

# WHY ACADEMIC WRITING STINKS

BY  
STEVEN PINKER

# AND HOW TO FIX IT

**10 Tips on How to Write Less Badly**

MICHAEL C. MUNGER

**Inoculating Against Jargonitis**

HELEN SWORD

**Becoming a 'Stylish' Writer**

RACHEL TOOR

**The Art and Science of Finding Your Voice**

THERESA MACPHAIL

# WHY ACADEMIC WRITING STINKS

BY  
STEVEN PINKER

SEPTEMBER 26, 2014 | [VIEW ON CHRONICLE.COM](http://VIEW.ON.CHRONICLE.COM)

**T**ogether 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 academes 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 academes 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 disinterested 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



SCOTT SEYMOUR

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 academes are symptoms of this agonizing self-consciousness:

**Metadiscourse.** The preceding discussion introduced the problem of academes, 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 audience 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 leav-

ing 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.”

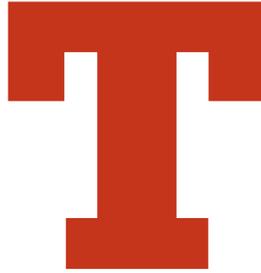
English grammar is an enabler of the bad habit of writing in unnecessary abstractions because it includes a dangerous tool for creating abstract terms. A process called nominalization takes a perfectly spry verb and embalms it into a lifeless noun by adding a suffix like *-ance*, *-ment*, or *-ation*. 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.

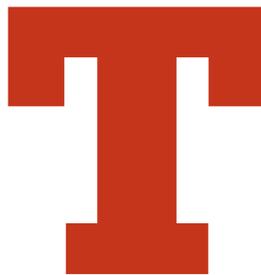
The second way in which expertise can make our thoughts harder to share is that as we become familiar with something, we think about it more in terms of the use we put it to and less in terms of what it looks like and what it is made of. This transition is called functional fixity. In the textbook experiment, 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 “poststimulus 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 other-

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

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



The final explanation of why academics write so badly comes not from literary analysis or cognitive science but from classical economics and Skinnerian psychology: There are few incentives for writing well.

When Calvin explained to Hobbes, “With a little practice, writing can be an intimidating and impenetrable fog,” he got it backward. Fog comes easily to writers; it’s the clarity that requires practice. The naïve realism and breezy conversation in classic style are deceptive, an artifice constructed through effort and skill. Exorcising the curse of knowledge is no easier. It requires more than just honing one’s empathy for the generic reader. Since our powers of telepathy are limited, it also requires showing a draft to a sample of real readers and seeing if they can follow it, together with showing it to *yourself* after enough time has passed that it’s no longer familiar and 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. ■

*Steven Pinker is a professor of psychology at Harvard University, chair of the usage panel of the American Heritage Dictionary, and author, most recently, of *The Sense of Style: The Thinking Person’s Guide to Writing in the 21st Century*, just out from Viking.*

# 10 TIPS ON HOW TO WRITE LESS BADLY

BY

MICHAEL C. MUNGER

SEPTEMBER 6, 2010 | [VIEW ON CHRONICLE.COM](#)

# M

ost 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.

**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. ■

*Michael Munger is director of the Philosophy, Politics, and Economics program at Duke University.*

# INOCULATING AGAINST JARGONITIS

BY

HELEN SWORD

JUNE 3, 2012 | [VIEW ON CHRONICLE.COM](#)

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

In its most benign and neutral definition, jargon signifies “the technical terminology or characteristic idiom of a special activity or group.” More often, however, the jingly word that Chaucer used to describe “the inarticulate utterance of birds” takes on a pejorative cast: “unintelligible or meaningless talk or writing”; “nonsense, gibberish”; “a strange, outlandish, or barbarous language or dialect”; “obscure and often pretentious language marked by circumlocutions and long words.” So when does technical terminology cross over into the realm of outlandish, obscure, and pretentious? And how can academics communicate effectively with one another without exposing themselves to the contempt, derision, or irritation of those who do not understand them?

Many thoughtful and eloquent academics have defended the use of jargon in appropriate contexts. Derek Attridge observes that jargon makes transparent what other modes of critical discourse seek to hide, namely, the contingent and contextualized nature of language itself. Roland Barthes describes jargon as “a way of imagining” that “shocks as imagination does.” Jacques Derrida, whose exuberantly neologistic prose has charmed and exasperated several generations of

humanities scholars, dwells on the material pleasures of difficult language, noting that words like “jargon” and its cousin, “argot,” are chokingly ugly yet bizarrely sensual: “They both come from the bottom of the throat, they linger, for a certain time, like a gargling, at the bottom of the gullet, you rasp and you spit.” (*“Ils sorbent tours deux du fond de la gorge, ils séjournent, un certain temps, come un gargarisme, au fond du goosier, on racle et on crache.”*) What these commentators have in common is a deep respect for language that engages and challenges. None of them advocate lazy or pretentious writing—which, all too often, is what disciplinary jargonizing amounts to.

