

deirdre mccloskey economical writing

Deirdre McCloskey: The Economist's Guide to Economical Writing

In the realm of economic discourse, clarity and precision are paramount, yet often elusive. Deirdre McCloskey, a towering figure in economic thought and rhetorical analysis, has consistently championed the art of economical writing. This approach goes beyond mere brevity; it embodies a commitment to impactful communication, where every word serves a purpose and complex ideas are rendered accessible. Understanding Deirdre McCloskey's principles of economical writing is crucial for economists, students, and anyone seeking to communicate effectively about economic matters. This article delves into her philosophy, exploring the core tenets of her approach and providing practical insights for achieving clarity, persuasiveness, and intellectual honesty in economic prose. We will examine why economical writing matters in economics, explore McCloskey's key strategies for achieving it, and discuss its broader implications for the field.

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The Imperative of Economical Writing in Economics

Economics, by its very nature, deals with complex systems, abstract concepts, and quantitative data. The ability to translate these intricate elements into clear, understandable language is not a mere stylistic preference; it is an ethical and intellectual imperative. Economical writing in economics serves to

democratize knowledge, making economic arguments accessible to a wider audience beyond a select group of specialists. When economic ideas are presented in a concise and precise manner, they become more readily scrutinized, debated, and ultimately, applied. Conversely, verbose or jargon-laden prose can obscure meaning, foster misunderstanding, and even shield flawed arguments from critical examination. Deirdre McCloskey has consistently argued that the quality of economic writing directly impacts the quality of economic thought and policy. The pursuit of economical writing is therefore intrinsically linked to the pursuit of intellectual rigor and effective public policy.

The stakes are particularly high in economics. Economic policies shape societies, influence individual lives, and determine the allocation of resources on a global scale. For these decisions to be sound, the underlying economic reasoning must be transparent and comprehensible. Economical writing ensures that the logic of an economic argument is laid bare, allowing for informed discussion and robust critique. It is about maximizing intellectual impact with a minimum of verbiage, ensuring that the signal of sound reasoning is not lost in the noise of unnecessary words. This focus on efficiency in communication allows for a more productive and responsible engagement with the economic challenges facing the world.

Deirdre McCloskey's Core Principles of Economical Writing

Deirdre McCloskey's advocacy for economical writing is rooted in a deep understanding of rhetoric and a profound respect for intellectual honesty. She believes that good economic writing should be as clear and precise as a well-crafted scientific experiment, leaving no room for ambiguity or misinterpretation. Her approach emphasizes several key principles that guide the economist in their writing endeavors.

Clarity Over Complexity

McCloskey champions clarity as the ultimate virtue in economic writing. This means avoiding unnecessarily complex sentence structures, convoluted terminology, and obscure jargon. The goal is to make the economic argument as transparent as possible, allowing the reader to follow the logical progression of ideas without unnecessary cognitive load. Economical writing prioritizes conveying meaning efficiently, ensuring that the substance of the argument is not buried beneath a façade of sophisticated but ultimately empty prose.

Precision in Language

Precision is another cornerstone of McCloskey's philosophy. Every word should be chosen with care, ensuring it accurately reflects the intended meaning. This involves a rigorous selection of vocabulary, a clear understanding of economic terminology, and an avoidance of vague or imprecise language. Economical writing demands that economists be masters of their lexicon, using words that convey precise economic concepts without ambiguity. This meticulous attention to word choice distinguishes thoughtful

economic analysis from superficial pronouncements.

Honesty and Humility in Argument

Beyond mere stylistic concerns, McCloskey's principles extend to the ethical dimension of economic writing. Economical writing, in her view, is inherently honest and humble. It avoids hyperbole, unwarranted claims, and overly aggressive pronouncements. Instead, it presents arguments with a sober acknowledgement of uncertainty and the limitations of economic models. This fosters trust and credibility, encouraging readers to engage with the economic argument on its merits rather than being swayed by rhetorical force alone.

The Use of Vivid and Concrete Language

While economics can often seem abstract, McCloskey advocates for the use of vivid and concrete language to illustrate economic principles. This can involve the use of compelling examples, illustrative metaphors, and clear narratives that bring economic phenomena to life. Economical writing does not equate to dry, sterile prose. Instead, it seeks to engage the reader's intellect and imagination through language that is both precise and evocative. The goal is to make economic concepts relatable and memorable.

Avoiding Unnecessary Jargon and Technobabble

A significant aspect of economical writing, as promoted by McCloskey, is the conscious effort to shed unnecessary jargon. While certain technical terms are essential for precise communication within the field, their overuse or their deployment in contexts where simpler language suffices can create barriers to understanding. Economical writing encourages economists to ask themselves if a less technical term can convey the same meaning effectively, thereby broadening the accessibility of their work. This principle directly combats the tendency for academic disciplines to become insular through the exclusive use of specialized language.

Strategies for Cultivating Economical Writing Habits

Adopting Deirdre McCloskey's principles of economical writing requires conscious effort and the development of specific habits. These strategies are designed to refine an economist's prose, making their arguments more impactful and their communication more effective. By integrating these practices into the writing process, economists can significantly enhance the clarity and persuasiveness of their work.

