Politics and the English Language

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF GEORGE ORWELL

George Orwell was born Eric Arthur Blair to parents he described as a pair of snobs despite their meager cashflow. Through scholarships, Blair attended boarding school in England from the age 6 to 19. He was a sometimes-strong student but, partially due to his relative poverty, a social outcast. Blair spent his early 20s as a policeman in India, where he witnessed the horrors of British colonial rule firsthand. At 27, Blair left India to travel England and France, establishing his writing career with a collection of essays under the name George Orwell. Blair spent his 30s as a reporter, notably as a war correspondent for the Spanish Civil War. Blair's career put him in the intersection of fiction and nonfiction. In fact, just prior to penning "Politics and the English Language" in 1945, Blair wrapped up a stint as a reporter and published his novel *Animal Farm*. After finishing "Politics and the English Language," he started work on the novel *1984*.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Orwell penned "Politics and the English Language" in 1945 during the final year of World War II. His essay makes several references to the aftermath of World War II and at one point notes the "continuance of British rule in India." During the time Orwell was writing this essay, the British still exerted power over India and exploited Indian resources to fund the British war effort. Orwell also mentions "the Russian purges and deportations." By 1945, Stalin had enacted a massive ethnic cleansing program throughout Russia, leading to the removal and murder of various ethnic and political groups. Finally, Orwell mentions "the dropping of the atom bombs on Japan," which refers to the U.S. Air Force dropping atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

As "Politics and the English Language" suggests, Orwell never saw himself as just a novelist or just a reporter: he was always thinking and writing as both. In "Politics and the English Language," Orwell argues that the style in which people communicate determines the degree to which their governments can successfully pass off lies as truths. As a reporter, Orwell demonstrated a distinct skill for teasing out the truth within political messaging, as seen in *Keep the Aspidistra Flying* and *Homage to Catalonia*. As a novelist, Orwell convincingly created dystopic political worlds by replicating the linguistic techniques of propagandistic communication, as he did in *1984* and *Animal Farm*. As an essayist, notably for "Politics and the English Language" and "The Prevention of Literature," he explored the intersection of political and literary cultures. In "Politics and the English Language," Orwell considers how, in light of World War II, wordy, vague prose contributes to a political culture of manipulation and violence. Edith Wharton argued a similar point after World War I in the 1923 *Son at the Front*. Similarly, with its attention on concision in prose, "Politics and the English Language" sits within a lineage of writing guides aimed towards improving clarity. These guides include *The Plain English Guide* by Martin Cutts (1996), *Slaying the English Jargon* by Fern Rook (1983), and *Style, Toward Clarity and Grace* by Joseph M. Williams (1995).

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** "Politics and the English Language"
- **When Written:** 1945
- **Where Written:** London, England
- **When Published:** 1946
- **Literary Period:** Modernism
- **Genre:** Essay, nonfiction

EXTRA CREDIT

Rejection. Orwell originally wrote "Politics and the English Language" originally intended for publication in *Contact* magazine. After *Contact*'s editor, George Weidenfeld, rejected the essay, Weidenfeld and Orwell's friendship suffered.

Person of Interest. Britain's spy agency, MI5, kept an active file on Orwell from 1929 until his death. Orwell's bohemian clothing, supposed communist sympathies, and writings for leftist publications were all cited in the file, which was made public in 2007. In the end, the agency declared Blair's communism unorthodox and non-threatening.

PLOT SUMMARY

George Orwell's central argument is that the normalization of bad writing leads to political oppression. Orwell starts with the premise that the distortion of "language" reflects a "corruption" of "civilization." But Orwell objects to the conclusion he believes readers usually draw from this initial premise. Specifically, Orwell claims that most readers—even those who think language and politics are in a bad state—presume that language is merely a mirror of society. That is, language only reflects the state of the world. Orwell claims language doesn't just reflect

the condition society. Language, he argues, also shapes society. He contends that language is both prescriptive and descriptive of civilization's decline.

Orwell then takes a step back to what explain constitutes bad writing. He begins by listing a series of passages. Reading each passage, it's difficult (if not impossible) to make out the writer's point. Orwell uses these passages to identify the elements of bad writing, such as "inflated prose" or a "mixture of vagueness and sheer incompetence." In describing the features of "inflated prose," Orwell posits that laziness is the primary driver of "inflated style." That is, instead choosing words and phrases carefully, lazy writers use inflated style to grab whatever smart-sounding words and phrases they have on hand. In the process, bad writers lose their grip on reality, allowing junked-up prose to create a "gap between one's real and one's declared aims." These writers, he explains, exchange truth for convincing as they pull together words without "really thinking."

According to Orwell, inflated style circulates through society like a disease, rotting the brains of writers and readers. Once the normalized, Orwell warns, aspiring dictators can more easily engage in linguistic trickery. Manipulative governments can "make lies sound truthful and murder respectable" by using the same "inflated style" of lazy writers. In other words, dictatorships merely capitalize on the linguistic vagueness normalized by lazy writers.

Thus, as means of resisting oppression, Orwell encourages readers to adopt more careful reading and writing practices. To help a writer "change his own habits" as means to resists government manipulation, Orwell outlines eight guidelines for writers geared towards more honesty and concision. He explicitly warns against relying on "readymade phrases" which he describes as like "a packet of aspirins always at one's elbow." Instead, Orwell encourages readers to exercise more imagination and create more vivid metaphors. Likewise, Orwell recommends concision: using as few syllables and words as possible.

CHARACTERS

George Orwell – George Orwell, pen name of Eric Arthur Blair, was a twentieth-century reporter, essayist, and fiction writer. He is the author and narrator of "Politics and the English Language," in which he attempts to persuade his audience to adopt better reading and writing practices in the name of "political regeneration." According to Orwell, the broad use "inflated style" normalizes vagueness and wordiness. Once normalized, governments can more easily adopt similar vagueness and wordiness within political communication to cover up their abuses. As an example, Orwell describes the use of the word "pacification" to describe state-sponsored murder. Orwell also claims that the normalization of "inflated style" dumbs down the public, making it easier for nefarious governments to manipulate their citizens. Orwell thus argues that adopting concise prose makes it harder for corrupt governments to exploit and control its citizens. In the conclusion of this essay, Orwell carves out something of an exception for fiction, explaining that his issues with precision and concision don't apply to a genre which doesn't attempt to represent the truth. But it's worth noting that, while Orwell makes no mention of his own work as a fiction writer in this essay, Orwell's fiction work mirrors the style he outlines in this essay—that is, it's characterized by concise prose, a preference for concrete language, and simple phrasing.

