scientific research. It took decades of painstaking effort, and the commitment of scientists who spent their careers seeking to understand something most of us did not even know was being studied. One of those scholars, the Cal Tech physicist Kip Thorne, commented in *The New York Times:* "It's as though we had only seen the ocean's surface on a calm day but had never seen it roiled in a storm, with crashing waves."

Intrigued by his remark, I looked up some of Thorne's scholarly articles. I have a Ph.D. in history, but I was almost a geology major and I've always appreciated scientific research. Yet I must admit, I could not make sense of his scholarly writing. It was filled with jargon and formulae.

Was that my fault? Was it the fault of Thorne and his coauthors? Was it, as Steven Pinker wrote in these pages, because academic writing stinks? Or is it in the nature of scholarship to be challenging to the uninitiated because academics write at the edges of what is known? My own understanding of physics is far, far — light years perhaps — away from that of Thorne and his colleagues. And

yet I am thankful for all of their work.

It has become a trope, a joke perhaps, to comment on how bad academic writing is. Thus, in a recent essay touting a program to help academics write more clearly for the public, Naomi Wolf and Sacha Kopp threw in the now-standard critique of academic writing: "The transmission of our ideas is routinely hampered — understandably, given academe's publication, evaluation, and tenure conditions — by a great deal of peer-oriented jargon. As a result, the most exciting ideas, hard-won insights, and relevant hypotheses end up clothed in language that only specialists can understand. Academe's publication structure then exacerbates the segregation by corralling this rich, important set of ideas within a tiny niche readership — in costly book-distribution contexts or expensive academic journals behind digital paywalls."

Yes, some academic writing is more abstruse than it needs to be. No doubt, scholarship should not be hidden behind expensive paywalls. And, yes, academics, like all people, are shaped by the conditions of their employment.

But the story is more complicated. Many critics rightly accuse academics of too rarely writing for the broader public. In doing so, however, those critics often confuse two different projects that have been distinct, and in tension with each other, since ancient times — participating in the public sphere (the domain of rhetoric) and seeking truth (the domain of philosophy).

Rhetoric is interested in persuasion. Rhetoricians, therefore, have been primarily concerned with how to engage a public audience effectively. As Wolf and Kopp make clear, public writing begins and ends with the public. Public essays, they write, require a "hook." They must derive their relevance from something au courant — often in a world of fast-moving news cycles. Good public writing must avoid scholars' tendency to "bury the lede."

Yet there is a risk when we mistakenly assume that public and scholarly writing are the same thing — that one is good and clear and the other is needlessly complex. Critics often blame academics for overusing verbiage that is meaningless to the general public. But jargon and complexity have their place. One need only ask whether theoretical physicists would have been able to achieve their insights if each of them had to write for lay readers like me instead of for each other. Of course not.

There is jargon, and then there is jargon. In my own field of history, shared references to specific scholars, concepts, or schools of historiography can open up worlds of meaning economically. It allows us to focus on our shared task: scholarly inquiry.

Do scholars sometimes hide behind jargon? Of course. Can jargon mask emptiness? Yes. Do scholars sometimes use jargon when more accessible language is available? No doubt. Does jargon primarily serve the needs of tenure and promotion? Sometimes. Should academics write as clearly as they can? Yes. There is good academic writing and bad, just as there is good public writing and bad. But can we do away with jargon? Not if by jargon we mean scholarship that uninitiated readers simply cannot understand. Indeed, to do so would make it impossible for philosophy to achieve its goals.

Plato mocked rhetoric. He believed that rhetoric, because it taught people to speak with the public, could never get out of the cave of shadows. Truth and goodness required leaving the ordinary world behind, emerging into the sun, and trying, however imperfectly, to get a sense of its beauty. The philosopher would never be able to return to the cave; indeed, he or she would have to be forced to do so for the good of everyone else, Plato famously argued in *The Republic*. But philosophers, having seen truth, will struggle to speak with people who remain enamored by shadows. Worse, the people will distrust them. The people will accuse them of attacking their idols. The philosopher could end up, as did Plato's mentor Socrates, killed.

That was an extreme response to the question of the relationship between the public sphere and truth, but it speaks to a real problem. The public is not composed of philosophers. The public has its

"I am grateful for my scientist friends who posted on Facebook links to videos and essays in which scientists explained, in terms that I could understand, why it was so significant that we had heard black holes colliding."

idols and wants them to be respected even if, from an academic perspective, they are just shadows. Yet in a democracy, one cannot imagine the public as nothing more than ignorant or impassioned. One must also recognize the majesty of the people, and that democracy is the aspiration that we ordinary people, as citizens, are able to govern ourselves. Plato was no democrat. We are.

Democratic deliberation needs philosophy, because deliberation that relies on falsehood will lead to disaster. And to gain truth, Plato was right, we need to allow philosophers to pursue it even when unpopular. We need to permit scholars to study human evolution or global warming. We need to be able to tell the truth about history, not because doing so is joyful but because it is how we can come to terms with our present condition. As James Baldwin wrote in 1965, it is only "in great pain and terror one begins to assess the history which has placed one where one is and formed one's point of view."

So, yes, scholars must engage the public. In doing so, however, they must respect the integrity of public conversations that have their own traditions and icons, heroes and villains. "The nation," Ernest Renan wrote in 1882, "is a soul" sustained by "a rich legacy of memories." Public conversations, like academic ones, rely on the shared reference points of a common culture. Public rhetoric requires starting where we as a people are and then bringing us where the speaker or writer believes we need to be. It is a democratic practice.

