

# Why Simple Is Smart

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A few years ago, a young writer asked me if I had any tips for an aspiring journalist. My first instinct was to say no. My career has been full of hard work but also quirky luck, and I think everybody should distrust individuals who claim that the path to success is a highly specific set of circumstances that just happens to match, step for step, the story of their life.

A rant about selection bias seemed misplaced, though. So instead I shared a few organizing principles that I've relied on for nonfiction writing, and I'm sharing them again, below. What follows is hardly Strunk and White, but some may find it helpful.

***Simple is smart.*** High school taught me big words. College rewarded me for using big words. Then I graduated and realized that intelligent readers outside the classroom don't want big words. They want complex ideas made simple. If you don't believe it from a journalist, believe it from an academic: "When people feel insecure about their social standing in a group, they are more likely to use jargon in an attempt to be admired and respected," the Columbia University psychologist Adam Galinsky told me. [His study](#) and [other research](#) found that when people use complicated language, they tend to come across as low-status or less intelligent. Why? It's the complexity trap: Complicated language and jargon offer writers the *illusion* of sophistication, but jargon can send a signal to some readers that the writer is dense or overcompensating. Conspicuously sesquipedalian communication can signal compensatory behavior resulting from suboptimal perspective-taking strategies. *What?* Exactly; never write like that. Smart people respect simple language not because simple words are easy, but because expressing interesting ideas in small words takes a lot of work.

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