IS IT POSSIBLE TO DO JUSTICE TO THE COMPLEXITY OF ACADEMIC SUBJECTS WHILE COMMUNICATING CLEARLY TO nonspecialist audiences? Is respect for difficulty compatible with accessibility? I have always assumed that the answer to these questions is yes, but I may be in the minority. I have noticed that graduate students are increasingly skeptical when I advise them that they do not have to write obscurely to make a positive impact on professional audiences. Some go so far as to claim that a certain amount of obfuscation is a prerequisite for professional success. When students write ponderously and evasively, it is often not because they could not do otherwise but because they are convinced that such writing is what their professors want.

And of course they may sometimes be right. In any case, students are not alone in thinking that academic communication is inherently arcane. One of the most pervasive beliefs in our culture—one that is found among academics and nonacademics alike—is that the life of the mind is so difficult that only a small minority can understand its concerns or take a serious interest in them. They evidently assume that, like modern poetry as famously described by T. S. Eliot in 1921, serious scholarship “must be difficult.” Eliot reasoned that since modern civilization comprehends unprecedented “variety and complexity,” the modern poet had to become more and more “allusive, more indirect, in order to force, to dislocate if necessary, language into his meaning” (65). It seems a short step from Eliot’s view of poetry to a belief in the necessary difficulty and limited readability of literary scholarship and, by extension, of any scholarship.

It is certainly possible to adduce many examples of academic writing that bears out such a belief. The world of knowledge and thought is indeed challenging and difficult—if it were not, there would hardly be any need for scholars to double as teachers. And there is no disputing that work in the more technical sciences is inherently arcane. Here is an abstract submitted by a student for a recent undergraduate symposium held on my campus:

Scholars and Sound Bites: The Myth of Academic Difficulty

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The AML Tumor Suppressor Gene on Chromosome 5, Band Q31: Localization and Evaluation of Novel Candidate Genes

Interstitial deletions or complete loss of the long arm of chromosome 5, centering at 5q31, are seen in a variety of hematologic malignancies, including acute myeloid leukemia (AML) and myelodysplasia (MDS) [. . .].

Some would argue that the inaccessibility of this passage—for better or worse—is not in principle different from the kind of inaccessibility that marks much research in the humanities and social sciences. In both cases, some who take this view would claim, a serious engagement with the subject matter requires a form of writing that is comprehensible only to specialists.

One could reply, however, by pointing out that, though the passage just quoted is opaque to nonspecialists in cancer genetics like me, I and other generally educated readers can readily comprehend what the research is about and what it will be used for—to treat malignant tumors. Furthermore, it can be argued that most work in the humanities and social sciences requires far less technical information and vocabulary for comprehension by nonspecialists. Then, too, I am told that even the most esoteric science has to be translated into nonspecialist terms to influence the field. A biochemist colleague tells me that researchers with superior command of technical science often struggle in their careers if they lack the verbal and rhetorical skills to explain the significance of their research in a grant proposal.

In any case, and I shall not try to discuss the technical sciences here, I would argue that academics make their intellectual culture look more opaque, rarefied, and remote from normal learning capacities than it is or needs to be.¹ In this essay I want to suggest that the reputation for obscurity of academic writing, though not without foundation, rests on a misperception and that such obscurity is less frequent (or more peripheral and local) than we tend to think in work that makes an impact on its field.

Underlying the exaggerated perception of academic difficulty is the belief—found inside and outside academia—that academic communication is fundamentally different from everyday vernacular discourse and the “sound bite” communication of the popular media. Since the modern research university and the popular media emerged around the same time at the turn of the century, the very definition of the academic has been derived from its presumed contrast with popular culture. If something is accessible to nonacademics it can’t be academic, and if it is academic it can’t be generally accessible. What defines academic discourse as academic—or forbiddingly “intellectual”—is presumably that it is everything popular media communication is not, which is to say that academic communication cannot be reduced to sound bites.

