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The Writing of Economics

Reviewed by Judith Latham

Donald N McCloskey *New York Macmillan Publishing Company, 1987, 63 pp, \$6 00 (paper)*

McCloskey constantly reminds us, in his newest book, that writing is no optional matter for professional economists. Thinking alone, however brilliant, leaves the job of economics undone. Communicating with others by means of the written word is the best way to reach a large audience. The discipline of writing, furthermore, compels the writer to think more clearly (p 3)

McCloskey, a professor of economics and history at the University of Iowa, has written several books on economic history and regularly lectures economists around the country on the craft of writing. His latest book, a manual on writing by an economist for other economists, is a gem. The book's sole flaw, if it can be called a flaw, is that it is so witty and beguiling that the casual reader may be tempted to regard it more as entertainment than as instruction.

Those of you who consider yourselves so-so writers can learn the tools of the trade from McCloskey's book, while those of you who are already competent writers can refine them. Those of you who are contributors to *The Journal of Agricultural Economics Research* will want to follow McCloskey's guidelines.

Unclear writing is simply not read—skimmed perhaps, but not read. Therefore, as McCloskey says “the premise that you can split content from expression is wrong” (p 4). The giants of modern thought, like Freud, Einstein, and Keynes, who profoundly influenced their contemporaries and succeeding generations, were all splendid writers. The ideas of Samuelson and Galbraith have touched those outside the economics profession because they were so effectively communicated. There's no getting around the fact that clarity of expression and influence are highly correlated.

Latham is coeditor of *The Journal of Agricultural Economics Research* and the coordinator of the writing workshops of USDA's economics agencies.

What is the economist who would be a better writer to do? And what is that same economist not to do? You will recognize in some of McCloskey's ideas precepts from your college writing courses and from William Strunk and E B White's *The Elements of Style* (to which McCloskey is indebted). But, frankly, several of McCloskey's precepts contradict, as they should, the common writing practices of the economics profession. He, for example, recommends using active voice constructions, avoiding jargon, and eliminating lengthy introductions and stage directions for the text. The following highlights from McCloskey's book will help everyone write better.

Things To Do

- Be clear. The reader, not the writer, is “sovereign” (p 7). If any reader thinks something is unclear, it is—by definition. A reader who has too much trouble understanding a passage gives up (p 8). Dense writing makes slow reading. The writer does not have a captive audience, and readers will ignore, skim, or outright misunderstand messages the writer does not communicate clearly and directly.
- Be brief. Well-known agricultural economist Don Paarlberg used to say “The relationship between length and reader interest is best represented by a curve that is negative and steep.” Therefore, it is wise to comb your writing for extra words, and eliminate them. When using tables, graphs, or equations, ask “Is this entry necessary?” Get rid of whatever your reader does not need to understand your message.
- Arrange your ideas carefully, be imaginative. Get away from the ho-hum, dreary organization of much economics writing. McCloskey spoofs the arrangement of the typical article: introduction, roadmap (or outline), theory, model, results, suggestions for future research (“since nothing ever works”), and summary (p 12). A contents paragraph at the beginning is scaffolding and, like all scaffolding, is ugly. Excessive introduction or summarizing is “boilerplate”, it bores the reader (p 23). Likewise, an article that begins

"This paper discusses " is dull (p 24) Minimize background padding, and avoid elaborate summaries Consider the needs of the reader who wants to know What worked, what didn't, how were the questions formulated, and why (p 24)? The guiding question in all reporting of research should be. So what? You need to answer it

- Watch your tone Many writers assume a pompous, scientific pose They appear to be saying "this-stuff-is-so-complex-that-I-can't-be-clear," which is an "outright lie" (p 27) Anything you understand well, you can also explain, if you take the time and make the necessary effort The writer's purpose should be to help people understand, not to make them "jump through mental hoops" (p 30) Come down from the ivory tower and use the language of ordinary speech Choose strong, one-syllable verbs for emphasis Here's a super example from McCloskey "The writer who wants to be clear does not *clot* his prose with traffic directions" (p 25)
- Use the active voice (subject-verb-object sentence order) whenever possible Active sentences are more forceful than passive ones Recast passive voice constructions into the active voice to make the implied agent assume responsibility for the action Limit the use of linking verbs ("is," "are," "was," and "were") because they do not imply action but simply state that a thing exists in a particular form (p 44)
- Make writing hang together by using repetition to link one sentence to another The reader can best understand your intent if you develop your ideas logically and link the ideas in each sentence to the previous one by repetition Repeat key terms, rather than using traffic signals For example, avoid beginning sentences with adverbs like "also" and "thus", they are traffic signals (pp 32-34)
- Get a rough draft as soon as possible Begin the rough draft as you do your research rather than waiting until the end to write it up McCloskey refers to writing the first draft as the "teachable trick" (p 13) It helps get around writer's block and forces the writer to be concerned from the outset with communicating the major steps of the research to the reader in an intelligible way McCloskey recommends that at the end of each writing session you jot down your thoughts on what will come next, a practice that will help to eliminate mental blocks as you move forward (p 21) I find this tip, which I'd never heard anywhere before, particularly helpful

