

Academic Difficulties: The Enemies of Clarity

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It is generally assumed that academic writing is bad writing. This reputation is not merely a product of anti-intellectual prejudice — the feeling that any writing that is difficult or abstract is inherently worthless — but it is an opinion equally accepted, with chagrin or resignation, by the very practitioners of the type of writing we are discussing. Most academics regard poor prose as an inevitability, despite having the contrary evidence readily available in the library, if not on their own shelves. One need only gain a passing familiarity with the work of Terry Eagleton, Martha Nussbaum, or Edward Thompson to realize that intellectual depth and graceful prose are not incompatible, and that in fact the clarity of its expression can sharpen an idea and aid in the evaluation of an argument.

That academic writing is often, or even usually, dull, opaque, and inexcusably ugly, it is impossible to deny. The reasons for this are many and can only be disentangled, and thus addressed, with some difficulty. Apart from the ordinary laziness and incompetence of any individual writer, there are also a host of conventions, some formal and others informal, which together make good writing — the kind that communicates clearly and is a pleasure to read — even more difficult than it is already. Among the formal impediments I would count the rote chapter summaries appearing in so many introductions, first chapters entirely devoted to proving that one has done the required reading, and citation regimes that clutter up each paragraph with parenthetical lists of surnames and dates. Each of these, being part of the apparatus of a work, may have its place and purpose, and depending on the project and the discipline may even be mandatory. So my point is not that these must be given up entirely. But it must be admitted that such nominally utilitarian elements often stand out as blemishes on an otherwise pleasing work; and worse, frequently fail to add to its utility. The effect is like that of an elegant theatre marred by the architect's failure to account for heat ducts and plumbing; these necessary features get added in as afterthoughts, spoiling whatever aesthetic effect was initially intended. The solution, somewhat paradoxically, is to so far as possible make a virtue of necessity, treating these elements with the same care and attention as the rest of the composition and where (as with citations) beauty might be beyond reach, at least seeking to render them as unobstructive as possible. That approach would suggest the adoption of a principle of minimalism, carefully selecting a few representative sources rather than ostentatiously hoarding them all.

More avoidable, and thus more pernicious, are those *informal* conventions which we might, consciously or not, even consider part of what marks a piece of writing as *academic*. Some of these, such as the hourglass structure, are offered as supports for new writers but quickly turn into straightjackets. Equally inhibiting is the convention of tediously declaring what one intends to say, then saying it, and then summarizing what has just been said. As always this can be done well, adding clarity and guiding the reader, or badly, adding only to the word count and boring everyone. In the very worst cases, a writer might become so preoccupied with the "I will argue," "I argue,"

"I have argued" recitations that they forget to provide an actual argument to justify the declarations about what they intend their paper to be doing.

The greatest sin, the least forgivable though also the most tempting, is to fall into the fallacy of believing that an opaque style indicates depth or rigor. On its own, it does not, and should generally raise our suspicions. Baroque prose can serve to cover any number of structural flaws and sophists may adopt an overwrought style for this very purpose, because they know their arguments are weak or, more likely, absent. But much more common, and in its own way worse, is the honest thinker who feels compelled to employ a pretentious and obscurantist style because that is what they think is expected. Worst of all, they may be right. Readers, including editors, might disdain an argument that is too plainly put; I suspect it offends their sense of status to think that an important idea might be conveyed in such a manner as to be understood by the cafeteria staff.

None of this, I should repeat, is an argument against difficult writing. The serious questions of the humanities and the social sciences often *are* difficult. Sometimes they are hard to correctly formulate before we can even begin to answer them. And every field accumulates a certain amount of necessary technical language. The problem comes when a piece of writing is made more difficult than it needs to be — more difficult, that is, for the reader; often it will be just as easy for the writer, if not more so, since they have surrendered the burden of making themselves understood. Jargon has a way of reaching beyond any technical use to take on a political function as well, serving as a kind of secret handshake to distinguish the initiates from the outcasts.

Nothing I have said should surprise anyone who has worked in a formal academic setting, whether or not they would have formulated the matter in quite this way, or indeed whether or not this situation had previously seemed to them like a problem. The crucial question is not what is wrong with academic writing —plenty!—but whether anything can be done about it. In his famous 1946 essay "Politics and the English Language," George Orwell offers six rules for better writing:

- "(i) Never use a metaphor, simile, or other figure of speech which you are used to seeing in print.
- (ii) Never use a long word where a short one will do.
- (iii) If it is possible to cut a word out, always cut it out.
- (iv) Never use the passive where you can use the active.
- (v) Never use a foreign phrase, a scientific word, or a jargon word if you can think of an everyday English equivalent.
- (vi) Break any of these rules sooner than say anything outright barbarous."

These should of course be kept in mind and followed as far as possible. I have found that a new writer's work can often be improved *just by reading Orwell's essay*. However, as we have discussed, the very nature of academic writing, the conventions that set it apart as a genre, will sometimes frustrate the attempt to apply these rules in practice.

There is one final problem, which I believe underlies all the others: Academic writing always suffers from divided aims. Part of the motive behind an academic work is, surely, what we might call intellectual: a sense of curiosity, a desire to explore ideas, the excitement of discovery, and the urge to engage with others in pursuit of knowledge. But often more important are motives that

might best be characterized as bureaucratic: the completion of an assignment, the receipt of a passing grade, obtaining a degree, building a resumé, applying for grants, receiving tenure, and so on and so on until the institutional demands swallow and impede the intellectual drive in much the same way that academic language can stifle meaning and suffocate thought. It is, from the perspective of the individual and the institution, more important that a dissertation be completed than that it be good; but that is precisely the reverse of the attitude we as readers might expect of any writer worth our bother.

The crucial thing, when one sits down to write, is to put out of mind all extrinsic considerations in order to focus on the piece itself, and what the piece demands. There really is no secret to writing well apart from caring about the writing. It helps of course if one has something to say and feels strongly about it, and so wants very badly to make oneself understood. After that, it is just a matter to working at it, and working at it, and working at it — until one gets it right.

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Kristian Williams is the author of *Between the Bullet and the Lie: Essays on Orwell*, *Resist Everything Except Temptation: The Anarchist Philosophy of Oscar Wilde*, and *The Illuminist: Philosophical Explorations in the Work of Alan Moore*, along with numerous books on the history of policing.

Bibliography

Orwell, George (1946). 'Politics and the English Language', available here:

<https://www.orwellfoundation.com/the-orwell-foundation/orwell/essays-and-other-works/politics-and-the-english-language/>