Dare to Be Reductive

The pervasiveness of this belief among academics explains why “reductive” is felt to be just about the worst charge—this side of an accusation of plagiarism or sexual harassment—that can be leveled at an academic author. I share this antireductive attitude up to a point, feeling abused when my own ideas are reductively caricatured by critics and contrite when I realize I have sinned against others. What I object to, however, is knee-jerk antireductivism, which refuses to see that there are legitimate reductions, useful and necessary simplifications that can be distinguished from simplifications that seriously misrepresent and mislead. What troubles me is undiscriminating suspicion of simplification and reduction as such—as if writing could not be reductive and nonreductive at different moments. George Steiner exemplifies this suspicious outlook when he states categorically that “simplification, levelling, watering down, as they now prevail in all but the most privileged education, are criminal” (B6). In fairness to Steiner, he is answering the false populism that equates intellectually challenging education with elitism. But
Steiner's equation of simplification with bad forms of leveling and watering down is equally harmful, for simplification is not only crucial in teaching beginning students but (as I hope to show here) also a necessary aspect of any effective intellectual communication, even when we address other experts in our fields. Blanket suspicion of anything that might be called reductive—which often translates into a fear of making an assertion lest one be criticized—is probably far more to blame than opaque jargon for obfuscatory academic writing and teaching.

Academics' anxiety about being reductive is an overlooked aspect of the notorious conflict between research publication and teaching. The conflict becomes difficult to overcome, after all, if reductive simplifications are presumed to be necessarily vulgar and demeaning. Since beginning students need reductive simplifications before they can move on to the complications of a text, an issue, or a field, the pressure on academics to avoid being reductive, to eschew sound bites, to complicate as much as possible and at all times clashes with the interests of good teaching. Indeed, as long as we operate with this understanding of academic research, teaching can only remain a low-status activity despite the best efforts to honor and reward it. For if the reductiveness necessitated by teaching is seen as incompatible with scholarly integrity, it follows that teaching is irrevocably wedded to inferior modes of thought and expression.

It is not surprising, then, that some instructors resist being reductive in their teaching. A graduate student friend describes a history course he took in which the professor's daily monologues were incomprehensible. One day, when my informant could stand it no more, he interrupted the stream of obfuscation and asked the professor to please stop and clarify his point. At first the professor responded defensively, but he finally proceeded to draw a chart on the blackboard that reduced the two hundred years of cultural history he had been covering to a few simple dichotomies. In a flash, the shape and point of what the professor had been laboring to get across became clear. Yet what struck the student was how ashamed and embarrassed the professor was as he schematized the material: "I can't believe I'm doing this," he muttered several times. For the student it was the most illuminating class of the semester, yet the professor felt ashamed. He had been reductive.

The Gist Business

The prospects of improving teaching depend greatly, then, on how we respond to the proposition that "academic" and "popular" occupy opposing ends of the communication spectrum. If American education is serious about its claims to be democratic, it is implicitly committed to translating and popularizing the esoteric and the difficult. But insofar as educators assume that reductive communication is incompatible with intellectual complexity, we doom ourselves to be poor translators, which is to say poor teachers.

I want to go further, however, and argue that it is not only the interests of teaching but those of academic research as well that are compromised by the opposition of reductive popular discourse to antireductive academic discourse. I submit that when academics translate their ideas into terms accessible to nonacademics, their research profits as much as their teaching. Reductive moments are as important to effective communication among academics as they are to effective communication between academics and the non-academic public.

In 1996 the University of Chicago sponsored a symposium, "The Public Intellectual," that directly addressed these questions about the extent to which academic work can and should be made accessible to popular audiences. At one point in the proceedings an audience member asked a speaker why academics did not make clearer "the gist" of their research. The speaker's reply was immediate and blunt: "We're not in the gist business," he said.
His point was that if it is the reductive gist of an academic argument that we want, we can call the university public relations office or take out a subscription to the *Chronicle of Higher Education* or *Lingua Franca*, but we should not expect academics to lower themselves to reductive popularization. Yet there was something odd about the professor’s comment: in disavowing his involvement in “the gist business,” the professor demonstrated the very opposite of his claim. For his retort provided a usefully succinct description of what the academy—according to him—does not do, useful because it summed up a more complicated position. Far from closing off complications, moreover, the professor’s reductive statement created an opening in which they could be pursued, which is what took place in the discussion that followed his remark. If there was a problem with what the professor said, it was not that it was reductive but that it was wrong.

