

**Pinker, Steven. *The Sense of Style: The Thinking Person's Guide to Writing in the 21st Century*. New York: Viking Penguin, 2014: 978-0-698-17030-8**

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Read the following passage.

*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, and marked a shift from a form of Althusserian theory that takes structural totalities as theoretical objects to one in which the insights into the contingent possibility of structure inaugurate a renewed conception of hegemony as bound up with the contingent sites and strategies of the rearticulation of power.*

Bewildered? Intimidated? Exhausted? Is it challenging? Dense with meaning? Or is it stuffy and boring? If you read academic literature, you're bound to encounter writing like this. In fact, academia is a sacred sanctuary for writing like this. It's the kind that takes even an educated reader ten minutes or more to simply decode, let alone evaluate its claims.

We could defend this style by calling it a necessary evil. Experts need to communicate with other experts economically. Explaining every concept would be wasteful, taking up too much of the reader's time and space on the page. So, we package complex events, actions, and ideas into efficient jargon. It makes scholarship move faster and more smoothly. On the other hand, sometimes the aim is the exact opposite of efficiency. The author of the above passage, renowned gender studies scholar, Judith Butler, intends this writing to be a socio-political act. The style is meant to be radical, because radical ideas require a radical style. Plain and simple prose can be easily co-opted by hegemonic power structures, she claims. Thus, her writing is deliberately challenging.

But these excuses don't wash. Not according to psycholinguist Steven Pinker, whose new book, *The Sense of Style: The Thinking Person's Guide to Writing in the 21st Century*, takes a cognitive approach to uncovering why this type of writing fatigues us rather than inspires us. And, more importantly, he offers an antidote.

Sure, the above passage challenges us, as Butler would have it, but it challenges us in a bad way. It bullies us by taxing our cognitive abilities without giving us time to think over its ideas. It's not a sentence. It's a runaway freight train of

metaconcepts rushing past us before we can jump on and tag along for the ride. We can marvel at the spectacle. But we don't understand. And we certainly don't evaluate. If we did, it wouldn't be pretty. Analytic philosopher Martha Nussbaum translates Butler's sentence into readable English: "Marxist accounts, focusing on capital as the central force structuring social relations, depicted the operations of that force as everywhere uniform. By contrast, Althusserian accounts, focusing on power, see the operations of that force as variegated and as shifting over time." And suddenly it's simple as a newspaper editorial: one person had this theory about society and another person came along and introduced this other idea into the theory. Butler's writing is certainly not efficient.

But what about the need for inefficient, radical writing? Whether simple prose can truly be pilfered by the power structure, as Butler claims, is open to discussion, but it's enough to say that the verbal freight train above shares more than a little in common with the self-serving gobbledygook of politicians and bureaucrats. Compare Butler's passage with this satire from a political cartoon in the *Washington Post*: "Incomplete implementation of strategized programmatic designations to maximize acquisition of awareness and utilization of communication skills pursuant to standardized review and assessment of languaginal development."

According to Pinker, the main culprits are bad habits that arise from self-conscious, relativistic, and postmodern styles. But these habits are also products of the pitfall in communication we all suffer from more or less, one that is especially common in scholarship. It's a tendency called the *curse of knowledge*, a phenomenon where once we know something, we find it difficult to put ourselves in someone else's shoes and imagine what it's like to not know it. Both stylistic tendencies are self-serving. Self-conscious and ironic postmodern writing is designed to protect the author. "The writer's chief, if unstated, concern is to escape being convicted of philosophical naivete about his own enterprise," as Francis-Noel Thomas and Mark Turner put it. Similarly, the various manifestations of the curse of knowledge are a sign the writer lacks empathy for her audience, that she isn't taking the time to imagine what they know and don't know about their field, topic, or even their own narrowly focused research.

These habits are manifested in a handful of specific tendencies that make writing soggy, including the aforementioned metaconcepts, as well as signposting, hedging, apologizing, and use of "zombie nouns." Some, such as metaconcepts, hedging, and apologizing, come from postmodernism, others, such as the use of zombie nouns, are the result of the curse of knowledge. Pinker gives special attention to metaconcepts (concepts about concepts) and their cousins zombie nouns—both of which are found in

Butler's verbal freight train. Metaconcepts inflate language as in the phrase "prejudice reduction model" which really means "reducing prejudice." Likewise, zombie nouns, a term coined by Helen Sword, are nominalizations that take a verb and turn it into a lifeless noun by adding -ance, -ment, -ation, etc. Pinker gives several examples, including this gem: "Comprehension checks were used as exclusion criteria" which he translates as "We excluded people who failed to understand the instructions." Writers deploy zombie nouns partly because they are unable to put themselves in the shoes of their readers. They've been stuck in their own laboratory world for too long: "Sorry Professor, I haven't finished the comprehension checks on group C and D yet. I'll get on it right away."

