"Academia, Here I Come!" : Plain Language and Academese in the Postsecondary Academy

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“ACADEMIA, HERE I COME!": PLAIN LANGUAGE AND ACADEMESE IN THE POSTSECONDARY ACADEMY

by

Heather Lockhart

A Master’s Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of Montclair State University

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Abstract

Since the birth of the plain language movement forty years ago, proponents of plain language have seen a considerable uptick in plain language advocacy, use, legislation, and regulation within government, legal, and business organizations. Those who have adopted this style believe that its most important benefits include increased clarity, ease of both reading and writing, and accessibility. In spite of these benefits, one field that has not yet embraced plain language is academia—a field that, as many have argued, could benefit from adopting a plainer writing style in order to make academic texts more accessible. The uncertainty about plain language’s place, specifically in the postsecondary academy, is at the center of a heated debate about language use in general, and calls into question whether the existence of inflated, obfuscatory academic language—known as academese—is as problematic as some make it out to be.

The three chapters of this thesis cover plain language’s history and its definitions, the debate about academese, and concepts from cognitive psychology that provide deeper insight into perceptions about language use in the postsecondary academy from a student point of view. What emerges from synthesizing these components is that these two language extremes constitute opposite poles of a spectrum of writing styles that can be used successfully in academic context.
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Montclair, NJ

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This thesis is dedicated in memory of my uncle.
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Introduction

Over the past forty years, proponents of what has become known as the plain language movement have seen a considerable increase in plain language advocacy, use, legislation, and regulation within government, legal, and business organizations. This uptick is in large part due to the passage of laws such as the Plain Writing Act of 2010, signed into effect by President Barack Obama in October of that year, which made plain language writing a requirement in government documents and other bureaucratic publications. However, in spite of these organizations embracing plain language for its suggested benefits—clarity, ease of both reading and writing, and accessibility—considerable debate about plain language’s place in the rest of the world still exists, particularly within academic circles. Some scholars claim that the postsecondary academic world favors inflated, obscure, and confusing language that has been slapped with labels such as “Engfish” (Macrorie 1) and “academese” (Chase 55; Oxford English Dictionary) and consequently argue that plain language use, specifically within the postsecondary academy, is sorely needed for the benefit of scholars and students alike. Others, especially some scholars in the humanities and social sciences, disagree.

In this thesis, I explore the issues surrounding the use of plain language in place of complicated and confusing language in academic writing. The debate about language use in the academy has existed about as long as the plain language movement itself, and the question it boils down to is: Does plain language have a place in the academy, and, if so, what is that place? To answer this question, I dissect plain language and the plain language movement through a series of investigations into its history, its goals, the arguments for and against its use within the academy, and what qualitative and
quantitative evidence exists in support of those arguments. Because the phrase “plain language” can mean different things to different people, I examine its goals by framing it as a social and intellectual movement that has specifically influenced two groups whose impact on our lives is felt on an almost daily basis: the government and the world of higher education.

Using a theoretical framework of institutional critique based on the work of James E. Porter, Patricia Sullivan, Stuart Blythe, Jeffrey T. Grabill, and Libby Miles, I approach this topic from a few theoretical angles in order to explore the arguments for and against plain language use and lend some credence to both sides of the debate. Their work is also important for creating a connection between government and academic institutions and justifying their meshing together in this research. As Porter et al. explain: “Though institutions are certainly powerful, they are not monoliths; they are rhetorically constructed human designs (whose power is reinforced by buildings, laws, traditions, and knowledge-making practices) and so are changeable” (611). Many proponents of plain language use hold similar opinions, especially those within the government who support the plain language movement and those within the academy who have criticized academic language for being needlessly complex at times. Porter et al.’s framework embodies the beliefs of plain language supporters because institutional critique “[aims] to change the practices of institutional representatives and to improve the conditions of those affected by and served by institutions” (611). At the same time, though, an identical argument could be made by those who would rather not see academics adopt a plainer style of writing. Plain language proponents like Stuart Chase and Ken Macrorie believe that high-level ideas can and should be conveyed plainly; some of those on the other side
of the debate, like Judith Butler and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, believe that high-level ideas deserve high-level language.

This divide in opinions about language use in the postsecondary academy has serious implications, especially when examined within this framework. Both sides are pushing for a change that would affect a huge portion of the academy’s population—in this case, students and educators—by shifting the power dynamic created from using certain kinds of language in an academic setting. When students enter a college classroom, they are expected to present their ideas in a way that is often new to them, so they look to a source of power for guidance. The professor is this source of power; professors represent the institutions where they work, and they talk and write in ways that reflect the academic climates of their respective institutions. This behavior contributes to the rhetorical construction of the academy itself, which is what most influences students as they progress through the world of higher education. Institutional critique’s insistence on examining powerful groups by the ways in which they are rhetorically constructed—that is, by the myriad ways they use language and what effects arise as a result of that language use—allows for a game of tug-of-war between those caught up in the plain language debate that may not be as unwinnable as it seems.

The first chapter examines the concept of plain language in governmental contexts in order to show the ways in which its various definitions connect, as well as to provide examples of plain language at work. The first chapter also introduces the complaints about academic writing and sets up parallels between what plain language proponents in academia are calling for and what plain language proponents in government have already put into place. The second chapter highlights specific
arguments for and against plain language’s use within the academy via a literature review surveying the work of scholars who have criticized what they see as overly-complicated academic talk (including Alan Sokal, Philip Eubanks, and John D. Schaeffer), and scholars who consider such language both a necessary feature of the academy and an unavoidable part of academic life (such as Butler and Spivak). The third chapter explores recent studies conducted on the cognitive concept of fluency in order to provide a more solid, scientific foundation from which those scholars’ stances can be argued. This research shows that different types of language—in this case, plain language versus complicated language—are processed and evaluated differently by audiences, depending on the level of complexity of the text. The results of these studies provide a new way of looking at the plain language debate as it pertains to academia, as they suggest that there may be firm middle ground on which everyone engaged in the debate can comfortably stand.
Chapter 1: Plain Language Foundations

As Beth Mazur writes, “Ask 10 people [to define plain language] and you’ll get 10 different answers.” The phrase “plain language,” which seems as straightforward as the language it promotes, is in that way almost deceptively simple, but its meaning and interpretation vary according to the context in which it is used. The many definitions of plain language that currently exist depend on the occupation or academic discipline of the definer, but most important is highlighting the similarities between these definitions to understand what plain language, at its core, is, and what the goals of the plain language movement are.

The “plain language movement” discussed in this chapter refers to a movement currently taking place in government, politics, and the business world. Legislation passed over the past few decades has made plain language use a requirement in United States government agencies, and the passing of these laws has consequently amplified the calls for plain language use within groups outside the confines of bureaucracy. The push for plain language use within institutions of higher education is a good example of the movement reaching beyond politicians and public servants. However, because proponents of the movement within the government have had to make clear to the public what plain language is according to them so that other groups can follow suit, this chapter positions those widely accepted definitions alongside recent calls for increased clarity in academic writing. Although those definitions of plain language are written with bureaucratic purposes in mind, the features that they most emphasize—clarity and accessibility—are the same features called for by proponents of plain language use within academia, so these definitions could eventually be applied across the board.
Throughout history, all the way back to (and especially during) the days of the Greco-Roman philosophers,¹ people have promoted the use of plain language—also sometimes called plain English and plain writing—in order to facilitate more effective communication of ideas. In recent years, this advocacy has birthed a fully-fledged movement that has been endorsed and adopted by many; similar to what has been put in place in the United States government, countries worldwide have implemented—or are either in the process of implementing or proposing—laws that require government agencies to write their documents in succinct, straightforward language that is accessible to all literate citizens.² In spite of the popularity of the plain language movement, though, a universally agreed-upon definition of plain language itself does not yet exist.

Plain language has roots in information design, which emphasizes “creating clear, organised, and concise communications (in any language) that are easy to read, understand and use” (Information Design Association, “Definitions”). Federal plain language guidelines do not stipulate a standard reading level for documents,³ but emphasize that readers should be able to “find what they need, understand what they find, and use what they find to meet their needs” (PLAIN, “Federal Plain Language

¹ See texts such as Cicero’s De Oratore, Demetrius’s De Elocutione, and Quintilian’s Institutio Oratoria. Though these deal largely with verbal rhetoric and recognize the use of plain language as a style all its own—that is, the “plain style”—they still each, in some way, emphasize clarity as a necessary part of the communication process.

² Some of these countries include Spain, Portugal, Brazil, Mexico, Australia, New Zealand, Belgium, Sweden, Norway, and Britain (PLAIN2013, “Home”).

³ These guidelines are available in full at http://www.plainlanguage.gov/howto/guidelines/FederalPLGuidelines/index.cfm
Guidelines”). Similarly, common features of the many definitions of plain language that do exist place heavy emphasis on clarity and understandability above all else. According to PlainLanguage.gov, run by the Plain Language Action and Information Network (PLAIN), “plain language is defined by results—it is easy to read, understand, and use” (“What is Plain Language?”). Robert Eagleson, an Australian professor of Modern English, provides a more elaborate definition:

[Plain language is] clear, straightforward expression, using only as many words as are necessary. It is language that avoids obscurity, inflated vocabulary and convoluted sentence construction. It is not baby talk, nor is it a simplified version of the English language. Writers of plain English let their audience concentrate on the message instead of being distracted by complicated language.

In that vein, Martin Cutts, research director at the Plain Language Commission in the United Kingdom and author of the Oxford Guide to Plain English, defines plain language as “the writing and setting out of essential information in a way that gives a cooperative, motivated person a good chance of understanding the document at the first reading, and in the same sense that the writer meant it to be understood” (3). The qualifying language Cutts uses is worth noting, as he assumes readers must approach a text with something of an agenda; in this case, they must be “cooperative” and “motivated” in order to understand the text, which is a statement that carries some potentially serious political implications. If someone is reading a text filled with claims and beliefs that come into conflict with his own, it may be likely that, on some level, he will feel at least a little bit “uncooperative” while reading. This definition is therefore slightly more problematic
than other definitions of plain language due to what it suggests in terms of reader
expectation. All definitions could be seen as problematic in some way, though, as they all
come pre-loaded with a set of expectations for both the reader and the text.

Most other explanations of plain language fall more in line with Eagleson’s,
which assumes that readers approach texts as literate English speakers. This assumption
is problematic as well, though; not all English speakers are literate enough to understand
even plain language when used in certain contexts, but the extant definitions of plain
language do not seem to take that into account. Duncan Berry states that the “goal of the
plain-language movement is to produce language (particularly written English) which is
clear, straightforward expression, using only as many words as are necessary, and which
avoids obscurity, inflated vocabulary and convoluted sentence construction” (48).
Jacqueline Domey explains that plain language “favors the interests of the reader and
consumer over the private or organizational interests of the writer” (49). For this
definition, the “organizational interests” to which Domey refers might fall under the
interests and goals of academic institutions or academia as a whole, which both
undoubtedly influence how academic writers present their message, and the “private”
interests may include the aspirations of those academics who seek publication. Together,
these interests could contribute to the pervasiveness of overly-complicated academic
writing. Because academic writers often write for an academic audience, they may
assume their readers will be able to understand what they have written simply because the
communication taking place is between two (or more) highly educated people, so the
playing field is perceived as level. But this is not always true; other academics, like
Cornel West and Neil deGrasse Tyson, have published extremely popular works for
“non-academic” audiences. Yet the perception is still that academics write mostly for other academics, and one way to remedy that misconception is by changing the ways academics use language all the time—not just when writing for a more common audience.