Writers and Readers – Orwell writes for an audience of writers and readers who want to improve their political condition. To begin, he outlines two shared concerns with the audience: bad writing and bad politics. Early on in the essay, Orwell acknowledges that the audience shares a concern about the "abuse of language." However, he also attempts to appeal to both "professional" and non-professional writers. In his analysis of "inflated prose," Orwell frequently describes the effect of vagueness on the reader, thus empowering the reader to identify bad prose. The last section of the essay directly addresses writers, as Orwell outlines several specific and general writing rules for producing better political prose. He also addresses readers in the conclusion, urging them to reject lousy prose. Moreover, throughout the essay, Orwell describes the experience of a writer as the experience of a reader, particularly as the writer reads over his or her own work. Thus, while Orwell may speak to non-professional writers and readers, he does not see writers and readers as wholly separate groups. On another note, Orwell frequently addresses the audience with pronouns "you," "we," and "us," suggesting that Orwell is speaking to his peers. But Orwell's tone with writers and readers isn't always friendly; throughout the essay, he sharply criticizes writers of bad prose. However, as Orwell himself admits to relying on bad writing habits, it's also possible that the writers and readers he ridicules are in fact part of this peer-audience. Note that Orwell always relies on masculine pronouns (him, his, and he) suggesting that he imagines his audience as entirely male. This was common practice of the time.

Professor Harold Laski – The author of the first of five passages that Orwell lists to illustrate what he later describes as "inflated style." Laski's short passage appears to compare English writers Shelley and Milton. However, it's difficult to determine exactly what conclusion Laski is attempting to draw. That Laski's point is so difficult to discern is part of Orwell's argument. Orwell specifically notes that the wordiness in Laski's passage make it difficult to understand, accusing Laski of using "several avoidable pieces of clumsiness which increase the general vagueness," including "superfluous" words that amount to "nonsense." Further, Laski's passage represents a piece of literary criticism, a genre in which it is "normal to come

across long passages which are almost completely lacking in meaning." During the time Orwell wrote this essay, Laski was chair of the Labor party and famously political; as such, it's likely that readers during Orwell's time were familiar with Laski as a politician. Yet in this essay, Orwell makes no mention of Laski's political work, and the passage from Laski himself does not make explicit reference to politics. Thus, by attaching a name his audience likely associated with politics with a seemingly apolitical passage, Orwell subtly reinforces his argument that nothing exists outside of politics.

Professor Lancelot Hogben – A zoologist and linguist, Hogben is the author of one of the five passages that Orwell uses to illustrate bad writing. While the point of his passage is difficult (if not impossible) to parse out, clues give the readers an idea of the biological subject matter. For one, there's mention of ducks. The second clue is that the passage is from the book *Interglossa*. Orwell doesn't describe the book, but readers may know that *Interglossa* is Hogben's attempt to construct an international lexicon of science and technology. That context—which, again, is lacking in Orwell's essay—gives readers a better idea of what's going on in Hogben's passage. Specifically, Hogben appears to be describing the use of different phrases as a part of his lexicon. Orwell derides Hogben's passage as an example of a writer too lazy to look words up in the "dictionary and see what it means." Like Laski, Hogben was likely well-known to his audience as a political activist. While Orwell makes no note of Hogben's activism, readers of the time were likely familiar with Hogben as a biologist who advocated against eugenics. It's also possible that, still like Laski, by attaching a political activist to a seemingly apolitical passage, Orwell is subtly reinforcing the claim that *all* discourse is political discourse, and that politics and language are tightly intertwined.

English Professor – Orwell invents a hypothetical English professor defending Russian totalitarianism to help explain his argument for honesty and concision in writing. After connecting laziness to political trickery, Orwell argues that bad actors adopt an "inflated style" to rebrand their abuses and hide the reality of their actions. The hypothetical English professor example illustrates how one such bad actor might use inflated style to "make lies sound truthful and murder respectable." According to Orwell, the inflated style allows bad actors to linguistically disguise arguments "which are too brutal for most people to face." Through this hypothetical English professor, Orwell demonstrates how someone might rephrase "I believe in killing off your opponents" as "certain curtailment of the right to political opposition is an unavoidable concomitant of transitional periods." Both sentences say the same thing, but the second one is less explicit and therefore less obviously violent. In doing so, Orwell suggests that violence is easier to commit when the harshness of that violence is smoothed through deceptive language. Thus, through this example, Orwell demonstrates how deceptive political speech relies on euphemisms for violence that ultimately make the reality of that violence more challenging to confront.

Stuart Chase – An American economist and socialist whom Orwell mentions in his discussion of "abstract language" near the end of the essay. Throughout "Politics and the English Language," Orwell opposes the use of abstract language. For instance, Orwell claims that "abstract" language distorts the truth within one's mind, "blurring or even changing your meaning." He also claims that abstract language makes it difficult for "people to think." But Orwell stops short of advocating against *all* abstract language, and he specifically objects to Chase's claim that "all abstract words are meaningless" (Orwell's words—not Chase's). Orwell claims that Chase's attempt to wholeheartedly eliminate abstract language is a means of silencing dissent or a "pretext for advocating a kind of political quietism." Orwell provides no other background information about Chase, but Orwell's readers likely recognized the name: Chase was an American Communist whose book, *The Tyranny of Words*, indeed argues that abstract language is meaningless language.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

THE DANGER OF INTELLECTUAL LAZINESS

In his essay "Politics and the English Language," George Orwell's central point is that bad writing produces bad politics. According to Orwell, a culture full of lazily written nonsense enables governments to control citizens through deceptive messaging. This is because lazy writing leads to lazy thinking—or, rather, to a lack of critical thinking about the messages one receives. To get from bad writing to bad politics, Orwell draws a line from laziness, to nonsensical writing, to politics, and back again. Starting with writers, Orwell argues that lazy authors simply repeat what they read, relying on people's work as a template rather than engaging in the more laborious process of original thinking. Then, to cover up their tracks, lazy writers gussy up their lifeless prose with jargon and excessively complicated sentences. Ultimately, these lazy writers fill the air with jumbled up nonsense that they themselves can't even understand. The laziness doesn't stop with writers, either: conditioned by nonsensical writing, readers themselves grow slothful. Orwell highlights this cyclical nature of linguistic laziness when he points out that language shapes thought as

much as thought shapes language: "[Language] becomes ugly and inaccurate because our thoughts are foolish, but the slovenliness of our language makes it easier for us to have foolish thoughts." With both readers and writers thus steeped in a culture of nonsensical communication, deplorable governments can more easily pass off their lies as truths. Specifically, a culture of lazy communication normalizes the linguistic tools governments need to reframe abuses as simple policy issues, like referring to exile as the "transfer of population" and rebranding mass murder as "pacification." Further, once caught within an oppressive regime, writers and readers grow even more resistant to critical thought, making it increasingly easy for bad actors to lie about their actions.