It is very hard to engage in rhetoric and philosophy at the same time. That was something Cicero understood. He recognized that many people shared Aristophanes' depiction of philosophers in his play *The Clouds.* Philosophers were lost in airy, arcane pursuits that had no bearing on the needs, aspirations, and lives of most citizens. Yet, Cicero responded in *The Ideal Orator,* however funny it is to insult philosophers for being inaccessible, that only takes us so far. The real problem is that rhetorical and philosophical activity are fundamentally different: "The procedures of oratory lie within everyone's reach, and are concerned with everyday experience and with human nature and speech." Scholarly inquiry, on the other hand, "draws as a rule upon abstruse and hidden sources." In philosophy, "the highest achievement is precisely that which is most remote from what the uninitiated can understand and perceive, whereas in oratory it is the worst possible fault to deviate from the ordinary mode of speaking and the generally accepted way of looking at things."

Ancient writers and Renaissance humanists both struggled with how to bring rhetoric and philosophy together. They mocked writing that they believed lacked beauty. They wondered how the insights of philosophy might be made useful to public life. They hoped that there was an alternative to, in Cicero's words, the philosopher's "inarticulate wisdom" and the uninformed citizen's "babbling stupidity." Effective speech without wisdom was no better than wisdom that remained in the clouds.

That this is a centuries-long problem should give us pause when we echo Aristophanes and treat academic writing as nothing more than drivel. Basic research in the arts and sciences is the source of wisdom. Yet that wisdom needs to be shared. There are in all disciplines scholars who fit Cicero's definition of the ideal orator, combining eloquence with wisdom. Yet Cicero recognized that the philosophical pursuit of truth requires different things from us than public engagement because it is a different kind of activity. We do neither academics nor the public any service when we conflate the two. Indeed, doing so is a category mistake.

We want physicists who write for each other. I appreciate that, at conferences and in academic papers, they have challenged each other's conclusions and, in doing so, have pushed forward the boundaries of knowledge. Yet I am also grateful for my scientist friends who posted on Facebook links to videos and essays in which scientists explained, in terms that I could understand, why it was so significant that we had heard black holes colliding.

I enjoyed physicist Lawrence Krauss's clear articulation of why a citizen like me — who could never understand an academic paper in physics — should continue to support investing oodles of money in basic research: "By exploring processes near the event horizon, or by observing gravitational waves from the early universe, we may learn more about the beginning of the universe itself, or even the possible existence of other universes." This matters: "Every child has wondered at some time where we came from and how we got here. That we can try and answer such questions by building devices like LIGO to peer out into the cosmos stands as a testament to the persistent curiosity and ingenuity of humankind — the qualities that we should most celebrate about being human."

I appreciate the scientists who have taken time to write for readers like me about the importance of hearing ripples in space-time. But I am also thankful for the many scientists who spend most of their time talking to each other. Instead of writing for me, they devoted their efforts to producing inaccessible scholarship that, over time, produced public insights of profound beauty.

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Originally published on March 6, 2016

ADVICE

The Art and Science of Finding Your Voice

By THERESA MacPHAIL

AT an early stage of your academic writing career, there's a not-insignificant 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 instruction to find one's voice is often perplexing or anxiety-provoking. And, truth be told, some mid-career authors still feel as if they haven't quite found their voices yet — or as if they once had that voice, only to suddenly misplace it. (Yes, this is possible. If an author shifts genres or fields, she can lose her voice temporarily.)

Professional writers talk about "finding their voice" with a zeal akin to that of religious converts. It is the missing piece of an intricate puzzle; when an author finally finds it, it can feel like an epiphany. "Egads!," the scribbler shouts, jumping up from her desk. "I've finally found it!" But until that blissful moment, the editorial instruction to "find your voice" can send an author into paroxysms of self-doubt. Questions abound: What is "a voice" in the first place? How does one go about locating it? When will I know I've found it?

In what follows, I'll offer some concrete exercises and tips to help you along your path to discovery. But first we need to explore the biggest difficulty involved in the process.

ILLUSTRATION BY ADAM NIKLEWICZ FOR THE CHRONICLE

The consternation that an author feels when she is first asked to find her voice is natural. This is a reflection of the fact that *there is absolutely no consensus about what "voice" is.* That's the dirty secret all experienced writers eventually learn, and that's why finding your voice is such a difficult task.

Voice is frequently conflated with an author's style of writing. Sometimes it is described as akin to a writer's unique authorial fingerprint. Think of an author like Mark Twain or Haruki Murakami or Maya Angelou or Barbara Kingsolver or Dorothy Parker. Or if you'd rather, think of a distinctive author in your particular field — for me it's Bruno Latour, Donna Haraway, Sherry Ortner, or Eric Klinenberg. If an author has a distinctive "voice," then we can often accurately attribute a text to its correct author even if her identity is concealed. Somehow we just know who wrote it. This is what "voice" encapsulates: an author's habitual turn of phrase, her particular way of organizing a text, his certain way with description or analysis. In other words, voice is synonymous with prose style, but it also encapsulates more than just prose style. Voice is a reflection of how a writer sounds when he "talks" to his readers.

This column, for instance, is deliberately written in a conversational tone and with a consistent structure. If you've read any of my other essays, then you probably recognize it. First, I introduce

the problem and then I offer exercises. Throughout each essay, I try to amplify my voice so that it echoes in your ears as you are reading these words. Developing a personal style requires you to vocalize your prose. Finding your voice is really about envisioning and communicating with your ideal reader for a piece.

