Bad Writing and Bad Thinking

By Rachel Toor, Chronicle of Higher Education, April 15, 2010

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 studiers 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 picture 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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To read this article online, visit http://chronicle.com/article/Bad-WritingBad-Thinking/65031/.

Comments

1. pokerphd - April 15, 2010 at 10:54 pm

As an Orwell scholar and writing instructor (a form of 21st century self-torture), I applaud your effort, empathize, agree, etc. etc. etc. Such, such are the joys...

2. khadimir - April 16, 2010 at 12:08 am

As a humanities scholar and managing/copy editor of an academic journal, I also applaud.

I have discovered, however, that writing simply and directly can confuse scholars used to grammatically complex prose--especially that of high semantic complexity.

Finally, I am not in agreement concerning the list of terms used in the article. I do not find them offensive in the slightest as long as they are used in a technically astute manner to an academic audience. However, I have a highly educated and academic audience in mind, for otherwise I would agree.

3. nordicexpat - April 16, 2010 at 01:21 am

Oh my, Strunk and White as well as Orwell. For an alternative view of the value of Orwell's "rules," see http://languagelog.ldc.upenn.edu/nll/?p=992,
and http://languagelog.ldc.upenn.edu/nll/?p=551

4. bajan - April 16, 2010 at 01:42 am

The first time I read critical theory my question was, "Why couldn't this have been written clearly and simply?" I still have the same question, although I have long suspected that if the authors had done so they would not have been able to fill books and sounded important.

5. fiona - April 16, 2010 at 02:03 am

William Zinsser's _On Writing Well_ gives specific ways to use Orwell's principles in your writing. See esp. his chapters on "Simplicity" and "Clutter."

6. darr3455 - April 16, 2010 at 05:56 am

I think we should blame Heidegger! Yes, Heidegger. He got famous by stealing ideas and inventing a langauge to (a) sound importnat, (b) hide the fact that he stole many of his ideas, and (c) hide the fact that the ideas that he didn't steal, don't really mean anything. Then he got really famous and scholars from (almost) every discipline in academia decided Heidegger was cool and that its cool to write in a way that only 'special' people understand you... What they leave out is the fact that what makes you special is that you're willing to keep the secret: its all a bunch of bull....

7. profesoraamericana - April 16, 2010 at 06:34 am

I am a developmental editor who works with academics. It seems to me that there are a number of common problems, the love of jargon and the desire to 'sound academic' are only two of them. One is that articles are often made up of bits and pieces of other articles, trying to fit a larger idea into the smaller title proposed by a journal or agreed upon by the editors of a book. Everyone's intentions are good, but the retrofitting is damaging to the work and to the idea. Once the idea gets damaged, it is hard to make the writing good.

Working under extreme pressure is another writing wrecker. Thinking while panicking is tough; going for tenure while sitting on committees, teaching, giving lectures, having to say yes to at least some of the requests that come your way, finishing your book, and then doing at least the bare minimum for your family, wow, it seems so obvious why the writing isn't better. Good writing requires good thinking. Good thinking requires some semblance of calm, or at least the time to think and think again, to make it better. It seems to me that often there isn't enough time to make it better.

And then darr3455 makes a point, there are terms and ways of speaking that are intelligeble to 'the chosen', and though they appear incorrect or convoluted to the rest of us, they are like the secret handshake within their

world. I find this with EU English, within the EU there are terms and vocabulary that are used that would never pass in the states, but are accepted as correct here.

Last but not least, who do the academics have to help them? I know that the people I work with were often writing and then trying to edit their own work, by themselves, always against tight deadlines until we started working together. There does not seem to be much of a spirit of constructive criticism in the academic workplace. I see the track changes comments on the work from advising committees and they are brutal. Hard to be a great writer in a climate of fear and pressure.

8. cleverclogs - April 16, 2010 at 08:09 am

Of course the author has a point, and Orwell had a point. In fact, many of the objections listed have been showing up in writing instruction since Erasmus and Castiglione (the 1520's) and maybe before. Odd how they never catch on.

On the other hand, Orwell's system of writing and thinking simply expresses his preferences and prejudices, ones which he assumes all right-thinking persons share. I think our students prove (mine almost daily) that what Orwell and many of us might consider "good writing" and "good thinking" is as impenetrable to them as scholarly writing seems to be to the grad students in the article. I'm fine with simplifying academic writing, but let's not pretend that we're substituting a universally clearer system. We're substituting our preferences and prejudices, which still require strong enculturation.

Sidenote: I'm also wary of what happens when people/students apply this attitude to, say, Shakespeare or Emerson - "If he really wanted me to understand him, he would have written it more simply. I'm not gonna waste my time with someone who doesn't want to communicate!"

9. sherbygirl - April 16, 2010 at 08:22 am

My first-year writers, cleverclogs, say the same thing about Orwell! They find that he didn't write simply, at least for them. It's the perfect time to talk about audience, time-period, country, etc and how it influences the writing and writing style. We also talk about how Orwell breaks many of his rules (at least in the students' eyes, but it helps them understand and recognize the advice Orwell gives).

I would point to as well, dar3455, to an article from a few weeks ago (http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/story.asp?storyCode=405956). It lists the most frequently sited authors in the Humanities: Foucault, Derrida, etc. Heidegger's there too, just ahead of Chomsky. Those whom we quote the most, we also try to emulate as scholars. We've all been seduced by postmodernism and have tried to sound like our patron saints (yes, I used that on purpose).

Another issues (and we all love doing this!) is that Foucault and Derrida are from the French tradition, which has always been wordier than English. The translations of these academics has been challenging and has done little to help English academic writing. So when all else fails, blame the French!

10. obododimma - April 16, 2010 at 08:45 am

I do not subscribe entirely to the argument that "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." Is it possible that a piece of writing that tasks the reader compels the reader to think and to think deeply. We seem to live in an age where things are supposed to be made simpler for people to become lazier! Just as we can have a machine cook for us by just pressing a button, we wish to have a text yield all its meanings when we take just a casual glance at it. Obscure writing has its audience, too, for not everyone would want to eat meat that contains no bones.
A bit of James Joyce, served with some hot Derrida, is always worth consuming for a vibrant imagination!

11. reader2010 - April 16, 2010 at 08:59 am

I agree with the author's critique of bad writing.

I have to say, though, the unnecessary (and unfair) jab at Oprah was off-putting and I discontinued reading the article.

12. rightwingprofessor - April 16, 2010 at 09:17 am

I call BS on reader2010, you surely continued reading to see if there were any more slights against Oprah. Then you posted the lie above.