To set the foundation for his argument, Orwell posits that bad writing is generally the result of intellectual laziness. As evidence, Orwell points to writers who rely on "readymade phrases" and "stale metaphors" instead of more accurate, original ways to describe the world. Orwell outlines some of the features which make writing bad, with particular attention to "worn-out metaphors" and "lack of precision." For instance, Orwell argues that relying on tired phrases and comparisons enables bad writers to turn off their brains and pump out droll content, a practice more akin to erecting a "prefabricated henhouse" than building sharp observations. Orwell then claims that, after starting from a point of unoriginality, bad writers attempt to hide their lack of effort through overcomplicated word choice, fluffing up "banal" prose with gratuitous prefixes and suffixes (e.g., -zing and un-) and superfluous words. Further, Orwell claims that lazy writers use words they don't even understand, going as far to accuse one writer of being "unwilling to look *egregious* up in the dictionary and see what it means." As Orwell describes it, writers who indulge in bad prose save themselves "mental effort" on the front end: they can avoid thinking about what they write before they get words on the page. However, Orwell warns that writers pay the price of their laziness down the road: a lack of thinking on the front end produces indecipherable writing. To the lazy writer, Orwell warns the lack of effort on the front end—that is, writing without thinking—comes at "at the cost of leaving your meaning vague, not only for your reader but for yourself. Orwell thus defines lousy writing, in contrast to concise and imaginative writing, as easy to write and impossible to understand.

After establishing the relationship between bad writing and intellectual laziness, Orwell considers the effect of this bad writing on readers. He describes how readers internalize the nonsensical style of communication to avoid "mental effort." Once readers internalize an uncritical practice, people act as puppets, regurgitating the nonsensical style they pick up from writers. As evidence, Orwell points the mindless use of words without knowing what those words mean: "The appropriate noises are coming out of his larynx, but his brain is not involved as it would be if he were choosing words for himself." Thus, lazy writing makes for lazy readers with a bad habit of communicating without actually thinking.

Orwell claims that this lack of critical thought creates the conditions for political deception. The style of nonsense gives lying politicians and policymakers easy access to the tools for spreading "foolish thoughts." Within a culture that normalizes dishonest communication, bad actors can more easily rebrand their abuses and hide their sins, allowing for the "the defense of the indefensible." Under the haze of laziness and stupidity, audiences are susceptible to oppressive governments for whom the hallmarks of bad writing (readymade phrases, fluffed up prose, and misuse of words) serve as rhetorical strategies—a "catalogue of swindles and perversions"—for hiding the truth of their actions. Thus, even for sloppy writers and readers who do not intend harm, their laziness contributes to a dangerous lack of critical thinking across society. As Orwell describes it, "This reduced state of consciousness," in turn, sets the stage for "political conformity"—a willingness to unquestioningly accept and regurgitate political dogma.

Orwell provides readers with a way to interrupt the cycle of thoughtlessness and government-sponsored cruelty. He urges his audience to resist oppression by refusing the impulse to read and write without effort—that is, by taking the time to actually thoughtfully consider what they read and are told. Although "it's generally assumed that we cannot by conscious action do anything about" our communicative practices, Orwell insists that readers *can* intervene in the degradation of language. Specifically, Orwell encourages readers to demand better whenever they notice writers relying on readymade phrases, encouraging readers to send a lazy phrase to the "dustbin where it belongs." However, Orwell stresses that his "cure" will not happen overnight: Orwell instructs audiences to take up a concentrated and sustained effort to think more carefully as writers and demand more as readers. The antidote for lazy literacy is thus both difficult and straightforward: it's hard work.

STYLE AS A POLITICAL ISSUE

In "Politics and the English Language," Orwell pays careful attention to style—that is, how a person says something: the tone, syntax, flow of sentences, metaphors, and choice of words. He argues that the style in which people communicate determines the degree to which their governments can pass off lies as truths. In doing so, Orwell attempts to convince a politically minded audience that the specific way people express themselves—that is, their language itself—is inseparable from the content of their messages. Orwell ultimately argues that all writing is inherently political.

To begin, Orwell argues that non-professional writers should consider style a political issue. He explicitly appeals to an

audience that values "political regeneration." To this audience, he argues that bad writing isn't just a headache for the literary world. Bad writing, he stresses, produces oppressive politics. To make this point, Orwell outlines three reasons readers should not dismiss stylistic concerns as "sentimental archaism" or the whining of a nostalgic old man: first, writing is prescriptive and descriptive of how a culture thinks; second, bad writing has serious "political and economic" consequences; and third, bad writing is fixable. Thus, to a skeptical audience who might dismiss concerns about style as "frivolous," Orwell relies on a shared interest in politics to create buy-in for an argument about style.

After establishing the stakes for his argument, Orwell offers five short passages from various authors to illustrate the specific stylistic features of lousy writing and to show how "the present political chaos is connected with the decay of language." Orwell argues that all five passages share a similar, "inflated style," meaning pompous prose that looks fancy but lacks substance. Each passage, Orwell argues, reflects a shared style of "vagueness" indicative of gobbledygook—not coherent arguments or observations. Orwell's selection of passages also subtly reinforces the importance of style. Of the five passages, only two have a named author. The more explicitly political examples, such as the "Communist Pamphlet," do not specify an author. What's more, the only two passages with named authors are seemingly the most apolitical: Lancelot Hogben's zoological observations and Harold Laski's literary criticism. However, at the time, both of these named authors were well-known, politically engaged academics. By organizing the authors from most to least famous, Orwell subtly hints at his next point that writing style spreads through circulation: "A bad usage can spread by tradition and imitation, even among people who should and do know better." Further, by assigning a political name to seemingly apolitical texts, Orwell implicitly reinforces the notion that all writing is political.

From an analysis of five passages, Orwell elaborates as to why style matters for politics. Chiefly, he claims that no communication exists outside of political discourse: "In our age, there is no such thing as 'keeping out of politics.'" Put differently, Orwell argues that bad style infects all discourse. Once normalized, audiences grow tolerant of bad style. Unfortunately, the "vagueness" is a favorite style of tyrannical governments: "Orthodoxy, of whatever colour, seems to demand a lifeless, imitative style." The practice of using ambiguous phrases and "gumming" together words without regard to meaning bleeds into a dangerous political practice, in which leaders effectively reduce critical political concepts to empty buzzwords: "The words democracy, socialism, freedom, patriotic, realistic, justice, have each of them several different meanings which cannot be reconciled with one another." As such, even if a writer doesn't comment on policy, how writers collectively craft prose shapes a standard style for all areas of life—including the political. Further, bad style dulls a writer's ability to resist oppression. Not only does reading bad prose make people stupid, without the linguistic tools to clearly define the enemy, even a well-intended opposition fails. As he describes via the example of a poorly written pamphlet against fascism, poor writing practices simply reproduce a "familiar dreary pattern" rather than articulate a concrete opposition. Bad style thus pushes people away from the truth, effectively burying people under a "mass of lies, evasions, folly, hatred and schizophrenia," making resistance more difficult.