Here's my advice: Practice these six key techniques and exercises. They will help you speed up the process of finding and developing your distinctive voice. The first technique is the simplest and most powerful.

1. Free write. Free writing is a wonderful tool for discovering your voice (and for identifying your arguments). It requires you to sit down with a blank piece of paper or a blank document on your screen. You won't have any other pieces of text to work with. No notes, no quotes, no evidence, no data. Just you and your thoughts. Write for 15 to 20 minutes without stopping. No backspacing or deleting or rearranging. Write whatever comes into your head — even if it's "I don't know what I'm writing."

If you are working on an article or a book chapter, picture your reader, and really conjure her up. Envision her. You are talking to this person on the page. So talk to her. "Speak" to her in your own language. What do you need her to know about your subject? Give her some context, some background. But don't talk forever and don't overwhelm her with details. This is a one-sided conversation, but remember it's still a conversation. Then start describing — in your own words — what your argument is. Walk her through it.

I recommend doing this exercise whenever you begin a new piece of writing. It also works wonders when you are stuck on something. But it is crucial to discovering your own words on a subject.

2. Read more. Always be reading. When you're writing, it's helpful to have a handful of writers you admire "on deck." I learned this trick from my dissertation chair at the University of California at Berkeley, Xin Liu, but I've heard at least a dozen writers echo it. Stack a few key books or essays you love on your desk. Occasionally pick them up and read a few passages. But read them like a writer. Tear them apart like an engineer would take apart a machine in order to know how it works. Ask questions like: How did the author do it? Are the sentences long or short here? Is the writing clear or playful? What is the tone? How is the argument arranged? Is this structured in sections or not? Try to mimic the styles that you most esteem. Eventually, you'll craft your own unique voice out of the hodgepodge of other styles that you've admired.

Also, read outside your field and your genre. I mean it. Don't tell me you don't have time. Pick up a thriller and try to learn how the author moves the story along. Read a cooking blog and see how the author describes the complicated steps for preparing a dish or how she manages to make her particular recipe for macaroni and cheese seem exotic and new. Peruse long, investigative magazine articles to see how to construct a tight narrative arc in a relatively short amount of space. There are tricks of the trade to be learned from anything you read. Eventually, if you read enough while you're writing, you'll pick up your "voice" almost by osmosis.

3. Write every day. Even if it's only for a few minutes. Don't get out of the habit. A writer's voice develops in only one fashion — through continuous usage. The more you write, the more you'll refine your skills. The more you revise and edit, the more you'll see your own style start to emerge from the page.

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. You have to trust yourself to know when you're good, when you need work, and when you're talking utter nonsense. If you write every day, you should start to develop a pretty good feel for how you — and only you — write about your subject. Be honest with yourself, but be fair. Following your gut instinct about how best to write a particular piece of text will very often directly reveal your voice. After all, only you know how to write like you.

And when you finally find your voice, you'll know it.

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Originally published on August 8, 2014

ADVICE

Shame in Academic Writing

By **RACHEL TOOR**

My advisee came in to the cafe, sat down awkwardly, and looked at me out of the corners of his eyes. He describes himself as having "curious posture" and "British teeth," though he's from the Midwest. He writes well, with energy and imagination and a fine attention to his sentences. It has been a pleasure being his thesis adviser, and I always look forward to our meetings.

For months I had been reading his work and telling him it wasn't quite there. For months he listened to me — asking smart questions, grilling me on general issues about the craft of writing, wondering how other authors got away with moves he was trying to make, and working hard to figure out what was going wrong in his own work. He never got defensive or upset, he just kept at it, doing what the best students do.

The essays he'd given me were revisions of drafts I'd seen before. When I read them this time, I used "track changes" to give him line-by-line comments, edits, and suggestions. Back when I was a book editor, in the first part of my life, I developed a tendency to rewrite, fix, or make better what an author had done. As a teacher, that's no longer my job, and now I discipline myself not to insert my own voice — my particular word choices, my quirky syntax — into the writing of my students. At times I will rewrite a couple of sentences to give an example of what I mean, but generally I simply point out places that aren't working and expect the student to do the fixing.

But at the time of our meeting, his essays were close to being finished, and I wanted to make sure that every line was exactly right. So I did a gentle edit, changing "exacerbate" to "exaggerate" (I could tell that he had just learned the first word and was test-driving it), lopping off the ends of sentences that went on too long, substituting periods for semicolons. My advisee knows how to use semicolons, which is unusual, but he tends to rely on them too heavily. So I wrote "too many semicolons" at the top of the page and expected him to examine each long sentence to see which ones would benefit from having their independent clauses divorced.

After I made those edits, I e-mailed my version to my student. When he came to join me at the cafe, we sat at my usual table, him askew and looking at me sideways, me on my third cup of decaf, as we peered at each other from over our laptops.

He looked serious and more twitchy than usual. He leaned back to pose what I could tell would be a big question.