Of course, this is a point of contention that assumes changing language use in this way will not just make it simple, but simple-minded. But, as Eagleson points out, plain language is not language that should be labeled “dumbed-down.” To suggest that is to go against the purposes of plain language entirely; dumbing down a text would suggest something has been taken away, which may impact the accessibility of the document just as much as if the text were written in another language entirely due to the removal of essential information. Plain language does not necessarily aim to reduce, though that is often a result of plain language translations; rather, plain language aims to augment by way of clarification. Words that were judged as not needed in the first place, or words which obstruct understandability, are removed or changed to make way for a clearer point. As Mazur writes,

The majority of plain-language resources do not advocate shortening and dumbing down documents. In fact, many plain language proponents seem to share a similar respect for the user with their information design counterparts. For example, [Cutts] notes, plain language “…does not mean always using simple words at the expense of the most accurate words or writing whole documents in kindergarten language.”
The arguments put forth by Mazur and other plain language proponents is that plain language is not one of those concepts that only work in theory; it works in practice, as well.

The following short examples, provided by PLAIN, show plain language at work.\(^4\) Some are more dramatic than others in their degree of change, but all illustrate the impact plain language use can have on overall readability of a text.

\[\text{Medicare Beneficiary Services: Fraud Correspondence}\]

\textbf{Before:}

Investigators at the contractor will review the facts in your case and decide the most appropriate course of action. The first step taken with most Medicare health care providers is to reeducate them about Medicare regulations and policies. If the practice continues, the contractor may conduct special audits of the provider’s medical records. Often, the contractor recovers overpayments to health care providers this way. If there is sufficient evidence to show that the provider is consistently violating Medicare policies, the contractor will document the violations and ask the Office of the Inspector General to prosecute the case. This can lead to expulsion from the Medicare program, civil monetary penalties, and imprisonment.

\[^4\text{ Longer examples can be found on the Center for Plain Language’s website,} \]

\http://centerforplainlanguage.org, where documents and letters are available in full.
After:

We will take two steps to look at this matter: We will find out if it was an error or fraud. We will let you know the result. (PLAIN, “Plain Language: Before and After – Medicare Fraud Letter”)

Department of Health and Human Services: Assuring Access to Essential Health Care

Before:

Title I of the CARE Act creates a program of formula and supplemental competitive grants to help metropolitan areas with 2,000 or more reported AIDS cases meet emergency care needs of low-income HIV patients. Title II of the Ryan White Act provides formula grants to States and territories for operation of HIV service consortia in the localities most affected by the epidemic, provision of home and community-based care, continuation of insurance coverage for persons with HIV infection, and treatments that prolong life and prevent serious deterioration of health. Up to 10 percent of the funds for this program can be used to support Special Projects of National Significance.

After:

Low income people living with HIV/AIDS gain, literally, years, through the advanced drug treatments and ongoing care supported by HRSA’s Ryan White Comprehensive AIDS Resources Emergency (CARE) Act. (PLAIN, “Before and After – Essential Health Care HHS Publication”)

National Highway Traffic Safety Administration: Car Safety

Before:

This is a multipurpose passenger vehicle which will handle and maneuver differently from an ordinary passenger car, in driving conditions which may occur on streets and highways and off road. As with other vehicles of this type, if you make sharp turns or abrupt maneuvers, the vehicle may roll over or may go out of control and crash. You should read driving guidelines and instructions in the Owner’s Manual, and WEAR YOUR SEAT BELTS AT ALL TIMES.

After:

![Figure 1. Higher Rollover Risk sticker. The text reads: “Avoid Abrupt Maneuvers and Excessive Speed. Always Buckle Up. See Owner’s Manual for Further Information.” The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration won the thirteenth “No Gobbledygook Award” for this revision (“Plain Language: Before and After – Car Safety”). Original image located at http://www.plainlanguage.gov/examples/before_after/carsafety.cfm; new image provided by the author for clarity.](image)
In these examples, the translated text is shorter than the original, yet they still convey most of the information necessary to ensure that the reader understands what is being said. In the Medicare fraud letter example, specific legal information was removed and replaced with a simple notification of what the customers should expect and what action they should take. Whoever translated the original letter into plain language decided the legal warning included in the original wasn’t necessary at that stage of correspondence, since an investigation of the issue hadn’t yet occurred. A similar change was made in the Department of Health and Human Services memo: The editor removed the specific, jargon-filled information about the CARE Act and instead emphasized the information most relevant, and likely most important, to those who would be impacted by it.

The car safety notice is the best example out of all these in terms of improved accessibility; it conveys information visually, which is especially important when considering the purpose of that information: It is much easier for drivers to flip down their sun visors and quickly understand the warning when presented visually. Other agencies that use plain language include the Federal Aviation Administration, the Food and Drug Administration, the Department Housing and Urban Development, and the Federal Emergency Management Agency. These groups have embraced plain language use, which has improved their ability to communicate with those whom they serve by
making information more accessible. Academics who want to bring the plain language movement into academia seek to improve the same thing: accessibility.\(^5\)

Plain language proponents often cite a handful of texts to defend their insistence on simplicity and to establish the bases for their definitions of plain language. As a result of continually referencing, some of them have become integral to the plain language movement’s establishment and preservation. In 1920, William Strunk, Jr. saw publication of his influential style manual, *The Elements of Style*, which calls for the use of clear and concise writing.\(^6\) The manual provides “elementary” rules of usage and composition focusing not only on grammar, but style, as well. Some of his proposed style rules include omitting needless words, not overwriting, not overstating, and avoiding “fancy” (76) words. These are rules that plain language proponents revere and abide by, and it appears that Strunk felt just as strongly about the necessity of including these rules in his own pedagogy. In the introduction to the 1979 edition of *Elements*, Strunk’s former student E. B. White recalls his professor’s passion for clear writing and his desire to ensure that his work would help groom a generation of succinct writers. In explaining the “masterly Strunkian elaboration of this noble theme,” White writes:

Vigorous writing is concise. A sentence should contain no unnecessary words, for the same reason that a drawing should have no unnecessary lines and a machine no unnecessary parts. This requires not that the writer

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\(^5\) Richard Lanham’s “paramedic method” can be used to make texts more concise in all contexts in order to improve accessibility; he originally developed this method to translate what he called the “Official Style”—that is, the language of bureaucracy—into “plain speech” (Lanham vii).

\(^6\) It was not until 1957 that E. B. White’s name was added to the byline, after he revised it for re-publication with Macmillan for “the college market and the general trade” (White xiii).
make all sentences short or avoid all detail and treat subjects only in outline, but that every word tell. (emphasis added) (xv-i)

The declaration that every word must tell has become the mantra of plain language proponents, as it would mean that every word in a given sentence serves a purpose: to convey the idea contained within it as concisely as possible. Doing so is not always easy because of the differences in the many, many writing styles that exist in both the professional and academic worlds, but by using Elements as a guide, many of those who support the movement make a good case for plain language’s potential use in many fields.

Of course, Strunk was not the first to suggest that writing should be as clear and concise as possible, but Elements remains one of the most influential and widely-cited texts on the subject of plain language both inside the classroom and beyond. His and White’s work is still largely regarded as vital to the teaching of writing at almost all educational levels, and many writers and educators have echoed their sentiments in the nine decades since the book’s publication. A number of these other landmark texts have received a plethora of public attention, so much so that there seems to be no way to avoid encountering them at least once—especially in academic environments, where they are either used to teach writing, to help students learn how to critically examine the rhetorical makeup of texts, or to provide talking points for those engaged in the ongoing debate about language use within the academy. Another example of well-known work on plain language, eventually adopted by the plain language movement and its followers as a
canonical text, is George Orwell’s 1946 essay “Politics and the English Language.” In “Politics,” Orwell advocates a shift in writing trends similar to those called for by Strunk and White. He emphasizes the need to steer clear of “dying metaphors,” “operators or false verbal limbs,” “pretentious diction,” and “meaningless words” (159-61) in order to avoid—or at the very least, decrease—“slovenliness and vagueness” (161) in writing. Like Strunk and White, Orwell set out to improve readability and accessibility not by way of sheer simplification, but by the elimination of what he labels “bad habits” (157), which is similar to what plain language proponents advocate. But the difference between Elements and “Politics” is that Orwell’s essay is, as the title suggests, overtly political. For that reason, his essay reads less like a list of suggested rules and more like a condemnation of anyone who uses the kind of language he rails against. This argument is often used by those on both sides of the plain language debate: Plain language advocates feel that those who write complexly are purposely making their message obscure. This argument is in turn seen as a condemnation of anyone who cannot use that language, essentially giving it a gate-keeping function. On the other hand, some who believe no need for plain language use exists feel they are being bullied into dumbing-down their ideas.

Strunk and White acknowledge that “style rules of this sort are, of course, somewhat a matter of individual preference” and that there exists a “fallacy of inflexibility” and the “danger of doctrine” (White xvii), so they do show some consideration for the writer who may choose to not follow their proposed rules for

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7 Sally McBeth compared parts of Orwell’s essay to a “rallying cry” during the opening plenary of the Fourth Biennial Conference of the PLAIN Language Association International in 2002.
whatever reason. Orwell does this as well with his last proposed rule—“Break any of these rules sooner than say anything outright barbarous”—but by politicizing the argument, he has created polarity: One can either agree with him and do as he suggests in order to begin “[thinking] more clearly,” or risk not taking that “first step toward political regeneration” (157). In Orwell’s view, inflated language, which can most often be found in the language of political policy, obscures meaning to the point that it is hidden from the audience. This is not a way to communicate effectively. Plain language proponents would argue that using inflated language is not a way to communicate at all, as purposeful obscurity is the opposite of communication. To illustrate his point, Orwell uses a fictional example of an English professor defending Russian totalitarianism:

[The professor] cannot say outright, “I believe in killing off your opponents when you can get good results by doing so.” Probably, therefore, he will say something like this: While freely conceding that the Soviet régime exhibits certain features which the humanitarian may be inclined to deplore, we must, I think, agree that a certain curtailment of the right to political opposition is an unavoidable concomitant of transitional periods…. (167)

In this extreme example, Orwell shows the kind of language people are likely to find thrown their way in a politically-charged environment. He claims that the “decline” of the English language has “political and economic causes,” then notes that “an effect can become a cause, reinforcing the original cause and producing the same effect in an intensified form, and so on indefinitely” (156). So it is not just that we must improve or be more mindful of our use of the English language to regenerate our political thinking—
that is, to make us more aware of what is actually being said in political speech and in
policy, thus enabling us to act on it effectively—but also vice versa.8