Throughout his essay, Orwell reiterates that readers must see the link between politics and language. As he argues, even when a writer's subject is not political, the style of writing carries political implications. Thus, style is a political issue because it's a key element of how governments communicate with their citizens. In this essay, he's particularly concerned with a trend in "political speech and writing" in which bad actors can easily manipulate their citizens. With reality erased by abstraction, policymakers effectively shut out any meaningful dissent.

HONESTY, TRUTH, AND CONCISION

In addition to arguing *against* linguistic laziness, Orwell argues specifically *for* a writing process that encourages concision—that is, using as few words as possible to get a point across. Indeed, two of his proposed rules for good writing include: "Never use a long word where a short one will do," and "If it is possible to cut a word out, always cut it out." Underlining this argument is the idea that reality or facts (or thoughts, feelings, and experiences) are raw goods, and language is a way of processing those goods and presenting them to others. As a tool to represent reality, language helps people share the world. But, at the same time, language all too easily distances the mind from reality, obscuring truth behind vagueness and misleading euphemism. Put differently, words carry weight which inevitably creates space between the writer and the reality they seek to represent through language. For Orwell, concise prose is a prerequisite for honesty and truth because it essentially strips ideas bare; there is no obfuscation for lies to hide behind.

Orwell identifies several features of bad, dishonest writing. His analysis starts with features most indicative of unintentional dishonesty and ends with the most dangerous. He grapples first with "dying metaphors," or "worn-out" phrases that, due to overuse, "[have] lost all evocative power," like the much-used phrase "Achille's heel." He also points out how many phrases have been "twisted out of their original meaning without those who use them even being aware of the fact," like how many writers use the incorrect phrase "tow the line" instead of "toe the line." Orwell explains that dead metaphors often reveal that a writer was "composing in a hurry." In this case, a well-intended writer may grab a dead metaphor to simply get words on a

page. But, in a rush to repurpose ubiquitous phrases, that writer unknowingly slips into a spiral of dishonesty. For readers, "dying metaphors" alone may indicate laziness—not necessarily intentional dishonesty. For writers who want to stay close to the truth, though, Orwell recommends exercising caution when dealing with idioms and common phrases.

After discussing dying metaphors, Orwell turns to pretentious diction and operators. Operators, or verbal false limbs, refers to a preference of overcomplicated phrases over simple verbs, like saying "renders inoperative" instead of "break." He then describes pretentious diction, or uselessly complicated and technical phrases used to "dress up simple statements and give an air of scientific impartiality to biased judgments." Operators and pretentious diction both serve to gussy up bland prose, helping the author hide his laziness. Hence, these features involve a level of dishonesty. Further, in fluffing up prose with pretentious diction and operators, a lazy writer can lose sight of his own reality. To readers, the presence of these features indicate that the writer *knows* they're spewing nonsense, which understandably makes readers weary. For writers, avoiding wordiness is key to avoiding fluffed up prose that can "blur" the edges of their reality.

Of all the features of vague writing that Orwell identifies, meaningless words are the most toxic. While meaningless phrases may appear in the less nefarious forms of dishonest writing ("particularly in art criticism and literary criticism"), meaningless words often indicate a more dangerous scam in action. Specifically, Orwell warns the readers against meaningless political words which are "almost always made with the intent to deceive." To detect the presence of a meaningless word, readers should take extra care to make a note of words that lack a clear definition and have different meanings in different contexts. Writers should likewise exercise vigilance when dealing with abstract language, making sure to stay anchored to reality by asking themselves "What am I trying to say?" Words, especially needless ones, can create a "pad" between a writer and their truth. An unintentionally fraudulent writer loses his grip on reality through a haphazard writing process: he sets out to say one thing and, by incompetence or laziness, says another. Contrastingly, an intentionally fraudulent writer actively misleads his audience, using "vagueness and wordiness" as tools to "swindle" his audience. Orwell argues that wordiness litters a well-intended writer's mind, "blurring" the edges of his reality.

While bad writing is characterized by stale metaphors, pretentious diction, and meaningless words—a breeding ground for vagueness and dishonesty—good writing is characterized by one key thing: concision. The reason why concision is so important is that it lends itself well to honesty—writers can't hide behind lofty prose or tired idioms and must instead directly face the truth they want to convey. From the outset, before any writing occurs, Orwell suggests writers spend more time concentrating on "concrete" reality. Writers should meditate on this "truth" before littering their mind with prose. When the writer finally does put pen to paper, Orwell recommends that writers take time to carefully select words that best represent the concrete facts they wish to communicate. He warns writers that, if they rely on being convincing rather than being correct, they will lose their grasp on the facts: "let the meaning choose the word, and not the other way about." Orwell includes a handful of other tips to help writers write succinctly and honestly. For instance, he recommends that writers avoid passive voice and other wordy constructions, opt for shorter words when possible, stay away from unnecessary jargon, and don't repeat the same old phrases they see in print. These tips are like a sieve that force writers to strain their work until they're left with only the essence of what they want to convey, filtering out the bulky prose and unhelpful metaphors in the process. However, Orwell concedes that his suggestions aren't foolproof, admitting that even he sometimes falls back on bad writing habits: "Look back through this essay, and for certain you will find that I have again and again committed the very faults I am protesting against." The critical thing, Orwell stresses, is that writers maintain a continual effort to stay as close as possible to the truth.

Throughout his essay, Orwell takes shots at professional writers. He ridicules the poor writing of academics, activists, and governments—anyone he believes is more concerned with filling the page than making a clear and truthful point. He highlights the way that many writers muddy their ideas with impenetrable lofty diction, foggy words that lack clear meaning, and metaphors that have dulled with time. All of these things transform the writer's ideas, intentionally or otherwise, into a thick swamp that the reader must trudge through in search of the truth—and only concision can cut through the muck.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

DRINKING AND SHAME

Orwell uses drinking and shame to represent the mutually productive relationship between language and laziness. Orwell argues that laziness encourages a wordy style writing which, in turn, makes people stupid. In doing so, Orwell is countering the notion that language is simply a mirror to the world. Rather than reflect societal ills, the wrong style is itself a "mental vice." To illustrate, Orwell suggests that bad writing, born out of laziness, is similar to the spiral of drinking and shame, wherein shame leads to excessive drinking, and drinking leads to more shame. As he describes it, a man "may

take to drink because he feels himself to be a failure, and then fail all the more completely because he drinks." He argues that the same is true for laziness and writing: "[language] becomes ugly and inaccurate because our thoughts are foolish, but the slovenliness of our language makes it easier for us to have foolish thoughts." Thus, according to Orwell, intervening in language practices is not only possible, but a way to improve society. Specifically, Orwell suggests interrupting the spiral of laziness and vagueness with a writing style that prioritizes truth and concision.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Penguin Modern Classics edition of *Politics and the English Language* published in 2013.