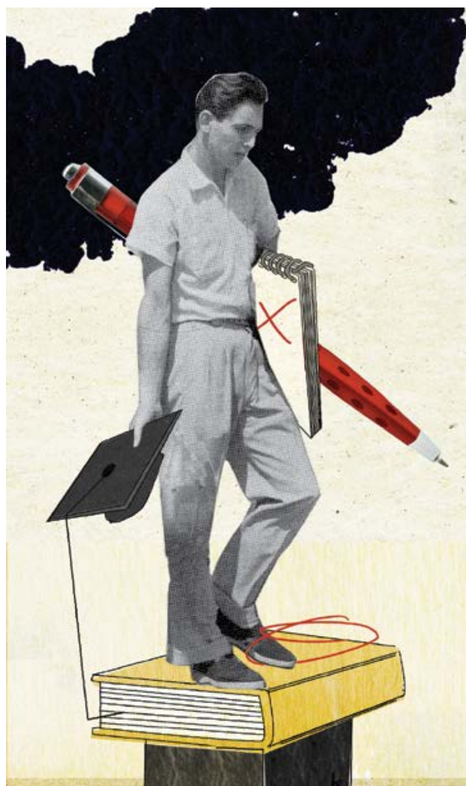
ILLUSTRATION BY KATY LEMAY FOR THE CHRONICLE

"Is it normal," he asked in a small voice, "to feel stupid after getting an edited manuscript back?"

I laughed, but I knew this wasn't funny. He was embarrassed by the mistakes he had made, the sentences that weren't perfect, the fact that I had seen him in the intellectual equivalent of his undies. Somehow it had been easier for him to have his ideas battered generally than to have specific mistakes in prose highlighted.

So I launched into a monologue about how we all feel stupid most of the time, especially after getting our manuscripts back. And he was lucky, I noted, that he still had me to point out all this stuff while he could make changes and learn from his mistakes. After grad-

uate school, it gets hard to find someone to pay so much attention to your writing.

As graduate students, we could talk to our advisers about feeling behind. Or inadequate. Or unoriginal. When we had thesis advisers, we (sometimes) got the emotional support we needed to keep going.

Now that I am a thesis adviser myself, I know that, even after meetings where I think I am being helpful and supportive, my students go home and cry. Later they suck it up and get the work done. I've also had students who internalize all their doubts, never voice them, and then blame me when their writing isn't going well. I'm not telling them exactly what they need to hear in exactly the right way. The problem is me, not them. Some become passive-aggressive. Some just become aggressive. Some never learn a thing.

But I also realize something else in thinking back on that conversation with my student in the cafe. I realize that after graduate school, it's not hard just to find attentive criticism of your writing. It's also a lot harder to find someone to whom you can admit your shame. If you're a new assistant professor, an adjunct, or a lecturer, who can you ask, "Is it normal to feel this way?" when you're feeling inadequate? Who can reassure you that yes, it is normal, and encourage you to keep doing what you're doing? Who can promise — or lie — that it will all be OK?

Recently I had the opportunity to dust off my old acquisitions-editor's cap and spend an afternoon talking with academics at a fancy-pants university about their projects. In a morning presentation, I had warned them not to get too excited when editors got excited about their book proposals. Editors, I told the audience, are pathologically interested. They're never going to say "That's a terrible idea for a book." They will just ask to see the manuscript.

Now that I'm out of the publishing business, I said in my talk, I tell writers the truth, or at least my take on it. That makes me less popular than when I was a book editor, able to hand out tenure-winning contracts from the Oxford and Duke University presses. But for those writers who want an honest response to their work, I can be more useful.

The university where I was speaking set me up in a conference room and scheduled half-hour sessions in which I would meet with individual faculty members and dispense advice, kind of like Lucy in her little counseling booth. "That'll be five cents, please," I wanted to say as each person left.

On the long flight home, I realized that most of my conversations with professors at the university had nothing to do with the intellectual content of their projects. The works would rise or fall — be published or not — on merit, on connections, and on flukes like whether the manuscripts were read by the right editors. My role as a visiting speaker was to give potential authors encouragement, to tell them that the anxiety they were feeling about their projects was normal.

On the schedule for my one-on-one meetings at the fancy-pants university, I noted that there was a faculty member who had seemed hostile during my initial presentation. She had asked pointed questions that seemed dismissive, and I noticed her conversing with a neighbor when other people were asking questions. I made the obvious leap: She must have thought what I was saying was stupid and obvious. So when she came in and sat down, I expected a confrontation.

A tenured professor, in expensive clothes and trendy shoes, she described her project in crisp and definitive tones. Her first book had been published by a good press, and she had a contract for the second. As she talked about breaking the contract and going with another press, I was having a hard time figuring out why she'd made the appointment to chat with me. She seemed to have it all together. In fact, she kind of intimidated me.

And then she started crying.

She felt ashamed that she hadn't yet finished her second book. It was taking far too long. She felt ashamed she wasn't writing. Why was it so hard? How could she manage this? How could she deal with the shame? The question she didn't ask — my advisee's question: Is it normal to feel this way? — was the only question I could answer for her.

I tried to tell her that everyone feels that way. Most people don't admit it, and many of us don't have anyone we feel safe talking about it with. Tenured faculty members at excellent research universities are supposed to have it together. And if they don't — and most people, wherever they work, really don't — they're not supposed to admit it.

Since that meeting, I haven't been able to stop thinking about that professor. Maybe that's because I've seen versions of her at every university I've traveled to. I remember her, and my student, whenever I talk about writing and publishing. Even those who make it look easy — whose work is good and well published — are still struggling with issues of how to get it done, and with the shame of not doing it, or not doing it well enough, or quickly enough, or whatever they think is enough. I think of the self-satisfied and mediocre and wonder if they're leading happier lives.