What was wrong was the opposition the professor assumed between academic complication and “the gist business” of reductive sound bites. Once we accept this opposition, the discussion of academic writing becomes caught in an either-or box, in which the only options are either to write like George Orwell or to contend in the annual Bad Writing Contest sponsored by the journal *Philosophy and Literature*. In fact, any effective discourse necessarily has its reductive moments, but this necessity does not prevent writers from going on to complicate their arguments as much as they can. Reduction and complication are not opposites but both legitimate moments in communication.

I would argue that academic discourse does not make an impact even on academic audiences, much less on the nonacademic world, without considerable reliance on sound bites and the vernacular. Effective academic writing alternates between simplicity and complication, the general rule being Simplify before or after you complicate. For ideas cannot circulate in a complex society unless they can be reduced to concise formulations that sum up a concept or an argument in the speech genres of the vernacular. “Let there be light” was the first sound bite.

Good academic writing, I am suggesting, tends to be “bilingual,” making its point in the complicated language of academese and then restating it in the vernacular (which, interestingly, alters the meaning). Here is an example, from a review by a professor of ecology and evolution, Jerry A. Coyne, of a book on evolutionary biology. Coyne is explaining the theory that men are biologically wired to compete for women:

> [It is this internecine male competitiveness that is assumed to have driven not only the evolution of increased male body size (on average, bigger is better in a physical contest), but also of hormonally mediated male aggression (there is no use being the biggest guy on the block if you are a wallflower). (28)]

Coyne here makes his point first in academese (which I italicized) and then in the vernacular, setting up a dialogue in the text between the writer’s (and the reader’s) academic self and “lay” self. The review appeared in a nonacademic journal, the *New Republic*, but there is nothing in the passage that could not appear in an academic journal or book.

The argument I am making parallels the thesis of Bruce Robbins’s book *Secular Vocations: Intellectuals, Professionalism, Culture*, in which Robbins questions the widespread view that professionalism is intrinsically narcissistic, cutting itself off from accountability to the nonprofessional public. Robbins answers critics of professionalism like Louis Menand, who argues that “as humanistic study has become increasingly professionalized, its practitioners have become less and less disposed to respond to any intellectual challenges except those presented by the work of colleagues within the discipline” (qtd. in Robbins 87). Though Robbins concedes a grain of truth to Menand’s critique of academic disciplines “in the name of outsiders,” he points out that such criticism has long been pervasive among disciplinary insiders. Robbins concludes that
Menand is wrong, after all, to rely on the familiar assumption that professional means private, exclusive, esoteric, inaccessible. For the easy, habitual antithesis between the professional and the public excludes just what Menand himself exemplifies: the professional’s own will, as professional, [...] to take over and mobilize the point of view of “people outside the profession,” to enter into some sort of dialogue with the extra-professional public. (87-88)

As Robbins goes on to argue, the history of professionalism suggests that professions fail to survive unless they enter into a dialogue with the extraprofessional public.

Citing Thomas Haskell’s *The Rise of Professional Social Science* and other histories of professions, Robbins argues that “professions are not hermetically sealed, but porous. [...] Address to outsiders, according to these histories, is indispensable to professional speech” (91). The discourse of the “outside” public is already “inside” professional discourse. Robbins’s point supports my claim that incorporating the voice of the outside public makes professional writing more rather than less effective with other professionals. To translate Robbins’s terms into mine, academics advance not by turning their backs on the perspective of those outside their immediate fields but by writing that perspective into their scholarship, creating a dialogue with a more academic register like the one the ecologist Coyne produces above.

