

# THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

## The Chronicle Review

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### Why Academics Stink at Writing

By *Steven Pinker*

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 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.



### It's No Joke: Humor Rarely Welcome in Research Write-Ups

Examples of funny papers are few and far between. That's a shame, says one scientist.

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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 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 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.

**T**he 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: terms 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 box 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 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.

**T**he 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.*

## 57 Comments

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**aloofbooks** · 2 days ago

"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."

Agreed!

22 ^ | v · Reply · Share >

**PL** · a day ago

What graceful, well constructed, compulsively readable prose! Reading Pinker is like eating popcorn. But when I'd finished this article I asked myself, what have I learned that I didn't already know? The answer was, zilch.

25 ^ | v · Reply · Share >

**Mons G. R.** → PL · 12 hours ago

The purpose of the article isn't to present you with new information though. It is to argue for changing some common writing practises. And I'm pretty sure Pinker's prose managed to convey that to you.

8 ^ | v · Reply · Share >

**PL** → Mons G. R. · 8 hours ago

I wasn't thinking of information so much as of those horrible writing practices and of why it would great if academics abandoned them and wrote good, lively, logical, plain prose like, e.g., Pinker's. I've been around that sort of horrible writing longer than I care to remember, and have been wishing (fond wish!) for the sort of improvements Pinker hints might be possible for just as long. That's what I meant when I said the article told me nothing I didn't already know.

There was, however, a piece of information that was new to me: "The Rabbit Illusion" – I mean the name; the thing seems to be what common sense would have guessed anyway. But that's the



...that common sense would have guessed anyway, but more the case with a good many of the so-called discoveries of Psychology.

2 ^ | v · Reply · Share >



**ApathyNihilism** → PL · an hour ago

Congratulations if indeed you already knew all these pearls of wisdom. Nevertheless, even what one knows, or considers obvious, is often worth repeating so that one remembers to act on the knowledge.

^ | v · Reply · Share >



**Lippity Ohmer** · a day ago

Using gender pronouns such as "she," instead of "he" - in order to make some political/social statement in an article about neither - is pretty sloppy writing.

Make political/social statements elsewhere, please. Thanks.

10 ^ | v · Reply · Share >



**Samuel Hammond** → Lippity Ohmer · 20 hours ago

Sorry, do you mind quoting the section where he does this? All I can find is a brief parenthetical where he explains the Linguistics convention of having He be a writer and She be a reader.

^ | v · Reply · Share >



**barrygarelick**

It's in the 6th paragraph: "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."

^ | v · Reply · Share >



**Samuel Hammond**

I don't think this was the pronoun Lippity was referring to. That simply says scientists have jargon that, while beyond an amateur reader, is both too basic within the field to merit elaboration and too technical to expect a superior synonym.

I'm genuinely very confused by these top level comments complaining about pronouns. If anything it seemed like Pinker took the extra step of anticipating a negative reaction. I'm flabbergasted that this is what people have chosen to discuss rather than the actual topic, which to me is fascinating.

4 ^ | v · Reply · Share >



**Jeff Guinn**

"It would be tedious for a biologist to spell out the meaning of the term transcription factor every time she used it ..."

Yet another example of what I mentioned below. Since he isn't talking about a specific biologist, he is talking about biologists as a class. Therefore, write the sentence with the subject in the plural the way it should be:

"It would be tedious for biologists to spell out the meaning of the term 'transcription factor' every time they used it ..."

The (to me) astonishing thing is that this unnecessary clumsily stumbling around gendered singular pronouns happens more often than not. Why?

4 ^ | v · Reply · Share >



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Of course, your banishment of political/social statements in this article is itself a political/social statement.

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**Jeff Guinn** · [a day ago](#)

A pet peeve.

Dr. Pinker clues us in to the convention for using gendered pronouns. "He" for the author; "she" for the reader.

In almost all cases, this is completely unnecessary. If the person isn't known specifically — in which case gendered pronouns are completely appropriate -- then the sentence should be written in the plural.

From the text:

"The writer can see something that the reader has not yet noticed, and he orients the reader so she can see for herself."

Clearly, though, Dr. Pinker isn't talking about a specific writer, or reader, but writers and readers collectively. So to get around the hackneyed gender neutrality, get rid of it entirely by writing about collectives as they actually exist, in the plural:

"Since writers can see things readers have not yet noticed, writers orient readers so they can see for themselves."