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Originally published on August 3, 2011

Scholars Talk Writing: Steven Pinker

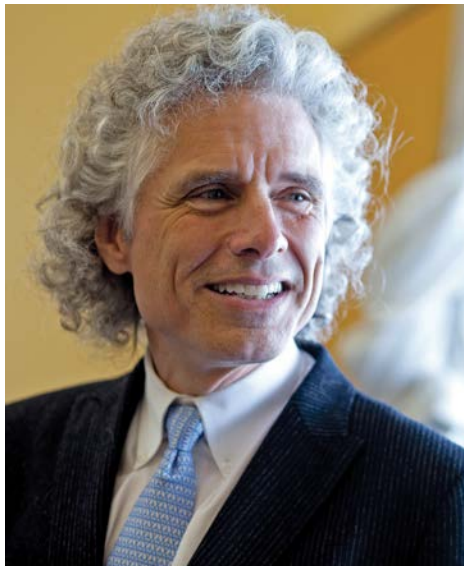
‘Good prose requires dedication to the craft of writing, and our profession simply doesn’t reward it.’

By RACHEL TOOR

STEVEN PINKER is about as close as you can come to being an academic celebrity. The Harvard professor of psychology has written seven books for a general readership in addition to his scholarly work, which is wide-ranging. Pinker frequently writes about language for *The New York Times, The Guardian, Time,* and *The Atlantic,* and also tackles subjects such as education, morality, politics, bioethics, and violence.

All of which makes him a prime candiate for this Q&A series, Scholars Talk Writing. Listing all his honors and awards could cause us mere mortals to feel inferior; you can find them on his website, Stevenpinker.com (where you'll also see that he has a great head of hair).

Perhaps the most important thing for writers from across the disciplines to know about Pinker is that he has a recent book: *The Sense of Style: The Thinking Person's Guide to Writing in the 21st Century,* which should be required reading.


ROSE LINCOLN/HARVARD U.

Steven Pinker

Q. Who are the writers who influenced you in terms of your own prose?

A. Since many people are under the misconception that you have to write badly in academia to be taken seriously, I'll just mention some renowned scholars in my own field whom I read as an undergraduate and who were sparkling prose stylists.

My adviser Roger Brown was a great social psychologist, the founder of the modern study of language acquisition in children, and the author of the delightful *Words and Things: An Introduction to Language and Social Psychology.* George A. Miller, a founder of cognitive psychology and psycholinguistics, was also a dazzling writer; his sprightly 1956 article, “The Magical Number Seven, Plus or Minus Two: Some Limits on Our Capacity for Processing Information” is one of the most cited in the history of the field. Indeed, 20th-century psychology was blessed with many other fine writers.

D.O. Hebb and B.F. Skinner were contemporaries, had rival Theories of Everything (neural networks and behaviorism, respectively), and were both aspiring novelists. The team of Alan Newell and Herbert Simon co-founded artificial intelligence and cognitive psychology. Social psychology had Gordon Allport, Leon Festinger, and Stanley Schacter, among others. And, of course, it all began with one of the greatest writers in the history of modern English (and the namesake of the building I work in), William James. So don't tell me that successful academics can't be good writers!

Q. How did you learn to write for a general readership?
A. From the time I was in graduate school, I took writing seriously. I lingered over passages of writing I enjoyed and tried to reverse-engineer them. I read style manuals for pleasure. When I wrote review articles, I strove to explain abstruse theories in linguistics and AI in clear language. I dropped in bits of whimsy when they fit and didn't feel forced or gratuitous. I tried to apply knowledge from my own field, psycholinguistics, on what makes a sentence easy to parse. I got the idea to cross over when an editor at MIT Press read one of my journal articles and asked me if I had ever considered trying my hand at popular writing.

Q. You've done a wonderful job diagnosing the reasons why academic writing stinks. Can you give the CliffsNotes version here?
A. First, academic writers start off with the wrong tacit goal. Rather than trying to show their readers something interesting in the world (what Francis-Noël Thomas and Mark Turner call "classic" style), their main goal is to prove that they are not naïve about how terribly difficult it is to assert anything about anything in their field (what they call "self-conscious," "ironic," or "postmodern" style). In that defensive stance, they clutter their prose with hedges, apologies, shudder quotes, narcissistic observations about their profession (as opposed to its subject matter), and metadiscourse (discourse about discourse).

Second, academics suffer from the Curse of Knowledge — the difficulty of appreciating what it's like for someone not to know something that you know. So they fail to explain their jargon, spell out their acronyms, or supply concrete details that would allow the reader to form visual images of what they're describing.

Finally, they have little incentive to care. Good prose requires dedication to the craft of writing, and our profession simply doesn't reward it. It isn't taught in graduate school, and few reviewers will veto a manuscript or a grant application just because it's a painful slog to read.

Q. What strategies can academics (and others) use to write less stinkily?
A. Prose quality must itself be a distinct goal in the writing process. Getting the literature review and the methods and the data and the interpretation and the argument down is not sufficient for the paper to be clear, let alone pleasant to read — at least one pass must be dedicated solely to improving the language.

Ideally, there should be additional passes after enough time has elapsed that the prose is not too familiar to you. Then show a draft to a sample of readers and ask if they can follow it. You'll often be surprised to find that what's obvious to you isn't obvious to anyone else.