Politics and the English Language Quotes

A man may take to drink because he feels himself to be a failure, and then fail all the more completely because he drinks. It is rather the same thing that is happening to the English language.

Related Characters: George Orwell (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 1

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage from the essay's introduction, Orwell uses an analogy about drinking to explain the logic underlying his argument about how lazy writing leads to lazy reading/thinking. Orwell is saying that drinking and shame have a circular relationship: drinking leads to shame, which then leads to more drinking. Orwell's rationale is that bad writing is similar, and does more than *reflect* stupidity; bad writing actually *makes* people stupid, which leads to more bad writing. Thus, like drinking, bad writing is both a cause *and* an effect.

Analogical reasoning thus helps Orwell clarify and explain the rationale for his argument. Specifically, through the analogy of drinking and writing, Orwell describes how a symptom can operate as both a side effect and cause. Further, if an audience assumes that *treating* shame is key to addressing a drinking problem, they may more easily accept Orwell's conclusion that *fixing* writing is key to making people less stupid.

Prose consists less and less of *words* chosen for the sake of their meaning, and more and more of *phrases* tacked together like the sections of a prefabricated hen-house.

Related Characters: George Orwell (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 4

Explanation and Analysis

After the introduction, Orwell turns to explain specific stylistic features of bad writing—in other words, what bad writing actually looks like. Orwell starts with a discussion of "dead metaphors," or overused metaphors and idioms. As he describes it, dying metaphors are the result of lazy writers settling for whatever's laying on the surface of their minds to explain a point. Orwell would prefer writers spend more time and effort, digging deeper for fresher phrases to better illustrate their ideas.

What's more, because writers tend to repeat whatever they see in print, overuse builds on itself: dead phrases rot as they move through discourse, growing less vivid with each use. In other words, dead metaphors catch on like yawns. To represent the problem of flat imagery in action, Orwell describes prose made from a series of dying metaphors as "tacked together like the sections of a prefabricated hen-house." In including this much more original metaphor, Orwell demonstrates an alternative to dying metaphors *within* an argument about dying metaphors.

The words *democracy*, *socialism*, *freedom*, *patriotic*, *realistic*, *justice*, have each of them several different meanings which cannot be reconciled with one another. In the case of a word like *democracy*, not only is there no agreed definition, but the attempt to make one is resisted from all sides.

Related Characters: George Orwell (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 9

Explanation and Analysis

This passage serves to connect Orwell's discussion of bad

writing to his discussion of bad political communication. Orwell does not divide his essay into sections, but readers can easily break down the body of the essay into three conceptual segments: 1) analysis of the stylistic features of bad prose, 2) description of how bad prose allows for bad politics, and 3) explanation of techniques to improve writing. Here, in a passage connecting the first and second of these sections, Orwell describes "meaningless words"—a stylistic feature of bad prose—as especially toxic within political communication.

Specifically, Orwell's concerned with how bad political actors use abstract language to rally support and evade accountability for their actions. As he describes it, references to abstract concepts can inspire support despite lacking a clear reference within policy. Because policymakers don't have to provide specific explanations of how they're using words like *democracy* or *justice*, they never need to own up the specifics of their actions. Generating support through empty words frees policymakers from checkpoints that people could use to enforce accountability. Thus, politicians can seek support merely by saying a word and without a commitment to any concrete policy.

> In our time it is broadly true that political writing is bad writing. Where it is not true, it will generally be found that the writer is some kind of rebel, expressing his private opinions, and not a 'party line.' Orthodoxy, of whatever colour, seems to demand a lifeless, imitative style. The political dialects to be found in pamphlets, leading articles, manifestos, White Papers and the speeches of Under-Secretaries do, of course, vary from party to party, but they are all alike in that one almost never finds in them a fresh, vivid, home-made turn of speech.

Related Characters: George Orwell (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 13

Explanation and Analysis

After detailing the stylistic features of bad writing, Orwell adjusts his focus to talk about political communication. This passage, taken from the first paragraph in which Orwell focuses specifically on political writing, details the pervasiveness of bad writing within political communication.

To recap: Orwell's main point is that the normalization of bad writing allows for dictatorial governments. To get from bad writing to dictatorial governments, Orwell describes how bad writing is the principal style within political communication. In this sense, his argument hinges on the normalization of bad writing. In this passage, Orwell directly speaks to the concept of normalization, referring to bad writing as "orthodoxy" or a generally accepted practice. It seems every political institute, regardless of its specific ideas, writes in lazy, vague, and convoluted ways. Orwell also describes how bad prose shapes political thought. Superficially, he describes the lack of diversity in communication a means of silencing political dissent: everyone writes the same and everyone thinks the same.

> A speaker who uses that kind of phraseology has gone some distance towards turning himself into a machine. The appropriate noises are coming out of his larynx, but his brain is not involved as it would be if he were choosing his words for himself [...] And this reduced state of consciousness, if not indispensable, is at any rate favourable to political conformity.

Related Characters: George Orwell (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 14

Explanation and Analysis

Throughout the essay, Orwell assigns a kind of contaminating power to readymade phrases, granting such stale, overused language the power to infiltrate the mind via laziness—and, once inside, to deteriorate thought. In this passage, part of an explanation of how bad writing shapes political communication, Orwell elaborates on how the normalization of bad writing erases the ability to generate original thought. That is, lazy writing discourages people from making the effort to think for themselves.

In particular, he describes how readymade phrases turns people into puppets. In doing so, he returns to a central claim in his argument about how bad writing both reflects and produces stupidity. From the introduction to this essay, Orwell argues that bad writing isn't just a reflection of stupidity; bad writing is a means of *making* people stupid. Thus, in a discussion of how bad writing shapes politics, Orwell returns to this idea from the introduction. Specifically, Orwell claims that mindlessly regenerating readymade phrases reduces people to a zombie-like state: talking without thinking, as if controlled by an outside force.

Thus political language has to consist largely of euphemism, question-begging and sheer cloudy vagueness. Defenceless villages are bombarded from the air, the inhabitants driven out into the countryside, the cattle machine-gunned, the huts set on fire with incendiary bullets: this is called *pacification*.