To be fair, Pinker does a bit of hedging himself and admits that none of the above need be hereby forbidden in all writing. Hedging or rather qualifying a statement is sometimes a necessity. When a scholar lays out his thesis, he must go on record with a precise statement so that a reviewer can properly evaluate it. And some nominalization is necessary to avoid repetition. Nevertheless, these tools need to be deployed judiciously, and Pinker explains what narrow conditions warrant their use.

But Pinker's book is more than just a diatribe against and cognitive explanation of clumsy writing. It offers a solution to these habits, one that can help writers produce lively, easy-to-follow prose. The solution Pinker proposes is called *classic style*, an approach taken from the aforementioned Thomas and Turner's book, *Clear and Simple as the Truth: Writing Classic Prose* (first published in 1994). The foundation for classic style is the idea that the writer has observed something in the world and is pointing it out so the reader can see it for himself. Classic style is confident, concise, and coherent. It uses strong verbs and nouns. It's visual. And it refers to a world the reader and writer share.

This may strike some as philosophically naïve. Fine. The idea is that the writer and reader both acknowledge the limitations of our ability to view the world objectively, without bias, but they tacitly agree to set such concerns temporarily aside, so that they can effectively communicate on the topic at hand. Sort of like the way we set aside the fact of our own inevitable mortality to discuss whether Abenomics works or where to get the brakes on our bike fixed for cheap. The point is to get to the truth of the matter with the assumption that truth exists external to our consciousness and that we can access it well enough.

Indeed, Pinker's book is a pleasure to read precisely because it's written in the classic style it espouses. The prose is vibrant and easy-to-follow. He compares good writing to movie direction: "A writer, like a cinematographer, manipulates the viewer's

perspective on an ongoing story, with the verbal equivalent of camera angles and quick cuts.” The image is vivid and anyone who has watched a well-made movie and read well-written prose attentively can see his point. He also intersperses his arguments with relevant humor. In explaining the curse of knowledge, he uses as an example the confounding instructions for his alarm clock: “When I’m lucky enough to find the manual, it enlightens me with explanations like ‘In the state of {alarm and chime setting}. Press the [SET] key and the {alarm ‘hour’ setting}→{alarm ‘minute’ setting}...’ I’m sure it was perfectly clear to the engineers who designed it.”

But Pinker acknowledges that classic style is an ideal that does not necessarily apply to all writing. One caveat this reviewer would offer is that not all of its principles apply to scholars writing research. One aspect that may not square with research writing is the preferred tone, which is conversational. While trying to engage the reader to be an active reader seems appropriate enough, the conversational tone Pinker talks about implies the reader is “cooperative” and can be counted on to “read between the lines.” This may be asking too much of researchers trying to construct a cogent argument about complex or narrowly defined issues. It also seems to contradict warnings about the curse of knowledge.

On the other hand, the warning against zombie nouns is more than warranted for academic writers. Pick up any academic journal in any field and start reading one of the articles. You’re bound to encounter a veritable zombie apocalypse. And student writers looking to start publishing tend to mimic this unfortunate habit. Not only does it make the writing colorless and dry, it also makes the prose unwieldy. Nominalizations can be difficult to handle and student writers, especially those writing in English as a foreign language, are often better off unpacking these words and laying out the concepts in more concrete language.

Pinker never claims classic style is some kind of panacea. But, whatever you think of the details of his prescribed style of writing the basic principles are unassailable: write about your topic not about yourself, and write from the perspective of your audience. And as Pinker states, “knowing the hallmarks of classic style will make anyone a better writer, and it’s the strongest cure I know for the disease that enfeebles academic, bureaucratic, corporate, legal, and official prose.” For this reason alone, Pinker’s book would be a wise addition to the libraries of academics, including graduate students, looking to publish writing that rewards.

Speaking of rewarding writing, before launching his critique of flabby writing, Pinker shrewdly begins his tome with carefully selected examples of good writing done in classic style. His samples come in a variety of genres and tones. He goes to the

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trouble of explaining exactly why they spring off the page. But the writing speaks for itself. I'd like to close this review with my favorite examples taken from, of all places, an obituary column.

*Maurice Sendak, widely considered the most important children's book artist of the 20th century, who wrenched the picture book out of the safe, sanitized world of the nursery and plunged it into the dark, terrifying, and hauntingly beautiful recesses of the human psyche, died on Tuesday...*

*Roundly praised, intermittently censored, an occasionally eaten, Mr. Sendak's books were essential ingredients of childhood for the generation born after 1960 or thereabouts, and in turn for their children.*

Clear and vivid language is its own reward. And there is no reason to forego this reward when writing for the sake of scholarship. That is the benefit of classic style.