In August 2014, Will Self criticized Orwell’s work on BBC Radio 4’s A Point of
View podcast in an episode titled “Why Orwell was a Literary Mediocrity,” in which Self
took Orwell’s essay to task for some of its more potentially dangerous claims about what
kind of language should be used when and by whom. Self argued that Orwell was
prejudiced “against difference itself”: “Orwell and his supporters may say they're
objecting to jargon and pretension, but underlying this are good old-fashioned
prejudices...Only homogenous groups of people all speak and write identically.” Self felt
that Orwell’s essay essentially urges its readers—assuming that those readers are “exactly
the sort of [people] who [are] sufficiently intelligent to comprehend the very essence of
what [Orwell]'s trying to communicate”—toward conformity, which Self sees as far more
dangerous than the use of convoluted language:

Since 1946, when Orwell's essay was published, English has continued to
grow and mutate, a great voracious beast of a tongue, snaffling up
vocabulary, locutions and syntactical forms from the other languages it
feeds on. There are more ways of saying more things in English than ever,
and it follows perfectly logically that more people are shaping this
versatile instrument for their purposes. (Self)

Plain language proponents advocate a similar reshaping of language, but this is the
danger Orwell’s essay faces due to its political nature: By framing it in such a way, he

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8 A well-known example of concise, clear, and effective political speech is President Abraham Lincoln’s
Gettysburg Address.
has assigned a specific set of politically-oriented goals to the act of writing itself and has made an assumption that all writers have those same goals in mind while writing, which is not and has never been the case. And “[a]ny insistence on a particular way of stating things,” Self said, “is an ideological act, whether performed by George Orwell or the Ministry of Truth.” Though parts of his argument have more to do with Orwell’s popularity as an author of literature than with his standing as an essayist, Self does have a point: Some danger undeniably exists in insisting writing be done a certain way for the sake of salvaging our ability to think politically, as that edges toward promoting groupthink. But the plain language movement does not seem to encourage that level of homogeneity, nor is that what plain language advocates have taken from Orwell’s work. They are instead using Orwell in a specific way that fits their purpose, which is to encourage effective communication without focusing on the political implications of language use.

Ignoring or neglecting the political implications of language may be a shortcoming, though, since it is difficult to remove the politics inherent in all utterances. So Self’s critical points are worth considering, especially in the context of academia: Students come from multiple racial and economic backgrounds and therefore bring multiple ways of speaking and writing into the classroom. Orwell’s emphasis on cultivating a common, streamlined way of communicating is therefore particularly problematic for those students, and these implications should not be pushed aside in favor of a simplistic, rosy view of plain language. But thanks to plain language proponents’ insistence that texts should be accessible to all, the current plain language movement instead exhibits a fairly inclusive philosophy that promotes bringing more people into the
discussion—or, at the very least, offering them something they might not otherwise have: the chance to take part in it.

Writing Studies scholars such as Bruce Homer support the idea that a “translingual approach” (Homer, Lu, Royster, and Trimbur 303) might help scholars and educators embrace students’ multiple Englishes instead of insisting on a more homogenous style like Orwell does. This approach, which is one way of offering people—particularly students—the chance to take part in discussions, “sees difference in language not as a barrier to overcome or as a problem to manage, but as a resource for producing meaning in writing, speaking, reading, and listening” (303) and “asks of writing not whether its language is standard, but what the writers are doing with language and why” (304-5). These features are somewhat similar to the features of plain language; like this approach, plain language is specifically concerned with what the writer is trying to communicate and how they present their message to an audience. And, like plain language, a translingual approach “requires that common notions of fluency, proficiency, and even competence with language be redefined” (307). These two movements might learn something from each other if brought together; the translingual approach addresses the political implications that the plain language movement—in some ways—neglects.

Orwell was not wrong in seeing writing as a political act, though, and it is for this reason that the debate over language use is so heated, particularly within the oftentimes politically-charged nature of the academy. This is where the government—a place in which politics, the “relations of power among people,” (Gee 64) reign supreme—and the academy can be brought together under the umbrella of institutional critique. Institutional critique, the methodology proposed by Porter et al., does three things: It 1) “examines
structures from a spatial, visual, and organizational perspective;” 2) “looks for gaps or fissures, places where resistance and change are possible,” and 3) “undermines the binary between theory and empirical research by engaging in situated theorizing and relating that theorizing through stories of change and attempted change” (630-1). Its second feature is most important in this particular discussion: Porter et al. point out that the gaps to which they refer are often discursive—that is, “places where writing...can be deployed to promote change” (631). And these changes are most effective in “zones of ambiguity,” which are “locations where change can take place because of the boundary of instability they highlight” (Sibley qtd. in Porter et al. 624). Plain language proponents in government were able to enact change by way of passing legislation that made plain language use a requirement, which opened up the zone of ambiguity that is explored in this thesis: the lack of discussion about how plain language, when brought into the context of academia, can rearticulate power dynamics among people—that is, scholars, educators, and students—through institutional critique.

9 President Richard Nixon “decreed that the Federal Register be written in ‘layman’s terms’” in 1972 (Locke). In 1978, President Jimmy Carter issued Executive Order 12044, “Improving Government Regulations,” which intended to make government regulations “cost-effective and easy-to-understand by those who were required to comply with them” (Carter qtd. in Locke). On June 1, 1998, President Bill Clinton issued a Presidential Memorandum on the subject of “Plain Language in Government Writing,” which stated that he and Vice President Al Gore were “determined to make the Government more responsive, accessible, and understandable in its communication with the public” (Clinton qtd. in PLAIN, “President Clinton’s Memorandum”). Most recently, President Barack Obama passed the Plain Writing Act of 2010, which requires “that federal agencies use clear Government communication that the public can understand and use” (Obama qtd. in Mazur).
Those calling for plain language use in academia are also, in a way, investigating zones of ambiguity: By “[examining] the micro practices within the macro structures” of the academy, the plain language proponents who currently exist in the academic world are seeking to “produce rhetorical and material change” (Porter et al. 627) by affecting the way academics communicate their ideas not just to each other, but also to larger audiences who speak multiple Englishes. Those larger audiences are often composed of students from varied backgrounds—usually first-year college writers—who encounter academic language for the first time and are not quite sure how to decipher it, let alone use it effectively themselves. Unfortunately, positioning this complicated issue next to the comparatively simple-seeming concept of plain language does nothing to make it any less complicated. The key to unlocking the potential positive effects that plain language proponents in academia see lies in first defining what plain language is before attempting to bring the two together, as there will be no way to enact any kind of change if the change being called for is so multi-faceted that no one involved in the debate can find common ground upon which to agree.

Introducing plain language to the academy might, so the argument goes, prevent overly complex language like the following: “If one examines the cultural paradigm of context, one is faced with a choice: either reject textual nihilism or conclude that the task of the participant is significant form. The subject is contextualised into a predialectic socialism that includes truth as a totality.” This quotation, from Charles Wilson’s “Reading Foucault: Textual Nihilism and the Cultural Paradigm of Context,” is an example of academic writing that is not concise. Fortunately, it also is not real. Wilson’s essay, the citations contained within, and the author himself are all the product of an
online text generator known as the Postmodernism Generator, a “system for generating random text from recursive grammars” (Larios). The creator of the engine on which the Postmodernism Generator runs, Andrew C. Bulhalk, writes of his creation: “The initial application of the Dada Engine was to generate travesties of papers on postmodernism, literary criticism, cultural theory and similar issues. I chose this genre because it is easy to convincingly generate meaningless and yet realistic travesties of works in it” (5). With each page refresh, a new essay is generated, each one as meaningless and garbled—but no less supposedly academic-sounding—as the last.

The kind of language produced by the Postmodernism Generator is known by many names: Stuart Chase called it “gobbledygook” and “pedageese,” Ken Macrorie called it “Engfish,” and even the Oxford English Dictionary contains a definition for it under the term “academese.” These words boil down to the same concept: the high diction of the academic elite, language so inflated and embellished it is almost unrecognizable to anyone situated outside the gates of the Ivory Tower and even to some within, which is a lot like the problem plain language proponents in government had been facing when they decided to start pushing for plain language use.

Stuart Chase’s 1954 publication, *Power of Words*, dedicates an entire chapter to the concept of “gobbledygook.” This word, perhaps unsurprisingly, has political roots: The original term, coined by Texas Congressman Maury Maverick in 1944, means “using two, or three, or ten words in the place of one, or using a five-syllable word where a single syllable would suffice” (qtd. in Chase 52). Chase narrows his focus, though: While gobbledygook can be applied to many fields, “pedageese” serves as a more specific term for the kind of gobbledygook that appears in academic circles. Chase writes:
"Professional pedagogy, still alternating between the Middle Ages and modern science, can produce what Henshaw Ward once called the most repellent prose known to man. It takes an iron will to read as much as a page of it" (55). Chase's criticism is aimed squarely at the befuddling nature of some academic talk and, in doing so, he exposes what may pass as motive for the use of such language: the publish-or-perish nature of academia. He writes: "A bright instructor, for instance, in need of prestige may select a common sense proposition for the subject of a learned monograph...adorn it with imposing polysyllables...[coin] some new term to transfix the reader...add a page or two of differential equations...and [publish] with 147 footnotes and a bibliography to knock your eye out" (55). In the first chapter of *Telling Writing*, Ken Macrorie similarly introduces "Engfish" as "the phony, pretentious language of the schools" (1). The Oxford English Dictionary's definition of "academese," which best sums the concept up, is: "The language or writing style of academic scholarship, especially when considered dry or over-complicated." The OED traces use of this word back to 1917, one year before *The Elements of Style* was published, where it appeared in historian Will Durant's *Philosophy and the Social Problem*. It is used only once in his book, but that single use shows Durant considers academese the opposite of plain language: "Suppose we let people know quite simply (and not in Academese)..." (31). Here, Durant creates a spectrum of language with simple language on one end and academese on the other. Rather than defining what plain language is, though, these scholars have shown what plain language is not—according to them. They have thus laid the groundwork for the argument against using
this kind of language—regardless of what its official label may be—in academic settings.\textsuperscript{10}

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\textsuperscript{10} For the purposes of this thesis, this kind of language will be referred to as “academese.”
Chapter 2: Academese

Myriad political, philosophical, and pedagogical issues have cropped up amid the debate about academese’s existence in the postsecondary academy. Consequently, opinions on the causes and effects of academese vary from academic to academic, depending on where in the academy they are situated. In some cases, this debate is seen as a battle between science and the social sciences and has important implications for knowledge production and writing in the disciplines. In other cases, composition and rhetoric professors view the debate as one that most affects students and how they form their academic identities once they reach college. Because academese may be the result of misinterpreting the conventions of academic language—or taking those conventions, such as the convention that says academic writing should be formal and use discipline-specific language, to an extreme—there is a good chance this kind of language exists in some form at all levels in all disciplines, and affects both educators and students.