13. ginnis - April 16, 2010 at 09:24 am

Thank you. I just finished a manuscript (complex and relatively dense - because the journals have max length requirements), and I tried to write in a clear straightforward manner, which is not valued by many in my field. I did it anyway. Like you, I think writers hide behind complicated words and phrases that say nothing. Just say it! That's the hard part - putting an interesting thought into words and developing that thought conceptually in a way that has never been done. But do it. So many just don't. In grad school, my advisor wrote a paragraph on a manuscript we were co-authoring and it was jargon salad - just gibberish. I asked her what it meant - and she admitted that it didn't say anything but that reviewers and readers would like it. I resolved NEVER to be that kind of scholar. And, if I remember correctly, I got most of that paragraph out of the paper. Some people are all about the facade ..

14. sisgett - April 16, 2010 at 09:25 am

At least the metaphor, "Oprah's quest for skinniness," is current and clear to any contemporary American reader.

15. sedge713 - April 16, 2010 at 09:27 am

Certainly a better metaphor could have been chosen.
On a more practical note, I still find it disturbing that I get term papers in my senior seminar whose I authors I need to refer our campus Writing Center. A common problem is paragraphs a page and half long! However, I do get numerous well written and research papers also.

16. jffoster - April 16, 2010 at 09:40 am

No 3. nordicexpat gives us links to " an alternative view of the value of Orwell's "rules," . Thank you for this, Mr. Nordicexpat. They are indeed alternatives, written by real linguists David Beaver and Geoff Pullum.

These are indeed "alternative views",in the same way that Chemistry's views are alternatives to Alchemy's, that Astronomy's views are alternatives to Astrology's, and that informed analyses are an alternative view to uninformed unanalyzed prouncements.

17. dnewton137 - April 16, 2010 at 09:53 am

I applaud Rachel Toor's commentary. Let me note that this problem is not confined to academic use of the English language. A member of my family is a philosophy professor. He once showed me one of his mid-term exams. It consisted of one long paragraph quoted from the work of an eminent scholar, with a request that the student critically analyze the thought expressed by the author. I noticed that the entire paragraph was one single sentence, with phrases tied to clauses within yet more phrases. Identifying its subject(s), verb(s), and its object(s) was a nontrivial task. It looked to me as if the sentence had been translated word-for-word from some other language using a rather simplistic dictionary, perhaps a traveler's pocket reference. Then I noted the name of the author. Kant! But of course!

18. pfletch - April 16, 2010 at 10:05 am

I can only agree with the viewpoint here. I prefer, however, Chesterton's assessment from 1908:
Most of the machinery of modern language is labour-saving machinery; and it saves mental labour very much more than it ought. Scientific phrases are used like scientific wheels and piston-rods to make swifter and smoother yet the path of the comfortable. Long words go rattling by us like long railway trains. We know they are carrying thousands who are too tired or too indolent to walk and think for themselves. It is a good exercise to try for once in a way to express any opinion one holds in words of one syllable. If you say "The social utility of the

indeterminate sentence is recognised by all criminologists as a part of our sociological evolution towards a more humane and scientific view of punishment," you can go on talking like that for hours with hardly a movement of the grey matter inside your skull. But if you begin "I wish Jones to go to gaol and Brown to say when Jones shall come out," you will discover, with a thrill of horror, that you are obliged to think. The long words are not the hard words, it is the short words that are hard. There is much more metaphysical subtlety in the word "damn" than in the word
"degeneration."

19. uvuorem - April 16, 2010 at 10:31 am

I can relate to the graduate students mentioned at the beginning of the article. When I started graduate school I often felt overwhelmed by the amount of reading and the unfamiliarity of the discipline specific language. As I persisted the language/terminology became more familiar and in fact it became part of my own language and writing. The academic field I once felt new to as a graduate student is the same field I am now an academic in. I get the point about how we need to write so others can understand, but is not one of the purposes of graduate school to become familiar with the discipline so we can communicate proficiently. There is a maturational period that needs to take place so we can communicate with others about the same topics.

20. hanstedt - April 16, 2010 at 10:37 am

Interesting discussion. This makes me think of Nancy Welch's "Resisting the Faith," about two different graduate programs in composition and rhetoric, and how at least one of them uses language and discourse violently to make the point that the world is a violent place. It's a good read.

21. berkeleygirl - April 16, 2010 at 11:08 am

Fantastic article! Kudos to you! I will be passing this on to all of my "wordy" peers!

22. dizflores23 - April 16, 2010 at 11:40 am

Yes, let's blame Heidegger!

23. emwhite - April 16, 2010 at 11:59 am

There is a nice minority undercurrent in these comments, resisting the overly simple view of language in the article and in its applauders. Keep in mind the sentence often attributed to Einstein: Everything should be as simple as possible, but NO SIMPLER.

24. johntoradze - April 16, 2010 at 12:25 pm

Yes, well, when the academy stops teaching classes based around pompous, obfuscatory authors (many with little to say) who are held in the highest regard, then we shall see a change. Until then, not.

In some sciences the writing has become so awful (and for decades now) that even professors in the specialty can require an hour or more to puzzle through one page. For instance, read and completely understand: Zinkernagel and Dohertty, Restriction of in vitro cell-mediated cytotoxicity in lymphocytic choriomeningitis with a syngenic semiallogenic system, Nature Vol. 248 pp. 701-702(1974). This seminal paper's problems go way beyond technical language.

Then look at how things have evolved, with professors refusing to use each other's terms (and acronyms) for the same thing, much less write a straightforward declarative sentence. To help deal with this, I drafted a paragraph I (and others) would like to see in legislation.

18. Establish that federal science granting agency recipients shall make reasonable efforts to come to agreement on terminology used in papers, and that such recipients of federal moneys shall make efforts to make terminology humanly understandable as much as possible. Coining of new words, or use of reasonable phrases shall be preferred. The practice of papers in certain fields turning into alphabet soup shall be curtailed and acronyms chosen judiciously in collaboration with others in the field and related fields, and only used for the purpose of ease of reading and comprehension by an ordinary college graduate in the field. Sensible cooperation within and between fields on terminology and phraseology is encouraged, and some inexpensive

studies on what makes terminology understandable and memorable is encouraged. The extent of compliance with these provisions by grant applicants shall be taken into account by grant evaluators, but not retroactively, with special focus on grant applicants who are unable to agree on terms for the same thing, and on grant applicants whose papers make above average use of acronyms not generally accepted in the field. The intent is that papers become more easily readable and understandable, both to current readers and readers in the distant future. The intent is to promote easier utilization of research results, with consequent macro-economic benefit, and to ensure that understanding of the actual methods and analysis is not lost to posterity.

25. jcfish57 - April 16, 2010 at 12:36 pm

Wm. Zinsser's works on writing are superb. Kurt Vonnegut wrote fiction, but I howl whenever I think of his no. 1 "rule" (as if he followed any rules) when it comes to writing: "Don't use semi-colons. All they do is show that you went to college."

