

Introduction

Writing

Writing is a form of thinking – the most difficult, yet most effective, form. The effort of giving our ideas form in words and sentences is indispensable to clear thinking. It crystallizes our ideas, giving them the sort of clarity and consistency they might not otherwise have had. We see more clearly what we don't know or don't understand; where our arguments have broken down; where we need to argue our case more clearly; where we need more evidence; and where we need to use clearer words and phrases.

But this work can be difficult and tiring. You can sit at your computer or with pen in hand for what seems like ages without a thought appearing on the screen or down on paper. It is not surprising, therefore, that much of what we read is the product of writers who have found the task too much for them. Instead, they settle for using language that suggests clarity and consistency where little exists. So, as we evaluate a writer's work, we must ask whether the meaning of the words and phrases he uses is clear and consistent throughout his argument.

Unfortunately, as students we are inducted into these ways of expressing our ideas that lead to obscurity, rather than clarity. We seem 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. We are led to believe that anything we write that uses words of common use, which could be understood by someone without our expertise, lacks credibility.

As a result, it's 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

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

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

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

³ Hawking, *A Brief History*, p. vii.

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