In his classic 1946 essay, “Politics and the English Language,” George Orwell demonstrates how any writer can turn powerful prose into mushy pablum—“modern English of the worst sort”—by replacing evocative nouns and resonant cadences with impersonal, abstract terminology:

“I returned and saw under the sun, that the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, neither yet bread to the wise, nor yet riches to men of understanding, nor yet favor to men of skill; but time and chance happeneth to them all.” (Ecclesiastes 9:11)

“Objective considerations of contemporary phenomena compel the conclusion that success or failure in competitive activities exhibits no tendency to be commensurate with innate capacity, but that a considerable element of the unpredictable must invariably be taken into account.” (Orwell’s translation into standard bureaucrat-speak)

The annals of academe are filled with examples of hoaxes based on parodies of scholarly discourse, from the fake “Spectrism” poetry movement of the 1920s to the infamous Sokal affair of the 1990s, in which the physicist Alan Sokal successfully placed “an article liberally salted with nonsense” in the cultural-studies journal *Social Text* and then publicly boasted about his feat. As Sokal demonstrated, a satirist with a finely tuned ear can simulate the signature style of just about any academic discipline. So, indeed, can a cleverly programmed computer. The following passages were generated by online “chatterbots” designed to parrot the prose of postmodernists, computer scientists, and the linguist Noam Chomsky, respectively:

“The main theme of von Ludwig’s analysis of postsemioticist rationalism is a mythopoetical totality.”

“After years of theoretical research into flip-flop gates, we prove the analysis of massive multiplayer online role-playing games, which embodies the confirmed principles of fuzzy networking.”

“Note that the speaker-hearer’s linguistic intuition does not readily tolerate nondistinctness in the sense of distinctive feature theory.”

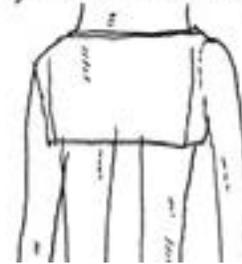
Based on fairly simple algorithms, each of these programs conjures up the kind of muddy, obscurantist prose that Orwell likened to the defensive response of “a cuttlefish spurting out ink.” But it is their heavy-handed jargon—“postsemioticist,” “mythopoetical,” “flip-flop gates,” “fuzzy networking,” “nondistinctness,” “feature theory”—that most clearly marks these sentences as “academic.”

In my survey of 100 recent writing guides, I found that 21 recommend against disciplinary jargon of any kind; 46 caution that technical language should be used carefully, accurately, and sparingly; and 33 make no comment on the subject. I have yet to discover a single academic-style guide that advocates a freewheeling embrace of jargon. Nevertheless, academic journals are awash in the stuff:

“Tomita extended LR parsing, not by backtracking and lookahead but by a breadth-first simulation of multiple LR parsers spawned by nondeterminism in the LR table.” (computer science)

“Moreover, central aspects of Holland’s theory are structurally represented in the RIASEC interest circumplex wherein an explicit set of relations between variables in the interest domain are

unusually rotating in my brain the  
 inaccurate appropriate contexts /  
 in in an octopussy's sea feature  
 involving massive nondistinctness  
 interest domain mythopoetical &  
 a swirling gyrosopic horde  
 reflect variable delirium of disc  
 determinism feature theory obs  
 flip gates pedagogical jargonizing  
 mythopoetical anechoic nebula  
 psychosocial morphology



JORDIN ISIP FOR THE CHRONICLE

specified.” (psychology)

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

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

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

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

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

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

None of the seven articles provide evidence that its authors have actually read and engaged with Foucault’s work themselves. Far from being wielded by these scholars as a precise instrument to facilitate a nuanced understanding among experts, the word “Foucauldian” becomes a sort of semantic shotgun, scattering meaning in all directions.

Stylish academic writers do not deny the utility of jargon, nor do they eschew its intellectual and aesthetic pleasures. Instead they deploy specialized language gracefully, cautiously, and meticulously, taking care to keep their readers on board. For example, when the educational researchers Ray Land and Sian Bayne appropriate the Foucauldian term “panopticon” in a discussion of disciplinary surveillance in online learning environments, they provide a succinct historical overview of the concept, grounded in Foucault’s own writings. When the literary critic Peter Brooks imports the Russian formalist terms *fabula* and *sjuzet* into his book *Reading for the Plot*, he deftly glosses both terms and explains how they contribute to a deeper understanding of stories and plots. When the philosopher Jacques Derrida coins a word, *différance*, to signify semantic differences that lead to an endless deferral of meaning, he explains at length the thinking behind his neologism. These authors hand their readers complex tools—but always with instructions attached.