26. ulyssesmsu - April 16, 2010 at 12:37 pm

First, with all respect, any writer--such as Ms. Toor--who recommends Strunk and White doesn't know enough about writing to be giving writing advice to others. Second, Orwell violates his own rules even within that very essay; this has been pointed out and discussed numerous times, as a previous comment mentioned. Third, most of Orwell's "rules" are nonsensical: Never use a long word? Always cut out a word if you can? Never use the passive voice? This kind of "always/never" advice doesn't help anyone to become a better writer, partly because these "rules" are vague and incorrect.

Orwell was correct about one thing: A great deal of British writing in his time was awful, and continues to be. But the application of his "usage opinions" (not "rules") won't make better writers in 2010 any more than they did in 1946.

27. tarastar77 - April 16, 2010 at 12:47 pm

Thank you for this article. I'm just now wrapping up a first-year composition course, in which I used Orwell several times to get an important point across to my students: clarity is the most important thing in academic writing. If we are not communicating clearly, we are not communicating at all. Sometimes jargon is necessary - sometimes a highly specialized term says precisely what we need to say, particularly when discussing complex concepts with specific connotations and resonances. However, I'd be surprised if we couldn't all agree that jargon is overused, and academic writers hide behind it at times. Writing well in academia is about maintaining a balance, wherein we can use specialized terms without sacrificing clarity. "Profesoramericana" brings up some interesting points - good writing takes an awful lot of time, which is something most of us don't have.

A couple of comments mention Shakespeare and Joyce, which brings up a separate point. Literature and academic criticism don't have the same purpose, so they shouldn't use the same language. I don't think Orwell had Shakespeare in mind when he was urging simplicity.

28. anonscribe - April 16, 2010 at 12:56 pm

Strunk & White? Not helpful. Orwell's essay? Enjoyable but not a helpful model for academic writers. What academic writers need are models of clear and erudite academic writing taken from recent publications. Such models are not, in fact, difficult to find. In my opinion, Emory Elliot, Henry Louis Gates, and Steven Mailloux present such models.

I agree with the central claim of the article: academic writing is often unnecessarily complicated or poorly composed. But, Heidegger wrote well. Derrida's writing is also clear and comprehensible even if it sometimes takes lots of effort and focus to follow his looping metaphors. Most people I've met who whine about how postmodernists write, or use their style as a bludgeon, are simply too dim or too lazy to understand their writing. They are also just inverting the silly notion that using big words makes your writing count for more, believing instead that using big words makes your writing count for less.

Admittedly, too many academic writers (including literary critics long before those evil postmodernists) confuse syntactical complexity with intellectual heft, but that's no reason to bask in our inability to confront difficult but

worthy writing.

Judging from her article, Dr. Toor probably agrees with the preceding paragraph.

29. dank48 - April 16, 2010 at 02:01 pm

#26 should read over Orwell's rules again. Only the first and sixth are unqualified. The others are, clearly and sensibly.

What I find horrifying--no exaggeration--is how many people want to defend obfuscation, in many cases apparently without reading Orwell. There's nothing anti-intellectual about preferring clarity to murkiness, brevity to tedium, and shoe polish to organic fertilizer.

30. spsjc - April 16, 2010 at 02:07 pm

"In bad writing, Orwell continues, 'The passive voice is wherever possible used in preference to the active'...". Yes, and we should avoid clichés like the plague.

31. skaking - April 16, 2010 at 02:21 pm

Ms. Toor's points are, as usual, dead on. I also prefer to write clearly and simply. But there are political issues as well that may often lead to bad writing. Journal reviewers, who are gatekeepers, are often atrocious writers (they likely wrote articles in those journals and thus were asked to be reviewers). They have an ungodly amount of power as many editors don't actually edit but leave major decisions to the reviewers. So, as I have experienced a few times, a clearly written paper instead of being applauded is labeled as 'journalistic', as if that is some kind of insult. But that is how the reviewers may see it, and therefore the paper gets rejected. It's not surprising that so much of what's in humanities and social science journals that could and should be readable, given their particular topics and methods, are not.

32. mubbs - April 16, 2010 at 02:51 pm

Yes, I think you are right.

And the problem begins in grad school where we make an effort to learn all of these cliches.

Academics (95 percent) are among the worst writers in the world. They don't avoid cliches and dead language--they think it makes them sound smart.

They say things like. There are at 2, at least 2, major objections.

And then a small little army of grad students begin to chime in: "I have 2, at least 2, principle objections...There are at least 3 possible interpretations here"

It is friggin terrible. And, the real funny part, is how if you just avoid those cliches how much more interesting and intelligent you sound.

I like watching the documentaries when they consult academics.

There will always be two, at least two, Harvard or Princeton professors saying things like: "yes, and we approach here precisely the absolutely fundamental question... precisely...yes and if one is to find here the naysayer then so be it...

And then you have another academic who speaks plainly and doesn't look like a fool.

Quite. You want something funny, look up Bertrand Russel on You tube. Now there is a pretentious man.

33. randallbillington - April 16, 2010 at 02:58 pm

There is consensus that bad writing is a prevalent problem; less so on how to improve it. Although the above essay focuses on advanced academic writing, habits of "clear thinking" that support clear writing begin at a much earlier stage of education.

When I taught undergrad psychology, the fact that I was not teaching a "writing class" limited the attention I could give to writing skills, but I found several simple techniques made a big difference. First, I enforced the discipline of rewriting. Readers here may know the comment, "There is no good writing, only good rewriting." But college students who feel pressed to get writing assignments completed may fail to develop the important habit of editing/rewriting one's work. Therefore, when an assignment required writing a paper, I made certain that the task of preparing a second draft was a mandatory part of the assignment. (Rewriting is more helpful, as most writers know, if at least a few days pass before one comes back to the task of editing and revising.) As another antidote to disorganized thinking, I required students to submit an outline with each paper. These simple techniques can be used by teachers in almost any subject where papers are required. In my experience, these techniques not only helped younger students to organize and present their thoughts more clearly, they made my own job of providing feedback and scoring simpler as the papers became easier to read.

34. thumphre - April 16, 2010 at 03:27 pm

I object to any argument for the use of passive voice in science - all scientists I know who teach writing and write up their own research avoid passive voice as a matter of habit. If there was ever a 'reason' for it, it's not apparent to this generation of scientific writers.

35. ths117 - April 16, 2010 at 03:39 pm

The juxtaposition of Toor's Oprah reference and Orwell's fourth question: "Have I said anything that is avoidably ugly?" is rather jarring, and the fact that the author studies gender and body issues seems particularly ironic.

36. fiona - April 16, 2010 at 04:08 pm

One of the joys of being a longterm full professor is that I don't have to read anything that's badly written, except for student writing.

I read articles linked with aldaily.com, I read the Chronicle, I read a lot of British intellectual pieces online, I read salon.com.

I do not read academic journal articles. I would rather watch my cats.

