

Start Making Sense

In the academic world, to be incomprehensible is to be respected.

By Herbert Rotfeld

Too many college students are unable to speak clearly or write a clear sentence. But then, neither can their teachers.

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Many academic theories and research *could* be interesting and useful to the public if they were presented in everyday

language. An extensive vocabulary *could* be used for greater precision in writing and speaking. But in the tortured language of the academic world, some words confuse, many are misused and others are made up.

Admittedly, not everyone should be expected to understand the latest microbiology discovery or nuclear physics research. However, academic research from psychology,

economics, management or marketing could possess relevance and guidance for government, business and the public. But first, it must be presented in a way people can understand.

Intelligence and education alone do not create this strange way of speaking. College faculty members know that their colleagues who publish the most articles in academic journals get the top salaries, while those whose strongest skill is clear communication with students and the public often get notices terminating their teaching contracts.

To publish in these journals, faculty members are

discouraged from writing clearly. The most respected academic journals in many fields get poor scores on readability; psychologists, economists, business professors and others gain prestige by publishing unintelligible articles in journals that almost no one reads. It has been documented that the more people who read and understand an article, the more poorly it is regarded in the academic world.

For example, the Journal of Marketing Research is often noted as the most respected marketing journal. Marketing deals with everyday business problems, yet an issue picked at random carries such titles as "The Effectiveness of Alternative Preference Elicitation Procedures in Predicting Choice," or "Antecedents and Consequences of Salesperson Job Satisfaction: Meta-Analysis and Assessment of Causal Effects" (translation: "What Makes Salespeople Like the Job and What Happens If They Do?").

I often wonder what would happen if these journals stopped printing new issues. I doubt if most faculty members would even notice. In any academic field, the pro-

fessors can quickly assert the identity of the "best" journal. But when asked to name the most interesting article read in the past year, they hedge and mutter and finally admit they have "fallen behind" in their reading.

In schools of business, as in other areas of "professional education" such as pharmacy or telecommunications, colleges claim to educate students to careers. Yet faculty often are discouraged from writing articles for magazines that are heavily read by professionals working in those fields. On campus, the only important publications are in the turgid prose of academic journals.

Despite the low readability and readership, faculty members must publish in "respected" journals to get promotions and merit pay. And if faculty members also can talk this way, so much the better.

When universities interview job applicants, the prospective new faculty member typically conducts a lecture or research presentation. Having missed one such talk due to a schedule conflict, I asked a colleague what he thought of it.

"It was pretty good," he replied, "but I didn't understand most of it."

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