And lighten up. Explain your material as you would to a sympathetic and intelligent friend who happens not to know what you know. Don't walk on eggshells, terrified that you'll let slip the horrible truth that you're not rigorous, sophisticated, and cultivated enough to belong to the club.

Q. Which style manuals do you like or recommend?
A. For a beginning writer, a student, or an inveterate dispenser of academese, *The Elements of Style* is not a bad place to start. For writers seeking more insight and depth, Francis-Noël Thomas and Mark Turner's *Clear and Simple as the Truth* is a treasure; it's simply brilliant. Joseph M. Williams's *Style: Toward Clarity and Grace* is also excellent. Theodore Bernstein's *The Careful Writer* is a witty reference manual, and the usage notes sprinkled throughout the *American Heritage Dictionary: 5th Edition* are more sophisticated and evidence-based. For historical and literary depth, I recommend Oliver Kamm's new *Accidence Will Happen: The Non-Pedantic Guide to English Usage.*

Q. What or how do you teach your students about writing?
A. Recently I've followed the time-honored academic tradition of assigning them my own book. I also provide feedback, including fine points like where to use a semicolon, and the difference between "to hone" and "to home."

Q. What is your own worst habit?
A. Prolixity.

Q. That seems to be a common answer, and a problem many academics have. When I was an editor, I gave out contracts for manuscripts of 100,000 words and frequently they came in at twice that. Is this because scholars feel that they must use everything they've ever learned?
A. In part this bad habit comes from defensiveness: Writers fear all the possible objections and fend them off pre-emptively. In part it comes from self-presentation: the desire to flaunt one's erudition and justify one's history of reading and research. And in part it comes from incompetence.

A well-structured essay carries the reader along without a lot of signposting. But if the essay is structured in the order in which thoughts occur to the writer, he or she will have to erect obtrusive previews, summaries, and signposts to prevent the reader from getting lost. A lack of attention to concision can fatten prose at every level of organization. Strunk and White's prime directive is to "omit needless words" (a lovely example of itself). But it takes skill and effort to spot and extirpate the needless words — and the needless sentences, paragraphs, and sections.

Q. How do you go about cutting your own prose?
A. As I revise, I consciously strive to omit needless material, a habit I picked up from writing newspaper op-eds. If you don't write to length, a deadline-pressured editor will hack off slabs of your prose with little concern for coherence or completeness, so better you than him or her. And I discovered that in squeezing the essay into the prescribed length, the quality of the prose often improves as if by magic.

Q. How do you approach revision?
A. Recursively and frequently. After writing a sentence, I immediately revise it. The same with each paragraph and section. Then I revise the entire chapter in a single pass from beginning to end — to clean up the piecemeal changes and enforce coherence and flow. After completing a draft of the book, I gather comments from expert colleagues, friends, and my mother, go back to the beginning, and revise each chapter twice. Then two more passes over the entire manuscript for a final cleanup and polishing. Then it goes to the copy editor.

Q. Really, your mother? Is she available to read my stuff?
A. Academics have a bad habit of using "my mother" as shorthand for an unsophisticated reader. But I actually mean my mother. Roslyn Pinker — a retired high-school vice principal and a voracious consumer of text — is a sophisticated reader, and more to the point, my idealized reader. Academics also have the misconception that when they write for nonacademics, they have to imagine communicating with a truck driver or chicken plucker, and as a result tend to patronize their readers. But most chicken pluckers don't buy books. Instead, one should imagine writing for a reader that is as intelligent and as intellectually sophisticated as you are but happens not to know what you know. I'll ask Roz if she's available.

Q. You're married to the novelist Rebecca Goldstein. What have you learned from her about style?
A. A horror of cliché. An imperative to show and not tell. A taste for the judiciously placed offbeat word — she periodically sends me to the dictionary, one of the great joys of reading. (That's how I learned ichor, apotropaic, borborygmus, tenebrous, hyalescence, cinereous, and swinge.)

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Originally published on August 1, 2016

Scholars Talk Writing: Camille Paglia

"Good Lord, I certainly learned nothing about writing from grad school!"

By RACHEL TOOR

Not long after she had splashed onto the scene with the publication of her first book, *Sexual Personae: Art and Decadence From Nefertiti to Emily Dickinson,* and followed that up with an essay in *The New York Times* claiming that Madonna was the future of feminism, I went to see Camille Paglia speak on a panel about political correctness at New York University. My recollection is of being frisked by armed guards before being allowed to enter the auditorium, but it's more likely we just had to empty our pockets and go through a metal detector. That I thought the extra protection was for the professor from a small arts college in Philadelphia, and not for another speaker on the dais, Edward Said, tells you something about how Paglia was regarded in the circles in which I traveled.

Camille Paglia is an intellectual flamethrower. She's fearless. She can be bully-mean and a name caller. She makes some people really, really mad. But she's also a serious thinker who has been able to write important scholarly books that cross over into a wide readership, and you can regularly find her byline in national magazines, where it's always a treat to read her sentences. Whether she's writing about the Obama administration, characterizing cats (in *Sexual Personae*) as the "autocrats of self-interest," rhapsodizing about *The Real Housewives,* or bludgeoning feminists, Christopher Hitchens, or Jon Stewart, she is sometimes right and never boring.

I approached her for this series with trepidation. I was eager to hear what she had to say about writing, but, to be honest, I was a little afraid of her (she called my former boss, Stanley Fish, a "totalitarian Tinkerbell"). Silly me. Camille could not have been more gracious, personable, or fun. She did tell me with a bit of glee that my former employer, Oxford University Press, was one of the seven publishers that rejected *Sexual Personae*. Thankfully that was before I started working there.