37. thundering_m - April 16, 2010 at 04:50 pm

Comprehending what you read and writing comprehensibly involve very different functions. The first requires patience and curiosity in what someone has to say; the second requires, well, patience and curiosity in what someone wants to hear. For this reason, the solution to improving both seems to be the more direct communication of conversation. That, too, requires patience and curiosity. I find that my students benefit greatly from opportunities to discuss their ideas. I prompt them to tell each other the connections they found; to find out what each other found meaningful. This seems to make their writing more fluid and digestible--much more than micromanaging the writing process by checking outlines, etc.

38. francishamit - April 16, 2010 at 10:12 pm

I have a book on legal writing which refers to "throat-clearing language". There seems to be lot of that in Academia. My writing style was formed by two years on the Army Gneral Staff, where getting to the point is critical because lives may be on the line. I have also done hundreds of artilces for trade magazines. Hundreds because I employ my own editor for the mechnicals and turn in pristine copy that can be electronically pasted up. It's a competitive edge.

Some observations: Jargon, in any field, is a defense mechanism to keep people at bay and also the keep them from looking too closely at what you are saying. Academia has a great and abiding fear of reporters because we're like that annoying little kid who keeps asking "why". We compound it with "where, who, how, and when".

We're looking for clarity. Which means calling you on your BS.

Everyone writes for an audience. Academics won't accept better writing because it's not within its tradition.

39. slahey3 - April 16, 2010 at 10:48 pm

My favorite model for prose is U.S.Grant's memoirs. I recommend it to anyone looking for a model for academic writing. They probably think I'm crazy and humor me, but for clear, concise writing describing terribly complex reality, this fits the bill.
I think Gertrude Stein thought so, too, unless it was some kind of ironic comment to which I am not privy.

40. categorical - April 17, 2010 at 09:27 am

darr3455 (comment #6),
But if Heidegger didn't write like Heidegger, we couldn't read him as poetry. Some of his phrasing is not that differrnt from Gertrude Stein.

41. intered - April 17, 2010 at 11:41 am

Stimulating, intriguing, clever, complex, surprising writing as art? Of course. But's let's not confuse that rare talent with Rachel's topic.

42. hoppingmadjunct - April 17, 2010 at 12:26 pm

"Orwell's system of writing and thinking simply expresses his preferences and prejudices," says Cleverclogs above (#8).

Not really: "Mistakes were made" is as dishonest a dodge for a Democrat as a Republican, a black man as a white woman, a conservative as a radical, tenured or otherwise. Compare "We lied to you," "I stole the money," or even the more and more useful "What a mess!"

43. jffoster - April 17, 2010 at 12:49 pm

43, what about
'Someone / People made mistakes.'

Here there is an agent stated in the active voice but because the agent is indefinite there is in fact no more information than in the passive voice 'Mistakes were made.' where there is no agent at all because the semantic patient is the subject of the sentence. So what's the point of Orwell's blanket objection to Passive Voice? Like most prescriptive tradition grammarians, he confuses semantics with syntax-morphology and doesn't seem to know whether he's talking about one or the other.

44. intered - April 17, 2010 at 01:08 pm

One can write for many reasons. One common reason is to convey information with the goal of informing (cf. persuading, scaring, etc.). Under this goal. certain standards are in play. Among these standards are clarity, accuracy, economy, readability, etc. as they apply to the intended audience. Applying these standards to the typical writing in academia, one would conclude that the goal is to do something other than inform.

45. rick1952 - April 17, 2010 at 05:46 pm

Catty comment about Oprah. It may be good writing, technically speaking, but it is a poor reflection on the character of the writer.

46. carbhozel - April 17, 2010 at 09:44 pm

I think this is an unbelievable bunch of nonsense. Sometimes I wonder why chronicle.com even posts jobs, because literally every article is meant to scold and discourage people from seeking a career in academe. I also see repeated epithets calling on academe to strip faculty of all their freedom and their self-respect for work that took time, imagination, and courage to accomplish.

Your writers are clearly in one identifiable school: fire as many professors as you can and praise the few who

take a very dim view of the work they do. After all, it's a recession and no one can tolerate keeping educated people in jobs which roughly average half that of a police officer.

47. carbhozel - April 17, 2010 at 10:38 pm

we were schooled and schooled with this stuff--about how publishing had changed, how simple, declarative writing without "passive voice" was a necessary step towards saving the insitution of publishing. what Dr. Toor is saying is nothing new. Nor is the point of learning "jargon" and "multi-syllabic words" Orwellian. Yes, there have been lots of books that are simplistic--some of them, including Cisneros's The House on Mango Street--were in fact brilliantly written.

The simplest fact of the matter is this: complex writing is meant to make a superior academic case, give a conceptual backing to heavy research. If you do as Dr. Toor says to degrade research by making it simple, you'd have to retrain the entire academy for several years, including people from foreign countries. Dr. Toor's comments are a smack in the face of virtually everything we're taught in graduate school. To trim the ranks of academia because of budget cuts is understandable. To defrock and denude the world of scholarly achievement isn't fair--people put a lot of time and imagination into writing, including undergraduates.

If I could say with a straight face that undergraduates have the same writing capacity as professors, I'd be crazy. I have seen some who could out-write the professor, I'd say they accomplished something. But basically the gist of this essay is not fair. It's a measured change that we academicians were aware of ten years ago--to add the Orwellian tag isn't fair simply because Orwell was a fiction writer, not a researcher or trained scholar. Even if he was, academic scholarship is much more objective and fair than it was then. I have several books from that time period, she is correct in stating the idea of simple writing has some relevance.

While we're at it, Dr. Toor probably thinks that roughly two-thirds of her colleagues should quit teaching and find another job. That's fine, but where the hell do you get off thinking that professors have any real "privilege" in this world??? On average, a plumber, a janitor, or a construction worker outearns the professor--even, usually at the highest rank.

I'm in Florida and they marked teachers for extinction here. What you are doing is bad, plain and simple. It's ideological, a movement of absolute conformity. That you take professors out of the profession may correspond to economics. To say they're not doing their job presumes you have some invincible system of training and re-training graduate students, and that somehow your work will accomplish what 60 years of constant academic change could not.

48. carbhozel - April 17, 2010 at 11:09 pm

Can you do it?

The answer is no, no way, not in a long time. The reason--a large percentage of your "scholars"--particularly in the Third World--have not been taught that academic writing is "Orwellian". A good majority are going to be uncertain as to what that means...

...and yet, what a wonderful thing that Dr. Toor's idea doesn't extend to them. Here are some of the best science and social science researchers in humanity's history. Here are people that grew our intelligence segment and our university endowments to the point at which the American university system could never be dethroned as the greatest. And still, here are faculty brought up in the old, colonial, Victorian mode of inquiry and hypothesis. Here also are a minority group that doesn't read the essays on your website very often. It's a white-only website, and only a few non-whites with basically a white American upbringing and educational training--could ever like.

