

Opinion Piece II: Language Crimes: A Lesson in How Not to Write, Cour- tesy of the Professoriate, Dennis Dutton

[Denis Dutton](#) (1944-2010) gained his PhD in philosophy at University of California, Santa Barbara, and was Professor of Philosophy, University of Canterbury, New Zealand. He founded, and for 23 years edited, the journal *Philosophy and Literature*. In 1998 he commenced the web-based newsletter [Arts & Letters Daily](#).

Pick up an academic book, and there's no reason to expect the writing to be graceful or elegant. Many factors attract people to the scholarly life, but an appealing prose style was never a requirement for the job.

Having spent the past 23 years editing a scholarly journal, *Philosophy and Literature*, I have come to know many lucid and lively academic writers. But for every superb stylist there are a hundred whose writing is no better than adequate — or just plain awful.

While everyone moans (rightly) about the decline in student literacy, not enough attention has been given to deplorable writing among the professoriate. Things came to a head, for me, a few years ago when I opened a new book aptly called *The End of Education: Toward Posthumanism*. It began:

This book was instigated by the Harvard Core Curriculum Report in 1978 and was intended to respond to what I took to be an ominous educational reform initiative that, without naming it, would delegitimize the decisive, if spontaneous, disclosure of the complicity of liberal American institutions of higher learning with the state's brutal conduct of the

war in Vietnam and the consequent call for opening the university to meet the demands by hitherto marginalized constituencies of American society for enfranchisement.

This was written by a professor of English. He's supposed to teach students how to write.

Fed up, I resolved to find out just how low the state of academic writing had sunk. I could use the Internet to solicit the most egregious examples of awkward, jargon-clogged academic prose from all over the English-speaking world. And so, the annual **Bad Writing Contest** was born.

The rules were simple: Entries should be a sentence or two from an actual published scholarly book or journal article. No translations into English allowed, and the entries had to be non-ironic: We could hardly admit parodies in a field where unintentional self-parody was so rampant.

Each year for four years now the contest has attracted around 70 entries. My co-editors at *Philosophy and Literature* and I are the judges, and the winner is announced in the journal.

No one denies the need for a specialised vocabulary in biochemistry or physics or in technical areas of the humanities like linguistics. But among literature professors who do what they now call "theory" — mostly inept philosophy applied to literature and culture — jargon has become the emperor's clothing of choice.

Thus, in *A Defense of Poetry*, English Prof. Paul Fry writes:

It is the moment of non-construction, disclosing the absentation of actuality from the concept in part through its invitation to emphasize, in reading, the helplessness — rather than the will to power — of its fall into conceptuality.

If readers are baffled by a phrase like “disclosing the absentation of actuality,” they will imagine it’s due to their own ignorance. Much of what passes for theory in English departments depends on this kind of natural humility on the part of readers. The writing is intended to look as though Mr. Fry is a physicist struggling to make clear the Copenhagen interpretation of Quantum Mechanics. Of course, he’s just an English professor showing off.

The vatic tone and phony technicality can also serve to elevate a trivial subject. Many English departments these days find it hard to fill classes where students are assigned Milton or Melville, and they are transforming themselves into departments of so-called cultural studies, where the students are offered the analysis of movies, television programs, and popular music. Thus, in a laughably convoluted book on the Nancy Kerrigan/Tonya Harding affair, we read in a typical sentence that “this melodrama parsed the transgressive hybridity of un-narrated representative bodies back into recognizable heterovisual modes.”

The pretentiousness of the worst academic writing betrays it as a kind of intellectual kitsch, analogous to bad art that declares itself “profound” or “moving” not by displaying its own intrinsic value but by borrowing these values from elsewhere. Just as a cigar box is elevated by a Rembrandt painting, or a living room is dignified by sets of finely bound but unread books, so these kitsch theorists mimic the effects of rigour and profundity without actually doing serious intellectual work. Their jargon-laden prose always suggests but never delivers genuine insight. Here is this year’s winning sentence, by Berkeley Prof. Judith Butler, from an article in the journal *Diacritics*:

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.

To ask what this means is to miss the point. This sentence beats readers into submission and instructs them that they are in the presence of a great and deep mind. Actual communication has nothing to do with it.

As a lifelong student of Kant, I know that philosophy is not always well-written. But when Kant or Aristotle or Wittgenstein are most obscure, it’s because they are honestly grappling with the most complex and difficult problems the human mind can encounter. How different from the desperate incantations of the Bad Writing Contest winners, who hope to persuade their readers not by argument but by obscurity that they too are the great minds of the age.

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