

From the editor

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One of the most common requests I make of authors who have been invited to revise and resubmit their paper is to make their writing clearer. Too many authors use prose that can be very difficult to understand. I use a rather simple rule of thumb when judging the clarity of writing of papers submitted to this journal—do I understand what the author is expressing? If not, then there is a problem. I have a difficult time with nuance and complex logic. I need things expressed simply with as much transparency as possible. I am not impressed with scholars who try to sound sophisticated.

I teach a research methods course for graduate students. I regularly tell them that the purpose of academic writing is to convey ideas and to create new knowledge. This can only be accomplished if readers understand what they write. If their writing is too complex, dense and laced with excessive academic and specialized jargon, then their ability to influence others with the written word will be diminished.

I recently read a book by Michael Billig entitled *Learn to Write Badly: How to Succeed in the Social Sciences* (2013). The book is a critique of the way social scientists write. It should be required reading of all scholars in training. Billig identifies a number of reasons why social science scholars write poorly. I offer three of them here.

First, there are problems with the way young scholars are trained in modern universities, which Billig says “resemble hothouses in which temperature and humidity have been perfectly adjusted for growing ... pot after pot of big words and clunky phrases” (p. 36). For example, he

says that young scholars have to convince their advisors that they are ready to be academics. They do this by *sounding* like they know a lot and can use the terminology of their specialized sub-disciplines. “Doing this may require a number of literary skills, but it does not demand genuine understanding,” he writes (p. 44).

Second, scholars are expected to “publish voluminously,” which requires that they write speedily. Billig refers to an article by the historian Anthony Grafton (2010) who, in language that will resonate with some readers of this journal, “compared modern universities with fast food outlets.” Continuing, Billig states (p. 26):

Grafton argues that slow scholarship, like slow food, is deeper and richer than the fast stuff. However, the push nowadays is for fast scholarship. This is where the conditions of work directly affect the style of academic writing: fast scholarship means fast writing. It is easier to dash off another piece, resorting to the same old theoretical clichés, rather than struggle to work out new ideas and, above all, to express thoughts clearly.

Third, Billig says editors of academic journals are equally complicit. “Generally, the editors of journals in the social sciences do not accept papers that are written in ordinary language and that are devoid of specialist terminology” (p. 35). So, I guess I shoulder some of the blame. Although it is unrealistic to expect that published academic writing will never contain specialized terms, his point is clear: “We should try to use simple language and avoid technical terms *as much as possible*” (p. 212; emphasis added).

I am generally pleased with the exposition of authors who publish in this journal. However, some submissions have been a challenge. Here are a few examples of

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sentences that I have a difficult time understanding from papers submitted to *Agriculture and Human Values*.

- Neoliberal governmentality is described as a homogenizing, disciplining force ...
- Re-embedding is the re-subordination of the self-regulating market ...
- Both ... are reified as discrete components within modernity's discourse.
- Political, social and economic imaginaries underpin discourse and are key to understanding political contestation.
- The representative consumer can be incentivized to choose the socially optimal rate of nutritious food by complementing the appropriate Pigouvian tax and subsidy combination ... with a compensating variation paid by the consumer in exchange for the information that brings their price perception into alignment with the objective price of nutritious food.

Even single words can be difficult, such as “governmentality”, “problematizing”, “discursive”, “incentivize”, or “praxis”. (The first two words don't even show up in my computer's spell-check software.) These examples come from experienced as well as young scholars. With apologies to scholars who write on the topic, I can almost always expect that if the title or abstract of a paper contains the word “neoliberal”, then the writing will be particularly dense and difficult to digest.

My commentary is not about the content of the scholarly writing I see. Much of it is important, interesting and very relevant. Rather, it is about presentation and the words scholars use to convey their ideas. Prospective authors don't want editors struggling to understand the message of their paper, unless the editors are primarily interested in publishing papers with big words but few ideas. Clarity in written and oral expression should be elevated as an academic standard.

I am a trained economist. Economists are just as guilty in making things more complicated than they need to be—and not just from the words they choose to use. Economists thrive on producing overly technical mathematical models to describe relatively mundane economic phenomena. Ronald Coase, a Nobel Prize winning economist who died in 2013, offered this observation: “In my youth it was said that what was too silly to be said may be sung. In modern economics it may be put into mathematics” (Coase 1988, p. 185).

I know mine is a small voice in a noisy world, but I will do my best to encourage authors who want to publish in

this journal to write clearly and to express themselves in a way that makes its content accessible to everyone.

This issue of *Agriculture and Human Values* begins with a paper by Sachs et al., who use the metaphor of the front and back of a house to explore gender and ethnic disparities in worker and workplace conditions of farms and restaurants. Chiffolleau and Touzard survey managers of wine cooperatives in southern France in order to examine the nature and effectiveness of managerial advice networks. Specht et al. discuss the advantages and disadvantages of rooftop gardens, rooftop greenhouses as well as indoor agricultural production activities. Ngo and Brklacich investigate how new farmers migrating from urban to rural areas in Canada create a sense of place and identity. Furman et al., examine how civic agriculture as a social movement affects the production and marketing strategies U.S. farmers use to adapt to climate change. Besky explains how industrially-produced Darjeeling tea in India achieved its geographical indication status. Labeyrie, Rono, and Leclerc show how the social organization of Kenyan smallholder farmers affect patterns of crop diversity. Finally, Gunderson draws on Marxian theory to critique the defetishization thesis and the concept of ethical consumerism.

This issue also contains two discussion pieces and the presidential address by Professor Clare Hinrichs, delivered at the 2013 meetings of the Agriculture, Food and Human Values Society at Michigan State University in June 2013. In the first discussion essay, Hospes critiques debates regarding food sovereignty. In the second essay, Looy, Dunkel, and Wood examine attitudes that consumers in the West have toward eating insects. In her presidential lecture, Professor Hinrich explains how transitions research applies to problems relating to sustainability and food systems change. The issue concludes with book reviews and the list of books received.

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