Embrace the Power of Revision

Revision is not merely about proofreading; it is about the fundamental reshaping of ideas and language. McCloskey stresses the importance of ruthless self-editing. Economists should be willing to cut unnecessary words, sentences, and even entire paragraphs that do not directly contribute to the core argument. This iterative process of refinement is crucial for achieving conciseness and ensuring that every element of the writing serves a clear purpose.

Read Widely and Deeply

Exposure to excellent writing is a powerful teacher. McCloskey herself is a gifted prose stylist, and her own work serves as an example. Reading economists who exhibit clarity and precision, as well as writers from other disciplines known for their elegant prose, can inspire and inform one's own writing. Paying attention to sentence structure, word choice, and the overall flow of arguments in well-written pieces can provide valuable lessons.

Outline and Structure Meticulously

A clear and logical structure is fundamental to economical writing. Before diving into drafting, economists should invest time in creating detailed outlines that map out the progression of their arguments. This ensures that ideas are presented in a coherent and logical sequence, minimizing the need for explanatory digressions or repetitive points. A well-structured piece naturally lends itself to conciseness because the logical flow guides the writer to present information efficiently.

Practice Active Voice and Strong Verbs

The use of active voice and strong, descriptive verbs can significantly enhance the clarity and impact of economic prose. Active voice generally leads to more direct and concise sentences compared to passive voice. Strong verbs convey action and meaning more powerfully than weak verbs supplemented by adverbs. Economical writing encourages a preference for directness and dynamism in language.

Seek Feedback from Diverse Audiences

Having one's work reviewed by individuals with different backgrounds and levels of expertise can be invaluable. Economists should seek feedback not only from peers within the field but also from those who may not be intimately familiar with specialized economic terminology. This external perspective can highlight areas where the writing is unclear, jargon-ridden, or otherwise convoluted, providing crucial insights for achieving greater economy in expression.

Engage in Regular Writing Practice

Like any skill, economical writing improves with practice. Economists who regularly engage in writing, whether it be drafting articles, policy briefs, or even blog posts, will naturally develop a greater facility for concise and impactful communication. The act of writing itself forces a confrontation with language and meaning, providing opportunities for honing one's ability to express complex ideas efficiently.

The Impact of Economical Writing on Economic Discourse

The adoption of economical writing principles by economists has a profound and far-reaching impact on the broader economic discourse. It fosters a more engaged, informed, and productive public conversation about economic issues, leading to better-informed policy decisions and a more robust understanding of economic phenomena.

Enhanced Public Understanding and Engagement

When economic arguments are presented clearly and concisely, they become accessible to a wider audience, including policymakers, journalists, and the general public. This enhanced understanding fosters greater public engagement with economic issues, leading to more informed debate and a stronger democratic process. Economical writing democratizes knowledge, breaking down the barriers that often isolate economic discussions within academic enclaves.

Improved Policy Formulation and Evaluation

The clarity and precision inherent in economical writing are crucial for effective policy formulation and evaluation. When economic research is communicated clearly, policymakers can more readily grasp the implications of different approaches and make more informed decisions. Similarly, the ability to critically evaluate existing policies is enhanced when the underlying economic reasoning is transparent and readily accessible. Economical writing ensures that the logic behind economic recommendations is readily apparent, facilitating their assessment.

Increased Credibility and Trust

Economists who practice economical writing often build greater credibility and trust with their audiences. Their commitment to clarity and precision signals intellectual honesty and a genuine desire to communicate effectively. This builds confidence in their analyses and recommendations, making their contributions to economic discourse more influential. When economists can explain complex ideas without resorting to obfuscation, they demonstrate a mastery of their subject matter and a respect for their audience.

Fostering Intellectual Rigor and Debate

Economical writing encourages intellectual rigor by forcing economists to distill their arguments to their essential components. This process sharpens the logic and exposes any weaknesses in the reasoning. Furthermore, clear and concise communication facilitates more productive debate, as participants can more easily understand and respond to each other's points. The emphasis on clarity in economical writing ultimately strengthens the intellectual foundation of the entire field of economics.

The Role of Economical Writing in Economic Education

The principles of economical writing are equally vital in economic education. For students, clear explanations of economic theories and models are essential for comprehension and mastery. Professors who employ economical writing in their lectures and course materials can significantly improve student learning outcomes. When economic concepts are presented with clarity and precision, students are better equipped to grasp the nuances of the discipline and to develop their own analytical skills. This focus on clear communication from the outset of an economic education is paramount for cultivating future generations of clear-thinking economists.

Conclusion: Embracing Economical Writing for a Clearer Economic Future

Deirdre McCloskey's advocacy for economical writing offers a powerful framework for enhancing the quality and impact of economic communication. By prioritizing clarity, precision, honesty, and conciseness, economists can ensure that their insights are not only sound but also accessible and persuasive. Embracing these principles is not merely about stylistic improvement; it is about fostering a more informed, engaged, and effective economic discourse that ultimately benefits society. The commitment to economical writing is a commitment to intellectual rigor, public service, and the pursuit of a clearer, more understandable economic future.

