Writing Matters

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Avant-propos

Mon audience francophone me pardonnera l'usage de l'anglais pour cette courte présentation.

Il est vrai que nous sommes à Montréal, mais peu importe ce qu'on puisse penser de la Loi 101, il n'en demeure pas moins que

1. Mon audience inclut quelques anglophones, mais surtout
2. L'anglais demeure la *lingua franca* de la science économique.

Quiconque veut une carrière de recherche en science économique doit donc investir dans l'apprentissage de l'anglais écrit (et oral, mais ce sera pour un autre jour).

Ayant fait toutes mes études sauf mon doctorat en français, je suis la preuve qu'il est possible de devenir un communicateur compétent en anglais lorsque cette langue est une langue seconde.

Intentionality

The key is to be *intentional* about wanting to become a competent communicator in English.

This means approaching both the inputs—what you read in English—and the outputs—everything you write in English—carefully.

In other words, it means reading good writing, but it also means treating every opportunity to write something as an opportunity to do better.

Intentionality in Reading

On reading, you will not learn how to write well in English by reading journal articles (or worse, most stuff on the Internet).

I decided that I wanted to become good at writing in English during my first month of university. I lived at home on the south shore, and every day I had a long metro ride from Longueuil station to Université-de-Montréal station.

I filled the time by working my way through the novels of Robertson Davies and by reading every issue of *The Economist* cover to cover.

(Nowadays when I want to read good writing I like to reread John Kenneth Galbraith's books.)

Intentionality in Writing

On writing, you should take every opportunity to write something in English as an opportunity to become a better writer in English.

What I mean by this is that every email, every term paper, every article you write in English should be approached as a chance to learn how to write better.

And don't think ChatGPT or other generative AI is a substitute for good writing. If you cannot express yourself clearly in English, you will not write good prompts. Worse, you will not be able to look at what generative AI writes for you and know whether it is good or bad—and it *is* mostly bad.

Practical Matters

Okay, but how do you write better in practice?

First, the bad news: Writing well is hard, and (most) writing is rewriting.

But the good news is also that writing is rewriting. Perhaps the most famous passage of Ann Lamott's *Bird by Bird* is a section titled "Shitty First Drafts," in which she explains that we should expect the first draft of anything we write to be, well, shit. What matters at this stage is to get ideas on the page.

You cannot make something out of nothing. But as it turns out, when it comes to writing, you *can* polish a turd. Through the process of rewriting over and over (e.g., I must have rewritten the intro to each of my published articles at least a few hundred times each, if not more), it is possible to take awful writing and turn it into good writing.

Practical Matters

Second, when it comes to "style," the way in is the way out. In other words, the way to develop your own style is to not try to have your own writing style, and to favor plain English as much as possible.

You cannot go wrong with short declarative sentences with as few adverbs as are absolutely necessary (Hemingway is my source of inspiration, and my time as a journalist has paid off).

The goal of scientific writing is to be understood clearly. Write a sentence. Read it out loud. Does it sound like it makes sense? Keep going. If not, rewrite it so that it makes sense to someone who would hear that sentence spoken. If it brings any question up in the reader's mind, the next sentence (or, in some cases, a footnote) should answer that question.

Practical Matters

How do you properly use "i.e." and "e.g.," and what do they mean? Where does a footnote go in a sentence? How do you write numbers? Does the period go inside or outside the quotation marks?

If you don't know the answer to those questions, you should.

Luckily, there is a handy resource for that: Anyone who makes a living from writing in English should have a copy of Strunk and White's *The Elements of Style*, maybe even two—one at work, and one at home.

Practical Matters

There is no such thing as writer's block in scientific writing. If you have done the research properly, you know what to write about.

Unlike most (if not all) academic writing in French, English academic writing is not meant to impress the reader by its complexity. Furthermore, whereas a lot of French academic writers seem to think that it is the reader's job to understand them, English academic writers strive to meet the reader where the reader is. Nothing will get your articles rejected faster than writing like a postmodern French philosopher.

Also, ~~the passive voice must be avoided~~ avoid the passive voice.

Conclusion

Make no mistake, writing competently in English for a scientific audience is hard.

But that doesn't mean that it is impossible. You were smart enough to pass your first-year core classes in micro, macro, and econometrics—you are *definitely* smart enough to learn how to write in English. You just need to learn by doing.

For how to structure a journal article in economics, see chapter 2 of my book *Doing Economics* (MIT Press, 2022).