The Needless Complexity of Academic Writing

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The Atlantic:

"Persistence is one of the great characteristics of a pitbull, and I guess owners take after their dogs," says Annetta Cheek, the co-founder of the D.C.-based nonprofit Center for Plain Language. Cheek, an anthropologist by training who left academia in the early 1980s to work for the Federal Aviation Commission, is responsible for something few people realize exists: the 2010 Plain Writing Act. In fact, Cheek was among the first government employees to champion the use of clear, concise language. Once she retired in 2007 from the FAA and gained the freedom to lobby, she leveraged her hatred for gobbledygook to create an actual law. Take a look at recent information put out by many government agencies such as the Department of Veterans Affairs, the Department of Health and Human Services, and the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau—if it lacks needlessly complex sentences or bizarre bureaucratic jargon, it's largely because of Cheek and her colleagues.

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Last year, Harvard's Steven Pinker (who's also written about his grammar peeves for The Atlantic) authored an article for The Chronicle of Higher Education in which he used adjectives like "turgid, soggy, wooden, bloated, clumsy, obscure, unpleasant to read, and impossible to understand" to describe academic writing. In an email, Pinker told me that the reaction to his article "has been completely positive, which is not the typical reaction to articles I write, and particularly surprising given my deliberately impolite tone."

Read the whole story: The Atlantic