

The language of academia deters meaningful learning

For those of you who missed the reading for any of your classes recently, I'll share with you some words from my recent assignments:

"In other words, deviation, originating as expression, may after a time become normative, and when this occurs it is necessary either to invent new deviations for the sake of aesthetic effect or to point up those already in use."

"No doubt, if Plato were to go beyond the gross contrast between perceiving and knowing to discriminate more finely among modes of 'getting hold of something within the soul,' he might in the process come closer to modern ways of treating judgement of identity."

"To assert that incompleteness gives rise to expectations of completeness is tantamount to tautology."

These quotes are taken from textbooks by Leonard Meyer and Myles Burnyeat. If you didn't understand these three sentences (yes, each one is only ONE sentence), you're not alone. If you think these sentences were badly written, you're not alone.

These excerpts are not unique. Every student has several horror stories about The Textbook That Wouldn't Die. The professors who write our textbooks usually prefer to bludgeon the reader with a vast vocabulary, which diverts the reader's attention away from the dangling modifiers, the pronoun-antecedent difficulties and all the other syntax problems we were taught to avoid in elementary school.

The writing style (or lack thereof) of the academic world is more than just a hardship for students. It widens the gap between academia and the "real world," a gap that will eventually threaten academia.

We see signs of the problem already. Last year's "obscene art" controversy was worsened by the lack of a capable spokesperson for the artistic community. Say what you will about the intellect of Jesse Helms and Pat Robertson; they know how to communicate with the common man, and the average art professor doesn't.

Inability to communicate is a severe problem. University faculty who cannot put forth their ideas in plain English are in the same boat as the functionally illiterate — unable to participate in the public forum of ideas.

The scariest part of the language-imposed gulf between academia and the real world is that it seems to be institutionalized. The overbearing language of academic journals tends to carry into professors' classroom conversation, forcing students to emulate their professors.

It seems that learning how to write badly is a rite of initiation into the ranks of academia. The only required

□ New day rising Beau Dure

course at Duke is the University Writing Course, in which students who made high scores on every conceivable standardized writing test are told to scrap their old (and successful) ways and learn a new method. From graduate students. Gee, thanks.

The supposed purpose of the University Writing Course is to prepare students in all fields (read: science majors who supposedly can't write) in the ways of academic prose. But the sciences are conducted in a different, ever-changing language that poses its own particular problems. Science majors are not helped by the UWC.

Humanities majors learn even less in the UWC. These students take the liveliest and strongest aspects of their high school experience and trash them for the sake of appeasing a graduate student who would much rather teach a history section. Some students revert to their old

style when they take other courses, but other students lose that style completely and force themselves into an uphill battle every time they face the word processor.

Yet UWC is not the worst part of the indoctrination into academic prose. Many professors emphasize quantity over quality, and almost all professors urge their students to write above a specific length. Students are encouraged to write for volume, ensuring that no student will ever learn the value of concise writing. A typical newspaper copy editor, who is trained to sharpen prose, could reduce any 10-page paper to five pages without losing any of the essential arguments.

The typical professor, if he or she has read this far, may consider a language critique a trivial complaint. But I hope some professors are concerned that the gap between the real world and the ivory towers is a serious problem. And I hope they manage to find some way to encourage some non-masochists to attend graduate school. I know I won't be one of them.

Beau Dure is a Trinity senior and managing editor of The Chronicle.