Why Inaccessibility? Despite progressive tone, attacks on academics' lack of clarity can be profoundly regressive.

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It has become popular to denounce academic writing as elitist and unhelpful. **Eric Detweiler** *argues that inaccessibility may be a more complex issue. "Inaccessible" writing may be the result of an author trying to do things with language that conventional, "clear" uses of language cannot. Furthermore, these critiques are often launched at marginalised fields that are writing in non-standard ways in an attempt to critique staunch elitism. Academics tossing blame at each other can be part of the problem rather than the solution.*

> *Anyway, does a 'request for clarification' mean anything but an invitation to the speaker to change problematics? So that the result is not a clarification but an obscurity. And the obscurity of the clarification testifies to the fact that the speaker is dispossessed of his mastery. –Jean-François Lyotard (*Just Gaming*, p. 7) [1]*

In September of 2014, the Chronicle of Higher Education published a piece by Harvard psychology professor Steven Pinker. In that piece, entitled "Why Academics Stink at Writing," Pinker asks, "Why should a profession that trades in words and dedicates itself to the transmission of knowledge so often turn out prose that is turgid, soggy, wooden, bloated, clumsy, obscure, unpleasant to read, and impossible to understand?" Pinker's question is a familiar one, and his iteration of it struck me as overly general and not especially helpful—but, since it's relevant to my work as a rhetoric and writing scholar, I threw together a short, slightly grumpy response before moving on. It wasn't until a few months later that I came across a more open-ended version of the question and felt compelled to put together the more extensive response featured here.

Specifically, what follows is a response to this tweet by the University of Wisconsin-Madison's Jesse Stommel: "Thinking about distinction between 'academic' and 'accessible' writing. Why do academics need to write EVER in language that's inaccessible?" I took Stommel's question to be an open one—not, in other words, a rhetorical question to which he presumed to already know the answer. For this reason, I found myself more sympathetic to Stommel's question than Pinker's. Because I know his work is tied to a host of important pedagogical, ethical, and social concerns, I assumed Stommel's tweet was not just expressing a reactionary and conservative attitude about style.

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Before proceeding any further, let me narrow the field of this response: I think "academics" write in language that others see as inaccessible for all sorts of reasons (and that, yes, some of those reasons are bad/indefensible/not thought through), but I'm not qualified to offer a response that would apply to all varieties of "inaccessibility" in all academic fields and sub-fields. I work in rhetoric and writing, so that's the angle from which I'm coming at this. I want to note two of the particular ways in which the sort of work I do gets attacked by uncharitable versions of Stommel's question:

(1) Rhetoric's been getting charged with obscurity and a lack of accessibility for millennia. In American political discourse, it's still commonplace for politicians and pundits to use "rhetoric" as a synonym for duplicity or plain old dishonesty, a way of obscuring bad or undesirable claims. Rhetoric gets associated with floweriness, excess, decadence—in short, a sort of overly abundant as well as disingenuous "style." Rhetoric is often dismissed or attacked as a means of styling questionable ideas so as to slip them past your audience. (This isn't always seen as a bad thing—St. Augustine and a number of nineteenth-century Scottish and English philosophers saw rhetoric's persuasive capabilities as an important supplement to fields like theology, philosophy, and logic).

(2) My research is also bound up with what some people call "deconstruction" or "post-structuralism" (specifically, I read and cite a lot of Emmanuel Levinas, Jacques Derrida, Judith Butler, and Avital Ronell). A lot of folks in and around academia love to blame thinkers in this arena for much of the "inaccessibility"/obscurity/etc. that they claim characterizes contemporary academic writing. (Even writers who build on deconstruction sometimes write off parts of it as too "flowery"—consider Slavoj Zizek's take on Derrida's writing.)

So I approach Stommel's tweet as an actual question that asks for a response, and as a scholar and teacher of rhetoric and writing. I'll thus focus on a few potential justifications for "inaccessibility" in my field's/fields' writing. (One more quick caveat: I'm assuming that by "inaccessibility" Stommel means something like "clarity," and I could be wrong in that assumption. In some ways, I think "accessibility" is a great and wonderful thing. For instance, I do a lot of composing in digital spaces, and try to hold that work to certain "accessibility" standards: HTML5 that's accessible for screen readers, transcripts of audio work, written descriptions of visuals, etc. Even though I'm not always as thorough as I should be, I think this sort of "accessibility" is hugely important. I also aim for a certain sort of "accessibility" when attempting to explain complex rhetorical ideas to the undergraduates that I teach. It's when "accessible" means something like "using written or spoken language clearly" that I get skeptical.)

So here goes: Some responses to the question, "Why do academics need to write EVER in language that's inaccessible?"