**Burying the Point**

Consider the following incomplete list of intellectual sound bites and the consequences for the intellectual world if scholars could not take them as points of departure:

One cannot step twice into the same river.
I think, therefore I am.
Hell is other people.
A poem should not mean / But be.
The best of all possible worlds

The mind-body problem
Blurred genres
History is written by the winners.
The personal is the political.
Bad money drives out good.
There is nothing outside the text.
The master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house.
Always historicize!
Social constructionism
Philosophers until now have sought to understand the world. The point is to change it.
There is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism.
What do women want?
The will to power
The other-minds problem

This is in no way to propose an *Oxford Book of Quotations* view of the intellectual world, in which Great Thoughts are lifted out of their complex contexts. On the contrary, none of the propositions and concepts listed above can be adequately understood or discussed without setting them in those contexts. But neither can these concepts and propositions be understood and discussed without recourse to such shorthand. Again, it is not that complication is unimportant but that moments of reduction are necessary for dealing with complication. Again, reduction and complication are not opposites but moments in one process.

To be sure, if “Always historicize!” is a kind of sound bite, it is one that only the intellectually initiated are likely to understand. Fredric Jameson’s maxim is accessible to academics and intellectuals outside literary studies, but to circulate in the nonacademic world it would need translation. The point is that even initiated audiences understand such academic communication by translating it into terms familiar to outsiders. To understand “Always historicize!” we translate the maxim into the kind of formulation we would use to explain it to someone unacquainted with arguments like Jameson’s: “in dealing with any
text or event, always examine the history that made it what it is.”

When academic writing is obscure, the reason often lies not in excessive complication but in the relative infrequency of reductive moments when academese is translated into terms intelligible to the uninitiated. Alternatively, even when such reductions appear frequently, they may come at the wrong times in the text, perhaps too late to help. These are among the ways academic writing makes itself look more forbidding and incomprehensible to uninitiated readers than it needs to be.

To illustrate, I want to look at some passages from Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s Epistemology of the Closet, a pioneering work in what has come to be called queer theory. Sedgwick’s very title constitutes a kind of caution flag, as if to warn readers not to expect any compromises with reductive vernacular discourse. And much of the writing in the opening pages of the book seems to bear out the warning:

For meanwhile the whole realm of what modern culture refers to as “sexuality” and also calls “sex”—the array of acts, expectations, narratives, pleasures, identity-formations, and knowledges, in both women and men, that tends to cluster most densely around certain genital sensations but is not adequately defined by them—that realm is virtually impossible to situate on a map delimited by the feminist-defined sex/gender distinction […]. (29)

This is the kind of prose that discourages casual readers and seemingly supports the belief that academic writing is only for the initiated. Indeed, Sedgwick’s vocabulary—“identity-formations,” “the feminist-defined sex/gender distinction”—is specialized to the point of sounding clinical. Yet if one can get to the issues raised in the passage, they turn out to be broad and general: How secure is the standard division of the sexes into male and female? Is this division grounded in biology, or is it socially conditioned? Sedgwick’s language obscures the fact that the questions she raises about the nature of sex and gender are potentially of general interest to nonspecialists.3

Even more interesting, some fifty pages into the book the prose clouds suddenly part. This occurs when Sedgwick turns to summarizing and answering the hostile questions about gay studies posed by journalists and other lay people as well as academics:

Has there ever been a gay Socrates?
Has there ever been a gay Shakespeare?
Has there ever been a gay Proust?

Sedgwick replies:

Does the Pope wear a dress? If these questions startle, it is not least as tautologies. A short answer, though a very incomplete one, might be that not only have there been a gay Socrates, Shakespeare, and Proust, but that their names are Socrates, Shakespeare, and Proust; and beyond that, legion—dozens of the most centrally canonic figures in what the monoculturalists are pleased to consider “our” culture, as indeed, always in different forms and senses, in every other.

What’s now in place, in contrast, in most scholarship and most curricula is an even briefer response to questions like these: Don’t ask. Or, less laconically: You shouldn’t know. (52)

“Don’t ask. You shouldn’t know” is about as vernacular as you can get, echoing the Jewish mothers of popular culture, including (for those old enough to remember) Gertrude Berg on The Goldbergs. The passage illustrates how even the most intellectually challenging academic writing often translates its arguments into folk maxims recognizable to a lay audience.