Academics turn to jargon for a wide variety of reasons: to display their erudition, to signal membership in a disciplinary community, to demonstrate their mastery of complex concepts, to cut briskly into a continuing scholarly conversation, to push knowledge in new directions, to challenge readers’ thinking, to convey ideas and facts efficiently, to play around with language. Many of those motivations align well with the ideals of stylish academic writing. Wherever jargon shows

its shiny face, however, the demon of academic hubris inevitably lurks in the shadows nearby. Academics who are committed to using language effectively and ethically—as a tool for communication, not as an emblem of power—need first of all to acknowledge the seductive power of jargon to bamboozle, obfuscate, and impress.

### Things to Try:

If you suspect that you suffer from jargonitis, start by measuring the scope of your addiction. Print out a sample of your academic writing and highlight every word that would not be immediately comprehensible to a reader from outside your own discipline. (Alternatively, you can ask such a reader to do the highlighting for you.) Do you use jargon more than once per page, per paragraph, per sentence?

Next, ask yourself some hard questions about your motivations. Do you employ jargon to:

- Impress other people?
- Signal your membership in a disciplinary community?
- Demonstrate your mastery of complex ideas?
- Enter an academic conversation that is already under way?
- Play with language and ideas?
- Create new knowledge?
- Challenge your readers' thinking?
- Communicate succinctly with colleagues?
- Retain only those jargon words that clearly serve your priorities and values.

For every piece of jargon that you decide to keep, make sure you give your readers a secure handhold: a definition, some background information, a contextualizing word or phrase. By the time you have clarified your usage, you might even find that you can let go of the word itself. ■

*Helen Sword is director of the Centre for Learning and Research in Higher Education at the University of Auckland. This essay is excerpted from *Stylish Academic Writing*, her book from Harvard University Press.*

# BECOMING A 'STYLISH' WRITER

Attractive prose will not make you appear any less smart

BY  
RACHEL TOOR

JULY 2, 2012 | [VIEW ON CHRONICLE.COM](#)

**W**hen I watch creative writers perform, I hear a host of mostly unspoken questions. In their body language, self-presentation, jokes, and post-reading interactions, they seem to be asking: Am I boring? Am I funny? Are my sentences flat and flaccid? Is the pacing right? Am I losing the audience? Am I making people feel something? Am I good enough? Ultimately, what I think they're asking, behind all the bravado, posing, and posturing is: Am I attractive?

Listening to academics, I pick up a different set of concerns: Am I making a convincing case? Have I mentioned everything everyone else has said about this topic and pointed out the ways that they are (sort of) wrong? Do you see how much I've read? Have I dropped enough important names? Does my specialized language prove I deserve to be a member of your club? Am I right? At the end, I hear hope disguised as an attitude that asks: Am I smart?

Patricia Nelson Limerick of the University of Colorado at Boulder said professors are the kids no one wanted to dance with in high school. Brandishing their big old brains like pompoms, academics often pride themselves on not caring about appearances. Instead of trimming food-catching beards and wearing clothes that fit, they embrace the either/or-ness of smart/pretty and their prose often waddles along under that false dichotomy. Scholars tend not to think about writing sentences that will make readers throw panties or send flowers. In my experience, gorgeous writers, even those who sport too-short pants and don't trim their beards, get a lot of panties and flowers. Really.

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

He tells a story about an academic colleague who, when asked if he liked a movie he had just seen, said, “I don’t know. I have to go home and think about it.” Accustomed to having to justify and support every thought, back up every assertion, and hedge every idea, academics learn to distrust their guts. They hem and qualify until they don’t know what they think and don’t want to say anything for fear of being wrong. “We creative writers are privileged,” Hugo wrote, “because we can write declarative sentences, and we can write declarative sentences because we are less interested in being irrefutably right than we are in the dignity of language itself.”

Complaining about bad academic prose is like discussing the weather: talk, talk, talk, and no one does anything. In my recovering-editor mode, I finally took the first step and allowed myself to admit that most scholarly manuscripts read as badly as many first-year composition papers. In my work for a publisher, I had perpetrated on the world a whole lot of garbled ideas expressed in jargon and in meaningless, incomprehensible, and never-ending sentences. It was then that I started to feel, as they say, bad about myself. Now as I go about trying to make amends, I end up sounding like Chicken Little, running around and screeching about how the academic sky is falling.

But, if you look up, you may notice the academic sky is crashing in on us. Jobs are about as abundant as ivory-billed woodpeckers and book publishing is in the crapper. Journal subscriptions, long swollen by libraries, are in danger of starting to look as dry as the Los Angeles River.

Plenty of people are sounding alarms. Last fall historians Anthony Grafton and James Grossman argued for big changes in graduate education. Michael Berube, president of the Modern Language Association, is toiling to make things better for contingent faculty. Such voices of reason are shaking things up and we need to listen to them. But we

also need to focus on training students to be good at the things that academics are supposed to do: read, write, think clearly and critically, and present new ideas and material so their importance shines through.