Related Characters: George Orwell (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 14

Explanation and Analysis

Orwell argues that, by normalizing bad writing, lazy writers make it easier for power-hungry politicians to engage in the kind of linguistic trickery necessary for establishing a dictatorship. Or, as Orwell describes in this passage, how governments repackage abuses using vague language and empty buzzwords.

The mention of "*pacification*" likely refers to the murder of approximately 20,000 Polish villagers by Nazi Germany in what Nazis referred to as "pacification operations." Thus, in calling upon "*pacification*" as a charged word, Orwell points to an example of a government engaging in deceptive communication strategies to avoid facing the reality of their actions. In doing so, Orwell warns the audience about what's at stake in terms of his argument: when meaninglessness is normalized, it's easier to avoid thinking about doing the unthinkable.

The great enemy of clear language is insincerity. When there is a gap between one's real and one's declared aims, one turns as it were instinctively to long words and exhausted idioms, like a cuttlefish spurting out ink.

Related Characters: George Orwell (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 15

Explanation and Analysis

After connecting vague prose to the concealment of political violence, Orwell elaborates on how readers should interpret that vague prose. In contrast to succinct phrasing, Orwell argues that wordiness gives lies more to hide behind. Think about it like this: providing a straightforward answer (e.g., "yes or "no") opens a speaker up for exposure. That is, it's easier to separate lies from the truth when there's less to sift through. A flurry of words thus makes it difficult for an audience to parse out a speaker's claim—to figure out what they're actually saying.

As Orwell describes here, readers can thus detect the very presence of a lie just from examining the pure volume of words and overused phrases. Or, as Orwell explains, when someone is telling a lie, he'll likely say *more* than if he were saying the truth. That is, people try to talk themselves out of trouble, running from the truth and its consequences like an octopus squirting out ink in an attempt to distract and escape from a predator.

But if thought corrupts language, language can also corrupt thought. A bad usage can spread by tradition and imitation, even among people who should and do know better [...] Look back through this essay, and for certain you will find that I have again and again committed the very faults I am protesting against.

Related Characters: George Orwell (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 16

Explanation and Analysis

Towards the conclusion, Orwell opens himself up for examination by the reader. This is key to his argument that bad writing is the norm. If bad writing, as Orwell claims throughout this essay, is genuinely the norm, then bad writing is everywhere—even within Orwell's work. Again, as Orwell describes it, bad writing isn't just the style of choice for evil dictators. As Orwell asserts throughout the essay, an evil dictator only takes *advantage* of what lazy and unwitting writers normalize through their work. That means that not even Orwell is free from the squirrelly seduction of bad writing. After all, as Orwell describes it, bad writing has a sort of magical quality: the ability to infiltrate one's own mind and, in doing so, erase and distort one's prospection of reality.

Also, in rhetorical terms, opening himself up for scrutiny is a savvy way for Orwell to counter an anticipated rebuttal. That is, a reader might dismiss Orwell for preaching concise prose because his prose isn't always concise. But, by admitting his weaknesses, Orwell does some work to interrupt that line of objection.

> When you think of a concrete object, you think wordlessly, and then, if you want to describe the thing you have been visualizing, you probably hunt about till you find the exact words that seem to fit it. When you think of something abstract you are more inclined to use words from the start, and unless you make a conscious effort to prevent it, the existing dialect will come rushing in and do the job for you, at the expense of blurring or even changing your meaning.

Related Characters: George Orwell (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 18

Explanation and Analysis

As Orwell nears towards a conclusion, he outlines an approach to writing that he believes would generate more concise and honest content. In this particular passage, he describes a specific writing process in which a writer sits with his thoughts before turning the pen to paper. That is, Orwell wants writers to gather their ideas before writing. In doing so, Orwell assumes that writing—especially in abstract terms—can infect one's reality.

Note that, from numerous studies on the best practices for generating concise prose, this is an approach most contemporary writing instructors would not recommend. Even writing instructing professionals who would likely agree with all other aspects of Orwell's argument would probably disagree on this specific piece of writing advice. Unlike Orwell, most writing instructors treat writing as a way to work *towards* a truth. That is, most writing instructors would advise spending more time on revision (that is, more drafting) than thinking without writing.

> I have not here been considering the literary use of language, but merely language as an instrument for expressing and not for concealing or preventing thought.

Related Characters: George Orwell (speaker), Stuart Chase

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 19

Explanation and Analysis

In the conclusion, Orwell makes a caveat regarding the limits of his argument. Precisely, he notes a specific limit on the genres to which his argument should apply. In doing so, Orwell provides a rebuttal or response to an anticipated counterargument or objection from the audience.

A rebuttal recognizes limitations or situations in which an argument would not hold. In this passage, Orwell acknowledges the limits of his argument regarding fiction writing. As he describes it, his argument only applies to that writing which attempts to represent the truth. Presumably, because fiction is inherently not a reflection of reality—by definition fiction is not reality—Orwell notes his argument would not hold within that context. However, note that in his own fiction (which he does not discuss here), Orwell appears to follow the advice within this essay, sticking to simple prose and concrete language.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

POLITICS AND THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE

To begin, Orwell outlines three common assumptions. First, that the English language is regularly misused and abused. Second, that the downfall of the English language mirrors the "decadence" (or moral denigration spurred by excessiveness) of English-speaking "civilization." With both of these first two points, Orwell agrees: the decline of writing and politics go hand-and-hand.

This essay first appeared in the literary journal Horizon: A Review of Literature and Art, *published in London in 1946. From this, one can deduce that Orwell's readers likely shared an interest in writing. Living in London at the end of WWII, his audience also would have experienced politically motivated violence. Here, Orwell establishes the assumptions that will shape his essay, drawing a link between politics and language to underscore the political importance of linguistic style.*

Then, Orwell draws out a third assumption: that people cannot consciously improve the English language and, thus, any attempt to repair the English language is nothing more than "sentimental archaism," or old-fashioned and pointless. On this point, Orwell disagrees. Rather than assume that language is an uncontrollable "outgrowth of nature," Orwell argues that language is a tool that he and other writers can "shape for our purposes."

By using inclusive pronouns like "our," Orwell identifies himself as one of the writers to whom he speaks; that is, he attempts to establish a sense of camaraderie with this audience by asserting that they are peers, even though he will go on to sharply criticize what he views as bad writing. In declaring that people can, *in fact, improve the English language, he's also implicitly defending this very essay: this isn't some overly-academic thought exercise, but rather an urgent and concrete political endeavor.*

Specifically, Orwell compares the relationship between laziness and stupidity with **shame and drinking**: shame initiates drinking, which causes more shame, which then leads to more drinking and therefore more shame, and so on. Orwell thus reiterates his rationale for focusing on writing style as a fixable problem. He argues that abuse of language doesn't just reflect laziness and stupidity. Rather, abuse of language both *describes and prescribes* laziness and stupidity. Because of the language's active role in encouraging stupidity and laziness, Orwell urges writers and readers to take an active part in interrupting the corruption of language.