Works darn near every time.

17 ^ | v · [Reply](#) · [Share](#)



**Eric Rasmusen** · [Jeff Guinn](#) · [9 hours ago](#)

Just using "he" when natural is the way to write if one is really devoted to the classical style. A standard rule for good writing is that the singular is stronger and clearer. Most often, "they" is weaker writing and less clear (though there are many exceptions).

If you are consciously working around what's natural and clear, you're promoting feminist ideology at the expensive of clarity. Maybe you think that's OK, but you have to admit that you're sacrificing clear writing for ideology when you do it. It's like when Cato ended speeches on every single subject with "Et Carthago delenda est."

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/C...> . That undermines the impact of the particular speech, though Cato did that deliberately, to argue that destroying Carthage was more important than anything else anybody was talking about. The same goes for gender-neutered writing— its users are saying that they think feminism is more important than anything else they write about.

(Note the exception— should I have said, "Its user is saying he thinks feminism is more important than anything else he writes about"? Here it could go either way. I chose naturalness and niceness over impact.)

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**feuilletoniste** · [Profile](#) · [Posts](#)

Because of course it's 'natural and clear' that the default state of all voices is to be male. How does a singular feminine pronoun - which includes the other 50% of the population in the discourse at the expense of a single additional letter - comprise political obfuscation?

(By all means introduce me to this writer 'who thinks feminism is more important than anything else he writes about.' We'll take tea together. It will be lovely.)

4 ^ | v · [Reply](#) · [Share](#)



**Gloria Monti**

"natural" is a concept invented by those who believe that men write and women read. natural is in fact naturalization of that history (change) rendered unchanging. and i won't comment on an academic quoting from wikipedia.

1 ^ | v · Reply · Share >



**Peter burns** · a day ago

I still don't quite get the candle thumbtack puzzle. How would attaching it to a wall in a small box keep it from dripping?

2 ^ | v · Reply · Share >



**mattmark**

This is a very funny and perceptive reply which nicely illustrates the corner into which Mr. Pinker has painted himself. Obviously, "attach the box to the wall" is here elliptical for "use the tacks to attach the box to the wall with its open end up, and put the candle in the box, so that the box catches the candle's drips." The box will then (possibly) prevent the candle's drips from reaching the floor while, of course, being powerless to prevent the candle from "dripping." In crediting the reader with the ability to figure out what the shorthand, "attach the box to the wall," signifies in this context, Mr. Pinker has been guilty of 'chunking'(\*), his consequent lack of clarity giving rise to your question.

I once briefly strayed off the news channels I customarily watch to one that has a much larger audience but a reputation for being less 'intellectual' (sorry, I couldn't think of a better word that would convey the same connotative meaning). The first report was from Beijing, but the news anchor said, "Beijing, the capital of China," presumably for the benefit of viewers who might not know this. I still prefer news channels that rightly presume they needn't supply me with this kind of basic

3 ^ | v · Reply · Share >



**PL** → mattmark · a day ago

Apropos "Beijing, the capital of China," we get both BBC and (US-based) CNN. Oddly, BBC always refers to Obama as "President Obama" while CNN always calls him "US President, Obama."

2 ^ | v · Reply · Share >



**mattmark** → PL · a day ago

...which you can interpret as a nod to American ignorance or as a courtesy acknowledging that other countries have presidents.

1 ^ | v · Reply · Share >



**Brian Slesinsky** → mattmark · 14 hours ago

A summary serves as an advertisement for readers who might be interested in the article. Similarly, each sentence in part convinces the reader to keep reading. So it's unnecessary for the rewritten sentence to have the same meaning as the original. It can be expanded on later, in the next sentence or the next paragraph, if it's important enough to keep.

In this particular example, explaining what the rabbit illusion is seems like a better way to draw in general readers than packing in all the same meaning as the original summary. Pinker probably could have gone further and given a full rewrite, but I suspect it was omitted as beside the point for a brief example.

That might in itself be a problem with clear writing: it's not very

dense so you end up saying less than you might otherwise. If mathematics texts were written for the general reader, they would probably never get to the advanced material. But there are compensations, like having more readers.

^ | v · Reply · Share >



**Peter burns** → Peter burns · 2 hours ago

Another challenge when writing an issue oriented essay is not letting your examples be more interesting than your thesis. I will remember the 'bunny hop' and the candle problem long after I forget the article.

