



Jargon

All fields of study are infected with this. We are encouraged to accept the argument on the basis that, as we are studying in a certain field, we should know and share the same beliefs that are represented in shorthand by the jargon of our field of study. It's like being a member of an exclusive club. Membership brings with it not just access to the current codes to decipher what's being said, but induction into the shared beliefs of the club, which you are not encouraged to question or challenge.

As I have explained in *How to Write Your Undergraduate Dissertation*, when writers use jargon their aim is to import ideas into their writing without having to argue for them and justify their point of view. They rely on jargon to encourage the reader to make unexamined assumptions about the legitimacy of what is being claimed. The jargon evokes a clutch of indistinct ideas, all of which can be interpreted in numerous ways. But, rather than reflect upon them, we are encouraged to move on driven by our concern that, as members of the profession, we should know what this all means.

Worse still, we are inducted into the same ways of expressing our ideas that lead to obscurity, rather than clarity in our own work too. We are led to assume that a simple style is a sign of a simple mind, whereas in fact it is the result of harder thinking and harder work. So we are easily led to believe that if in our writing we use words of common use, which can be understood by someone without our expertise, our work will lack credibility.

As a result, our work and that which we read in journals is like reading a foreign language. We have to translate it into simpler, more concrete language that makes contact with our own everyday experience. And in this lies the heart of the problem. In much of what we read there appears to be a determination to keep such vulgar sensibilities as our personal feelings and experience at bay and to insulate what is said from the concrete details of everyday life. But without this, without creating a bridge to our normal lives, it is difficult, often impossible, to understand what's being said.

The important thing to remind yourself is that there is not a single complex idea that is so complex that it cannot be expressed in simple concrete language that we can all understand. Free yourself of the belief that when you can't understand a passage the fault is yours; that it is simply beyond you. Given the will to understand on your part, the determination to stay with the explanation and understand it, and given the work on the writer's part to think through his ideas and capture them in everyday concrete language, you can understand the most complex and abstract of ideas. Look at the following passages. Both of them are tackling difficult abstract ideas, but both are written by writers who have thought through their ideas and captured them in concise concrete language. See how simple it is to understand them.

Example: Bertrand Russell

In the following passage, the philosopher Bertrand Russell is explaining how we can move from our acquaintance with ourselves and the evidence of our own senses to knowledge of the existence of things beyond ourselves in the universe, and knowledge of the past and the future.

'But if we are to be able to draw inferences from these data – if we are to know of the existence of matter, of other people, of the past before our individual memory begins, or



of the future, we must know general principles of some kind by means of which such inferences can be drawn. It must be known to us that the existence of some one sort of thing, A, is a sign of the existence of some other sort of thing, B, either at the same time as A or at some earlier or later time, as, for example, thunder is a sign of the earlier existence of lightning. If this were not known to us, we could never extend our knowledge beyond the sphere of our private experience; and this sphere, as we have seen, is exceedingly limited. The question we have now to consider is whether such an extension is possible, and if so, how it is effected.¹

Example: Stephen W. Hawking

In this passage, the cosmologist and theoretical physicist, Stephen Hawking, is explaining how Einstein's theory of relativity revolutionized our ideas of space and time.

'In Newton's theory, if a pulse of light is sent from one place to another, different observers would agree on the time that the journey took (since time is absolute), but will not always agree on how far the light travelled (since space is not absolute). Since the speed of the light is just the distance it has travelled divided by the time it has taken, different observers would measure different speeds for the light. In relativity, on the other hand, all observers *must* agree on how fast light travels. They still, however, do not agree on the distance the light has travelled, so they must therefore now also disagree over the time it has taken. (The time taken is the distance the light has travelled – which the observers do not agree on – divided by the light's speed – which they do agree on.) In other words, the theory of relativity put an end to the idea of absolute time! It appeared that each observer must have his own measure of time, as recorded by a clock carried with him, and that identical clocks carried by different observers would not necessarily agree.'²

As you can see, both writers are explaining fairly difficult and abstract ideas, yet both do this by using concrete language of everyday life. Neither uses the jargon of their profession, not until they have first converted it into concrete terms and in both passages there is only one abstraction, the word 'absolute' in the passage from Stephen Hawking's book, that needs to be converted into your own terms to understand what's being said. Beyond that, neither passage needs to be translated like some piece of foreign prose; these complex ideas are accessible the moment you read them.