1. Because "accessible" can be a synonym for "conventional." In other words, "inaccessible" writing—deconstruction, etc.—is trying to do things with language that conventional, "clear" uses of language maybe can't. Two examples: (a) Gloria Anzaldúa's Borderlands/La Frontera. In that book, not only does Anzaldúa blend English and Spanish, but she takes up a mosaic style of writing—often nonlinear, blurring genres, switching from autobiography to poetry to history—that can be inaccessible and disconcerting. Anzaldúa's book isn't exactly "academic writing," but I can imagine plenty of readers dismissing its rhetorical strategies—e.g. dropping in translingual words and phrases that readers may well be unfamiliar with, disorienting readers by shifting languages and genres—as "inaccessible" in ways that are similar to "inaccessible" academic writing. (b) Consider work in queer theory: Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* provides a well-known example, or consider Beatriz Preciado's Testo Junkie. These texts take words like "woman," "man," "gender," "sex"—some of the most foundational and accepted, one might even say "accessible," terms in the English language—and demonstrate the huge network of obscured assumptions upon which such terms' "clarity" is founded. *Gender Trouble* is a text that even I would describe as "inaccessible" in certain ways, but I'd say that as a compliment. It works to make words and language function differently than they typically do, shifting and stripping meanings in an attempt to get at something else. It refuses conventional "common sense," and that can make for some frustrating prose. Thank goodness. (For more on this point, see Butler's "A 'Bad Writer' Bites Back" and Jordana Rosenberg's "Gender Trouble on Mother's Day.")

2. Because you aren't their audience. In other words, language/writing isn't just "inaccessible" in and of itself. It's "inaccessible" for/to certain audiences. An article by someone in African-American studies might seem immensely dense and inaccessible to someone whose work focuses on the rhetoric of science, European history, or psychology. But that text is drawing on a robust intellectual corpus that likely includes clear, accessible, and detailed accounts of the various terms, concepts, and theoretical frameworks deployed in the particular article at hand. I can certainly hope that writers in other fields provide copious reference lists or hyperlinks, but I wouldn't expect them to restate everything for readers outside their discipline. If I want to "get it," render the inaccessible accessible, maybe it's my responsibility to read around—to experience a body of writing for myself rather than being frustrated someone else won't lay it all out it for me.

2b. A sub-point regarding #2: Writers who make claims about the obscurity or inaccessibility of academic writing often rely on vague references to "academics" as a universal category. Both Pinker and Stommel refer to "academics" in general, and this move—as some of the responses to Stommel's tweet demonstrate—often assumes an elitism on the part of academics. That is, it assumes academics are a universally privileged and snooty class of people. It can conjure up an image of an esoteric scholar of Renaissance literature refusing to pander to the masses by dumbing down his prose. But—without dismissing the fact that academics with enough stability and prestige to get books or influential articles published are likely much better off than many of their fellow citizens and thus "elite" in a certain way—I think it's important to keep in mind that the specific academic fields taken to task for generating "inaccessible" writing are often marginalized fields. Recall queer theory, postcolonial studies, or, again, consider deconstruction: In a 1983 piece called "The Principle of Reason: The University in the Eyes of its Pupils," Derrida notes, "One professor has recently written that a certain theoretical movement ['deconstructionism'] was mostly supported, within the university, by homosexuals and feminists—a fact which seemed very significant to him" (p. 132 in Right to Philosophy 2: Eyes of the University). I point this out for the following reason: When stated vaguely, critiques of academic writing's "inaccessibility" can sound populist and anti-elitist. These critiques, however, are often launched at fields that are writing in inventive and non-standard ways in an attempt to critique the staunch elitism of other sections of the academy. Is difficult writing a pragmatic way to accomplish this goal? I'll leave that question open, but I pose it as a reminder that attacks on "inaccessibility" and "obscurity" can be, despite their progressive tone, a profoundly regressive way of circling the wagons. (And in this case, isn't it understandable why queer theorists or scholars in postcolonial or African-American studies might be tired of explaining "inaccessible" terms and concepts to skeptical members of the public and scholars in other fields? If a Shakespeare scholar doesn't get or believe in structural racism, maybe that's on them.)

One final example and I'll move on: Given Stommel's interest in critical pedagogy, imagine a student in a B.Ed. program reading Paulo Freire's Pedagogy of the Oppressed and dismissing its Hegelian/Marxist jargon as inaccessible. Perhaps the writing of charter school advocates does a better job of getting to the point. Progressive academics could take this as a call to reiterate Freire's work in terms that will appeal to contemporary readers in the U.S. (maybe talk about "synergies" or vague notions of "collaboration" instead of dialectical synthesis?). But I think it's also worth considering that the reader should be responsible for working harder—that it's not the writer's fault for being an inaccessible elitist, but the reader's fault for wanting the text to conform to uninterruptive rhetorical and linguistic standards. At what point are claims about "inaccessibility" evidence of inattentive readers rather than bloviating writers? At what point do such claims act as a way of perpetuating prescriptive linguistic standards— sounding not unlike the demand that others "speak American"—rather than as a progressively populist and inclusive call for anti-elitist academic prose?

