Unpublished Paper

WRITING AND TRANSLATING RESEARCH FOR SELECTED AUDIENCES: CHOOSING TO COMMUNICATE

Proposition: Most academic writing is motivated by the desire to gain recognition among a relatively small group of colleagues.

To demonstrate membership in the elite in-group writers often resort to esoteric jargon and writing styles that exclude outsiders from readily understanding research findings or their implications.

Two extremes in anthropology

(1) "Brilliance" often attributed to scholars whose writing is opaque

Claude Lévi-Strauss comes to mind; readers assume that because they cannot understand the ideas are beyond them so the writer must be someone of exceptional brilliance, or alternatively, they read in ideas like one reads ink blots on a Rorschach Test.

In fact, I think opaque writing is more often a matter of muddled thinking than brilliance (careful reading of texts reveals)

(2) In contrast, easily understood text is often considered commonsensical, and therefore not profound: "If I can understand it, the person who wrote it can't be much smarter than me."

Margaret Mead comes to mind: she was often criticized by her colleagues for "popularizing" anthropology, for putting the results of her research in a language any educated layman could understand.

• Comment on Margaret Mead's contributions to anthropology as discipline

Issue is one of "exclusiveness" versus "inclusiveness"

Exclusiveness is based on the notion that only insiders should be privy to research results, and that only they should be able to legitimately convey the significance of these findings to outsiders. It amounts to an exercise in the political power of representation.

Inclusiveness is based on the idea that research results should be made maximally understandable to an educated audience, empowering them to draw their own conclusions.

In anthropology the issue of "representation" has become critical (in more ways than one.

Demands that anthropologists cease to represent "others" -- the **power** to represent themselves

Concern is with nature of discourse (embedded assumptions & presuppositions) as much as with discrepancies of power.

A matter of translation

Scientific jargon developed (in most fields) as a means of refining the precision of categorization, enabling us to measure, describe and conceptualize what we study more accurately.

But invention of jargon in some fields has gone well beyond functional necessity (particularly the human sciences, where our subjects have their own commensense language to talk and write about what concerns us).

Jargon as a way of marking ourselves as "experts"

I believe that just like any "foreign" language, scientific jargon can be translated into understandable English (or Australian)

When I can't understand, I ask for translation; if can explain, then why not write it that way in the first place; if can't explain, then I doubt that the writer understands what they are trying to explain.

Recently on doctoral committee of political science student who argued that the ideas he was dealing with were so complicated he had to use lots of jargon. I argued that if he persisted no one but a few political scientists would ever read his very important study (of the development of politics in early post-contact Hawaiian culture).

My advice: write like you were explaining your ideas to an intelligent 10 year old; he followed advice & the result was a much more powerful (and inclusive) dissertation.

(Oscar Wilde??) Writing to find truth rather that to express it; finding a balance between careful planning and allowing room for discovery & serendipity

Organizing to write

Developing an outline or diagram
Thinking about your research results and their implications
Choosing a framework (set of concepts for description & analysis)
May not be the same one as began with
Defining concepts (for oneself at very least)

Academic writing as argument

Trying to persuade audience that:
- problem is important
- data are valid & reliable (by describing methods)

• interpretation of results are best possible (more credible than other possible interpretations)

• standard scientific format (including jargon) as meta-communication about validity of data & authority of interpretation.

but scientism is losing credibility in behavioral sciences because the requirements of simplification and reductionism necessary for quantifying human behavior have generated strong misgivings among increasingly sophisticated audiences who are appreciative of the complexity of the human experience.

To be convincing one must:

First of all, must engage readers

requires lucid prose that gets them interested in the research problem and your research (means making clear from the beginning)

Second, must make your argument clear

Requires that you be aware of what your argument is
Recognition of alternative viewpoints and explanations, and addressing them directly or indirectly

Third, present your data in a compelling fashion

Make clear the nature of your data and how it bears on the issue(s) at hand.

Acknowledge limitations as a way of establishing your credibility (arguments are always within limits; it's best to establish what those limits are: confined to an age group, a specific gender, an ethnic group, etc.)

Provide enough context so that data do not seem so abstract as to be remote from readers' experience
Interpret data so that it is clearly understandable in terms of your argument

Fourth, draw your argument together in a conclusion

Remind readers of key findings (do not overwhelm them with a summary that is too complex and impairs the main thrust of your argument)

Take them step by step through your reasoning process
Spell out the implications of your argument for this and related issues