It is revealing that in the acknowledgements to *A Brief History of Time*, Stephen Hawking concedes that the subject of his book is often made unreadable, not because of the difficulty of the subject, but because of poor writing. Referring to a book he had written on the same subject in 1973 he says,

'I would not advise readers of this book to consult that work for further information: it is highly technical, and quite unreadable. I hope that since then I have learned how to write in a manner that is easier to understand.'³

Now compare these with the passages with the examples below. The first is from a major corporation and the second is a memo to the staff of one of New York's biggest banks. They are hardly dealing with subjects as complex and difficult to understand as those that Bertrand Russell and



Stephen Hawking are tackling, but whereas the latter can be understood immediately without serious problem, these are virtually incomprehensible:

Examples

- 1 'It's an umbrella group that interacts synergistically to platform and leverage cultural human resources strategies company-wide.'
- 2 'While our efforts cannot be characterized as having had a profoundly strategic horizon, the methodology utilized to identify strategy statements was not sufficiently program orientated for implementation.'⁴
- 3 This example is taken from the introduction to an essay written by a student studying for an MA in Art theory. The footnote is the author's:

'Adorno's quote 'art perceived strictly aesthetically is art aesthetically misperceived', asks us through negation, to reject the past of the Kantian point of universality, and through the particular dialectical workings of Adorno, understand our present immanent with, the historical i.e. Kant's subjectivity and his pure aesthetic judgement, Adorno's reflexive objectivity and his 'fluid'⁵ conception of an autonomous artwork and the unknown of our social present.'

You don't need to know anything about art theory and the philosophers to whom it refers to know that the meaning of the paragraph (in fact just a single sentence) all depends on what is meant by abstractions like 'negation', 'our present immanent', 'autonomous artwork' and 'the unknown of our social present'.
- 4 'We should take step changes to incentivise deliverables by adopting an holistic approach to employing greater maturity.'
- 5 Euphemisms:
 - 'Cost efficiency savings' – 'Sacking people saves money.'
 - 'Sorry, your job has been disestablished' – 'you're sacked!'
 - 'Sorry, we're going to have to let you go' – 'you're sacked!' (This one carries the implication that for some reason you have been eagerly pulling away, in effect wanting to be sacked. Now, the firm has been forced reluctantly to grant you your request.)
 - Lucy Kellaway, a Financial Times columnist, notes that last year Reuters decided that some staff would be 'transitioned out of the company'.⁶
 - HSBC 'demised' about 900 of its managers.
- 6 Nouns as verbs:
 - To 'inbox'
 - To 'solution'
 - To 'road-map'
- 7 'An affordable, portable lifestyle beverage' – a bottle of water.



- 8 Ron Stone, CEO of Cornerstone, wrote this about his ad agency's expansion: 'As brands build out a world footprint, they look for the no-holds-barred global POV that's always been part of our wheelhouse.' (As Lucy Kellaway points out, in this one sentence he has skilfully mixed four metaphors to say nothing whatsoever.)
- 9 Pfizer chief executive, Ian Read, explaining to a British House of Commons Select Committee his company's attempted takeover of AstraZeneca, used the following phrases, much to the frustration and mystification of committee members:
 'Let's make sure we get good capital allocation... build a culture of ownership... flexible use of financial assets... productive science... opportunity to domicile... putting together the headcount ... putting together the pipelines.'⁷
- 10 'Outsourcing', 'Offshoring' – sending jobs overseas where labour is cheaper.
- 11 The legendary BBC journalist Alistair Cooke, who broadcast the weekly *Letter from America*, described a piece of jargon used during a meeting of commanders in General Eisenhower's headquarters in London:
 An American colonel said: 'How many ICPs have been counted?'
 'What,' asked Winston Churchill, 'are ICPs?'
 'Impaired combatant personnel, sir.'
 'Never let me hear that detestable phrase again. If you're talking about British troops, you will refer to them as wounded soldiers.'
 Alistair Cooke concluded: 'Muddy language proceeds from muddy minds.'

¹ Bertrand Russell, *The Problems of Philosophy*, 1912 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), p. 33.

² Stephen W. Hawking, *A Brief History of Time* (London: Bantam Press, 1988), p. 21.

³ Hawking, *A Brief History*, p. vii.

⁴ William Zinsser, *Writing to Learn*, (New York: Harper & Rowe), p. 66.

⁵ Adorno, 'Aesthetic Theory', 'An artwork separates itself from what it developed out of, a reified external experience, through its law of movement which is its law of form', p. 3.

⁶ For this example and others in this list refer to <http://www.bbc.com/news/business-25652101>

⁷ The following examples are taken from this article <http://www.bbc.com/news/business-27512405>