In an essay called “Professional Boredom,” William Cronon, president of the American Historical Association, warned that, when taken to an extreme, the values and practices of good history—rigorous, complex, and nuanced argumentation; accuracy; grounding in primary re-

search; awareness of the field—can make the discipline accessible to only a small group. He warns about writing that keeps readers out rather than inviting them in. He chides against using jargon, and gives these examples: “agency,” “contingency,” and “document.” Quaint, right? I wish I remembered the days when I thought those words counted as academic cant. Cronon suggests that his peers tell stories, and he cautions them not to be boring.

It’s not surprising to hear historians, a fusty, unhip group slow to adopt high theory, carp about bad writing, but I nearly fell off my own fusty, unhip chair when I read a piece in *The Chronicle* about the supercool journal, *Public Culture*. Eric Klinenberg, the journal’s new editor, believes academic prose should not be about showing off your smarts. He says, “I want the writing to be persuasive and argumentative; I want the claims to be backed up by good evidence; and I want the language to be engaging, so that you want to start and finish every article.” Woot!

Writing frumpy, lumpy prose is the equivalent of showing up on a first date with unwashed hair and dirty clothes, and then talking about yourself in a way that leaves the other person looking at

**I end up sounding like Chicken Little, running around and screeching about how the academic sky is falling.**

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

In *Stylish Academic Writing*, a new book from Harvard University Press, Helen Sword analyzes 1,000 scholarly articles from an array of disciplines and comes up with some writing tactics used by “stylish” academics. (I confess I bristle against the word “stylish” because it seems a little rhinestone-studded-reading-glasses-on-a decorative-lanyard, but I’ll continue to use it here because she does.)

Like Cronon, Sword believes stylish writers tell compelling stories, avoid jargon, provide the reader with “aesthetic and intellectual pleasure,” and write with “originality, imagination, and creative flair.” She surveys stylish writing and notices extensive use of first-person anecdotes, catchy openings, concrete nouns (as opposed to nominalized abstractions), active verbs (eschewing forms of that bugger, “to be”), lots of examples, good illustrations, references that show broad reading, and a sense of humor.

No formal rules proscribe any of those practices, although many academics have formed a false consensus, believing that if they engage in such flashy, creative-writing-esque behavior they will pay for it by appearing Not Serious and therefore not smart.

And so we get a whole lot of academic essays that seem to be written neither by nor for humans, that lack a sense of narrative, and that use an impersonal voice to brandish fancy concepts. Sometimes, as Sword shows, name-dropping is no more than that. She looks at a bunch of articles that use the word “Foucauldian” and finds many of them have only a tenuous connection to anything Michel Foucault—himself a jiggy stylist—ever wrote. Pretension wins out over clarity, originality, or even meaning.

Sword gives lots of examples of good academic stylists, and she provides an even bigger buffet of the kind of writing all too familiar to most of us—prose that comes across as unintentionally hilarious when read out of context, if you can force yourself to plow through it. She also has a Web site, The Writer’s Diet, where you can paste in a sample of prose, of 100 to 1,000 words long, and the program will diagnose it from fit to flabby, pointing out the robustness of verbs, noun density, long strings of prepositions, needless modifiers, and those Cheez-Its of nutritionally bankrupt words like “that,” “there,” and “this.”

In his book *On Writing Well*, William Zinsser mentions warmth and humanity as important parts of nonfiction. Blaise Pascal wrote, “When we see a natural style, we are astonished and charmed; for we expected to see an author, and we find a person.”

Sure, as professors we are supposed to be intelligent, and sometimes it feels like we have to keep proving that. Remember, though, it’s not either/or. Attractive writing—brave, personal, narrative, zingy, imaginative, funny—will not make you appear any less smart. ■

*Rachel Toor is an associate professor of creative writing at Eastern Washington University’s writing program in Spokane. Her Web site is [racheltoor.com](http://racheltoor.com). She welcomes comments and questions directed to [careers@chronicle.com](mailto:careers@chronicle.com).*

# THE ART AND SCIENCE OF FINDING YOUR VOICE

BY

THERESA MACPHAIL

AUGUST 8, 2014 | [VIEW ON CHRONICLEVITAE.COM](http://VIEW.ON.CHRONICLEVITAE.COM)

**A**

t 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.

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. ■

*Theresa MacPhail is an assistant professor of science and technology studies and a faculty fellow in the John W. Draper Interdisciplinary Master's Program in Humanities and Social Thought at New York University.*

©2014 by The Chronicle of Higher Education, Inc. All rights reserved. This publication may not be reproduced without prior written permission of The Chronicle. For permission requests, contact us at [copyright@chronicle.com](mailto:copyright@chronicle.com).