1 ^ | v · Reply · Share >



**jaropa** · a day ago

Exhibit A: "Instead of moralistic finger-pointing..." Um, what is the title and purpose of this article again?

Exhibit B: "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." Sigh... nothing like the passive/female receiver of male-imparted knowledge. Why repeat such a trite and boring way to consider the world... I suggest you mull over that wordy Butler quote...

Exhibit C: "Academics mindlessly cushion their prose with wads of fluff..." You don't say...

Exhibit D: "Enough already. ... In writing badly, we are wasting each other's time, sowing confusion and error, and turning our profession into a laughingstock." Well, you don't say, deux! (Sounds kind of like "duh" doesn't it?)

Meh... I'm surprised Pinker doesn't have a website called "Pinker Knows Best."

14 ^ | v · Reply · Share >



**Bert Cappelle** → jaropa · a day ago

Actually, I thought linguists more typically use the convention to refer to the speaker (and by extension, the writer) as "she" and to the hearer (and the reader) as "he", to counter gender-based stereotyping and because it's mnemonically sound: s/speaker and h/hearer.

9 ^ | v · Reply · Share >



**wiseaftertheevent** · a day ago

An article that proves the thesis that people in non-empathetic social structures cannot understand empathetic connection.

If you actually read this Steven, here's a one-paragraph answer. It's about empathy, which even this piece doesn't possess. Academics write for completeness to assure their status with their peers. But real information transfer requires connection with the audience. And unfortunately, talking about that with academics is like discussing color with the colorblind.

7 ^ | v · Reply · Share >



**Al\_de\_Baran** · a day ago

Pinker, like most descriptivists, despises linguistic prescription, unless he is doing the prescribing.

Of course, Pinker also can't resist using a piece on style as a Trojan horse for small-minded digs at the liberal arts and humanities. As usual, he exposes nothing but his own ignorance and biases. His risible notions of "truth", "relativism", and "objectivity", in particular, assure that no one will accuse him of making any great effort to avoid appearing philosophically naive.

11 ^ | v · Reply · Share >



**BDewnorkin** → Al\_de\_Baran · a day ago

I don't think one can still call him a descriptivist after this article and his most recent book.

3 ^ | v · Reply · Share >



**Al\_de\_Baran** → BDewnorkin · 2 hours ago

It's what Pinker calls himself that is of main concern to me, although I hope that he will now realize precisely what you have indicated. I doubt that he has that much self-awareness, though.

^ | v · Reply · Share >



**W. V.** · a day ago

Except for the Prius at the beginning, everything about this essay is stale, especially the drive-by snark about literary studies. The last Bad Writing Contest was in 1998, and Dutton ended up a climate-change denier. (What a triumph of intellectual clarity!) Calvin and Hobbes ended in 1995.

English departments could disappear tomorrow, and 20 years later, scientists would still be cracking jokes about all that pomo Derrida nonsense.

17 ^ | v · Reply · Share >



**Coastghost** · a day ago

I did not finish reading to discover: what does Steven Pinker have against concision? or is his piece offered as an ironic assessment that depends on requisite prolixity?

(Twenty-one hours later I conducted a word-count: it took Pinker 5312 words JUST to get to his final paragraph, the one that begins: "Enough already."-- which then proceeds for another 44 words.)

12 ^ | v · Reply · Share >



**saksin** · a day ago

Steven Pinker makes perfect sense in his analysis of the multiple hows and whys of bad academic writing, but he stops short of a forthright indictment of the worst offenders: those "scholars in the softer fields" who "spout obscure verbiage to hide the fact that they have nothing to say." Pinker believes this "bamboozlement theory" applies only to "some academics some of the time", but there is an entire field of so called scholarship dedicated to it, as Alan Sokal's successful hoax on Social Text demonstrated with painful clarity.

What is practiced in these circles goes far beyond a stylistically awkward concatenation of metaconcepts to the dressing up of sheer ideological prejudice with complex cascades of jargon (in a verbal code largely shared by the devotees of postmodern 'cultural studies' and 'critical theory') to give an appearance of profundity to what is no more than a political party line or religious confession of faith.

6 ^ | v · Reply · Share >



**DarthChewie** · a day ago

Descartes is often guilty of all of the above. Discourse on the Method begins with a paragraph outlining his argument (metadiscourse). He uses the word "difficile" 5 times to describe the problems he is addressing (apologizing). "Almost," or "presque," appears 12 times and "faillir" another 4 (hedging). And the entire work is a "discours de la méthode"--an account of how philosophers think. Talk about professional narcissism!

