

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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