This chapter focuses primarily on the prevalence of academese in the humanities and social sciences with an emphasis on postmodern academic writing, not because academics within those fields are guiltier than anyone else when it comes to using over-complicated language, but because so much of the debate has taken place within those fields and is available for examination. However, the problems addressed by the many voices that make up that specific debate have brought up issues that permeate academia, so many of the points raised can—and should—have implications for other fields, as well. But no matter what the stance (and on what academic grounds that stance is maintained), accessibility remains the primary concern of this debate: The way writers manipulate and present language in academic texts determines who is able to understand
it, who is able to engage in a dialogue with it, and who is able to then contribute to the body of knowledge accessible to and shared by those within the entire academic community.

Though academese is certainly not a new phenomenon, it has garnered a considerable amount of attention over the last 150 years as modernism gave way to postmodernism. Postmodemism is not entirely to blame for the birth of academese, nor does every aspect of postmodernism contribute to the prevalence of academese, but postmodern writing showcases some of the elements of academese people consider problematic. As Self points out, the continuous evolution of language is undeniable and unavoidable; people will always "shape [language] for [their] own purposes," so it is unsurprising that postmodernists brought with them a new way of thinking about the world and a new set of rhetorical conventions for writing within their disciplines. Like plain language, postmodernism’s definitions vary depending on context, so perhaps the best way to define it is to look at its characteristics, which are inextricably bound to the characteristics of modernism. Some of these characteristics include “[a] commitment to finding new forms to explore how we see the world rather than what we see in it, ...[a] new faith in quasi-scientific modes of conceptualisation and organisation...[and] aesthetic self-reflexivity, in which artefacts explore their own constitution, construction and shape” (emphasis original) (Woods 7). These features contributed to the birth of a style of writing whose conventions are often ridiculed for the ways in which they obfuscate and sometimes contradict.

The essays produced by the Postmodernism Generator successfully demonstrate some of the effects the use of postmodern academese can have on a text’s overall
accessibility, but these effects are perhaps best illustrated in an essay much more well-known for taking this brand of academese to task: Alan Sokal’s “Transgressing the Boundaries: Toward a Transformative Hermeneutics of Quantum Gravity.” Sokal’s essay and the controversial hoax surrounding it remain well-known by academics in both the humanities and the sciences, and, because of the many ways in which “Transgressing” seeks to intentionally mislead its audience, it exemplifies a text that plain language proponents would certainly rally against—if not for one of the points the essay illustrates, which is that using needlessly complex language hinders understanding.

In 1996, Sokal, a professor of mathematics at University College London and a professor of physics at New York University, fooled the academic journal Social Text with his satirical, pseudoscientific article that melded—or claimed to meld—science and cultural studies together under a set of convoluted claims based on postmodern thinking. The content of the essay reads just as poorly as the examples provided by the Postmodernism Generator, but in this case, the essay was not generated by a series of scripted commands—though Sokal did follow something of a script in its construction. In the phony, dense, heavily-footnoted essay, Sokal strings together sentences meant to make eyes cross on the first pass thanks to their length and the amount of jargon contained in them: “Catastrophe theory, with its dialectical emphases on smoothness/discontinuity and metamorphoses/unfolding, will indubitably play a major role in the future mathematics; but much theoretical work remains to be done before this approach can become a concrete tool of progressive political praxis” (245). As with the examples provided by the Postmodernism Generator, the sentences that make up “Transgressing” are supposed to sound like they say something intellectual and
innovative thanks to the jargon-laden language used within them, but aside from Sokal, who could possibly hope to fully understand what is being said? The answer is no one; no part of “Transgressing” was designed to make total, logical sense. Rather, it was “constructed around quotations from eminent French and American intellectuals about the alleged philosophical and social implications of mathematics and the natural sciences” (Sokal and Bricmont 3). That is where resulting controversy lies: in the essay’s makeup.

As Sokal explains, “Media hype notwithstanding, the mere fact that the parody was published proves little in itself; at most it reveals something about the intellectual standards of one trendy journal. More interesting conclusions can be derived, however, by examining the content of the parody” (emphasis original) (3). The publication of the parody proves plenty in itself, though: If the Social Text editors did not believe “Transgressing” fit the conventions of academic writing and caliber of thought found in their journal, the essay likely would not have been published. By structuring this essay around what he judged to be some of the most nonsensical-seeming, unscientific postmodern academic writing available, Sokal produced a text that not only exemplifies academese in what might be one of its worst—that is, most inaccessible—forms, but also unabashedly mocks anyone who uses it.

Shortly after the publication of “Transgressing,” the magazine Lingua Franca published another piece by Sokal: “Revelation: A Physicist Experiments with Cultural Studies.” In it, Sokal reveals the hoax and explains his motives behind why he felt it necessary to write and publish “Transgressing”: 
For some years I've been troubled by an apparent decline in the standards of intellectual rigor in certain precincts of the American academic humanities. But I'm a mere physicist: if I find myself unable to make head or tail of *jouissance* and *différance*, perhaps that just reflects my own inadequacy. So, to test the prevailing intellectual standards, I decided to try a modest (though admittedly uncontrolled) experiment: Would a leading North American journal of cultural studies—whose editorial collective includes such luminaries as Fredric Jameson and Andrew Ross—publish an article liberally salted with nonsense if (a) it sounded good and (b) it flattered the editors' ideological preconceptions? ("Revelation," Sokal)

Sokal's wording shows that the success of the hoax depended on how it was presented: It had to sound "good." And in order for it sound good—as in, sound intelligent—it had to adhere to what Sokal believed to be the conventions of postmodern academic writing. It is no wonder, then, that Sokal's insistence on playing with fairly popular trend at the time, and presenting the result in such a way that it seemed groundbreaking, led to the essay's publication. The argument proposed in "Transgressing," which relies on the overuse of jargon, was that "feminist and poststructuralist critiques have demystified the substantive content of mainstream Western scientific practice, revealing the ideology of domination concealed behind the façade of 'objectivity'" ("Transgressing," Sokal 213). Therefore, Sokal claims, "physical 'reality', no less than social 'reality', is at bottom a social and linguistic construct; that scientific 'knowledge', far from being objective,
reflects and encodes the dominant ideologies and power relations of the culture that produced it" (213).

The evidence presented by Sokal in “Transgressing,” which draws on the work of over two hundred authors who represent almost every academic discipline, weaves scientific concepts together with work by scholars more well-known for their cultural and literary criticism, like Jacques Derrida, Jacques Lacan, and Slavoj Žižek—among many, others. By using these authors to demonstrate the ways in which “physical ‘reality’” — that is, the reality presented as established fact by scientists—is socially and linguistically constructed, Sokal was able to highlight what he saw as an abuse of science by postmodernists at the time: their appropriation of scientific theories for the sake of applying those theories to cultural studies, perhaps to act as a legitimizing force for a field otherwise lacking in scientific support. At its core, the problem brought forth by Sokal is an epistemological one that deals mostly with the truth-blurring effects of approaching science from a postmodern point of view. He, like Orwell, considers this sloppy thinking:

In short, my concern over the spread of subjectivist thinking is both intellectual and political. Intellectually, the problem with such doctrines is that they are false (when not simply meaningless). There is a real world; its properties are not merely social constructions; facts and evidence do matter. What sane person would contend otherwise? And yet, much contemporary academic theorizing consists precisely of attempts to blur these obvious truths—the utter absurdity of it all being concealed through obscure and pretentious language. (emphasis original) (“Revelation”)
Sokal suggests that unclear postmodern writing is a result of postmodern thinking, which he considers flawed for reasons such as those above. As far as plain language is concerned, though, the issue is not how "sloppy" thinking is, but how clearly the writer presents his thought process to an audience. Sokal's articulation of his purpose shows that he believes postmodern writers, with their tendency to be self-aware, recognize the ways in which postmodern uncertainty often destabilizes their own arguments. The problem is that by appropriating scientific concepts and reframing them through a postmodern lens, postmodern academics made those concepts inaccessible to the community that birthed them, thus pushing scientists—and everybody else—out of the discussion. Therein lies one of the problems with academese in general: Its reliance on obfuscatory language does not encourage or allow productive communication to take place. Rather, communication is limited to those who recognize that specific language, are able to effectively decode the meaning of any message written in that language, and are able to encode messages in that language in order to create a dialogue. If any one of those criteria is not met by the person attempting to engage with a text, he will not be able to do so. In this view, academese does not just hinder communication; it also inhibits the building and growth of academic communities because of that lack of communication.

Two years after the publication of "Transgressing," Sokal, alongside physicist and philosopher Jean Bricmont, published *Fashionable Nonsense: Postmodern Intellectuals' Abuse of Science*, which further explored the problems of postmodern academic writing's inaccessibility. Focusing their attention on postmodern thought meant focusing on the fields that appear to house the most academic postmodernists: the humanities and social sciences. Sokal and Bricmont are careful to point out that they "are not attacking
philosophy, the humanities or the social sciences in general; on the contrary, [they] feel that these fields are of the utmost importance and [they] want to warn those who work in them (especially students) against some manifest cases of charlatanism” (5). The “manifest cases” dissected in Fashionable Nonsense include the work of well-known cultural theorists such as Lacan, Julia Kristeva, Luce Irigaray, Bruno Latour, Jean Baudrillard, Gilles Deleuze, and a few others. In the book, Sokal and Bricmont seek to “deconstruct” the reputation that certain texts have of being difficult because the ideas in them are so profound” and, by taking these specific examples apart and performing a rhetorical analysis of each piece, they “in many cases...demonstrate that if the texts seem incomprehensible, it is for the excellent reason that they mean precisely nothing” (5-6).

According to Sokal and Bricmont, the biggest problem with postmodern academic writing is that it is not effective, productive writing, in much the same way academese in general is viewed as ineffective and unproductive. Postmodern academic writing obscures meaning through the use of over-complicated, inaccessible language, and does all this under the guise of a label that implies that the level of difficulty of a text is positively correlated to the level of intelligence of the author, and thus the level of intelligence of the idea itself. This, in turn, implies that the reader must have the corresponding level of intelligence needed to understand the text at all. In other words: If you don’t get it, it’s probably not meant for you, anyway.

Sokal’s essay is one of the best examples of academese at work, but Sokal knew exactly what he was doing—and why—when he constructed “Transgressing.” This is not always the case with other academic writers; if they were aware that their writing was occasionally considered inaccessible by others, and if the academic community at large
was not so used to encountering academese or were so accepting of it as an inevitable part of the academic profession, people like Sokal may not feel the need to point out what they consider the absurdity of its existence. The significance of the Sokal hoax has been discussed by many over the past eighteen years because it affected—and continues to affect—so much of the academic community thanks to Sokal’s effectively unclear rhetoric. But even though Sokal’s agenda was obvious, the fact remains that his hoax shed light on a problem for all academics in all disciplines. The humanities and social sciences are not the only areas where academese turns up; they just happen to be areas in which it is prevalent and is therefore much more easily dissected and diagnosed as problematic. And, like any problematic issue, academese has since received more and more public attention, often in the form of ridicule by those within the academy—like Chase, Macrorie, and Sokal—as well as those outside it.