49. ttuenglish - April 18, 2010 at 09:50 am

Although I love the healthy debate of academe, arguments posted here against simple writing are simply insane. We write this way for several reasons: we think it makes us sound smart; our fascination with "theory" makes us think complex theory cannot be written with simplicity; and we are rewarded for this terrible writing by editors and publishers (all points made by previous posters).

What I seek to add is that no smart people OUTSIDE academe read what we write. Fields with practitioners have brilliant people who are applying disciplinary knowledge and could care less about reading our journals and research. This should be alarming to us academics because we think our ideas resonate with society. The humanities can remain a bit smug about their inside knowledge of Derrida and Heidegger (the last person who actually worked for a living that cared about Derrida died in 1987). But any academic with any sense of knowledge application should blush at the fact that few who actually use disciciplinary knowledge in the real world care about what academics write.

Do you think the government's pre-occupation with assessment started because college costs began rising? You are naive. It started because legislators asked "who reads this drivel, and how could this incestous exercise of writing pompous prose to be read by one's peers possibly be valuable for undergraduate advancement?"

50. cleverclogs - April 18, 2010 at 09:59 am

@ #42 - hoppingmadadjunct writes:
"'Mistakes were made' is as dishonest a dodge for a Democrat as a Republican, a black man as a white woman, a conservative as a radical, tenured or otherwise. Compare 'We lied to you,' 'I stole the money,' or even the more and more useful 'What a mess!'"

Yes, this kind of sophism angers me as well, largely because I'm strongly invested in the same kind of culture Orwell was. The assumption underlying that anger, though, is that it's more important to assign blame in these situations than anything else - that, in fact, blame and responsibility are the key makers of truth in this communication.

But what if, for the sake of argument, a writer thinks it's more important to deflect anger and move on to solutions than to lay blame? Orwell's somehwat irrational injunction against the passive voice makes that impossible and reveals perhaps a stronger desire to affix blame than to solve problems. That's all I'm saying - Orwell's ideas about language reveal certain ingrained prejudices.

51. intered - April 18, 2010 at 12:48 pm

Although I don't know anyone who wishes to eliminate the professoriate, 'carbhozel' provides ammunition to those who might. I do know many former members of the professoriate who would like to see those who teach become more open to healthy self-examination and adaptation to the changing conditions in higher education.

Like it or not, higher education, which was once a small number of niche markets occupied by the rich and the smart, now consists of a very large number of different markets each of which presents somewhat unique inputs, education needs, and learner goals. Whereas less than 5% of the rising wave participated 100 years ago, 60-75% now participates. In the same way that the left side of the ability curve of today's students contains considerable more students than it did 100 years ago, the same is true for the professoriate. In my 40 years in the profession, I have seen a marked increase in the number of those who whine about their plight as professors. What was once a high minded and honorable profession seems, at times, something less.

Unlike Dr. Toor's article, which focuses on one aspect of the emerging and changing needs of students (we are paid to teach, remember?), carbhozel's posts seem self-centered and self-serving, the very thing that troubles non-academics about this profession. It matters not whether I agree with Dr. Toor, I agree with her self-examination and considerations as to how we might improve. It is healthy debate that calls for considered responses, not ranting.

Separately, as someone who spent more than a decade immersed in pure theory and survived on NSF funds, I can tell you that the greatest minds in theory -- whether physics, psychology, philosophy, or biology -- were also the most clear and simple writers. Their simplicity was elegant and genius. Other things being equal, high IQ confers greater, not less, ability to write clearly and simply. No one should be fooled into thinking otherwise. I recall occasions on which we worked for days to unpack the theoretical position of a popular but opaque theorist only to learn that, stripped of its complexity and obfuscation, there was nothing new in the position; occasionally

the position was internally inconsistent.

Most cognitive scientists from Piaget forward believe that writing is thinking and that bad writing is bad thinking. At the very least, bad writing hides bad thinking. It troubles me to see suggestions that a bad writer's thoughts are somehow too grand or complex to be made accessible to the rest of us. Note, please, that I am not addressing the artistic functions of language. I recognize that, among other issues and benefits, it sometimes feels good to struggle to climb a mountain, whether or not there is anything at the top. It is good exercise and I recognize that I may have benefited from struggling to unpack the thoughts of bad writers.

52. carbhozel - April 18, 2010 at 04:17 pm

Intered,

I don't buy your argument, even though I never lived on NSF funds. First of all, there are several very good books written roughly 60 years ago (not Orwell) that argue the case for "simple writing." None of this is new; as graduate students we were constantly reminded of the necessity of a "simple" style. Dr. Toor is blasting the publishing industry and decrying the idea of professional merit.

I doubt my comments are "self-centered," or that I'm trying to nix the professoriate. Professors are human beings, not magicians. Yes, there is a point and a good one to writing more readable prose, but to coin this as a "new" discussion is so uproariously absurd as to project another kind of racism. Lots of publishing houses and university presses folded over the last 10 years--they were well-recognized for their quality work.

If you came straight out and said what you really are saying--to drop publishing as a criteria for tenure, it might work. Lots of Ph.Ds do no writing at all and still manage to be excellent teachers. That isn't the problem. You're basically telling a lot of Ph.D's to devalue their work and many of them came to this country only to do research and gain experience. You can't throw out terminologies or "jargon"--though you can in fact throw out passive voice in most disciplines.

But it's a moot point. This is not information that Dr. Toor is magnanimously sharing with us in a note of pure orignality. This is actually common information that the very best professors shared with us plebs long, long ago.

53. carbhozel - April 18, 2010 at 04:31 pm

anonscribe--

Strunk & White was given as our model as undergraduates--20 years ago. Surprising that the Chicago Manual of Style is so unreferenced and by implication, so meaningless here.

I sometimes become embittered by the posts on this page. People spend a lot of time and effort on the monographs that they write, only to find out that people think their efforts mean nothing simply because of style. We wanted to be part of the discussion, and to use our conclusions intelligently and popularly in the classroom and at conferences. Sometimes these posts lead me to think that those who have power will write these essays to make sure that nobody gets to share space with them. They have become too good for us, and that's racism.

Choosing Orwell as a model for publishing is at best debatable. I'm not real fond of thinking that a complex philosophy such as poststructuralism can be decoded with "see dick dick Jane" type writing. The case for simple, declarative sentences is a good one, especially when writing a thesis or topic sentences. I'm less happy with any strategy that undermines the possibility for complexity--that seems to me to say that only a chosen few understand how to write, and that's racism, sexism, classism, and so on.

We did not enter this profession to be rendered obsolete so quickly.

54. intered - April 18, 2010 at 09:34 pm

carbhozel,

I accept your clarifications. Perhaps we might agree on one minimalist chain of reasoning.