- Read aloud Reading aloud is the best way to hear your writing as others hear it internally (p 42) Take pleasure in the language of our best literature, reading it aloud to develop your inner ear McCloskey lists some of the best writers of economics (such as Heilbroner and Griliches) to use as touchstones for your own writing (see p 9)
- Revise, revise, revise Become your own harshest critic and editor All good writers do The best writers revised almost endlessly Hemingway, for example, is reputed to have drafted the last page of *A Farewell to Arms* 60 times Economists can use McCloskey's guidelines as they revise their own writing

Remember that writing well is hard work You have to be committed to communicating your ideas to your readers in the language they will find easiest to understand and most agreeable to accept You will also have to discipline yourself to develop the humility to accept cheerfully the constructive criticism of reviewers Nothing could be less natural, but nothing else will succeed so well

Things To Avoid

- Do not bore the reader Trim the fat from your writing Don't drag in extraneous information that bogs down the text to impress the reader with your scholarship A neat trick (that McCloskey does not mention but that works wonders in the war against wordiness) is to comb your writing for nouns that end in -tion, -ness, -ment, and -ility, locate the root verb and substitute it for the longer noun
- Do not confuse the reader with "elegant variation," using fancy synonyms for straightforward terms Substituting a term like "calamitous volume deficiencies" for "bad crops" is empty display and unnecessarily puzzles the reader, who may think the writer has introduced a new concept (p 36)
- Do not use polysyllabic Latin and Greek words (those of more than one syllable, just to illustrate the point) when a simpler word is available "Interim variation" is jargon, "change" is clearer (p 49)
- Avoid overly long and convoluted sentences that trip up the reader who must often reread to understand (p 38) Sentences that begin with lengthy prepositional phrases or dependent clauses often require additional punctuation, which will complicate your prose and retard the reader

- Do not use third-person impersonal pronouns with the passive voice (such as "it was done") or the first-person plural pronoun ("we") to strike a remote, pseudo-scientific pose Using "I" is acceptable social science usage and is preferable to combining passive constructions with dangling modifiers (a practice rampant in economic writing) It's far better to say "I found" than "using X method, it was found that " Do not use the "editorial we" when speaking only for yourself
- Do not rely on adverbs and adjectives to dramatize your message (pp 42-43) Excise the weak adverb "very," as in "a very illuminating concept " Write with concrete nouns and action verbs whenever you can (p 18) McCloskey has compiled a list of "Bad Words" to avoid (pp 44-47) vague nouns and pronouns (structure, process, time frame), feeble verbs (implement, hypothesize, occur), pointless adjectives (interesting, intra/inter, aforementioned), useless adverbs (fortunately, hopefully, respectively), and clumsy conjunctions (due to, in terms of, thus)
- Do not clog sentences with nominal compounds, or noun strings, like "Cobb-Douglas production function estimation approach" (p 50) No one can decode such language without enormous effort Re-examine any phrase with more than one adjective, determining how you might improve it either by deleting modifiers or by recasting it and supplying prepositional phrases (for example, "Cobb-Douglas' approach to specifying the production function")
- Do not use abbreviations without defining them first (p 51), as in Economic Research Service (ERS) Keep the initials you do use to a minimum because your reader will resent being drowned in alphabet soup
- Do not rely on the demonstrative pronouns and adjectives "this," "that," "these," and "those," to guide the reader through the logical progression of your argument (p 52) "This" and its variations plague economic writers "This" interrupts the flow of a paragraph, forcing the reader to search for its antecedent (the noun to which "this" refers) Repeat the noun Remember, repetition clarifies the meaning for the reader

The Bottom Line

McCloskey's book is worth every minute of the hour you may spend reading it It's a pity the book is so difficult to find and that university bookstores don't yet stock it

The test of the book is in its application You won't have truly read it until you've measured your own writing against its precepts