Some of this ridicule takes the form of Web pages such as The Postmodernism Generator, the University of Chicago Writing Program’s “Write Your Own Academic Sentence” generator, and blogs such as “F*ck Yeah English Major Armadillo” on

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12 Found at http://writing-program.uchicago.edu/toys/randomsentence/write-sentence.htm
Professional organizations also take part in poking fun at academese, including the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE). The NCTE’s Public Language Award Committee is responsible for handing out two awards regarding language use each year: the George Orwell Award and the Doublespeak Award. The Orwell Award, “established in 1975, recognizes writers who have made outstanding contributions to the critical analysis of public discourse” (NCTE, “The George Orwell Award”). The Doublespeak Award, “established in 1974, is an ironic tribute to public speakers who have perpetrated language that is grossly deceptive, evasive, euphemistic, confusing, or self-centered” (NCTE, “The Doublespeak Award”).

Academic journals have also contributed to the fight against academese; from 1995 to 1998, Philosophy and Literature, published out of Johns Hopkins University, ran the annual “Bad Writing Contest,” which “[celebrated] the most stylistically lamentable passages found in scholarly books and articles published in the last few years” (Dutton).

Academese is also found in popular culture, but never in a meant-to-be-taken-seriously form; rather, academese is most often used as ammunition for jokes about the pretentiousness of academia and the eggheadedness of academics. Take this Calvin and Hobbes comic strip, for example:

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13 Found at http://fyeahenglishmajorarmadillo.tumblr.com/
Calvin proudly tells Hobbes that he has mastered academic language because he finally understands the purpose of it: “To inflate weak ideas, obscure poor reasoning, and inhibit clarity”—just as Sokal accused the postmodernists of doing. Here, Calvin assumes that his mastery of this skill will lead him to a fruitful academic career, as if all that is required for success in academia is the ability to, as some might say, bullshit. And what is known as academic bullshit comes in many forms, from the benign bullshit that is simply unclear—like the language found in the comic below—to the kind of bullshit that is intentionally deceptive, like Sokal’s.
"To the best of the author’s knowledge..." = "WE WERE TOO LAZY TO DO A REAL LITERATURE SEARCH."

"Results were found through direct experimentation." = "WE PLAYED AROUND WITH IT UNTIL IT WORKED."

"The data agreed quite well with the predicted model." = "IF YOU TURN THE PAGE UPSIDE DOWN AND SQUINT, IT DOESN’T LOOK TOO DIFFERENT."

"It should be noted that..." = "OK, SO MY EXPERIMENTS WEREN’T PERFECT. ARE YOU HAPPY NOW??"

"These results suggest that..." = "IF WE TAKE A HUGE LEAP IN REASONING, WE CAN GET MORE MILEAGE OUT OF OUR DATA..."

"Future work will focus on..." = "YES, WE KNOW THERE IS A BIG FLAW, BUT WE PROMISE WE’LL GET TO IT SOMEDAY."

"...remains an open question." = "WE HAVE NO CLUE EITHER."

Figure 3. “Deciphering Academese” by Jorge Cham, PhDcomics.com.

The phrases used this comic are phrases which can be found in the business world and in all academic disciplines (even though many of the comics featured on PhDComics.com focus specifically on postgraduate scientific research). Though these phrases are not unclear or confusing in the same way as The Postmodernism Generator and Sokal’s examples, they are still the result of attempting to model some of the conventions of academic writing and ultimately failing, resulting in a phrase that does not convey information effectively. This comic calls author intentionality into question, which is a much larger issue, but the “translations” of these phrases suggest academese may be a kind of tool that can help authors build or fortify their reputation regardless of whether readers understand the message. It is entirely possible that these phrases can be used genuinely and without meaning something snarky, however, which introduces the possibility that there actually may be a sliding scale on which the various types of academese can fall. If this is the case, then perhaps academese might not be such a bad thing—sometimes. However, the overarching concern among those who have lamented...
the existence of academese its many forms—and the list goes on and on— is that academese in any form is a problem that must be dealt with.

This is where the art of bullshit comes into play. In 1986, the *Raritan Quarterly Review* published philosopher Harry G. Frankfurt's essay "On Bullshit," in which Frankfurt seeks to "begin the development of a theoretical understanding of bullshit" in order to bring about a better understanding of "what bullshit is, why there is so much of it, [and] what functions it serves" (1). In doing so, he first turns to Max Black and his 1980 definition of "humbug": "deceptive misrepresentation, short of lying, especially by pretentious word or deed, of somebody's own thoughts, feelings, or attitudes" (qtd. in Frankfurt 6). This sounds a lot like the definitions for gobbledygook, pedageese, and Engfish, which all emphasize the pretention and confusion espoused by some academic writing, and neatly fits in with Sokal's critique of postmodern academese. Frankfurt picks the definition of "humbug" apart piece by piece in order to lay the groundwork for his theory of how bullshit works, and although his efforts do not provide any conclusive theories about bullshit as a rhetorical strategy, he still manages to come away from it with the conclusion that bullshit is a misrepresentation meant to ultimately affect how the author or speaker presents himself to an audience. Frankfurt writes: "What bullshit essentially misrepresents is neither the state of affairs to which it refers nor the beliefs of

the speaker concerning that state of affairs. [...] What [the bullshitter] does necessarily attempt to deceive us about is his enterprise. His only indispensably distinctive characteristic is that in a certain way he misrepresents what he is up to” (53-4).

Bullshitters are therefore not outright liars; rather, bullshitters go about their business with the sole intention of picking out the things they in order to “suit [their] purpose,” regardless of whether they “describe reality correctly” (56). This description sounds slightly less like academese, at least as far as its definition is concerned. Bullshit is not merely inflated, embellished (and yet somehow still dull) language; bullshit is actively deceptive in a way academese—again, by definition—is not necessarily meant to be.

Frankfurt’s essay refers to bullshit in general and does not touch on the issue of bullshit’s presence in academia. Philip Eubanks and John D. Schaeffer realized this, and so they wrote the essay “A Kind Word for Bullshit: The Problem of Academic Writing.” The phrase “academic bullshit”—or at least the word “bullshit” on its own—is one which is well-known to those in academia, especially educators and students. The wider culture is clearly familiar with it, too, as shown by Watterson’s comic; or, as Eubanks and Shaeffer put it, “[O]ur culture often singles out academe as the mother lode of bullshit” (374), and “[w]hen non-academics call academic writing bullshit, they mean that it uses jargon, words whose meanings are so abstract and vague as to seem unrelated to anyone’s experience. [...] [Academics] hide behind language that may be as slight, or exaggerated, or obfuscatory as any sales pitch or fish story” (381-2). So it is no wonder so many in the general public have a distaste for all academic writing and not just academese: It is often not accessible to them, even in its most mild forms. This distaste carries with it some dangerous consequences, the most dangerous being that “the phrase academic bullshit
thus presents a double insult to academics. It can mean academic writing shows a
reckless disregard for the truth—that it is almost certainly full of things that are false.
 [...] Yet an even worse problem may be that...bullshit is not seen as a personal affront”
(375-76). So unlike Frankfurt, who does not see bullshit as an attempt at lying, Schaeffer
and Eubanks see bullshit, when present in an academic context, as lying for the sake of
inflating or defending the author’s reputation. But if academic writing is perceived to be
full of lies, then academic writing is not to be trusted, and if this brand of bullshit is not
seen as a personal affront, then no one actually cares about what is being said one way or
the other. And as Sokal and Bricmont do, Eubanks and Schaeffer point out that those
academics situated in the fields of the humanities and social sciences are among the worst
offenders (373) and may therefore be the biggest liars and the least cared about, if that
description of academic bullshit holds true.

This view of the humanities and social sciences is—at least in part, they argue—
due to the role composition professors play in the postsecondary academy. Eubanks and
Schaeffer highlight three reasons why compositionists are in such a unique and
“complicated” spot compared to the rest of their colleagues, and why they may have a lot
to do with the abundance of academese in the humanities and social sciences:

First, the writing style of composition research risks being called bullshit
because it often has the timbre of abstruse literary criticism of social
science. Second, composition has taken up disciplinary writing as an
important area of study and thus implicitly endorses it. [...] Third, one
major consequence of studying disciplinary writing has been the
abandonment of the abstract ideal once called “good writing.” [The
current mainstream of composition studies]...sees writing instruction as at least partly a matter of introducing undergraduates to the established practices of expert academic writers. (374)

Students often must take some kind of first-year composition course when they begin college. In these first-year courses, students are introduced to the conventions of academic writing, and that introduction is meant to serve as adequate preparation for the rest of their college careers. What actually happens in first-year writing courses, though, does not always reflect those goals.

In 2002, Lee Ann Carroll published the results of a longitudinal study she had conducted, in which she reported on how a group of Pepperdine University students developed as writers during their time in college. Carroll found that these first-year courses were often not sufficient; these courses did not give the students in the study the tools they needed to succeed in writing beyond the boundaries of that one classroom, that one discipline. Rather, what these first-year courses provided them with was a foundation on which they were able to build, only once they learned that they had to do the building themselves. Carroll notes: “First-year writing provides intensive practice and a few basic insights about college literacy tasks that students often can express but may find difficult to apply” (49). Teaching students to write effectively in the disciplines, as well as across the curriculum, is a complex undertaking educators face not just in the first-year writing class, but in all classes that require writing. But what students learn in their first-year courses, as Carroll’s study shows, can be difficult to apply in areas outside of the discipline on which that course focuses; when students try to apply the conventions of
one discipline while writing in another discipline—like applying concepts from the humanities to science, for example—the result may seem like (or be) bullshit.

But this particularly offensive brand of academese is not so easily dismissed. It may, “at least in some senses, [animate] what is best in academic rhetoric” (Eubanks and Schaeffer 374). By using a “cognitive science view of categorization” (376), Eubanks and Schaeffer are able to assign much more specific characteristics to bullshit than Frankfurt did—characteristics that focus specifically on the actions of academic writers. They suggest that bullshit has graded categories, and distinguish between instances of prototypical and nonprototypical bullshit: Prototypical bullshit “has to do with a purposeful misrepresentation of self, has the quality of gamesmanship, and...is at least potentially a lie” (380). Prototypical bullshit often takes the form of sales pitches, but it can also take the form of “governmentese, which misrepresents intentions, is likely to be deceptive, and perpetuates, rather than plays, a game” (381). Nonprototypical bullshit, on the other hand, contains no false information. Although there is still a misrepresentation of self present in nonprototypical bullshit, there is no sense of playing with the audience in the same way as prototypical bullshit does, nor is it potentially a lie. Regardless of whether it is prototypical or nonprototypical—that is, deliberate or not deliberate—the presence of any form of bullshit is still problematic because it is a misrepresentation, and misrepresenting can lead to misunderstanding.