Bad writing makes it difficult to assess the merit of a scholarly publication (admittedly, my experiences come largely from the philosophy of science and the sciences but not exclusively so and I do not consider any branch of scholarship above reproach on this topic). Given that publishing is an important goal of academics, publishers that accept and publish bad writing are reinforcing bad writing and, therefore, are making it more difficult for all of us to assess the merit of scholarly publications.

A separate assertion is that when bad writing that ends up lacking merit circulates in the larger society, no one is served well.

Taken together, I think these points are sufficient cause to argue: (a) that publishers should not accept bad writing, (b) in accomplishing 'a' they will reject some bad thinking that would otherwise be published, and (c) that not publishing bad thinking is a meritorious outcome for all, even in the end for the person whose work was rejected.

If someone's intentions are to render scholarly work obsolete, I do not see it and if it is so, I am not in support of it. I do think bad writing of the kind we are discussing should be rendered obsolete or at least kept alive no more than enough to prevent extinction.

55. microfante - April 19, 2010 at 09:49 am

Bad writing produces lots of prose fluff, and allows you to spread through 150 pagea an idea that good writing would pack up in 10.

One idea = one book.
1 idea + 1 idea = 2 ideas
2 ideas = 2 books
2 books = tenure

Viceversa, in case of good writing

2 ideas = 1 article
15 ideas = 1 book
1 article + 1 book = pink slip

Gotcha?

56. viermont - April 19, 2010 at 10:25 am

If all writing about writing were engaged in with as much passion and clarity as has been shown here, we'd all be better off. I was amused that Orwell expresses his rule against the passive by using the passive, which may suggest not that Orwell did not know what he was talking about but that he may have been tweaking our noses. Let's concede to him at least the possibility of a little subtlety and playfulness.

As a recent graduate from a doctoral program who is working on getting a scholarly monograph published, I am keenly aware of the need to "join the conversation" in my field by speaking to my colleagues, my readers, in a way they understand. But they understand me perfectly well when I use a dialect that I hope will be readable by a more general reading public who might be interested in my subject. We don't have to be opaque to be clear to our colleagues. Rather, we ought to do our best to take terms and expressions, often derived from works we are reading in translation, and make them as widely and readily accessible to general readers, even when what we have written is still difficult for someone unitiated to understand.

My field is English, which, despite a doctorate with a specialization in a specific (though interdisciplinary) genre, encompasses composition/rhetoric, literature, and English as a second language. A generalist, how sad, I know; please don't remind me. But I have been reading in history for about 20 years, and my journal of choice, _The

William and Mary Quarterly_, features what, to my mind, is some of the clearest prose in any discipline with which I'm familiar. One of the striking features in the works I have read there is that many of the authors are conversant in at least one of the languages from which they draw sources and material. I was quite surprised at graduate school how few people read in a second, not to mention third, language. Reading Derrida and Heidegger in the original and allowing for the differences in other systems of rhetoric opens up various ways of understanding their works that we as writers of English can use to bring such works to our colleagues and students in a way that retains such authors' central ideas in forms that larger numbers of readers can then appreciate. We both construct and disseminate knowledge, as do our students. But, as several writers pointed out, we often do so between classes, committee meetings, and after reading student papers. That's a challenge for anyone.

One final remark before closing. A friend of mine was fascinated by semiotics, but his discussions of them in classes we shared were so close to his sources that most of our fellow graduate students were lost or, more charitably, unduly taxed by the exercise of trying to keep pace with the quite erudite explanations our fellow student was giving. I strained, and I had read the works he was grappling with.

Back to Orwell. Orwell was angry about totalitarianism and the dangers the totalitarian mentality posed, poses, to democratic societies (with all their abundant failings). Each war seems to produce language that, when decoded, is abhorent. And I say that the war produces the language in the active voice, even though a war would seem to lack any kind of agency to do so. Yet, and I say, yet, the act of war is so viscious in any time and relative to the technology available to pursue it that it seems as if our minds recoil and produce not conscious obfuscation (as in advertising) but expressions that take us away from the responsibility of our collective insanity of murder, rape, and mayhem which seems to require the catharsis of victory or defeat to purge from our thinking, a thinking that has over time largely been articulated by men, which ought to give us pause to reflect on the nature of patriarchal society. Ah, but that is another topic for another time.

57. viermont - April 19, 2010 at 10:26 am

Yes, I typed "unitiated." That should be "uninitiated." Let's hope everyone's Gestalt worked in my favor.

58. bstorck - April 19, 2010 at 10:32 am

A thanks to whomever included the Chesteron quote. Its statement of observation is one I think testable by every and anyone. I do not think the same can often enough be said for academic writing. Although I recognize that with specialty and expertise there follows a requisite need to state and examine with increasing detail and precision, it is exactly that winnowing of focus that can lead to neglect for not only a reading audience but the very impetus or statement of significance that sparked the project.
Obscure academic writing is hampered by a need to sound expert rather than demonstrate expertise, but even more so by a failure to answer rudimentary questions: Why and how is this argument/ observation worthwhile reading?

59. theburiedlife - April 19, 2010 at 10:44 am

I can't believe no one's mentioned Joseph M. Williams (unless I missed it)! He was the composition guru, and "Style: Lessons in Clarity and Grace" is the definitive book on clear writing.

60. microfante - April 19, 2010 at 01:12 pm

Viermont, you really prove my equation. Congratulations!

61. intered - April 19, 2010 at 01:46 pm

Someone who has 10 minutes should rewrite the section beginning with, "Yet, and I say, yet, the act of war . . ." I think I see two sentences, maybe three.

Responsibility does not rest solely with the new author. At least three people signed off on the dissertation, and countless professors failed to spill gallons of ink until no longer necessary.

It is a serious problem, isn't it? We are training otherwise decent minds to be wordy, pedantic, and most annoying, to simulate thought with posturing.

62. lyndahar - April 19, 2010 at 02:50 pm

I was searching online for an article I had read in which the author deconstructed scientific writing, showing that difficulty for the reader arose less from the terminology or syntax than from the organization, and that often poor writing obscured gaps in the writer's logic.

I didn't find that article, but I did find this one:

http://www.improbable.com/airchives/paperair/volume2/v2i5/howto.htm

63. intered - April 19, 2010 at 03:41 pm

Great satire lyndahar. Thanks.

For good but not perfect reasons, the scientific communities prefer to impose a logical reconstruction of method on the reporting of findings. Publishers will reject an article organized around on the actual empirical sequence of discovery. The truth is that very few individuals add to a scientific body of knowledge by stepping through the logical reconstructions that make up proper procedure. The claim made by senior scientists is that imposing this logic will make it easier to see various threats to interpretation or generalizability, the latter being most important. My view is that this is often true but that the imposition can have the opposite effect as well.

Then, there is the issue of fidelity to actual events. Denying the use of first person is one such example. You might still be taught that it lacks objectivity to say, "I then seated the participants." Rubbish! It is less clear, less specific, and less accurate to say, "The participants were seated."