Q. Do you think of yourself primarily as a writer?
A. Yes, I do, and that is how I am mainly known outside the U.S. From college on, my ambition was to establish the legitimacy of the genre now widely accepted as creative nonfiction.

Q. How did you learn to write?
A. Like a medieval monk, I laboriously copied out passages that I admired from books and articles — I filled notebooks like that in college. And I made word lists to study later. Old-style bound dictionaries contained intricate etymologies that proved crucial to my mastery of English, one of the world's richest languages.

Q. What have you done that has helped you reach an audience beyond academe? Did that involve unlearning things from grad school?
A. Good Lord, I certainly learned nothing about writing from grad school! My teacher was Yale's Sterling Library, that Gothic cathedral of scholarship. I was very drawn to the lucid simplicity of British classicists of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, where one could hear a distinct speaking voice.

In my final years of grad school in the early 1970s, French poststructuralism was flooding into Yale, and I was appalled at its willful obscurantism and solipsism. After a talk by some preening Continental mandarin, I complained to a fellow student, "They're like high priests murmuring to each other." I deeply admire French literature, but that poststructuralist swerve was one of the stupidest and most disastrous things that American humanities departments ever did to themselves or to the great works of art that were in their custody.

It was mass suicide, and the elite schools are now littered with rotting corpses.

Q. How do you think about crafting your literary persona/e? What choices do you make when you're thinking about that?
A. I was very influenced by American colloquial speech and slang. My mother and all four of my grandparents were born in Italy, so English was a relatively recent acquisition for my family — brash and dynamic. I adored the punchy, pugnacious sound of American media — Ann Landers's column in the newspaper ("Wake up and smell the coffee!") or the raucous chatter of 1950s disc jockeys.

Like Andy Warhol, another product of immigrant culture, I was fascinated by the bold crassness and rhetorical hyperbole of American advertising and comic strips, with their exploding exclamation points. I still listen constantly to radio, at home or in the car — it's a central influence, especially sports shows where you hear working-class callers going off on hilarious tirades.

For scholarly essays, I erase myself as much as possible, but my default literary persona — the one people instantly recognize — is a barking, taunting, self-assertive American voice.

Q. Is there anything you're afraid of, or that you struggle with (when it comes to writing)?
A. Yes, the actual writing! My system of composition has four parts. There's a long period of very enjoyable rumination, where I assemble information and jot ideas and phrases at random on legal-size notepaper — pages upon pages. Then as the deadline approaches, I study my notes and bracket or underline principal themes in colored ink to map out a skeletal general outline. Third comes the dreaded moment of writing — which is total torture! It's a terrible strain, and I'm literally tied up in knots of anxiety as I toil over it. Once a draft is blessedly complete, my fourth stage of reviewing and tweaking the text (which can go on for days, if there's time) is pure, serene pleasure — there's nothing I love more!

I must stress that all of my important writing, including my books, has been done in longhand, in the old, predigital way. I absolutely must have physical, muscular contact with pen and page. Body rhythm is fundamental to my best work. I may write interviews and columns for the web directly on the computer, but nothing else.

Q. What is your process for revision?
A. After every few scribbled pages, I trek to the computer and type it all up, so that I can see what the text will look like to the reader. My later tweaking is always done on printed-out text.

But my sole revisions are stylistic. My preparation for writing is so slow and extensive that I never revise per se, as others might understand it. For example, perhaps only twice in my entire career have I changed the position of a paragraph. The consecutive logic of my blocklike paragraphs (as in Roman road-building) is always resolved at the outline stage, before I ever sit down to write. Revision for me is essentially condensation — that's where the Paglia voice suddenly emerges. By subtracting words, I force compression and speed on the text. Through long practice, I've achieved a distinct flow to my writing — a compulsive readability, even when the reader hates what I'm saying!

I learned condensation from two principal sources: the impudent, crisply written *Time* magazine of my childhood and the epigrams of Oscar Wilde, which I discovered collected in a secondhand book when I was an adolescent in Syracuse. My Wilde-inspired ability to strike off sharp one-liners was a major reason for my rise to national visibility in the 1990s. For example, when *Time* contacted me at deadline for comment on its Viagra cover story in 1998, I replied within minutes, "The erection is the last gasp of modern manhood." Any compendium of contemporary quotes usually has a ton of mine.

In addition to condensation, I also employ syncopation, modeled on the jazz-inflected Beat poetry that had a huge impact on me in college. When people try to parody my prose, this is what they miss — those subtle, jagged twists, turns, and tugs, whose ultimate source is music. In short, the secret of my writing is focus, planning, persistence, labor, and attention to detail.

Q. Your thoughts on academic prose. Who are the academics whose style you love?
A. Cue the laugh track! What's to love in any living academic's style? You'd have to go all the way back to Jane Harrison, C.M. Bowra, and Rhys Carpenter to find an academic style I cherish. I've spent 25 years denouncing the bloated, pretentious prose spawned by poststructuralism. Enough said! Let the pigs roll in their own swill.

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Originally published on November 9, 2015

PRESTON GANNAWAY FOR THE CHRONICLE

From left: Naomi Levy, Virginia Matzek, and Julia Voss, all faculty members at Santa Clara U., attend a group called "Shut Up and Write."

