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Bad Writing and Bad Thinking

By Rachel Toor

Recently I was asked by a colleague to talk to his graduate class in physical education. He invited me because he had read some of my work—on being an athlete, on gender and body issues—but mostly, I suspect, because I was around and available.

They were a lively group of students, and we chatted for an hour, discussing topics we were all interested in. They asked smart questions.

When we were wrapping up, I asked them a question: "What is your relationship to reading and writing?" At that moment, they morphed from T-shirt-clad physical specimens and became generic graduate students, indistinguishable from all-in-black, cigarette-smoking studers of literary theory and bearded-and-geeky future scientists. It's all we do, they wailed, and it's hard.

What's hard?

The journal articles he makes us read (they said, directing accusing fingers at my colleague) are dense and boring. We're getting good information, but it can be painful. And, they said, we have to learn to write like that.

No, I said, you don't.

I've heard that song from graduate students in every discipline, and from faculty members, junior and senior, at universities across the country. The message: You have to write the same way as others in your field. You must use multisyllabic words, complex phrasing, and sentences that go on for days, because that's how you show you're smart. If you're too clear, if your sentences are too simple, your peers won't take you seriously.

Many people—publishers of scholarly work, editors at higher-education publications, agents looking for academic authors capable of writing trade books—who think about the general quality of scholarly prose would admit that we're in a sorry state, and most would say there isn't much to do about it.

But George Orwell did something about it. In 1946 he wrote
"Politics and the English Language," an essay that explains the connections between bad writing and bad thinking as well as the political consequences: "Modern [insert the word "academic" here] English, especially written English, is full of bad habits which spread by imitation and which can be avoided if one is willing to take the necessary trouble. If one gets rid of these habits one can think more clearly, and to think clearly is a necessary first step toward political regeneration: so that the fight against bad English is not frivolous and is not the exclusive concern of professional [or scholarly] writers."

By writing prose that is nearly unintelligible not just to the general public, but also to graduate students and fellow academics in your discipline, you are not doing the work of advancing knowledge. And, honestly, you don't really sound smart. I understand that there are ideas that are so difficult that their expression must be complex and dense. But I can tell you, after years of rejecting manuscripts submitted to university presses, most people's ideas aren't that brilliant.

Call me simple-minded, call me anti-intellectual, but I believe that most poor scholarly writing is a result of bad habits, of learning tricks of the academic trade as a way to try to fit in. And it's a result of lazy thinking. Most of us know that we may not be writing as well as we could, or should. Many academics have told me that they suspect they are bad writers but don't know how to get better. They are often desperate for help. I tell them to reread Strunk and White, and to take a look at "Politics and the English Language." Yeah, yeah, they say, and get buried working toward the next submission deadline, prepping for the next class.

But this is not to be taken lightly.

I'm going to provide a gloss on Orwell's essay, in the hope that it will encourage a few wannabe-better writers to read it themselves. (You can find the original in seven seconds of Googling.)

At the start, Orwell gives us five samples of prose to remind us just how bad bad writing can be. You could come up with 15 examples yourself by thumbing through the books and journals within an arm's reach of your desk chair.

Orwell warns against "dying metaphors" that do not do their job, which is, of course, to make us see something in a different way. "Ride roughshod over" and "grist for the mill"? If you use those phrases, do you really want us to picture the nails in horseshoes or industrious millers making use of everything brought to them? Do you visualize yourself toeing the line at the start of a race, or do you
picturing yourself towing some kind of rope?

During a recent long drive, I listened to an audiobook created by a company that provides college courses to the education-seeking masses. As interested as I was in learning about Beethoven's life and work, I could barely sit through the professor's language. It was, simply, long strings of clichés—shortcuts to making people understand without making them think.

Instead of using strong nouns and verbs, many of us resort to what Orwell calls "operators or verbal false limbs." He means the "elimination of simple verbs" in favor of phrases like "render inoperative, militate against, make contact with, be subjected to, give rise to, give grounds for, have the effect of, play a leading part (role) in, make itself felt, take effect, exhibit a tendency to, serve the purpose of, etc., etc."

In bad writing, Orwell continues, "The passive voice is wherever possible used in preference to the active, and noun constructions are used instead of gerunds ('by examination' of instead of 'by examining')."

Most writers know they should avoid the use of the passive voice. Few do. Sometimes it's more expedient to say that the bomb was dropped, or that the war ended, rather doing the work of assigning blame or awarding credit. I know the arguments for the use of the passive voice in science and agree that at times it's appropriate. Often, however, I think it's a result of conventions that are wrong and outdated.

Orwell's proscriptions of pretentious diction are as hopeless as Oprah's quest for skinniness. His preference for sturdy Anglo-Saxon words over Greek and Latinate constructions is, I'm afraid, doomed in academe.

But his section on meaningless words might make some blush. "When one critic writes, 'The outstanding feature of Mr. X's work is its living quality.' while another writes, 'The immediately striking thing about Mr. X's work is its peculiar deadness,' the reader accepts this as a simple difference of opinion. If words like 'black' and 'white' were involved, instead of the jargon words 'dead' and 'living,' he would see at once that language was being used in an improper way." Each discipline uses constructions and coded language that can, to an outsider, look like nonsense.

After translating a gorgeous verse of Ecclesiastes into an academic-sounding parody, Orwell gives what is, in my view, an assessment of modern academic prose: "It consists in gumming together long strips of words which have already been set in order by someone
else, and making the results presentable by sheer humbug."

He goes on to show the dangerous political and social consequences of bad writing, but I’ll stick to the part that I want my readers to remember: "A scrupulous writer, in every sentence that he writes, will ask himself at least four questions, thus: What am I trying to say? What words will express it? What image or idiom will make it clearer? Is this image fresh enough to have an effect? And he will probably ask himself two more: Could I put it more shortly? Have I said anything that is avoidably ugly?"

Orwell leaves us with a list of simple rules:

Never use a metaphor, simile, or other figure of speech which you are used to seeing in print.

Never use a long word where a short one will do. If it is possible to cut a word out, always cut it out.

Never use the passive where you can use the active. Never use a foreign phrase, a scientific word, or a jargon word if you can think of an everyday English equivalent.

Break any of these rules sooner than say anything outright barbarous.

I had my students read "Politics and the English Language" and then asked them to "Orwell themselves"—to look over their papers to see how frequently they broke his rules. OMG! was the common response.

It seems fitting to end with Orwell:

"One cannot change this all in a moment, but one can at least change one’s own habits, and from time to time one can even, if one jeers loudly enough, send some worn-out and useless phrase—some ‘jackboot,’ ‘Achilles’ heel,’ ‘hotbed,’ ‘melting pot,’ ‘acid test,’ ‘veritable inferno,’ or other lump of verbal refuse—into the dustbin, where it belongs."

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