In this respect, the rhetorical ballpark of academic writing is not as far removed from that of popular editorial writing as we might think. Compare Sedgwick’s encapsulation of her opponents’ view as “Don’t ask. You shouldn’t know” with the lead paragraph of an op-ed piece by William Safire about the congressional debate on the impeachment of President Clinton: “In
blowing off the House Judiciary Committee’s $1 interrogatories, a mockingly evasive Bill Clinton told the Congress of the United States: Take your impeachment process and stick it in your ear.” Sedgwick goes on to complicate her point far more than Safire does his, but her complications are set up by the same kind of reduction employed by Safire. The difference between Safire and Sedgwick is not that one uses sound bites while the other does not but that the editorialist puts his best sound bite up front, where it will control how readers process the rest of his text, whereas the academic buries her most effective sound bites fifty pages into a denser prose that prevents some readers from ever reaching them.

I stumbled onto this problem when I assigned *Epistemology of the Closet* in a graduate course several years ago and got several complaints from students that the book was unreadable. I pointed these students to the “Don’t ask. You shouldn’t know” passage, asking if they did not at least find this material as reader-friendly as they could wish for. To my surprise, the students seemed not to have noticed the passage nor its change of style. My first thought was that the students had been so stupefied by the impenetrable opening pages that they stopped reading before they got to the more readable part. I became convinced, however, that like many who are frustrated by academic writing (especially when it is “theory”), the students more likely expected Sedgwick’s text to be unintelligible that they failed to notice that part of it was not, figuring that if they seemed to understand it they must be missing something.

To be sure, a conservative journalist like Safire can take for granted a consensus on his assumptions that an academic queer theorist cannot. Some will say that this is simply the nature of things, that poststructuralism and queer theory are too subversive of received common sense to attract many general readers, that there is nothing to be done. Yet if Sedgwick could translate her points so effectively into the vernacular in one part of her text with no loss of complexity (as I believe she does in the “Don’t ask” passage), it is hard to see why she could not have done so in other parts as well. At the least, Sedgwick could have moved some of her vernacular moments up to the front, where they would have had a chance to control the reader’s reception of the denser material.

Jameson (despite having copped some bad-writing awards) provides an interesting counterexample in *The Political Unconscious,* which he front-loaded with the memorable “Always historicize!” (9). Furthermore, Jameson makes clear early on that to always historicize well we need Marxism, which he calls “that ‘untranscendable horizon’ that subsumes such apparently antagonistic or incommensurable critical operations, assigning them an undoubted sectoral validity within itself, and thus at once canceling and preserving them” (10). To be sure, phrases like “untranscendable horizon,” “subsumes,” “incommensurable,” and “sectoral validity” are far from anybody’s vernacular except for theoryheads and cultural studies specialists. Nevertheless, such phrases are not exclusive to any single academic field. And despite the turgid diction, the claim being made is helpfully reductive: Marxism trumps and includes all other isms.

The point is that Jameson’s writing differs crucially from merely obscure writing in the same intellectual vein by frequently packaging itself in reductive formulations, without which his book would not likely have become one of the academic best-sellers of our era. Because Jameson has said up front what the big point of his book is, readers can slog through lengthy sections that they may only partially comprehend—like the eighty-five-page heavy lifting of the introductory chapter, “On Interpretation,” with its formidable analyses of Hegel, Althusser, Greimas, Freud, and numerous other thinkers themselves noted for their difficulty.

Jameson has followed some of the oldest and simplest rhetorical advice: “First, tell ’em what you’re going to tell ’em; then tell ’em; then tell ’em what you told ’em.” Though readers may
get lost, as I at times did, attempting to keep up with the details, they will know where they are if they keep in mind the reductive meta-argument given in the opening pages—always historicize; always see that Marxism “subsumes” other ways to historicize. I am suggesting not that such writing should be skimmed in Cliffs Notes fashion but only that its difficulties are local, subsumed, as Jameson might say, by a metacommentary that is presented reductively up front. This procedure is very different from that of academic texts without such metacommentary, where one gropes for pages trying to figure out what the author’s point is and why he or she is impelled to make it. There is certainly plenty of this latter kind of academic writing around, but I submit that it does not get into circulation.