Orwell uses a comparison to break down the complicated idea that language is a social construction. In rhetorical terms, this is called analogical reasoning. Through analogical reasoning, the author uses an analogy to persuade his audience that, because two problems function similarly, they will share a common solution. In this case, because the reader will presumably accept that stopping drinking with ease the shame, the reader may also agree that making prose better will make people less stupid.

Orwell then takes a step back to clarify the terms of his argument, starting with the abuse of language itself: what this abuse looks like and why it occurs even among well-intentioned writers. To this end, Orwell provides five examples of passages which he describes as especially representative of bad writing. The first two passages come from academics (Professors Harold Laski and Lancelot Hogben). The last three passages cite only the publication (that is, they do not mention an author). Each example contains complicated sentence structures, many idioms and metaphors, or a series of adjectives attached to a single noun. The subjects of these passages are as follows: literary criticism, biology and language, psychology, politics, and broadcasting.

Orwell takes his own advice when it comes to writing: he seeks to ground his claims in clear, concrete examples. He shows specific examples of bad writing to help readers better grasp exactly what he's critiquing, and to also illustrate just how common such writing is. Further, the only two passages with a named author are the seemingly most apolitical: Lancelot Hogben's zoological observations and Harold Laski's literary criticism. At the time, both were well-known political activists. By assigning political names to seemingly apolitical texts, Orwell foreshadows his later claim that that all writing is political.

After listing the passages, Orwell points to two elements they all share: "staleness and imagery" and "lack of precision." Together, he argues, these elements dissolve any discernable or "concrete" point. He thus describes these passages as sloppy and unoriginal, as though the each were "tacked together like the sections of a prefabricated hen-house."

Orwell argues that improving style improves politics. Implicitly, this means that his own *writing shapes politics. Here Orwell attempts to interfere in the general atmosphere of bad prose with his own work. One of Orwell's main gripes with bad writing is the use of clichés, which evidences a certain laziness; writers can't be bothered to think up more unique examples, nor to articulate their points clearly. By mentioning the "prefabricated hen-house," Orwell models the behavior he wants to see: using concrete language to call upon an inspired image.*


Orwell then goes on to specify four features of bad writing. For each category he provides a definition, a few examples, the cause, and the effect.

Orwell describes his next move to the reader, enhancing the organizational clarity and precision of his argument.

First: "dying metaphors." Orwell defines these as overused and misused phrases meant to invoke an image. For example, Orwell lists "swan song" as an overused metaphor and "the hammer and the anvil" as a misused metaphor. Behind such dead metaphors, Orwell describes a bored, lazy writer "not interested in what he is saying." Writers thus string together a "huge dump" of dead metaphors, oftentimes without the awareness of erroneously misusing phrases (e.g., misusing "toe the line" in place of "tow the line") to "save the trouble" of choosing their metaphors more carefully. As a result, dead metaphors make for flat, unindicative prose.

A dying-metaphor indicates the presence of a lazy writer—not necessarily an intentional scammer. That is, the writer behind "dying metaphors" is not always out to do harm—he's just out to do very little! However, while the lazy writer lacks intention to do harm, Orwell suggests that, by normalizing stylistic features such as "dying metaphors," the lazy writer is partially culpable for the current political culture in which political can easily mislead the public through unclear or deliberately obfuscating language.


Second: "operators" or "verbal false limbs." Orwell defines this category as fluffing up a sentence with "extra syllables." For example, the use of a phrase like "serve the purpose of" or inessential prefixes and suffixes (e.g., "deregionalize.") Behind "operators" and "verbal false limbs," Orwell describes two types of writers: (1) those looking to "save the trouble" of more carefully choosing more precise phrasing and (2) writers hoping to pass off a "banal" statement as thoughtful. The result: the prose is generally more difficult for readers to understand.

Like the previous category, this stylistic feature is generally the product of a lazy writer. Note that, although the lazy writer does not set out to lie, he nevertheless fails to tell the truth. According to Orwell, not only is imprecise prose inadequate for representing reality to others, bad writing can contaminate a writer's own *perception of reality.*

Third: "pretentious diction" or language which attempts to "dress up simple statements" to give the impression of mental soundness. As an example, Orwell points to the excessive use of "foreign words" and political "jargon." Orwell specifically accuses academics and activists of relying on pretentious diction to hide a lack of tangible knowledge and make themselves seem more "objective." For readers, pretentious diction makes prose more difficult to process.

In this category, writers are more likely to know they're pulling a scam—even if it's just to hide laziness and stupidity. Orwell points to how institutionalized discourse (i.e., academia) conceals a lack of objectivity and originality through bad prose. In doing so, Orwell suggests a relationship between knowingly deceiving someone and lazily normalizing a style that allows others to practice deception.

Forth: meaningless words or words that lack a clear, concrete definition. Orwell points to words like "values" and "equality." He warns that meaningless words are "often used in a consciously dishonest way," and, within political writing, "almost always made with the intent to deceive." As a result, meaningless words allow the nefarious to sell empty political promises. That is, meaningless words are often meant to rile up support for or opposition to an idea (e.g., "democracy") without ever committing to the details.

In this section, Orwell pivots directly to political communication. The writer is described much less as unintentionally deceptive person and more purposely manipulative. The person who wields the stylistic feature "meaningless words" is certainly not stupid. Rather, some persons within this category appear to communicate with a high level of cleverness—they want *to deceive people through language.*

To illustrate bad prose via contrast, Orwell translates a short passage from *Ecclesiastes* to "modern" English. The result is longer, wordier, and less concrete that the original.

In this parody of Ecclesiastes *to illustrate the degradation of language, Orwell does not make mention of the oppressive political conditions underlying the publication of the King James Bible in which the original passage appears. Therefore, in holding up Ecclesiastes as a model of good writing, Orwell somewhat contradicts his central argument. That is, he implicitly suggests that bad politics can produce good prose (in that the oppressive conditions of the King James Bible led to a clearer rendition of* Ecclesiastes*).*

Before moving on to politics, Orwell summarizes his discussion regarding the features of bad prose. Specifically, he argues that "modern" writing "consist[s] of gumming together long strips of words" and then gussying up those phrases with needless complicated and empty words. The resulting prose is gobbledygook. He claims that the writers turn to bad prose to save time.

Orwell reiterates two sub-claims of his argument. A sub-claim reinforces the validity of the central agreement. These are: 1: lazy writing leads to bad prose and 2: bad prose does not accurately represent reality. The central argument is that widespread bad prose normalizes a culture of deception.

