

# Jargon

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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 Better Essays*, 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.

## Examples

### University teachers of English

In her account of her time studying English at a top US university, Helena Echlin describes the long sentences, received with awe and thoughtful silence, which sounded like English, but lacked all meaning:

The ode must traverse the problem of solipsism before it can approach participating in the unity which is no longer accessible.<sup>1</sup>

As she says, 'How can one "traverse" a problem, or "participate" in a unity?' Indeed how can you participate in something which is no longer accessible? Words are adorned with suffixes for no other reason than to make them seem more obscure and arcane: 'inert' becomes 'inertial', 'relation' becomes 'relationality' and 'technology' is substituted for 'method' as in the sentence,

Let's talk about the technology for the production of interiority.

Such obfuscation immunizes the sense of what's being said from all evaluation and criticism. As Echlin says, 'Where there is no paraphrasable meaning, dissent is impossible, because there is no threshold for attack.'

## Exercises

Compare the following passages with those we examined in the introduction written by Bertrand Russell and Stephen Hawking. One is from a major corporation and the other 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 their writing could be understood immediately without serious problem, these are virtually incomprehensible. See how good a jargon buster you are by trying to decipher what they are trying to say:

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<sup>1</sup> Helena Echlin. 'Critical Mass' in *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 10 February 2001; the complete article appeared in *Areté*, [www.aretemagazine.com](http://www.aretemagazine.com).

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.<sup>3</sup>

There is no better way of exposing the gaps in our thinking than writing our ideas down. But the most common and effective way of concealing these gaps is to resort to jargon and abstractions.

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<sup>3</sup> Quoted in Zinsser, William. *Writing to Learn*, (New York: Harper & Rowe, 1988), p. 66.  
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