The Secret to Hitting Your Writing Goals May Be Simple: Peer Pressure

By JENNIFER HOWARD

It's summertime, when scholars dream of doing all the writing they didn't find time for during the academic year. But some have found a year-round, low-budget solution to the academic writer's time crunch: Schedule a meeting.

Although meetings often deserve their reputation as gatherings where productivity goes to die, there's one that Virginia Matzek, an assistant professor of environmental studies and sciences at Santa Clara University, looks forward to: the get-together of her faculty writing group.

Its name — "Shut Up and Write" — sums up its approach. No idle chatter, no workshopping manuscripts, no wasting time, just a bunch of people from different departments and disciplines who all need to log some writing hours. "You're going to put your head down and get work done," says Ms. Matzek, who will go up for tenure next year.

Shut Up and Write is by no means the first such faculty group, but it's part of a growing effort among academics, especially those early in their careers, to make sure they have time for an essential but easily disrupted part of their jobs. Getting tenure is tough these days, tougher still if you don't have a good portfolio of publications, but teaching and service obligations can eat away at writing time. "You're not going to push back

your office hours or not show up for your class," says Ms. Matzek. "But writing doesn't have that kind of privilege in your calendar. It can always get pushed back" — unless you treat writing time with the same seriousness as you would any other professional obligation.

"If you say you have a meeting, it's the end of discussion," Ms. Matzek says. "Nobody challenges you when you say you have to go to a meeting. You don't have to be specific about what the meeting is."

Although they often spring from grass-roots efforts, faculty writing groups sometimes get a boost from campus administrations, with sympathetic deans or faculty-development groups organizing summer writing retreats and boot camps or meetups during the year, occasionally with a free meal thrown in. Many institutions belong to the National Center for Faculty Development and Diversity, headed by Kerry Ann Rockquemore. The center runs a popular Faculty Success Program that aims to help academics develop good writing and productivity habits, among other survival skills.

Naomi Levy, an assistant professor of political science who co-organized the Shut Up and Write group about three years ago at Santa Clara with Ms. Matzek, is training to be a coach in Ms. Rockquemore's program. "A lot of it is about finding the balance that aligns with your institution's expectations and sticking to it," she says.

THE POWER OF SHAME

Whether formal or informal, writing-accountability groups operate with a couple of basic assumptions: You're more likely to get writing done if 1) you book regular time for it and 2) you find colleagues to help hold you accountable. The power of scheduling and the equally formidable power of shame underpin writing guides like Paul J. Silvia's How to *Write a Lot: A Practical Guide to Productive Academic Writing* (American Psychological Association, 2007), which has become something of a cult classic for academic writers. A writing group "builds social pressure. It also builds the habit," says Mr. Silvia, an associate professor of psychology at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

Although some academics prefer what Mr. Silvia calls the lone-wolf approach to writing, others — particularly in the book-heavy humanities — benefit from a collective boost. "There's really no desperation quite like assistant-professor-working-on-a-book desperation," Mr. Silvia says.

For years he's belonged to a writing-accountability group at UNC called Agraphia, a nod to a medical condition that renders people unable to write. The group assembles at a coffee shop near campus for just 10 to 15 minutes every week. Mr. Silvia keeps a file folder with a paper on which everybody's weekly goals are written down, to be revisited the following week. (The writing itself happens on their own time.) "We keep it crisp," he says.

At Santa Clara, Ms. Matzek and Ms. Levy keep the mechanics of their group simple. At the beginning of each quarter they send out a general announcement. Usually 20 or 25 people express interest, and a smaller core group turns up regularly. Most of the regulars don't have tenure yet, according to Ms. Matzek.

Sessions don't usually run longer than an hour and a half or so. People show up, write a goal on a whiteboard — finish this chapter, do those footnotes — then get up and cross it off once it's done. Beyond writing, "there are people who are editing video, there are people who are analyzing data," Ms. Matzek says. "That task that you need to make yourself do, you can come do."

Julia Voss, an assistant professor in the English department at Santa Clara, has found the approach so useful that she started a departmental group with a couple of senior colleagues. It was hard to find mutually convenient times to meet, though, so this year they've been doing it virtually. "It's really motivating for me to open up my email in the morning" and see how everybody's doing with their goals, says Ms. Voss.

At Santa Clara and other smaller, liberal-arts institutions, meeting up to write also offers junior faculty in particular a research-friendly break from the institutional focus on teaching. At Colgate University, a writing-accountability group organized by Meg Worley and a colleague steers clear of the classroom. Ms. Worley, a medievalist who's an assistant professor of writing and rhetoric, makes a sideways reference to the famous quote from *Fight Club*: The only rule of writing group is "you don't talk about teaching."

The all-female group comprises early-career academics faculty from all of the college's divisions; postdocs and visiting faculty are welcome too. In addition to setting weekly goals, the group functions as a support network. "We also talk about self-care," Ms. Worley says, adding that she doesn't like the term because "it's a little too squishy for me." Whatever it's called, that support comes in especially handy for junior female faculty, she says, because often they "get pushed to open a vein for the institution."

To help one writer get out of her rut, the members of the group took turns as her writing buddy. "All week long, everybody did one hour writing with her," Ms. Worley recalls. "And by the end of the week, she had gotten out of the quicksand."

Maybe it's time to add "Organize a writing group" to your fall calendar.

Originally published on June 8, 2015

THE CHRONICLE
of Higher Education®

1255 Twenty-Third Street, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20037

202 466 1000 | Chronicle.com

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