Frequently Asked Questions

What is Deirdre McCloskey's central argument regarding economical writing?

Deirdre McCloskey's central argument is that the "economic" in economic writing refers not just to the subject matter (economics) but to the rhetorical and literary quality of the writing. She advocates for clear, engaging, and persuasive prose that tells a story, rather than relying solely on jargon, equations, or dry

data.

Why does McCloskey emphasize rhetoric and storytelling in economics?

McCloskey emphasizes rhetoric and storytelling because she believes that economics, like any human endeavor, is shaped by persuasion and narrative. By employing good writing, economists can better communicate complex ideas, connect with a wider audience, and ultimately have a greater impact on policy and public understanding.

What are some common pitfalls in economic writing that McCloskey criticizes?

McCloskey frequently criticizes the overuse of jargon, the reliance on overly complex mathematical models presented without clear explanation, a lack of engaging narrative, and a tendency towards sterile, uninspired prose. She argues this style alienates readers and can obscure the underlying economic realities.

How does McCloskey's approach differ from the 'positivist' tradition in economics?

McCloskey's approach challenges the strict positivist tradition, which prioritizes empirical verification and a scientific, often detached, style. She argues that economics is inherently a humanistic discipline, requiring interpretation, judgment, and a recognition of its rhetorical nature, not just objective measurement.

What are practical tips for economists who want to improve their writing based on McCloskey's ideas?

Practical tips include focusing on clear and concise language, using metaphors and analogies effectively, telling a story to frame economic arguments, actively revising and editing for readability, and considering the audience. She encourages economists to be aware of the literary artistry involved in their communication.

Additional Resources

Here are 9 book titles related to Deirdre McCloskey's ideas on economical writing:

1. The Rhetoric of Economics

This seminal work by McCloskey argues that economics is not a purely objective science but a deeply rhetorical discipline. It explores how economists persuade through metaphor, narrative, and appeals to authority, urging for a more self-aware and engaging style of economic discourse. The book challenges the prevailing scientific view and advocates for a richer understanding of how economic arguments are constructed and received.

2. *Economical Writing: Plain Style for Lawyers, Economists, and Other Sophisticated People*

This book, also by McCloskey, provides practical advice on how to write clearly and effectively, particularly for those in academic and professional fields. It emphasizes the importance of precision, conciseness, and elegance in prose, drawing on her own theories of rhetoric. The aim is to help readers communicate complex ideas with clarity and impact, avoiding jargon and unnecessary complexity.

3. *If You're So Smart: Leading Innovation in Engineering and Science*

While not solely about writing, this book by McCloskey delves into the importance of communication and persuasion in driving innovation within technical fields. It highlights how effective storytelling and clear articulation of ideas are crucial for convincing stakeholders and fostering progress. The underlying message is that even in technical disciplines, a strong command of rhetoric is essential for success.

4. *The Art of Rhetoric* (Penguin Classics)

Authored by Aristotle, this foundational text is a key influence on McCloskey's work. It provides a comprehensive analysis of the principles of persuasive speaking and writing, covering ethos, pathos, and logos. Understanding Aristotle's approach to rhetoric is crucial for grasping McCloskey's argument for a more humanistic and effective style of economic communication.

5. *How to Lie with Statistics*

Darrell Huff's classic work, though dated, resonates with McCloskey's critique of misleading statistical presentations. It exposes the various ways statistics can be manipulated or misinterpreted to create false impressions. This book underscores McCloskey's emphasis on honest and transparent reporting of data, advocating for clarity over obfuscation in economic writing.

6. *Thinking, Fast and Slow*

Daniel Kahneman's exploration of cognitive biases and decision-making processes offers valuable insights for economic writers. It reveals how our minds process information and how framing and presentation can significantly influence perception. McCloskey would likely appreciate this book's contribution to understanding how to communicate economic ideas in a way that is both clear and ethically responsible.

7. *The Sense of Style: The Thinking Person's Guide to Writing in the 21st Century*

Co-authored by Steven Pinker, this guide offers a modern perspective on effective writing, drawing on linguistics and cognitive science. It champions clarity, precision, and a reader-centered approach, echoing many of McCloskey's core tenets. The book provides a contemporary framework for achieving the economical and elegant prose that McCloskey advocates for.

8. *Eats, Shoots & Leaves: The Zero Tolerance Approach to Punctuation*

Lynne Truss's humorous yet insightful guide to punctuation emphasizes the critical role of grammar and punctuation in conveying clear meaning. McCloskey would likely approve of this book's dedication to the foundational elements of precise writing. Correct punctuation is essential for avoiding ambiguity and ensuring that economic arguments are understood as intended.

9. *The Elements of Style*

William Strunk Jr. and E.B. White's enduring guide is a cornerstone of concise and clear writing advice. It offers timeless principles for constructing effective sentences and paragraphs, advocating for brevity and precision. This classic work aligns perfectly with McCloskey's call for economical and impactful prose in all forms of writing, including economics.

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