

OTHER THINGS EQUAL

Economical Writing: An Executive Summary

Deirdre McCloskey
University of Iowa

The main cause of bad writing in economics is that economists don't read good writing. If economists would read Jane Austen or George Orwell, or even Adam Smith or Thomas Schelling, in bulk, daily, habitually, they would improve. I'm always surprised by how few books economists read, and how utilitarian their reading is. Look at their bookcases: empty of good books. It's a rare economist—an Alchian or a Hirschman or a Yeager—who reads seriously outside economics.

A subsidiary cause is that economists don't know the rules. I hope it's more than subsidiary, because about this second, subsidiary reason I can do something. I can teach the rules. Or so I keep hoping. Back in the 1970s I gave a course to graduate students at Chicago on how to write. Tom Borcherding, when he was editor of *Economic Inquiry*, encouraged me to make it into an article, which came out in 1985, and later I made the article into a little book, published by Macmillan (gobbled up by another publisher, orphaning the book: merger destroys the specific human capital of business relations, yes?). Now a new edition of the book, *Economical Writing*, has come out from Waveland Press. Moderately priced, it's just the thing for your students. If you assign papers your students are going to need the little book. As William Strunk (of the indispensable Strunk and White, *The Elements of Style*; also Macmillan) used to say to his students at Cornell, "Get the little book! Get the little book!"

But you, I know, are a busy, busy person. You just haven't got time to read even a 90-page book on how to write. Not to speak of Jane Austen or Tom Schelling, Mark Twain or Joan Robinson, Margaret Atwood or Bob Solow. Not in bulk.

So I offer here for the professoriate an executive summary, in the spirit of the cassettes advertised in airline magazines that promise the essence of *The Classics* and *The Year's Best Books on Business* in ten minutes a week. Think of it as a *Reader's Digest* article about the new edition. If there's enough demand I'll read it into a tape that you can plug into while you drive to work. \$14.95 postage paid.

Here are some rules:

Other Things Equal, a column by Deirdre McCloskey, appears regularly in this *Journal*.

Deirdre McCloskey: Economics Department, S336 PBAB, University of Iowa, Iowa City, IA 52242-1000. E-mail: deirdre-mccloskey@uiowa.edu

Eastern Economic Journal, Vol. 25, No. 2, Spring 1999

(1.) Choose a reader and stick with her. Changing your implied reader is in an economic sense inefficient. An article using the translog production function wastes motion if it rederives the elementary properties of a Cobb-Douglas production function. No one who has gotten so far into such an article will be innocent of Cobb-Douglas. The writing mixes up two mutually exclusive audiences.

(2.) Avoid boilerplate. Boilerplate in prose is all that is prefabricated and predictable. Little is getting accomplished with econometric chatter copied out of the textbook, rederivations of the necessary conditions for consumer equilibrium, and repetition of hackneyed formulations of a theory.

(3.) Impenetrable theoretical utterances have prestige in economics, but shouldn't. The economist will write about the completeness of arbitrage in this way: "Consider two cities, A and B, trading an asset, X. If the prices of X are the same in market A and in market B, then arbitrage may be said to be complete." The clear way does not draw attention to its "theoretical" character at all: "New York and London in 1870 both had markets for Union Pacific bonds. The question is, did the bonds sell for the same in both places?"

(4.) The table-of-contents paragraph is an abomination to the Lord thy God: "The outline of this paper is as follows." Don't, please, please, for God's sake, don't! Nine out of ten readers skip to the substance, if they can find it. The few who pause on the paragraph are wasting their time. They can't understand the paragraph until, like the author, they have read the paper, at which point they don't need it. You will never see it in competent writing. Weak writers defend it as a "roadmap." They got the idea from Miss Jones: "Tell the reader what you're going to say. Say it. Say that you've said it." It's exceptionally bad advice. The person who made up this memorable phrasing of it is burning in Hell.

(5.) Tables are writing. The wretched tables in economics show how little economists care about expression. Titles and headings in tables should be as close to self-explanatory as possible. In headings of tables you should use words, not computer acronyms. Remember: you're trying to be clear, not Phony Scientific. A column labeled "LPDOM" requires a step of translation to get to the meaning: "Logarithm of the Domestic Price." You want people to understand your stuff, not to jump through mental hoops. The same things can be said of displayed equations. It's clearer and no less scientific to say "the regression was Quantity of Grain = $3.56 + 5.6(\text{Price of Grain}) - 3.8(\text{Real Income})$ " than "the regression was $Q = 3.56 + 5.6P - 3.8Y$, where Q is quantity of grain, P its price, and Y real income." Anyone can retrieve the algebra from the words, but the reverse is pointlessly harder. The retrieval is hard even for professional mathematicians. The set theorist Halmos said: "The author had to code his thought in [symbols] (I deny that anybody thinks in [such] terms), and the reader has to decode" [XXXX, 38, italics mine]. Tables, graphs, diagrams, and displayed equations should elucidate the argument, not obscure it.]

(7.) Don't overload your sentences. The novelist John Gardner suggested a clever rule: Become self-conscious about how much you're putting into each part of a sentence. An English sentence has grammatically speaking three parts: subject, verb, object. Thus: subject = "An English sentence"; verb = "has grammatically speaking"

(“grammatically speaking” modifies the verb “has”); object = “three parts: subject, verb, object.” Vary your sentences, Gardner suggested, by how much you put into each, and in each sentence choose only one of the three parts for elaboration. In the sentence just finished the score is: subject absent but understood = “you”; verb = “vary,” complexly modified by “how much you put into each” object = “your sentences,” quite simple, though not as simple as the subject. A sentence with too much in all three of its parts can ruin a paragraph. (Gardner’s Rule: a complex subject [“A sentence with too much in all three of its parts”] connected to a simple verb [“can ruin”] and simple object [“a paragraph”].)