In Eubank’s and Schaeffer’s view, the problem with what is viewed as academic bullshit “comes down to audience: When people consider writing to be not plain enough or deliberately obscure, what they really mean is that the writing does not appropriately address them” (382). Of course, they point out that academic writing is not meant for an
“average” audience; “it addresses an audience of specialists. Indeed, much academic publication, especially by young scholars, aims to qualify the author for membership in a group of specialists” (382). So what academics consider to be prototypical bullshit is not the same as what general audiences consider prototypical bullshit. General audiences, it seems, equate prototypical academic writing with prototypical bullshit, but that is not necessarily the case. Eubanks and Schaeffer note that “the academic work that receives public scorn is recognizable as academic work but is not typical of it: the academic prototype is not characterized by outrageousness but rather by earnestness” (383). In this way, academic writing is more like nonprototypical bullshit because it “seldom aims to deceive the reader about its content, but it certainly is meant to enhance the reputation, the ethos, of the writer” (383). So it is not that academic writing is full of lies; rather, academic writing that seems to reek of bullshit may instead be a result of the author establishing—or attempting to establish—his ethos, which can lead to a clumsy, manipulative, or unclear discourse.

Eubanks and Schaeffer propose a list of the “constraints” to which academic writers must adhere while writing in order to establish that ethos. They must “make claims and prove them according to the conventions of the discipline,” must “marshal supporting information and arguments and present them in an approved format,” and “the level of writing must be congruent with that of other publications in the field,” and “even if the writer profoundly disagrees with another position, it is an implicit rule that the opponent’s professional reputation be respected” (384). Adhering to these “rules” has consequences, often in the form of creating “a certain tone, the tone of the competent, often dispassionate, expert who is attempting to expand a fund of knowledge” (384). It is
tricky to follow all those rules—as well as following grammatical rules and the rules of the style in which the writer is working—when composing, especially for students who have not had the chance to practice them as much as, say, tenured professors. Eubanks and Schaeffer pose the question: “Is it deceptive to represent oneself as one actually aspires to be; to create an ethos one doesn’t have yet but wants to have?” (377). If the answer to that question is yes, then all blossoming student writers are deceptive by trying to create an academic persona.

David Bartholomae’s 1986 essay, “Inventing the University,” is one of the most well known essays in the field of Writing Studies on how students develop an academic persona through writing. Bartholomae suggests that student writers invent the university each time they sit down to write—that is, they must “learn to speak [academics’] language, to speak as we do, to try on the peculiar ways of knowing, selecting, evaluating, reporting, concluding, and arguing that define the discourse of our community” (4). While composing, the students have to appropriate (or be appropriated by) a specialized discourse, and they have to do this as though they were easily and comfortably one with

their audience, as though they were members of the academy, or historians or anthropologists or economists; they have to invent the university by assembling and mimicking its language, finding some compromise between idiosyncrasy, a personal history, and the requirements of convention, the history of a discipline. They must learn to speak our language. Or they must dare to speak it, or to carry off the bluff, since speaking and writing will most certainly be required long before the skill is 'learned.' And this, understandably, causes problems. (4-5)

One of these problems is producing what might be judged either by the writer or their audience as bullshit, but other more serious problems can include writing “[coming] through the writer and not from the writer” (emphasis added), students “[entering] the discourse without successfully approximating it” and students being “shut out from one of the privileged languages of public life, a language they are aware of but cannot control” (Bartholomae 8-9). These problems are much more serious than being accused of bullshitting because they ultimately determine whether the student will be able to successfully form an academic identity.

In the essay “Values of Difficulty,” Judith Butler also explores some of the issues of communicability that academic writers encounter while composing. She opens with a series of questions regarding how an argument is formed and presented: “Will I be intelligible or not? And if I am intelligible, does that mean I have succeeded? And if I am not quite intelligible, or if I am unintelligible, then will that be a failure of communication? Or will it be making a different point?” (197). These are important questions to consider in the plain language debate; not all texts will be immediately clear,
and in some cases that will be the result of a rhetorical decision made by the author rather than a misuse of language. These are also questions that writers must ask themselves, as the answers to these questions determine the size of the audience the text is able to reach. Butler also notes that “the norms that govern communicability are not singular, and if they were, there would be no place for translation, no need to ask, how might I make this text communicable here and there? Or how can it travel? And what are the limits to its traveling?” (197). In other words, writers must consider not only their immediate audience when writing, but also a wider audience—the audience to which that text can potentially “travel.” Composing, then, is not simply an act of following the rules, but is also the result of a series of rhetorical decisions made by the writer—though often unconsciously.

Butler is not exactly known for her clear academic prose, though; she won the 1998 Bad Writing Contest and has been criticized by others, like Martha Nussbaum, for her writing style. But the point she makes in “Values,” via a discussion of the accessibility of social/critical theory as seen in the work of Theodor Adorno and others, is that there are two conflicting views of language use and accessibility. On the one hand,


17 This was Butler’s winning sentence: “The move from a structuralist account in which capital is understood to structure social relations in relatively homologous ways to a view of hegemony in which power relations are subject to repetition, convergence, and rearticulation brought the question of temporality into the thinking of structure, and marked a shift from a form of Althusserian theory that takes structural totalities as theoretical objects to one in which the insights into the contingent possibility of structure inaugurate a renewed conception of hegemony as bound up with the contingent sites and strategies of the rearticulation of power” (qtd. in Dutton).
academics on the left—that is, academics situated in the humanities and social sciences—must "speak in a way that does not become lost to the internal workings of academic language, but that it will be important to take popular culture as an object and venue for academic work itself" (200). On the other hand, "the language of the popular is that of uncritical consumerism" (201). This is clearly an argument about accessibility: a text is either accessible to a wide audience, including that which is situated outside of academia, or it isn't. But Butler notes: "Whereas the first might accuse the second of elitism, and with some justification...the second might accuse the first of selling out thought, or, indeed, of premising politics on a dogmatic anti-intellectualism" (201). There are, as Butler notes, "a number of viewpoints that fall between [these] two" (201), which may be where many academics find themselves. If Eubanks and Schaeffer are right in claiming that the academic prototype is characterized by "earnest tedium" rather than "outrageousness" (383)—that is, academics are more likely to belabor their points than fill their work with impenetrable, foggy language—then most academic writers would certainly not argue that plain language is dogmatically anti-intellectual. Plain language, according to its proponents, is not dogmatically anything other than a writer's attempt to effectively communicate an idea to his audience, regardless of the complexity of that idea. But in Butler's view, it might not be that simple; she, through Adorno, suggests that "passing through difficulty" is "part of what is necessary for critical thinking" (209). When the familiar becomes strange, or,

where it admits strangeness at its core, this may well be the moment when we come up against the limits of translation, when we undergo what is previously unknown, when we learn something about the limits of our
ways of knowing; and in this way we experience as well the anxiety and
the promise of what is different, what is possible, what is waiting for us if
we do not foreclose in advance. (Butler 209)

There may then be some reward for the audience member who pushes through a difficult
text; they may learn something because the difficulty of the text encouraged them to think
critically about what was being said. And there may be no way to avoid having to do this
at some point, as Butler suggests that truth, “historically,... has become a certain
difficulty, and that if we are unwilling to be disarmed and to become, suddenly,
unknowing, we assume instead a posture of dogmatism that may well sidetrack us from
the evanescence, if not the ineffability, of a life” (214). So we can then either accept that
we, as an audience, must encounter and work through at least some difficulty when
seeking the truth, or we risk missing out on something much larger, much more
important, and thus miss the truth altogether.

Others have discussed the problems with viewing difficult academic writing as
“bad” writing, or at the very least, writing that should be avoided.18 Gayatri Chakravorty
Spivak, another Bad Writing Contest award winner, holds a similar view regarding the
difficulty encountered in some academic and critical texts:

It’s like going to the gym for me. Have you seen the people who are really
trying at those machines—groaning, but pushing? No pain, no gain? We

18 See “Difficult Style and ‘Illustrious’ Vernaculars: A Historical Perspective” by Margaret Ferguson,
Form; or, What’s ‘Bad’ about ‘Bad Writing’?” by David Palumbo-Liu, all of which can be found in the
2003 collection, Just Being Difficult? Academic Writing in the Public Arena (Stanford, CA: Stanford UP,
2003).
know that in terms of the body. Why have we forgotten that in terms of the mind? A little bit of pain is not bad. Of course, one will never really understand everything of anything. It’s a challenge and an invitation to the general reader not to be turned off. (qtd. in Murray 182)

The interview, conducted by Stuart J. Murray, focuses largely on knowledge production and the politics surrounding it—in a vein somewhat similar to Sokal’s—but Spivak’s argument is that “the politics of the production of knowledge must be kept separate from the question of difficulty. […] My objection is not that one has to be difficult. My objection is that if one has to be difficult or if one is difficult…that should be kept separate from the question of the validity of the production of knowledge” (emphasis original) (qtd. in Murray 183). Therefore, in her view, there is no correlation between the difficulty of a text and the validity of the argument within that text. A complex idea is not inherently difficult to understand, and a simple idea is not necessarily inherently clear, and whether a text is difficult or clear does not—or should not—determine how valid the knowledge produced by that text is. However, some recent studies conducted by cognitive psychologists show that the level of difficulty of a text does affect how that text is perceived by its audience, and can ultimately affect how that text is then evaluated.
Chapter 3: Cognitive Concepts

Those who support the use of plain language in place of over-complicated language—such as bureaucratic gobbledygook and academese—claim that plain language is easier to understand, which in turn implies that the information presented in plainly-written texts may be easier to process on a cognitive level. This claim is, to some extent, true, and recent research in the cognitive science field shows that the concept of fluency may be what links plain language’s proposed usefulness to the academic world. Fluency, which refers to how easily information is processed, is more specifically defined by professor and cognitive psychologist Daniel Oppenheimer as “the subjective experience of ease or difficulty with which we are able to process information….not a cognitive operation in and of itself but, rather, a feeling of ease associated with a cognitive operation” (“The Secret Life of Fluency” 237).

For the most part, many of us are aware of how easy or difficult it is to understand and process information when presented with something new; the information will either be fluent and easy to understand and process, or disfluent and difficult to understand and process. Fluency is therefore a “metacognitive experience” that can be “generated by…many cognitive processes and is nearly effortless to access,” so “it can serve as a cue toward judgments in virtually any situation” (Oppenheimer 237). Those judgments can impact how the text and the text’s author are evaluated by an audience. Fluency is reported to influence judgments about truth, likability, frequency, fame, and intelligence (Oppenheimer 237). Oppenheimer and his colleagues have conducted multiple experiments on language complexity and processing fluency, the results of which often
pointed toward the obvious: The more disfluent a text is, the less easily understood and, consequently, the more poorly the text and its author are judged by an audience.¹⁹

However, other studies show that disfluency, when looked at as part of a “dual-process approach to reasoning” (Oppenheimer 239), can sometimes activate analytical thinking.²⁰ This dual-process theory suggests that there are two “distinct methods” of reasoning: system 1 reasoning, which is “heuristic, automatic, effortless and in parallel,” and system 2 reasoning, which “is analytic, deliberate, effortful, and in serial” (Oppenheimer 239). The use of these systems depends on the level of fluency of the information being processed. System 1 reasoning is activated when information is either familiar or presented in a simple, easy-to-understand way, and system 2 reasoning is activated when information is unfamiliar and disfluent. Because system 2 processing, triggered by disfluency, requires more cognitive effort, it—in some cases—is said to encourage critical thinking, just as Spivak suggests. In other cases, though, disfluency does not seem to stimulate system 2 processing; rather, it acts as a “direct cue toward judgment” (237) and leads to poor evaluations from the text’s audience.