He's another rule for pedants: never let historical facts get in the way of your yearning for a golden age.

4 ^ | v · Reply · Share >



**Larry\_Sanger** → DarthChewie · a day ago

Obviously, a work explicitly devoted to method will have metadiscourse; indeed, that's its subject! So perhaps Pinker was referring to Descartes' Meditations, which I'm fairly sure you'll find has less metadiscourse. I haven't checked just now; but I do seem to recall Descartes simply diving right into things, as contemporary philosophers don't.

1 ^ | v · Reply · Share >



**BDewnorkin** · a day ago

Pinker makes some great points in this article, both practical pointers and sociological/psychological explanation. But there are also a few stinkers.

I absolutely agree that scholars should make themselves comprehensible to lay audiences whenever possible, but they cannot do so at the expense of fellow scholars and scholars in training.

"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." Signposting has become taboo among journalists and writers who often write to a lay audience. But especially in fields that don't feature a standard format, they save a researcher looking for a particular set of arguments substantial reading time. Indexes and tables of content are not always suitable replacements.

"No offense, but few people are interested in how professors spend their time." True, but some are: current scholars, scholars-in-training, lay audiences interested in the development of a field. The quote Pinker selected to illustrate

[see more](#)

4 ^ | v · Reply · Share >



**Brian Slesinsky** → **BDewnorkin** · 14 hours ago

It seems like a table of contents should be adequate if it's well designed. Why do you think it isn't?

^ | v · Reply · Share >



**BDewnorkin**

Consider the structure of a contemporary ethics text (Derek Parfit's books are good examples): distinct sections corresponding with arguments that relate to one another. Each argument must be presented as full sentences. Of course, one can construct a table of contents with a section heading and the relevant argument under that heading, but presenting the arguments together – say, in the introductory chapter – serves the same purpose while also usefully drawing the full argumentative arc of the book. Unfortunately, some have deemed this unacceptable signposting.

^ | v · Reply · Share >



**Brian Slesinsky** → **BDewnorkin** · 2 hours ago

They may serve the same purpose, but I wouldn't say they're equally effective ways to present information. A good table of contents (perhaps with summaries) is easier to skim and therefore seems less tedious than similar content rendered as prose paragraphs, sort of like the difference between the Book of Numbers and the same content rendered using appropriate tables. Information that's structurally an outline is ideally presented visually as an outline.

^ | v · Reply · Share >



**BDewnorkin**

The example I provided is precisely of information that I don't believe should be tabulated and skimmed. Of course, one can present it as an abstract or a summary, but I would argue that this is just reformatted signposting, which gets us back to Pinker's gripe. In any case, let's not argue at the margins.

^ | v · Reply · Share >



**LuckyProf** · a day ago

In my experience, the third explanation, which Pinker dismisses, is the correct one. Every jargon-heavy article I've written has been relatively easy to publish. Everything I've ever written employing a more straightforward, jargon-free style has been quite difficult to publish. Editors and peer reviewers see the absence of jargon as an invitation to gate-keep.

Furthermore, the jargon-heavy articles I've gotten published were from earlier in my academic career and were of lower quality in terms of strength of the research and argument. This did not matter. The heavy-handed use of jargon (which I wasn't doing on purpose; I was simply younger and testing out my own voice) got them through the gate.

12 ^ | v · Reply · Share >



**John Evans** · a day ago

Steven Pinker states a sad truth that I have known for years. My old friend the art historian was a wonderful explainer when he spoke (especially informally) but a lousy writer when he published. I have often picked up his magnum opus in libraries and bookshops (even unto the remainders pile) without ever feeling able to bring myself to borrow or buy it. The prose style is just too painful to endure.

2 ^ | v · Reply · Share >



**Sheik Muhfuggah** · a day ago

As I get older, I find I concentrate on finding and imposing structure on my writing, which greatly increases its clarity; whereas, when I was younger (i.e., an undergrad) I was hypersensitive towards what I can only describe as a more instinctual approach toward expression. I now feel, however, that the impact/effect on the final reader, however imperfect, is more important (which is to say, more interesting) than being committed to a personal (often hermetic) truth.

^ | v · Reply · Share >



**voralex** · a day ago

This brings to mind an article published in the Chronicle in 2011: "The Problem is: You Write Too Well".