(8.) Paragraphs should have a structure like (AB)(BC)(CD). Note the linkages of repetition, one B connected with another, C with C, and so forth. Economists would call it “transitive” writing. To do it you must violate the schoolmarm’s rule of not repeating words. Verily, you must repeat them, linking the sentences and using pronouns like “it” or “them” to relieve monotony. The linkages can be tied neatly, if not too often, by repeating words with the same root in different versions, as was just done with the verb “linking” in the previous sentence and the noun “linkages” in this (the figure is called in classical rhetoric “polyptoton”). There are other tricks of cohesion. They rely on repetition. (In this paragraph for instance the word “repetition” is repeated right to the end in various forms: repetition, repeating, repeat, repeating, repetition.)

(9.) Avoid elegant variation. A paper on economic development used in two pages all these: “industrialization,” “growing structural differentiation,” “economic and social development,” “social and economic development,” “development,” “economic growth,” “growth,” and “revolutionized means of production.” With some effort you can see in context that they all meant about the same thing. The writer simply liked the sound of the differences and had studied elegance too young.

(10.) A lot of people are confused about the colon (:) and the semicolon (;). The safest rule is that the colon indicates an illustration to follow: just like this. The semicolon indicates a parallel remark; it is (as here) an additional illustration. The semicolon (;) means roughly “furthermore”; the colon (:) means roughly “to be specific.” The semicolon is also used to mark off items in series when the items themselves are long. “Faith, hope, and charity” uses commas; but if each item were elaborated (“Charity, the greatest of these, the light of the world”; and similarly with each) you might use the semicolon (;) as a sort of supercomma. You can see that the semicolon is also a sort of period lite; you can hurry the pace a bit by splicing two sentences with a semicolon, as here. So the semicolon falls between comma and period. Remember the difference between colon and semicolon by noting that the semicolon contains both a comma and a period within it, a printed compromise.

(11.) Weak writers these days use too many commas, and use them by rule rather than by ear, probably because Miss Jones told them to. It’s no rule of life, for instance, that “an if-clause always requires a comma after it” or “When a clause cannot stand alone it must be hedged with commas.” In fact, such rules lead to a comma in nearly every sentence, and a consequent slowing of pace. When applied too enthusiastically a rule-driven comma ends up separating subject from verb. (Notice that I did use a comma after the “In fact” in the sentence before last but not after “When

applied too enthusiastically” in the next. Stay tuned.) In revision the trick is to delete most commas before “the,” as I just did after “In revision,” and did a couple of sentences earlier after “When applied too enthusiastically”; I don’t do it after “In fact” in the earlier sentence because the next word was not “the.” The “the” signals a new phrase well enough without the clunk of a comma.

(12.) Cultivate the habit of mentally rearranging the order of words and phrases of every sentence you write. Rules, as usual, govern the rewriting. One rule of arrangement is to avoid breaking, as in this clause, the flow with parenthetical remarks. Put the remark at the end if it’s important and at the beginning if it’s not.

(13.) The most important rule of rearrangement is that the end of the sentence is the place of emphasis. I wrote the sentence first as “The end of the sentence is the emphatic location,” which put the emphasis on the word “location.” The reader leaves the sentence with the last word ringing in her ears. I wanted, however, to emphasize the idea of emphasis, not the idea of location. So I rewrote it as “. . . is the place of emphasis.” You should examine every sentence to see whether the main idea comes at the end—or, second in emphasis, the beginning. Dump less important things in the middle, or in the trash. A corollary of the rule is that putting less important things at the end will weaken the sentence. It would be grammatical to write “That putting trivial things at the end will weaken the sentence is a corollary of the rule.” Yet it shifts the emphasis to something already finished, the rule. The clearer way emphasizes the novelty, the idea of the weakened sentence, by putting it at the end.

(14.) This-ism is becoming a plague. These bad writers think this reader needs repeated reminders that it is this idea, not that one, which is being discussed. Circle the “this” and “these” in your draft: you’ll be shocked at their number. The “this” points the reader back to the thing referred to, for no good reason. No writer wants her reader to look back, for looking back is looking away, interrupting the forward flow and leaving the reader looking for her place. The thises and thats are demonstrative pronouns on the way to becoming the definite article (“le” and “la” in French come from Latin “ille” and “illa” = “that”; ancient Greek went through a similar development from Homeric to Attic). But we already have a definite article. It’s called “the” (derived from an Indo-European word meaning “that”). Often the plain “the” will do fine, and keep the reader reading. Consider repeating the word represented by “this.” Repetition, remember, brings clarity and unity to English. The rule is to query every “this” or “these.” Take most of them out.

(15.) Watch out for bad words. If economic prose would drop “via,” “the process of,” “intra,” “and/or,” “hypothesize,” and “respectively” the gain in clarity and grace would be big. If it would drop “at least minimal,” “process of,” “thus,” “overall,” “basic,” and “factor” the world would be saved. The best practice provides the standard. Virginia Woolf would not write “and/or” or “he/she” because she wanted prose, not a diagram. Some others that I’m sure Virginia would have disliked appear in my personal list of Bad Words: individuals, agents, structure, existence of, time frame, former, latter, very, for convenience, due to, in terms of, and a hundred more. How to know them? Read good books.

And meanwhile, get the little book, get the little book.