There is no excuse for a lack of accuracy, clarity, and economy. T Requirements for third person, passive construction, and conforming to an artificial procedural flow are not only less accurate, they facilitate bad writing.

64. natnabob - April 19, 2010 at 08:15 pm

Aha! The one time in 29 years my linguistics degree can be useful!

I can give a rationale for Orwell's "Never use a long word where a short one will do."

For thousands of years, the "short" words were the Anglo-Saxon words, the first-learned-as-a-child words, the "gut feeling" words. "Kill" versus "exterminate."

"Thwack!" is the ultimate English word. Hardly any other language has "Th" or the short "a" much less with a double consonant much less can end a syllable with a consonant.

Maybe YOU came from a long line of classical scholars bent over their ancient Latin texts. Your language didn't. Your language came from a long line of people thwacking invaders. And those thwacky words still have more life.

The long words came from Latin via French after the Norman Conquest. Ever since, English has had a short word and a long word for everything. There are two reasons for this--English has more speech sounds that most languages, and therefore readily accepts new words from other languages. Also, English has had a lot of contact with other languages. English has something like five times the words most languages do, partly because of the contact and partly because of the ready retention of foreign words.

In English, when you choose the short word, you are choosing the word closest to the gut. The one that came from Anglo-Saxon. The one that retains 40,000 years worth of blood, toil, tears, and sweat....oh wait I mean effort, lamentation, and perspiration. (Barf) When you choose the longer word, you are choosing the word that has been in the language a much shorter time, and wasn't the first word learned as a child.

So next time some pompous windbag starts erring on the side of the big words, screw that! (The SK- words came from the Vikings) Just listen how much vim and vigor is lost between "screw" and "fasten" or, for that matter, "screw" and a"fecundate." I should probably look for a shorter word than "pompous." "arch?" Once in a while a one-syllable word can add a very satisfying Anglo-Saxon weight. It's a Led Zeppelin guitar chord in the middle of a string quartet. There were all kinds of theories in linguistics that the sound held meaning and so it was legit to say something like that.

As for academic writing, I ordered a book called _White Trash: Race and Class in America_ not knowing it was an academic book. The subject matter was intensely interesting but I could hardly get through some of the essays. They had to go for ten pages at the beginning of the essay to establish that "meaning" could be said to be a social construct conceptualized and enforced by those in power, if "power" could be said to "exist" in "rational" "terms" (McPiffle, 1975) I knew this had happened to English since I had left the field, but I'd never had to read it. The only academic paper I ever wrote was about eye dialect and I wrote it in eye dialect (where the writer misspells a word in print but the speaker really isn't making a mistake. It's just written to look that way...example: "yew kids" or "it snot fair!")

I've been a professional writer for 26 years. I am sure I'd be considered a brainless bimbo in academic circles. All my professors screamed at us to use the short words--maybe because they were in linguistics instead of literature.

65. ajwild - April 20, 2010 at 07:07 am

The Modern English language does more with less, not less with more.

66. jffoster - April 20, 2010 at 09:15 am

Natnabob is generally right about the various groups of English vocabulary, and he's almost right about some of the sounds of "thwack".
The interdental consonant spelled with the digraph "th" is rare in languages; but I wouldn't say "hardly any other language has it." In Yurp alone, English, Castillian Spanish, and Welsh have it, and Icelandic does, even while thpewing ash all over Yurp. And Albanian has a sound that's almost an interdental. What it has howver to do with Orwell's short word admonition isn't clear to me.
There is no "double consonant" in 'thwack. Orthographic "ck" is simply [k]. And quite a number of languages can end syllables (and therefore words) with consonants.

67. toddgilman - April 20, 2010 at 10:27 am

As a few others have noted, the validity of Strunk & White's advice on style was rigorously questioned for good reason a year ago on this site (G. K. Pullum, "50 Years of Stupid Grammar Advice," The Chronicle Review, April 17, 2009). Much better: "Style: Toward Clarity and Grace," by Joseph M. Williams (1990).

Todd Gilman

68. natnabob - April 20, 2010 at 01:41 pm

jffoster: 1) The double consonant in "Thwack" is at the beginning. "TH" and "W." Some prof said that very few languages allow that!
2) I wish I did know how many languages had the "th" sound. I would have said "interdental consonant" but the rest of the readers might not know what I meant. I feel this reinforces the topic at hand.
3) I was taught that the many speech sounds English allowed the ready adoption of foreign words, leading to the larger number of words in English. How that ties in with Orwell's short word advice: English retained several words for many things. "Crap" and "excrement," for example. "Die" and "expire." Why did English retain so many words, allowing enough rope to hang ourselves with the long, bloodless ones? Because English was always so open to retaining foreign words. French actually has or had a government body to keep foreign words out. English kept the short Anglo-Saxon words and added the long Latinate ones. This is great. But when you use the one-syllable choice in English you're usually using the one with more life in it. I don't know if Orwell laid it out like that, but one of my profs did. Many speech sounds --> ready adoption of foreign words --> Norman conquest --> bunch of adopted words, bloodless because not learned in early childhood, and long because they happen to

be from French.
4) It's possible you're one of those profs. (Maybe not the one who said that though.) I had a linguistics professor with a similar name. If you are he, great times and thanks!

69. jffoster - April 20, 2010 at 02:46 pm

Hi Natnabob (68).
Technically, [w] is a sonorant glide rather than a true consonant but in 'thwack' is does act sort of consonanty and cluster with the interdental obstruent "th", so I concede that and you're more right than wrong. Note incidentally that English is highly restricted in the kinds of consonant clusters that can begin a word -- if the first segment is a stop [p, t, k, b, d, g; the second segment MUST be a vowel, a glide, or a liquid (l or r). If the second segment is a stop, the only possible first segment is [s] or a vowel.
It wan not to me clear why the rarity of the interdental "th" has a bearing on why English borrows a lot of foreign words. perhaps I missed something. Japanese has a very straightforward segmental phonology with no "rare" sounds (partly excepting its high back unround vowel /u/ which is actually unround phonetically, like Russian [y]). But Japanese readily borrows words from other languages and then partially Hihonicizes them.

Note by the way the circularity of your two consecutive sentences that read:

"Why did English retain so many words, allowing enough rope to hang ourselves with the long, bloodless ones? Because English was always so open to retaining foreign words."

But you're of course right about the fact of the borrowing. We even borrowed pronouns they:their:them from Danorwedish, and borrowed using the interrogatives who/which as relative pronouns from French, although retaining and now apparently going back to the native English general complementizer {that}. Moreover, we are probably after borroweing the "progressive "BE...Verb-ing" and the DO as an auxiliary verb -- both from Welsh, don't you know?

