

ECONOMICAL  
writing

THIRD EDITION

*Thirty-Five Rules for Clear and Persuasive Prose*

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*With an Appendix by* STEPHEN T. ZILIAK

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# Writing Is a Trade

In a *Shoe* cartoon strip long ago, the uncle bird comes in the front door with a briefcase overflowing with paper and says to the nephew bird, “I’m exhausted, but I’ve got to work. I’ve got to get this report out by tomorrow morning.” Next panel: “I’ll be up until 3:00 writing it.” Last panel, picturing the nephew with a horrified look on his face: “You mean homework is forever?!”

Yes, dear, homework is forever. A lot of it is writing.

Outsiders have been complaining for a long time about how economic and sociological and business and bureaucratic writing gets written (Williamson 1947). I’m an economist by training, a historian by avocation, a professor of English by late-life passion. People in all fields write. Unlike professors of English, though, only a few economists and historians have written about the craft of writing or taught it to their students. As a result, the standard of economic and historical writing has declined steadily. For example, nowadays even pretty good writers of economics and history and, yes, English use locutions like the academic “as we will see,” the newspaper version being “more on that later,” pointlessly anticipating in a manner you never see in Alfred Marshall (1842–1924) or Lord Acton (1834–1902), or even John Maynard Keynes (1883–1946) or A. J. P. Taylor (1906–90). The economist Walter Salant

did his part in an essay published in 1969. In 1978 J. K. Galbraith wrote a piece called “Writing, Typing and Economics.” He was referring to the novelist Ernest Hemingway’s crack about the Beat Movement novelist Jack Kerouac: “That’s not writing: that’s typing.” A lot of writing in economics, history, business, government service, the military, and on and on isn’t even very good typing.

No one tells the beginner in a craft with a lot of writing how important it is to improve it. The researchers at the US Department of Agriculture, surprisingly, do care about writing. It’s a tradition in the department. So do some Federal Reserve banks. Private companies do a lot of business by writing, and their CEOs often claim to care how it’s done. On the other hand, presentations in business, and now too in academic life, are dominated by the worst of PowerPoint. Academics of course must write, feverishly, if they are to get tenure and the respect of their colleagues. But many of them do so with a trowel. In most colleges the undergraduates are taught nothing about writing after the compulsory first-year course in composition, which they try to forget. The graduate students do not get even that. The master carpenter turns her back on the apprentice, concealing the tricks of the trade, such as how to cut a board without splintering the back of the cut.

The big secret is that good writing pays well and bad writing pays badly. Rotten writing causes more papers and reports to fail than do rotten statistics or rotten research. You have to be read to be listened to. Bad writing is not read, even by professors or bosses paid to read it. Can you imagine actually *reading* the worst report or term paper you’ve ever written? Your sainted mother herself wouldn’t.

A couple of trowel-writing professors of economics attacked the article version of the present book by claiming that actually obscurity pays off. Well, suppose it does.

Suppose I'm wrong that bad writing pays badly. So what? Being bad is bad. The sainted mother I mentioned told you to be good, period. Being clear — or, to use the term of art, “readable” — is an ethical matter beyond mere profit-making prudence (McCloskey 1992).