But surely that claim, you will say, is resoundingly refuted by the popularity and professional visibility of “theory,” which is simultaneously academically influential and unreadable. Theory is influential despite—or, some would argue, because of—its obscurity, thereby proving that if you want to get ahead in the academy, you must avoid sound bites, vernacular, and clarity and make your writing as difficult as possible, if not opaque.

One way to reply to this argument is simply to list the many prominent literary and cultural theorists who write an accessible, even entertaining, form of “vernacular theory”: Roland Barthes, Terry Eagleton, Stanley Fish, Henry Louis Gates, Bruce Robbins, Jane Tompkins, Wayne Booth, Jonathan Culler, Marjorie Garber, Michael Bérbé, W. J. T. Mitchell, Nancy Miller, Sandra Gilbert, Susan Gubar, Robert Scholes—the list could go on and on. (Even Homi Bhabha, Jameson’s frequent rival for bad-writing awards, writes very readable journalism for the New Statesman whose ideas overlap with those in his academic books.) To illustrate these theorists’ reliance on the vernacular, one could list titles of theirs drawn from popular songs (“Short People Got No Reason to Live” [Fish], “Me and My Shadow” [Tompkins], “What’s Love Got to Do with It?” [Gates]) and from popular films (“The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly” [Mitchell]). Eagleton has set theory into song lyrics, as in his parody of vulgar-Marxist criticism, “The Ballad of English Literature”:

- Chaucer was a class traitor
- Shakespeare hated the mob
- Donne sold out a bit later
- Sidney was a nob

[. . . . . . . .]

- There are only three names
- To be plucked from this dismal set
- Milton Blake and Shelley
- Will smash the ruling class yet

That theory has become synonymous with obscurity even though much of it is more lucidly written than most average academic prose is further testimony to the myth of academic difficulty. The myth obscures from us what is before our eyes—promoting the kind of misrecognition that current theory tries to understand.

**Where You Say It**

When I served in the early 1980s as the director of a university press, I became aware that academic writers often give little thought to rhetorical matters like where one places one’s points in a text. In reviewing and editing manuscripts, I repeatedly came on central arguments hidden in mid-paragraph or mid-sentence, obscured by surrounding subordinate clauses, or inserted too late in the text to be readily noticed, much less to control how readers processed the book. (I recognized these features in my own writing, as I had learned to write in graduate school, and they are not easy to change even now.) I also found repeatedly that the argument the author had chosen to make central was less interesting or important than arguments that were subordinate or marginal. Some—by no means all—university press and journal editors let such problems pass without comment. In part this is because academic editors are overworked (and underpaid),
but I suspect it is also because some editors, like other people, expect academic writing to be unintelligible to all but a few experts.

Some of the rhetorical misjudgments I just cataloged are inevitable in any piece of writing (I don’t want to think about those I may be committing in this essay). But often academic writers simply do not think much about these matters (an argument for not exempting professors from the teaching of composition), perhaps because they are not confident that their work will ever be read. And until recently, most academics had good reason to think this way. Zachary Karabell is right when he says in his recent book What’s College For? that “people outside the university rarely care, and even more rarely can understand, what academics are talking about.” Yet Karabell adds that “people do care about [...] issues” similar to those raised in academic work (73). As many academic fields have come to be concerned with contemporary culture (including the relation of the past to contemporary culture) and with issues of politics and cultural representation of the kind with which Sedgwick and Jameson deal, larger numbers of people outside the academy are now interested in “what academics are talking about,” even if the interest is hostile. It is as if the rhetorical climate had changed so quickly that academics had not yet adjusted. We go on writing as if nobody out there cared, and we are surprised and hurt when it turns out they do care and blast us for being opaque or politically correct. (The recent “science wars,” epitomized by Alan Sokal’s parodic article in Social Text, are but one example of the way intellectual disputes that would once have been conducted in the privacy of the seminar room today tend to be fought out in the public spotlight.)