And you're right about many of the native English part of the common vocabulary being more what I would call more "homey" things -- house, mouse, run, walk, sit, drink,..., sheep versus high falutin "mutton < Fr. mouton 'sheep'.

You and others might enjoy John McWhorter's new book -- called "Engliksh: the Story of our Bastard Tongue" or something like that.

70. fiskdetails - April 20, 2010 at 03:55 pm

An insightful piece. However, utilization of its recommendations not only by writers of academic prose, but corporate prose as well, is as unlikely as rendering inoperative the word utilization itself.

71. budgetprofessor - April 20, 2010 at 05:34 pm

"Technically, [w] is a sonorant glide rather than a true consonant but in 'thwack' is does act sort of consonanty and cluster with the interdental obstruent "th", so I concede that and you're more right than wrong." [69]

The path of the conversation that lead to this quotation evidences what Orwell's rules fail to consider: oftentimes the big word is necessary for precise communication. My primary complaint about student academic writing is the lack of precision that results from using too much common non-technical language.

But, then again, I have doubts whether "sort of consonanty" is all that precise.

72. elizvand - April 20, 2010 at 05:44 pm

"The war ended" is NOT a passive-voice construction. In that sentence, "War" is the subject and "ended" is the (active-voice) verb.

"The war was ended" or "the war was completed" are passive constructions, but "the war ended" simply is not.

Is the writer perhaps confusing "passive" and "intransitive"?

73. asongbird - April 21, 2010 at 07:25 am

The purpose of writing is to communicate, not to obfuscate.
The purpose of speaking is to communicate, not to obfuscate.

When I attend a conference, lecture, or other event, and hear excessively-jargon-laden, deliberately obfuscating language, I do not think the presenter is intellectually-gifted or expert in the field.

To the contrary, the speaker/writer impresses me as insecure, underprepared, narcissistic ... and, in my opinion, certainly needs to rethink their profession.

"Academic-speak" does not convey brilliance.

74. illuric - April 21, 2010 at 02:14 pm

As a former journalist who is about to enter the academic world, I am so relieved to read that I don't have to change my writing style in order to be published in scholarly journals. If I can continue to write clearly and simply, that is good news indeed!

75. intered - April 21, 2010 at 02:43 pm

So, what is the consensus here? It the case, as the cognitive scientists would have it, that bad writing is bad thinking? Speaking personally, I know it is sometimes true that I do not know precisely what I am thinking, especially with respect to subtle implications, possible internal inconsistencies, etc., until I write out my argument. When that happens, the stronger my position, the more clear and accessible it becomes.

76. sharonmurphy - April 22, 2010 at 09:12 am

And then, of course, there are the journal editors who believe that no article without charts and graphs and complicated language can be of any value.

77. sgnillib - April 22, 2010 at 12:46 pm

To :

Yes, _the war ended_ is not passive, as you wrote. Still, this is not active voice either. Instead, it's called inchoative (AKA anticausative or decausative).

78. sgnillib - April 22, 2010 at 12:47 pm

To elizvand:

Yes, _the war ended_ is not passive, as you wrote. Still, this is not active voice either. Instead, it's called inchoative (AKA anticausative or decausative).

79. robi6293 - April 22, 2010 at 04:49 pm

My full response to this article is at http://eaplog.wordpress.com/2010/04/22/bad-writing-and-bad-thinking-about-bad-writing-and-bad-thinking/ , but to sum up: Orwell was writing primarily about political writing in the middle of the twentieth century, and as such, his rules may be useful. But we should not expect academic writing to conform to the standards of journalism or propaganda any more than we would expect it to follow the rules for writing sonnets.

80. robi6293 - April 25, 2010 at 10:03 am

To sgnillib - the inchoative is not a voice like active or passive; it is simply a type of verb (or an aspect, in some languages).

81. charlesjesan - April 26, 2010 at 02:44 am

<Comment removed by moderator>

82. fjamesh - April 28, 2010 at 05:09 am

Wow! To think Orwell (as translated by Toor) continues to inspire so much! I'm thoroughly entertained by this blog, paricularly after reading a nativist blog-rant against William Finnegan's piece, "Arizona's Police State," in the latest New Yorker. Nativism. Now, there's a discourse full of short words and NEVER uses foreign words (the horror!) [http://readersupportednews.org/off-site-opinion-section/123-123/1596-arizonas-police-state].
Yet, it is a prime example of the language Orwell warns us against in the most critical passage of his essay:

"When one watches some tired hack on the platform mechanically repeating the familiar phrases...one often has a curious feeling that one is not watching [or reading] a live human being but some kind of dummy: a feeling which suddenly becomes stronger at moments when the light catches the speaker's spectacles and turns them into blank discs which seem to have no eyes behind them. And this is not altogether fanciful. A speaker who uses that kind of phraseology has gone some distance toward turning himself into a machine. The appropriate noises are coming out of his larynx, but his brain is not involved as it would be if he were choosing his words for himself. If the speech he is making is one that he is accustomed to make over and over again, he may be almost unconscious of what he is saying, as one is when one utters the responses in church. And this reduced state of consciousness, if not indispensable, is at any rate favorable to political conformity."

My God, that's some damn good writing!!! Not so much for goose-stepping to his own 6 little rules but, more importantly, for its creative critique of conformity and lack of imagination which can lead us into authoritarianism, a not so irrelevant concern in these Post-9/11, Police-State Days. Orwell's rules of order, as I appreciate them, are simply friendly advice on how to resist fascism with style, meaning, a way others will listen to and read us.

I have long thought of a number of postmodernists and poststructuralists (yes, I'll name names--Homi Bhaba, Judith Butler, Jameson) as academic Gramscians. Their writings are caught in prisons of academic and class conformity but don't have the good excuse, as did Gramsci, of real imprisonment for obfuscating their writing. Are journal editors (and reviewers) the academic equivalents of the prison guards? From this discussion, it seems so, and with greater powers than Gramsci's censors judging from the incomprehensibility of some academic writing and Gramsci's comparative clarity.

Thank you, Rachel Toor, for turning me on to Orwell's essay and reminding me why I love his writing so much! And thanks to everyone who has contributed to this very interesting blog. It is fascinating how so many very well-educated people can write in so many different styles, with differences of opinion, and even very different emphases (the linguists are hilarious!). All with simple and clear language, yet creating a dense, complex, and rich dialogue of the kind I rarely see in academic journals. Perhaps there is something to Orwell's advice, after all.

83. cathychua - April 30, 2010 at 05:39 am

I've had it put to me that there is a good reason for turgidly dull scientific papers, dull both in usage of language and that dreadful format which has to be followed to the T. The arument is that foreign-language readers will find it easier to follow.

I've done writing (non-technical) for an Asian audience from a wide variety of countries, Indonesia to China, and my experience is the style they like best to read is common usage, simple English. If this is the case, I thought it would apply equally to scientific papers, but perhaps I am wrong.

Thoughts anyone?