3. Because of word counts. This is just sort of a crank theory, but I'll trot it out: One of the occasionally frustrating things about reading Butler or Derrida is that the reading. Goes. So. Slowly. Like, I could watch five TED talks in the time it takes me to get through five pages of *Gender Trouble*. But why do I focus on the quantitative pace of my reading? I find myself wondering if Judith Butler could have written a version of *Gender Trouble* that was three times as long but took exactly the same amount of time to read. Adding block quotes from her sources, follow-up explanations of potentially ambiguous terms (I'll come back to this), illustrations—all this could have made the book more accessible, but would've also added to its word count. So maybe one frustration with inaccessible writing—that it's overly "dense"—isn't about the quality of the writing, but about its quantity. Perhaps there's just as much happening in five pages of some "inaccessible" writing as in 20 pages of "accessible" writing, and while you might be able to read more words per minute of the latter, in the end you'd spend the same amount of time on both. It's just that the latter feels more accessible because it feels so rewarding to turn pages more frequently. (I'm thinking here about 40-page drafts of my own that I've cut to 20 pages. Sometimes those cuts result in a cleaner piece of writing, sloughing off redundant or unclear sentences. In a lot of cases, though, examples and restatements of potentially obscure points are the first thing to go, and the end result, while "better" in certain ways, is a slower read than its lengthier predecessor.)

4. Let me loop back around to my hypothetical 900-page version of *Gender Trouble*—specifically the possibility that it could include follow-up explanations of potentially ambiguous terms. Honestly, I don't know if such explanations are possible or desirable. Part of Butler's argument, I take it, is that words and phrases we think are clear actually cover over a ton of obscurities/assumptions/etc. Part of the point, in other words, is that language—even the "clearest" of language—can be relentlessly inaccessible and exclusionary. Perhaps the frustrating quality of the book and its language, then, is part of the point. There are two sub-points I have in mind here: First, that using language in frustrating ways can in some cases be a significant part of a writer's argument. Some academic writing is inaccessible not because the writer needed a better editor or is trying to obscure shoddy ideas, but because language is ambiguous and accessibility/clarity can exclude and cover over a huge range of troubling obscurities. You should be frustrated, in other words. Second, that language is not simply a means of communicating ideas that exist outside of it (of the "transmission of knowledge," as Pinker puts it), but communication itself. This is a big old claim that could render this little post even more turgid and verbose, but I'll just gloss it and move on. (I have the fourth chapter of this book in mind, especially its concluding section. I'm also thinking about the distinction between "performative" and "constative" language, which is certainly relevant to Butler's work.) In short: Reading some academic texts is not just about gleaning ideas and information from them, but entering into a relation with the text. It's not about gathering knowledge, but participating in a relation that puts certain demands on you. Again, difficult writing might be asking for a sort of humility from the reader in the same way that some advocates of "accessibility" want a sort of "humility" from writers.

5. Finally, building on that point about humility: perhaps what some readers dismiss as "inaccessibility" is actually hedging. In other words, perhaps the writer isn't being as straightforward as some readers might want because she's not entirely sure about the claims she's making. This isn't just the case for post-structuralists: think about the ways scientists discuss the limitations of their methodologies, or the ways in which statisticians foreground margins

of errors and standard deviations. These hedges and hesitations can introduce a lot of jargon and undermine the directness and accessibility of their prose. But it's not simply the case that they could drop it and get the same point across more clearly—such hedges constitute a significant structural and ethical move. Maybe it'd help climate scientists counter the bombastic claims of climate-change deniers if they dropped their hedges, but it seems to me that their methodological humility is also an important part of what sets them apart from the self-assured arguments of deniers.

This gets even more complicated in certain branches of the humanities—branches in which it's not scientific knowledge claims but language itself that's being approached so haltingly. (Christopher Fynsk's The Claim of Language offers some thought-provoking and succinct reflections on such language-oriented research and writing.) If you're skeptical of how language works, of course your attempts to use language to address that skepticism might get messy. And that doesn't necessarily mean you're a lazy writer, an elitist, or have bad ideas. It could mean you're trying to proceed carefully and humbly, and expect your reader to be willing to do the same.

Perhaps I should end by asking the following: Have I made myself clear?

But one more final note: Let me acknowledge that I'm operating outside of a pragmatic framework here. That is, I recognize the potential benefits of academics publicizing their work's importance in certain populist ways—to knock down ivory-tower stereotypes and practices, to gain sympathetic attention from the public, to speak across disciplines, etc. I'm not claiming that the things I've written above are solutions to these practical issues, though I do think academics tossing blame at each other can sometimes be part of the problem rather than the solution. After all, folks outside academia are already really good at blasting academic work—even scientific work with important ecological implications—as overly esoteric and without accessible justifications.

[1] For this epigraph, the subsequent reference to Testo Junkie, and a huge number of conversations that have shaped my thinking on this subject, I'm deeply indebted to Kendall Gerdes, a fellow graduate student at The University of Texas at Austin and writer of a forthcoming article in the journal Philosophy & Rhetoric entitled "Habit-Forming: Humility and the Rhetoric of Drugs."

Note: This article gives the views of the authors, and not the position of the Impact of Social Science blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please review our Comments Policy if you have any concerns on posting a comment below.

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