²⁰ For more on this, see Adam L. Alter, Daniel Oppenheimer, Nicholas Epley, and Rebecca N. Eyre’s “Overcoming Intuition: Metacognitive Difficulty Activates Analytic Reasoning,” Journal of Experimental Psychology: General 136.4 (2007): 569-76.
Research into the field of fluency is still relatively new, which may explain these contradictions. Nevertheless, a number of studies on various types of fluency and related concepts may serve to provide some quantitative evidence to show whether plain language is as useful and effective as some have made it out to be, and whether academese is truly as detrimental as some have argued it is.

In 2006, Oppenheimer published “Consequences of Erudite Vernacular Utilized Irrespective of Necessity: Problems with Using Long Words Needlessly.” This article explored the results of five experiments he had conducted on multiple groups of Stanford University undergraduates in order to see how “needless complexity” impacted the audience’s assessment of the text and the text’s authors. These five experiments were born from the results of a poll Oppenheimer had conducted in class, in which he asked his students if they “ever changed the words in an academic essay to make the essay sound more valid or intelligent by using complicated language” and whether, when writing an essay, the students “[turned] to the thesaurus to choose words that are more complex to give the impression that the content is more valid or intelligent” (139). Nearly two-thirds answered yes to the latter question about using the thesaurus, and 86.4% of the sample answered yes to the former question about changing words. Oppenheimer notes: “When it comes to writing, most experts agree that clarity, simplicity and parsimony are ideals that authors should strive for. [...] However, most of us can likely recall having read papers, either by colleagues or students, in which the author appears to be deliberately using overly complex words” (139). This claim falls in line with what Bartholomae says about student writing in “Inventing the University”; it is clear that for a high percentage of the 110 Stanford undergraduates polled by Oppenheimer, making their
language more complex was viewed as a necessary part of the process of modeling and mastering academic language. Oppenheimer suggests a few reasons that his students think this way:

Intelligence and large vocabularies are positively correlated. Therefore, by displaying a large vocabulary, one may be providing cues that he or she is intelligent as well. Secondly...if authors are believed to be writing as simply as possible, but a text is nonetheless complex, a reader might believe that the ideas expressed in that text are also complex, defying all attempts to simplify the language. Further, individuals forced to struggle through a complex text might experience dissonance if they believe that the ideas being conveyed are simple. Thus, individuals might be motivated to perceive a difficult text as being more worthwhile, thereby justifying the effort of processing. (140)

No wonder that students, especially those new to the postsecondary academy, may be operating under assumptions that make the above statements seem true. They are positioned within the university in a way that leaves them little choice but to believe that, because the texts they read are written by experts, any difficulty they encounter while attempting to process the information presented in those texts is to be expected. Students attempt to assemble and mimic the university’s language (Bartholomae 4) by inflating their vocabulary to match some of what they see in the texts they read, and then attempt to duplicate style as well in order to convey complex ideas in a way they believe is fitting—oftentimes with mixed results. Oppenheimer’s experiments do not provide any concrete, end-of-discussion data that say definitively whether academese is to blame for
these students' (and others') attempts at simply "sounding" more valid or intelligent, but the data from his study do provide insight into the effects disfluency has on an audience. If academese is as disfluent as critics claim it is, then Oppenheimer's findings can easily be applied to the academic arena in order to explore how academese might affect an audience and how that audience, in turn, processes and evaluates it.

The first experiment in "Consequences" examined whether "increasing the complexity of text succeeded in making the author appear more intelligent" (Oppenheimer 140). Oppenheimer also looked at "to what extent...the success of this strategy [depended] on the quality of the original, simpler writing" and wanted to discover if a loss of fluency was to blame if the strategy was unsuccessful (140). In this experiment, graduate school admissions essays were made more complex "by substituting some of the original words with their longest applicable thesaurus entries" (140). Seventy-one Stanford University undergraduates participated "to fulfill part of a course requirement" and were given a packet of one-page questionnaires—including the survey for this experiment—in class and had a week to complete the entire packet. It is not stated if students received a grade for completing the packet, but because it was part of a "course requirement," some percentage of their grade likely relied on completion of the packet. Participants were recruited the same way in the other experiments and followed the same procedure. 21 This experiment used "six personal statements for admissions to graduate studies in English Literature" from writing improvement.

21 With the exception of Experiment 3, in which students were only given an hour-long lab session to fill out the packet and "an additional 50 Stanford University students were recruited outside of dining halls and filled out only the relevant survey" (Oppenheimer 146). Oppenheimer does not note why there was a difference in this experiment.
websites, then "logical excerpts ranging from 138 to 253 words in length were taken from each essay. A 'highly complex' version of each excerpt was prepared by replacing every noun, verb and adjective with its longest entry in the Microsoft Word 2000 thesaurus" (141). Students were then instructed to "read the passage, decide whether or not they want to accept the applicant, and rate their confidence in their decision on a 7-point scale. They were then asked how difficult the passage was to understand, also on a seven-point scale" (141).

The results of this first experiment showed that "contrary to prevailing wisdom, increasing the complexity of a text does not cause an essay's author to seem more intelligent. In fact, the opposite appears to be true. Complex texts were less likely than clear texts to lead to acceptance decisions in a simulated admissions review" (142). Oppenheimer found that simple texts were rated more highly by participants, and that complexity "neither disguised the shortcomings of poor essays, nor enhanced the appeal of high-quality essays" (142). However, although this experiment's results were suggestive, several factors may have contributed to those results: Words may have been misused, participants may have had biases against the strategy of complexity because of familiarity with use of the strategy (especially in admissions essays), and participants may have been influenced by "prior expectations of the author's intelligence" (143).

To address some of these problems, Oppenheimer conducted a second experiment, this time using translated excerpts from René Descartes's *Meditation IV*. Oppenheimer located two translations of the first paragraph of *Meditation IV*; these translations had comparable word counts but contrasting complexity: "[George] Heffernan's 98-word translation was judged by two independent raters to be considerably
more complex than [Stanley] Tweyman’s 82-word version” (144). Half of the participants read each translation and, to “manipulate prior expectations of author intelligence, half of the participants were told that the passage came from Descartes, while the rest were told that it came from an anonymous author” (144). This time, author intelligence was rated on a 7-point scale, as well as difficulty of the passage.

The results of the second experiment once again showed that “complexity negatively influenced raters’ assessment of texts” (145) as Heffernan, whose translation was rated as more complex than Tweyman’s, was rated as less intelligent. Prior expectations of the author’s intelligence did not, however, factor into that measurement, and this time, the statistical significance of the relationship between complexity and intelligence ratings was reduced when “controlling for difficulty of comprehension” (144). Oppenheimer notes:

While the data suggest that the process may be mediated by fluency, the failure to reach statistical significance means that it is difficult to draw strong conclusions. However, in light of the fact that the mediation analysis was reliable in Experiment 1, and was in the predicted direction for Experiment 2, normatively one should have increased confidence in the reliability of the effect. (145)

One factor complicating this experiment is the translators themselves, because “a less accomplished translator might create a less fluent text for reasons completely unrelated to word complexity” (146). According to Oppenheimer, “the results from the first two experiments could be due to the fact that the complex essays were in actuality worse papers” (146).
To account for the uncertainty of the results' source, Oppenheimer conducted a third experiment meant to again test the relationship between fluency and judgment of author intelligence. He explains that the word replacement paradigm used in the first experiment was "problematic because using an algorithmic approach to word replacement leads to the possibility of including imprecise synonyms, impairing flow and generally making the essay less coherent" (146). He goes on to say that if word replacement really were to blame for a lack of coherency, "then one would expect that the process should also harm an essay modified to use simpler vocabulary," but the fluency account "leads to the opposite prediction; less complex essays should be rated as coming from more intelligent authors" (146). Up to this point, Oppenheimer’s experiments showed that simpler texts were believed to be written by more intelligent authors. So if the perception is that complex writing comes from people who are less intelligent, then the implication of the results of Oppenheimer’s experiments is that those who write complexly are trying to compensate for their perceived lack of intelligence—just as Stuart Chase suggested of writers who use academese.

An "abstract with the highest proportion of words of nine letters or longer was chosen" out of 25 randomly selected dissertation abstracts from the Stanford University sociology department for the third experiment. Then the first two paragraphs of that dissertation abstract were modified by "replacing every word of nine or more letters with its second shortest entry in the Microsoft Word 2000 thesaurus" (146). Participants were told where the excerpt came from and were then instructed to read the passage, rate the author's intelligence on a 7-point scale, and rate the difficulty of the passage on a 7-point scale. The results showed that the simplified version was perceived as less complex by
participants, and the participants who read the simplified version rated the author as more intelligent than those who read the original version. Again, there was a lack of statistical significance, but Oppenheimer accounted for that by saying that the results of these experiments appear to be “at least partially mediated by fluency” (emphasis added) (147). This result led to his questioning whether the “lowered evaluations of the complex text were due to fluency at all,” so he designed and conducted two more experiments to test his fluency hypothesis.

The fourth experiment dealt more with visual fluency than lexical fluency, but still showed a correlation between fluency level and intelligence ratings. Oppenheimer claims that “any manipulation that substantially reduces fluency should also reduce intelligence ratings,” so in order to further test that, he manipulated a text’s font rather than its content “to examine whether fluency can influence intelligence ratings directly, or whether there was an unmeasured variable driving the mediation effects in Experiments 1-3” (148). He used an unedited version of “the highest quality essay from Experiment 1,” and prepared a non-fluent version of the excerpt by “converting the document into italicized ‘Juice ITC’ font” (148). As was the case in Experiment 1, participants were told that the excerpt came from a personal statement excerpt, read the excerpt, and then rated the author’s intelligence on a 7-point scale. Difficulty of the text was not evaluated in this experiment. And to “prevent participants from believing that the author of the text had chosen that font (as font selection could be a cue about intelligence) the instructions and rating scales were also written in the corresponding font. Thus, the participants would attribute font selection to the experimenter instead of the text’s author” (148). This seemed to work; “post-experimental interviews of randomly selected
participants \((n = 5)\) confirmed that participants attributed the font selection to the experimenter rather than to the author of the essay” (148). This experiment also showed, yet again, that the author of the non-fluent version was rated as less intelligent than the author of the original version.