Sedgwick (like the editors of Social Text) has received numerous bashings from journalistic reviewers, who have generally misunderstood her work. (One of the nastiest, meanest, and most uncomprehending recently appeared in the New Republic, by Lee Siegel [30].) I don’t claim that these bashings and misunderstandings would not have occurred had Sedgwick brought her most accessible pages to the front of her major book instead of burying them or had she made more use of her vernacular skills. At the least, however, she would have made her book harder to trash and misrepresent with impunity.

Though avant-garde academics are often right when they complain that they have been grossly misrepresented by their critics in the culture war (Bérubé; Felski), their training in rhetoric should by now have taught them the hard rule of public communication: to decline to use sound bites (or to bury them from view or muffle them beyond recognition) is to become vulnerable to the sound bites of others. The most salient recent example of this rule is the popular misunderstanding of deconstruction, an ironic outcome since the problem of the sound bite is one that deconstruction helps illuminate. One of the most widely ridiculed deconstructionist ideas is that in an important sense texts are “unreadable,” as Paul de Man frequently argued. Such a claim seemingly confirmed the criticism of detractors like David Lehman, John Ellis, and Dinesh D’Souza, whose accounts have established in many minds that, in D’Souza’s words, “deconstructionists hold that all literature is empty of meaning” (178) or that words can mean anything we want them to mean.

J. Hillis Miller, however, argues that when de Man writes of “the unreadability of the text,” he means not the text’s lack of meaning but “the text’s inability to read itself” (38). What de Man is getting at is a discrepancy between what a text says and what it says it says when it summarizes its own meaning, as in a sound bite. Every writer has had the experience of becoming aware, deep into preparing an essay, that the amassed examples and evidence not only do not clearly support the writer’s thesis but could also be used to support an opposing thesis. Reformulated this way, the deconstructive idea of the unreadability of the text becomes less obscurantist
and more interesting (and, in my experience, pedagogically useful) than it appears.

Deconstructionists argue that this discrepancy between what a text means and what it says it means is not a mistake, an accident, or an aberration but rather a structural feature of all communication. The lack of a perfect fit between our examples and what they are supposed to exemplify, a fit with no residue of unwanted implication, cannot be eliminated through further revision, since it is rooted in divisions that are sedimented into language—or rooted in the reality that the same set of facts can always be used to demonstrate opposing conclusions. When we adduce evidence for a claim, what it is evidence of or for is always contestable, which is why policy debates so often take the form of battles between competing applications of the same agreed-on facts. This is to say not that we have to give up (or could give up) trying to control our meanings but rather that there are limits to that control.

Unfortunately for the fate of deconstructionism, the clarifying sound bite I quoted above from Miller (which caused the scales to drop from my eyes) appears in the middle of a long paragraph about something else on page 38 of a book whose main topic is or claims to be "the ethics of reading." Would the reception of deconstruction have been friendlier had Miller moved his sentence up to page 1 and then proceeded to write a book about how the sentence's point has been missed: that deconstruction is not about how texts are meaningless or literally unreadable but about the ways texts systematically misread themselves? Perhaps the reception would not have been different—we don't know because nobody has yet written such a book.

Let me try to say exactly what I mean (though de Man says I can't quite). I do not underestimate the difficulty in bridging the enormous gap between academic and nonacademic communication (or even the large gaps between the discourses of academics in different disciplines). But neither should we exaggerate the distance between the academic and the popular, especially if doing so excuses bad academic habits of communication. What has obscured the passages in which intellectual discourse and the discourse of everyday intersect is not just the necessarily specialized vocabularies and conventions of the intellectual world but also our assumption that these discourses have nothing to say to each other. Such an assumption keeps us needlessly pessimistic about the chances of bridging the gap between research and teaching, about the potential of academic institutions to reach students, and about the academic potential of students themselves. We also mislead those students into thinking that the forms of thought and expression they learned while growing up have to be abandoned if they hope to do well in school.

