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THE COSTS OF ECONOMICAL WRITING

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"Economical Writing" is a wonderful guide. Cutting through the tangle of modern economic prose, McCloskey [1985] leaves a well-marked path to good writing. Were economists to follow it, they would carry their ideas to a wider and more comprehending audience. They would rid their journals of the jargon, redundancy, and solecism that obscure the meaning and diminish the value of economic discourse.

But for all its wit and charming good sense, "Economical Writing" risks hurting those it most intends to help. Young economists should understand that good writing has a lower economic value and a higher opportunity cost than McCloskey intimates. An economist trying to publish will misallocate his resources if he takes "Economical Writing" too much to heart.

McCloskey encourages young economists to write well because "rotten writing causes more articles to be rejected for publication than rotten t-statistics. Honest," he says, "[b]ad writing does not get read." The truth is that bad writing does get read—and published and discussed and cited—a fact depressingly easy to document.

For example, turn to the first page following McCloskey's delightful prose. Economists usually exhibit such eloquence as they possess on the first page, yet we find this: "State regulations applying specifically to various aspects of auto-retailing have existed since the mid 1930s."

Using Lanham's [1979, 6] Paramedic Method to improve economy, change the inert verb to an active one, and remove unnecessary prepositions and modifiers. The sentence then reads: "States have regulated aspects of auto-retailing since the mid 1930s." With no loss of meaning, the revision saves 30 percent on words.

Or look at this sentence on the first page of the next article: "Nevertheless, despite disagreement about the actual size of the underground economy, the available evidence points to an underground economy whose absolute and relative size has grown over time."

Economical common sense will improve this sentence. "Nevertheless" and "over time" are redundant; "actual" and "available" are unnecessary. Eliminating them saves 15 percent. To pare the sentence further without impairing its sense, delete one "underground economy;" it repeats where it need not. Take out "size;" things, not sizes, grow. Remove "the evidence points to," because we take it for granted that the author of a scholarly article will present evidence. Written economically, the sentence reads: "Although economists

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disagree about its size, the underground economy has grown." Eleven words instead of twenty-eight. The reader grasps the same idea more quickly.

By modern journal standards these sentences, and the articles in which they appear, are not poorly written. But by McCloskey's standards they are. If economy in expression had value, economists would expunge excess words with the same vigor they apply to the dead weight of welfare triangles. Good writing would share a place of honor with good mathematics and good statistics, and help an author to publish.

As things stand now, the opposite is more often true. The preponderance of poor writing in the economics journals constitutes an Official Style to which authors do well to conform. It marks them as members of a Scientific Society. They belong if they "critique a theoretical structure," but not if they simply criticize ideas. They belong if they "construct a case in which competition is assumed in the market for a good that has a quality dimension," but not if they merely study firms that compete by varying quality.

Editors and referees feel comfortable with the Official Style. They are approving something that appears impartial and scientific. Journal subscribers prefer to read the Official Style for the same reason. There are exceptions among readers, editors and referees, thank God, but as long as most economists believe in the Official Style, most journals will publish it. In this market, as in others, producers supply what consumers demand.

Writing in the Official Style also helps an author to publish by lowering his production costs. Good writing requires long study, hard thought, and repeated edits. Time spent on writing is time taken away from reading another article or running another regression. Rates of return between English and economics equalize well below the competence of McCloskey. If the goal is to publish, writing well misdirects time and labor.

Publishing economical writing, if carried very far, raises costs to editors. Leave aside the enormous amount of time it would take an editor to transform every piece into respectable prose; no one can reasonably expect devotion of this magnitude. The alternative is for authors to do the work themselves. Many would not or could not. An editor who demanded such work would lose submissions to other journals and lower the reputation of his own.¹

I do not mean that the low value and high costs of writing well should prevent economists from doing it. On the contrary, I hope economists heed McCloskey's advice, because the objective benefits (as opposed to the subjective perception of them) are so great. Quiller-Couch [1916, 117] was right in saying, "... to write jargon is to be perpetually shuffling around in the fog and cotton-wool of abstract terms . . ." Cutting the jargon improves economists' collective eyesight, enabling them to see farther and observe more closely. Mark Twain [1962, 226] was also right: "... the difference between the almost right word and the right word is really a large matter—'tis the difference between the

1. Collectively, editors could avoid such costs by forming a style cartel. Since there is little incentive to enforce its provisions, the cartel would probably be unstable.

lightning bug and the lightning." Exact diction energizes mental circuits and orders thought, as a magnet's force orders iron filings on a page. McCloskey [1985, 220] is emphatically right: "... economics is too fine a subject to be left in a verbal mess out of mere sloth." Economical writing shows respect for ideas and courtesy to those trying to understand them. Few traits are more important to scientific progress than respect for truth and civility in communicating it.

As more economists heed McCloskey's advice, the costs of doing so will fall, setting in motion a beneficent process. At the beginning of the process, a few economists recognize the virtues of economical style and submit to its discipline. Through example and exhortation, they convince an additional few, who do the same, and so on. Each step increases the demand for discriminating style and decreases its costs. If pressed with enough skill and dedication, the process will end in a fine prose with which to produce and exchange economic ideas.

The process needs leaders—the McCloskeys to initially persuade, the first ranks of economists to express their ideas vividly and gracefully, the pioneering editors to reward economical writing. To be sure, the leaders will bear increased costs; but their commitment to honest English can, in the long run, confer immeasurable benefit on the substance and style of economics. We should all hope that our profession learns to write. We should thank McCloskey for prodding us. But any economist about to invest in economical writing should carefully assess his costs, and balance them with the prospective gains.

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