<http://chronicle.com/article/T...>

In which the academic world can be seen resorting to euphemisms to point out the thinly veiled truth that an academic author cannot be taken seriously if he does not write in obfuscating prose, and conversely that the most stupid idea can pass for reasonable if delivered in complex enough a way (cf. the Sokal hoax).

What's galling is that this is happening at a time when anti-intellectualism is rampant, and some ugly ideologies are making their return unchallenged, because some people's idea of an audience are the thirty people in their field whose support is necessary to advance their career, while those thirty people's only desire is to safeguard their own.

4 ^ | v · Reply · Share >



**Alan Trevithick** · 21 hours ago

You are avoiding "awkwardness" by using "himself"? Really? This from a linguist who obviously knows about genderless languages like, say, the obscure family of Turkic languages whose speakers only number, I agree in the gazillions?

Now, also, in re this: "Are you having fun? I didn't think so."

Speak, or write, for yourself, but I'm having fun, yeah, so piss off. I like to read, just the way I like to listen to, different and special ways of using and, and minting, and playing, with words and wordish structures.

Btw, I didn't read your whole post here-and I'm somebody who has in the past



assigned my college students to read your books—because I could tell, smell, the message, which is, you're better than other people. Nice.

4 ^ | v · Reply · Share >



**Berel Dov Lerner** · 14 hours ago

Another factor: academic writers need to use technical terms in order to help potential readers find their work via computerized searches. Presumably, more researchers are interested in finding references to "post-stimulus events" than are interested in finding references to "finger-tapping."

5 ^ | v · Reply · Share >



**Ivan Appleton** · 13 hours ago

Hedging and qualification allow the scientist to avoid making strong public commitments to theories. Read Robert Park's "Voodoo Science" for the dangers of making such strong public commitments, and how this kind of stance makes it hard for researchers to accept falsifying data and arguments. Is it a coincidence that these great writers like Pinker and Dawkins - who make bold statements and stand behind the -, are not exactly known for ideological flexibility, becoming repetitive one-trick-ponies and increasing in strident defence of their positions as the years go by.

^ | v · Reply · Share >



**peterplagens** · 9 hours ago

How about, in all kinds of nonfiction writing, the use of the conditional? "A new therapy involving celery salt could end chronic depression." Then again, the therapy might prove it couldn't. "Researchers may have the answer to curbing carbon emissions." Then again, they might not. "This comment could solve most writers' reluctance to commit." Then again, it might not.

^ | v · Reply · Share >



**redweather** · 9 hours ago

"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."

The "communication scenario"? Whatever you say.

2 ^ | v · Reply · Share >



**Eric Rasmusen** · 9 hours ago

Professor Pinker is a bit bleak in what he says about there not being incentives for good writing, at least for my field of economics. The problem is that scholars, especially when young, don't realize there are incentives. It's much like our problem of brilliant Chinese and Korean PhD students deciding it's more important to take yet another advanced math course instead of basic English grammar. They don't realize that (a) Learning to write well is also learning to think well, and (b) If you can't communicate, you can't get jobs and publications.

Point (b) only becomes obvious once the scholar has done a lot of refereeing for journals. Then, after he starts reading yet another badly written paper and says to himself, "I've got to try very hard to be fair to this author and read his piece all the way through and not reject him just out of my savage hatred of his poor writing," he will think, "Oh— I guess the referees who reject my papers must be frustrated too."

In economics, the best-written articles are those written by the best economists, at least once they've reached scholarly maturity.

1 ^ | v · Reply · Share >



**schwaychron** · 9 hours ago

"Rational - actor model"?

^ | v · Reply · Share >





**Crazy Cat Lady** · 6 hours ago

I think there is even a simpler explanation, everyone can write to a degree but to be an engaging writer, well that's a gift, like knowing how to draw or paint. That cannot be taught. I had professors who were very good teachers and speakers but their writing was dry and dull and unfortunately in the academic world you have to publish or perish. To steal Christopher Hitchen's quote on writers "Everybody does have a book in them, but in most cases that's where it should stay."

^ | v · Reply · Share >



**Nelson O. Ntiamoah** · 5 hours ago

It's interesting Pinker seems to be detailing obvious features of academics that make them distinct from other social groups. Academics speak to different audiences and I cannot fathom Pinker suggesting that academics cannot look simple in their everyday conversations with friends, family members or any other audiences that fall outside academic. That will be unfair and a stereotype