Some Dos and Don'ts for Academic Writers

1. Be dialogical. Begin your text by directly identifying the prior conversation or debate that you are entering. What you are saying probably won't make sense unless readers know the conversation in which you say it.

2. Make a claim, the sooner the better, and flag it for the reader by a phrase like "My claim here is that [...]." You don't have to use such a phrase, but if you can't do so you're in trouble.

3. Remind readers of your claim periodically, especially the more you complicate it. If you're writing about a disputed topic (and if you aren't, why write?), you'll also have to stop and tell readers what you are not saying, what you don't want to be taken as saying. Some of them will take you as saying that anyway, but you don't have to make it easy for them.

4. Summarize the objections that you anticipate can be made (or that have been made) against your claim. Remember that objectors, even when mean and nasty, are your friends—they help you clarify your claim, and they indicate why it is of interest to others besides yourself. If the objectors weren't out there, you
wouldn’t need to say what you are saying.

5. Say explicitly—or at least imply—why your ideas are important, what difference it makes to the world if you are right or wrong, and so forth. Imagine a reader over your shoulder who asks, “So what?” Or, “Who cares about any of this?” Again, you don’t have to write in such questions, but if you were to write them in and couldn’t answer them, you’re in trouble.

6. (This one is already implicit in several of the above points.) Generate a metatext that stands apart from your main text and puts it in perspective. Any essay really consists of two texts, one in which you make your argument and a second in which you tell readers how (and how not) to read it. This second text is usually signaled by reflexive phrases like “I do not mean to suggest that [ ... ],” “Here you will probably object that [ ... ],” “To put the point another way [ ... ],” “But why am I so emphatic on this point?,” and “What I’ve been trying to say here, then, is [ ... ].” When writing is unclear or lame (as beginning student writing often is), the reason usually has less to do with jargon or verbal obscurity than with the absence of such metacommentary, which may be needed to explain why it was necessary to write the essay.

7. Remember that readers can process only one claim at a time, so there’s no use trying to squeeze in secondary and tertiary claims that are better left for another book, essay, or paragraph or at least for another part of your book or essay, where they can be clearly marked off from your main claim. If you’re an academic, you are probably so eager to prove that you’ve left no thought unconsidered that you find it hard to resist the temptation to say everything at once, and consequently you say nothing that is understood while producing horribly overloaded paragraphs and sentences like this sentence, monster-sized discursive footnotes, and readers who fling your text aside and turn on the TV.

8. Be bilingual. It is not necessary to avoid academese—you sometimes need the stuff. But whenever you have to say something in academese, try to say it in the vernacular as well. You’ll be surprised to find that when you restate an academic point in your nonacademic voice, the point is enriched (or else you see how vacuous it is), and you’re led to new perceptions.

9. Don’t kid yourself. If you could not explain it to your parents or your most mediocre student, the chances are you don’t understand it yourself.

None of what I have said in this essay should be mistaken for the claim that all academic scholarship can or should be addressed to a nonacademic audience. The ability to do advanced research and the ability to explain that research to nonprofessional audiences do not always appear in the same person. To adapt a concept from the philosopher Hilary Putnam, there is a linguistic division of labor in which the work of research and that of popularization are divided among different people, as Friedrich Engels was rewrite man for Karl Marx. Yet even Marx’s most difficult and uncompromising texts have their Engels moments—Engels could not have summarized Marx’s doctrine if they did not. In short, it is time to rethink the view that the university is not in the gist business.

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NOTES

1 Why this mystification of our expertise occurs—whether through a silent conspiracy of academics to keep the public dependent on us or (as I believe) through more complicated causes—is an important question, but one I am not able to pursue here.

2 The opposition is actually circular, a self-fulfilling prediction. The sociologist Howard Becker wittily observed (in conversation) that there is something tautological about the common view that sociologists write badly, since the work of anyone who writes well is not considered sociology. Becker’s own work and career refute the belief that social scientists must write obfuscatorily to be influential. See his useful guide, Writing for Social Scientists.

3 I have made this argument at greater length in two essays.
WORKS CITED


