



A Guide to Accessible Writing

Accessible writing goals are a constant challenge for scholars and experts who want to reach a wider audience without diluting the complexity of their scholarship. While the advice to make academic writing 'simpler' or 'easy to comprehend' is popular, this guide suggests that accessible writing should ideally find a way to invite the reader into the scholarly field. In other words, instead of meeting hypothetical readers on what is presumed to be their turf, we recommend that readers are invited into our specialized world. One should, obviously, remain mindful of the challenges involved in such an endeavor.

Reasonable goals

Solicited columns or commentaries written by scholars for mainstream platforms are often useful guides on how to make expertise and research accessible to a broader audience. Some common features from works of successful columnists include:

1. One submission, one argument (or two, closely inter-connected arguments): A successful columnist holds on tightly to the thread of the central argument throughout the article and every thematic description or analysis demonstratively loops back to the original premise.
2. Delineation: The introduction as well as concluding sentences (up to two) in these pieces include every idea discussed in the submission. If an article cannot be summarized in 2-3 sentences, it is probably trying to cover too much ground. (Caution: [Some scholars](#), who write for broader audience, unwittingly end up producing articles that go far beyond what their compact introduction states.)
3. Writing versus editing: A common complaint among editors of non-academic platforms is that scholars try to compress multiple ideas that each require longer pieces and more historical and conceptual background into shorter pieces for mainstream consumption. The writing likewise reflects an attempt to simplify existing scholarly writing for a different audience. Accessible columns start with a clean slate where both the content and the style are tailored towards broader appeal.
4. Make more paragraphs: Every concept or idea deserves its own paragraph. Even if the article as a whole does not come together for the reader, well-rounded paragraphs and sections offer a lot to think about.



Check out this philosopher's recent column in the New York Times:

<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/16/opinion/covid-philosophy.html>

Professor Asma has a rather abrupt but intriguing introduction which presents the evolutionary and religious perspectives on nature that have dominated responses to the pandemic. The conclusion reiterates the same idea but with an added texture drawn from the body of the article. The paragraphs are compact, each reinforcing the central premise. The article is written specifically for the mainstream audience but may also be appreciated by other philosophers.

Academic Jargon

As a general rule, one must avoid assumptions regarding the universality of any term, concept, debates. Terms such as structural racism, performativity, multiculturalism are now part of popular discourse, but it is still recommended that such terms are defined. As an experiment, we can evaluate mainstream articles currently being published by epidemiologists or virologists for the accessibility of specialized knowledge. Can we locate points where the expert could have given more context/definitions?

Although commonly-used words are preferable to specialized terminology, this is not a rule of thumb. The submission is also an educational document and it must ideally introduce readers to new ideas, terminology, and difficult concepts (for example, Prof. Asma uses terms such as *Rhizocephala* and *mythopoetic* but explains what they mean as he goes along).

To reiterate, scholars who regularly write for a broader audience do not assume that the reader is, in any way, familiar with their special field. But the tone of the piece also reflects openness and a collaborative spirit of knowledge sharing. An engaged reader will most likely comprehend complex ideas and nuanced perspectives when presented with proper context, persuasive evidence, and lucid prose. Well-meaning attempts to make scholarly writing 'simple' can end up alienating readers when the tone is perceived as patronizing.

Some articles by scholars who write accessibly for interested audience outside their fields:

Sara Ahmed http://sfonline.barnard.edu/polyphonic/print_ahmed.htm

David Graeber <https://www.ft.com/content/73212b74-c1ba-11e4-8b74-00144feab7de>

Articles which break down scholarship for a mainstream audience

On Intersectionality and Kimberlé Crenshaw:



<https://www.vox.com/the-highlight/2019/5/20/18542843/intersectionality-conservatism-law-race-gender-discrimination>

On Performativity and Judith Butler:

<https://www.thecut.com/2016/06/judith-butler-c-v-r.html>

On the Post-Truth World and Bruno Latour:

<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/25/magazine/bruno-latour-post-truth-philosopher-science.html>

Invitations to read on

It is now a fairly common practice in social science and humanities scholarship to grab the reader's attention early on with a fascinating human-interest story (or something from the current news cycle). These 'hooks' are very useful to connect with a broader audience, but scholars must take special care in selecting the said story or news item. The story must *replace* the introduction rather than just precede it. That is, the story outline or description should also function as a short summary of the article/chapter/paper as a whole. Before settling on your 'hook': 1. Consider the ideas and concepts in the submission as labelled boxes – does the selected story check all the boxes? Can 1 or 2-line summaries of the story also serve as an outline for your piece? Can you keep returning to this story (that is, can you keep mining it) throughout the piece while ensuring that the plot or characters do not become a distraction to your overall analysis?

In this [article](#), Prof. Yascha Mounk skillfully employs a story to introduce the premise of his argument: that the United States is no longer a democracy. The summary of the story simultaneously functions as the summary of his argument: "Yet even in this bastion of deliberation and direct democracy, a nasty suspicion had taken hold: that the levers of power are not controlled by the people."