Oppenheimer’s fifth and final experiment tested what effect disfluency had on an audience when the audience was made aware of the disfluency’s cause: “When obvious causes for low fluency exist that are not relevant to the judgment that is being made, people reduce their reliance on fluency as a cue; in fact, in an effort not to be influenced by the irrelevant source of fluency, they overcompensate and are biased in the opposite direction” (149). In order to test this hypothesis, they used what Oppenheimer calls the “low toner” paradigm: an unedited version of an essay from Experiment 1 was printed when “the departmental printer was low on toner,” so that it was more difficult to read. Participants were told where the essay came from, then read the passage and were instructed to “decide whether or not to accept the applicant, and rate their confidence in their decision on a 7-point scale,” and were also asked to rate the author’s intelligence on a 7-point scale. Results showed that “participants in the low toner condition were more likely to recommend acceptance for the applicant...than those in the normal font condition” and that “participants in the low toner conditions reliably rated the author as more intelligent than those in the normal condition,” thus confirming Oppenheimer’s hypothesis. When the source of the lack of fluency is obvious, “people discount that lack of fluency when making their judgment” and “do so to such an extent that they end up biasing their judgments in the opposite direction” (151).
Although the fourth and fifth experiments did not manipulate the level of difficulty of the text itself because the content was left untouched, these experiments—like Experiments 1-3—have implications for academic writing. The fifth experiment is perhaps the most relevant of all: By showing that people overcompensated "in their attempt to not be influenced by fluency" to the point that their judgments reversed—that is, they wound up attributing the lack of fluency to the printer rather than the writer and rated the author more favorably, perhaps out of sympathy—the results suggest there is a deeper psychological component at play when students are exposed to complex academic writing. Participants in the low toner group in Experiment 5 knew from first glance that the information presented to them was disfluent; they began reading with the expectation that the information would be unclear in some ways because the source of the "problem" was obvious. The poll Oppenheimer conducted that set this series of experiments in motion said something about student expectations of academic texts: They expect academic texts to call for big words, so they, in turn, believe they will be expected to do the same in their own academic writing. This implies that people believe academic writing, due to the context in which it exists—that is, the academy—should be complicated.

If the results found in Experiment 5 are valid and reliable, and if people believe academic writing should be complicated because it is academic, then they may either justify or shrug off any disfluency encountered in academic texts as a common feature of academic writing. As Oppenheimer stated early in his paper: "Individuals forced to struggle through a complex text might experience dissonance if they believe that the ideas being conveyed are simple. Thus, individuals might be motivated to perceive a
difficult text as being more worthwhile, thereby justifying the effort of processing” (140).

But it is not just the effort of processing that is justified in the case of academic writing; the effort of complicating the text to model academic language is also justified in order to “sound smarter” through writing.

The first three experiments showed the negative consequences of “needless complexity” in “widely disparate domains (personal statements, sociology dissertation abstracts and philosophical essays), across different types of judgements (acceptance decisions and intelligence ratings), and using different paradigms (active word replacement) and translation differences” (151). The results of all three experiments showed that needless complexity led to negative evaluations of the texts as well as the texts’ authors and suggest that the effect is “due to lowered processing fluency” (151).

But the data found through these experiments are not conclusive, and Oppenheimer is well aware of their shortcomings. Aside from the problems for which he compensated by designing and carrying out further experiments, Oppenheimer points out that the population tested also complicates the data in some ways. Stanford students, he writes, “are both well educated and motivated; it is possible that this pattern of results was found only because participants were able to understand the complex vocabulary, and made the effort to muddle through to the content beneath” (152). It may also be possible, however, that because the experiments were part of a course requirement, students felt compelled to complete them to the best of their ability.

Regardless, Oppenheimer still discovered a paradox in his students’ beliefs about academic writing. The results of his experiments showed that these students evaluated complicated texts and the texts’ authors poorly, even though a high percentage of them
said they had done exactly what they thought was ineffective. They rated the difficulty of
the text and evaluated the author’s intelligence side by side; as one went up, the other
went down. In the conclusion of “Consequences,” Oppenheimer points out that a study
by James W. Pennebaker and Laura A. King showed that “people are more likely to use
big words when they are feeling the most insecure” (153), so that may have something to
do with why students continue modeling academic language and producing academese
even though they perceive it as unsuccessful in others’ writing. But this defense
mechanism of using big words to compensate for insecurity seems to be a vital
component of students forming their academic identities—as Bartholomae claims,
students will either appropriate the specialized discourse required in their chosen field or
be appropriated by it (4). That is, they must learn how to take control of the language
they are trying to use. And although Oppenheimer does not provide exact data on what
year of university his students were in at the time of the study22, they were all
undergraduates, which suggests that a similarly high percentage of undergraduates may
share perceptions about academic writing.

Of course, students are not the only people who use academic language; it is also
used by professors and professionals much more familiar with it than undergraduates are.

22 In a personal correspondence via e-mail, Oppenheimer noted that his subjects came from Stanford
University’s general psych subject pool. Subjects included students from intro psych as well as students
from more advanced classes: “Intro psych students at Stanford came from a variety of majors because it
filled a general education requirement, with a slight skew towards folks who wanted to be psych majors.
They were mostly freshmen and sophomores but there was a smattering of higher level students as well”
(Oppenheimer).
They are familiar with the style and the jargon and know how to use both to (sometimes) produce effective writing:

One could imagine that experts in a given field (who are more familiar with the jargon) would react differently to simplified essays than novices. For one, the experts would find the jargon a great deal more fluent than non-experts. Additionally, a lack of jargon might be a signal that the author is not an in-group member of the field; this could lead to simplified writing being negatively associated with intelligence. (152)

This point is important to consider, especially when discussing the plain language debate. Oppenheimer’s participants were all students who had already formed their own theories about what academic writing is and how it is done. But as Sokal showed, jargon is not always fluent. The results of Oppenheimer’s study suggest that avoiding needless complexity will prevent negative evaluations in the same way Strunk, White, and Orwell suggest that writing plainly is the most effective way to communicate a message or idea. However, the results of one study cannot be used as proof that the use of over-complicated language—like academese—is always ineffective. But these results do show that there is a cognitive component to this issue that should be further examined. If further studies can confirm Oppenheimer’s fluency hypothesis, that should affect both academese and plain language’s places in the academy.
Conclusion

Plain language’s usefulness in bureaucratic contexts is obvious, but its usefulness in academia is still open to questioning because of the polarity created by plain language proponents. If plain language is regarded as the opposite of complex language, then in an academic context, plain language is the opposite of academese. The perception that plain language and academese are opposing forces serves only to polarize the debate about language use in the academy and might hinder the possibility of a productive dialogue between those engaged in the debate. The tug-of-war will continue with both sides exerting equal force until one side either tires or recruits more powerful support—but maybe that is not how this particular debate should be viewed. Maybe the only way to end this debate is to acknowledge that neither side can—or should—win. Plain language and academese should be viewed as opposite ends of a spectrum of styles that can be successfully used in academic settings, rather than viewing them as the only two style options available to academic writers.

Because so much of the focus of the academic language debate has been placed on students and student writing, it is obvious that plain language does have a place in the academy: in the classroom. Plain language can be used as a teaching tool, especially in first-year courses. Whether those courses are general college composition courses or courses focused on the conventions of a specific discipline, by focusing on developing the skills needed to write plainly, students should first come to understand how to convey their ideas as effectively as possible. This will not require them to model language with which they entirely unfamiliar and have not yet been taught how to handle. In that same vein, academese has a place in the academy, too: also in the classroom, right alongside
plain language. The two can and should occupy the same space; plain language and academese should be taught together—not as a binary system. After students recognize that their priority is effective communication with an audience, then they might benefit from being introduced to a more complex style—not just for the sake of sounding smarter, but for the sake of developing their academic identities and writing in a more self-aware way. As Bartholomae says in “Inventing the University,” “It may very well be that some students will need to learn to crudely mimic the ‘distinctive register’ of academic discourse before they are prepared to actually and legitimately do the work of the discourse, and before they are sophisticated enough with the refinements of tone and gesture to do it with grade or elegance” (19-20). Introducing students to the function of academese in a first-year setting would allow them to experiment with it and maybe come to understand what using that kind of language can accomplish.

One need that arises from proposing the idea of a spectrum is increased transparency about the existence of different approaches to academic writing, including the extremes of plain language and academese. This is not to say that first-year writing programs should be restructured; rather, increased transparency is one possible course of action that may prove fruitful. Showing students that there is a range of options available to them might encourage them to think more about their audience and how they present their ideas to that audience. Students may find it easier to adapt to different styles when they leave the first-year writing classroom—or may, at least, be more aware that they will likely need to shift their writing styles in order to effectively address new academic and non-academic audiences later on—if introduced to the idea that various academic styles exist early on in their college careers. The plain language movement is most concerned
with accessibility, and the question of audience is also a question of accessibility: Whom is this text meant to reach?

One of the consequences of educators' not being more explicit about the existence of this range of styles may be students relying on complex language to support and defend their ideas as well as their academic identities. Orwell suggests that there is a cyclical nature to poor writing, which, in academia, might look something like this: Students are assigned complex academic texts they may not fully understand, and then use those texts as models for their own language because they think those texts are representations of successful academic writing. They then reproduce that language under the assumption that it is what will make them successful students. Some of those students then go on to become academics themselves and continue producing complex writing, which future students are then exposed to, and model, and reproduce whether they are confident in their ability to wield such language. Oppenheimer's results suggest that this is exactly what happens: Even though students gave complex texts poor evaluations, they still admitted to complicating their own writing in order to be viewed more favorably.

Oppenheimer's results also point to some interesting implications about student psychology regarding power relationships within the academy. Students look to sources of power for guidance; in the classroom, that source of power is their professors. By assigning specific texts, professors may send a subliminal message that says the texts they assign exemplify the kind of writing they want to see their students produce, and so the students model that language in the hope that it will result in a good grade. Oppenheimer acknowledges that insecurity may be a contributing factor in the use of complex language, so if that is also one of the reasons why students fall back on
academese in their own writing, then the suggestion is that students are intimidated and attempt to compensate by elevating their diction.

Oppenheimer’s data and other future studies could provide building blocks for the plain language movement’s successful integration into academia. The data from one study is not sufficient to make a clear case that plain language is more effective than needlessly complex language, but it does point to a need for further research into this area to see whether similar results would turn up at other colleges and universities. If experiments similar to Oppenheimer’s were to be repeated at other postsecondary institutions, both public and private, as well as at two-year colleges, a more complete picture of student attitudes regarding language use would emerge and might provide clues as to how educators should approach this complex issue.

For now, the best we as academics can do is acknowledge that our audience often consists of more than just other academics and be more mindful of the level of accessibility of our writing and the level of accessibility we encourage in our students’ writing. As Steven Pinker wrote in a September 2014 article in The Chronicle Review, “Our indifference to how we share the fruits of our intellectual labors is a betrayal of our calling to enhance the spread of knowledge. In writing badly, we are wasting each other’s time, sowing confusion and error, and turning our profession into a laughingstock.” Perhaps one way to avoid these problems is to keep ourselves from falling into the trap of excessive academese by recognizing that it exists, thinking of it as part of a spectrum of academic writing styles, and by figuring out where on that spectrum our work most often falls and being aware of who can confidently access it.
Works Cited


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