Orwell then explicitly connects a culture of bad writing to political tyranny. He argues that the normalization of vague prose makes it easier for bad actors to exercise brainwashing: "They will construct your sentences for you—even think your thoughts for you, to a certain extent—and at need they will perform the important service of partially concealing your meaning from yourself." In other words, mushy prose produces a squishy, easy-to-manipulate mind.

Earlier in the essay, Orwell asserts that bad writing makes readers stupid. Here he takes this point a step further: using the stylistic tools of bad writing makes the writer himself *stupid. That is, as a writer engages relies on lazy imitation, he loses his grip on reality and, with that grip, the ability to think critically.*

From bad writing more generally, Orwell moves to describe "political writing." As he describes it, the majority of political communication—"pamphlets, leading articles, manifestos, and the speeches of almost every party"—is horrible. What's more, political communication is mostly people parroting meaningless phrases.

Here Orwell describes bad prose as omnipresent; not the work of a single writer or limited to one medium. Indeed, Orwell's primary argument—that the normalization *of bad style enables dictatorial politics—hinges on the concept that bad prose is widespread.*

Returning to the concept of a spiral, Orwell argues that, because lazy writing makes the features of manipulation available, even non-political speech has political consequences. Specifically, Orwell explains that a "general atmosphere" of "inflated style" allows for hazy communication to become the norm. When governments can pick up on this norm, the "inflated style" of lazy writers becomes a tool for linguistic trickery for the "defense of the indefensible." As an example, Orwell points to the use of the word "*pacification*" to describe state-sponsored murder.

This section connects the normalization of bad style to political oppression. To recap, Orwell's central argument is that the normalization of bad style enables oppressive politics. Mention of "pacification" thus serves as evidence for Orwell's argument. Shortly before the publication of this essay, the Nazi German government murdered thousands of Polish villagers under what they called pacification operations. That is, through the guise meaningless words, Nazi Germany enacted hideous violence.

To illustrate how a bad actor could use "inflated style" to manipulate an audience, Orwell invents a hypothetical character: an English professor defending Russian totalitarianism. He then speaks in the voice of that character to show how a speaker could use inflated style to reframe the murder of political opponents by saying that "certain curtailment of the right to political opposition is an unavoidable concomitant of transitional periods." Orwell thus warns the reader that, in the hands of a clever bad actor, inflated style can make violence seem innocuous.

To echo his point that bad style enables deception, Orwell invents a hypothetical character with the same linguistic style as the real professors cited earlier in the essay. Also, while Orwell does not mention specifics, his audience was likely aware of the Russian leader Joseph Stalin's practice of silencing dissent via murder.

Orwell goes as far as to claim that relying on "readymade" phrases can "anesthetize" the brains of well-intended writers. To illustrate how "thought corrupts language, language can also corrupt thought," Orwell turns to a political pamphlet denouncing German fascism. As he describes it, although the writer has a worthy cause, he's unable to articulate his position in any meaningful way. Orwell thus argues that the culture of communicative vagueness makes people too stupid to meaningfully oppose tyranny.

Now Orwell expands on the stakes of his argument. Stakes are what readers may gain or lose when by accepting an argument. Using the anti-fascism pamphlet as an example, Orwell identifies the ability to resist dictatorial politics as the stakes for his argument—in other words, he asserts that his discussion of language isn't esoteric or theoretical, but instead has urgent, real-world applications.

Despite the bad state of communication and politics, Orwell is hopeful that writers and readers can interrupt the cycle of lazy writing and political abuses. The solution, as he describes it, is more thoughtful writing and reading practices.

The thesis for this essay (or main argument) makes two interrelated claims. 1: normalization of unclear communicative style enables political oppression and 2: people can raise the standard of writing. In this part of the essay, Orwell shifts focus to the second claim, discussing the specifics of how to improve writing.

To interrupt the cycle of lazy literacy and political evils, Orwell encourages more honesty in communication through more concise prose: the "fewest and shortest words that will cover one's meaning." Orwell reiterates that relying on readymade phrases is a particularly dangerous habit with the potential of "blurring or even changing your meaning." To this end, Orwell recommends writers spend more time thinking about their truth before they begin writing.

For Orwell, writing marks an end to thinking. On this point, Orwell's writing advice is at odds with the writing advice of most contemporary writing instructors, including those who agree with Orwell in all other aspects of his argument. Namely, most of today's writing instructors believe the opposite: writing a part of thinking—not the end.

Before describing his "rules" for better writing, Orwell notes that improving writing practices isn't striking out old words from one's vocabulary or setting up a new grammatical standard. He likewise warns readers against "fake simplicity and the attempt to make written English colloquial." Instead, Orwell recommends a robust approach to writing and reading which favors concrete language and concision.

Throughout the essay, Orwell describes the language as being in a denigrated state. That is, it's worse than before. Often, the assumption that language is worse off now than it was in the past stems from the belief that that people are too loose with the rules of grammar. Here, Orwell explicitly declares that he is not advocating for the enforcement of a grammatical standard. Instead, he wants people to do the work of thinking clearly and then ensuring that their prose reflects that clarity through concision and precision.


To this end, Orwell provides a series of rules to encourage clarity and concision throughout the writing process. These include: "If it is possible to cut a word out, always cut it out" and "Never use a long word where a short one will do." Orwell ends his list of rules by encouraging writers to break any rule if that rule means saying "anything outright barbarous."

Orwell is hesitant to declare a universal standard, adding the caveat that a writer should feel empowered to break any of his rules if he needs to. Orwell is thus uncertain about the best way to write, but sure about the best outcome: the truth.


Before reaching for a conclusion, Orwell notes the limits of his argument. Explicitly, he argues that his advice does not apply to literary prose. Also, he specifically notes that, unlike Stuart Chase, whom Orwell claims comes "near" banning abstract language as means to eliminate political dissent, he does not think it's a good idea to ban abstract language altogether.

Orwell carves out a space for "literary" or fictional prose, which he presumably affords a longer stylistic leash because fiction—by its very definition—is a dishonest project. Also, Orwell presumably references Chase's book, The Tyranny of Language. *Note that, while Orwell implies otherwise, Chase did* not *advocate in favor of eliminating abstract language. In fact, Chase invented the phrase "The New Deal."*

To conclude, Orwell encourages the reader to "change his own habits" as means to resist government manipulation. After all, he reiterates, within a culture of vagueness, it's easier to "make lies sound truthful and murder respectable." Therefore, he encourages readers to send the features of bad prose "to the dustbin where it belongs."

Throughout the essay, Orwell describes the degeneration of language practices as widespread and ingrained: not the product of a single writer or group or exclusive to one medium. However, in the last third of his essay, he focuses on ways individuals can intervene in the process of normalization. Given this discrepancy, it's unclear how much of an intervention he believes this essay will make towards improving prose or politics.

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