

In April 1946, George Orwell published a short essay entitled "Politics and the English Language". Orwell's clear intention was to remedy the pervasive 'ugly and inaccurate' written English in contemporary literature.

Modern English, especially written English, is full of bad habits which spread by imitation and which can be avoided if one is willing to take the necessary trouble.

Ultimately, Orwell's efforts were underpinned by political concerns, in an era where propaganda had become the *arme de choix* of a range of oppressive political movements.

"Politics and the English Language" has become best known for its suggested six rules of writing, which might be employed in order to avoid poor writing. Since their publication, these guidelines have become much loved from amateur literary blogs to self-help websites.

Nonetheless, Orwell's rules deserve reassessment. Much has changed since 1946: the map of Europe has been redrawn, 140-character tweets have become a primary mode of communication, and a global health crisis has brought the world to a standstill. Do Orwell's rules, therefore, still hold firm? And what lessons might a PhD student garner from reading them?

GEORGE ORWELL

## 6 RULES FOR WRITING

- Never use a metaphor, simile, or other figure of speech which you are used to seeing in print.
- Never use a long word where a short one will do.
- If it is possible to cut a word out, always cut it out.
- Never use the passive where you can use the active.
- Never use a foreign phrase, a scientific word, or a jargon word if you can think of an everyday English equivalent.
- Break any of these rules sooner than say anything outright barbarous.

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Let us take Orwell's six rules in turn, and consider the resonance each recommendation could carry for a PhD researcher in the twenty-first century

**1. *Never use a metaphor, simile, or other figure of speech which you are used to seeing in print***

Originality is certainly a watchword of many PhD projects. The ability to break new ground within a dissertation is admirable. However, the quest to express oneself in an unprecedented way should not obscure the clear presentation of research findings. In some cases, certain metaphors or similes have become integrated into the English language precisely because they capture a sentiment in a particularly effective manner. In this case, their replication in a passage of PhD prose could be justified. A preoccupation with originality of prose has the converse potential to lead to the creation of phrases which are simply inappropriate. If writers cannot bring themselves to use an established figure of speech, the best advice might be to avoid elaborate language altogether: simply state an idea in plain terms.

**2. *Never use a long word where a short one will do.***

Concision is essential in PhD research. A reader must be able to take away a clear picture of research findings. Equally, in the time-pressed academic world, accessible prose is a valued characteristic. The academic community is also global. English may not be the first language of any given reader. As such, the avoidance of archaic or obscure vocabulary is a sensible measure.

**3. *If it is possible to cut a word out, always cut it out.***

Orwell's prioritisation of economical prose will speak to many PhD students. A limit of 100,000 words is, at first, daunting for many researchers when starting to write a dissertation. Often, however, the eventual challenge will be deciding which words to omit from a final draft. As such, the implications of Orwell's advice are sound. If a long phrase can be substituted for a shorter one, it creates more room for the inclusion of useful insights.

**4. *Never use the passive where you can use the active.***

Of all Orwell's rules, this is perhaps the recommendation which is most dependent on personal preference. As long as the use of the passive voice does not obscure

than writing: 'never be passive where you can be active'. The COVID-19 pandemic has illustrated how opportunities can be snatched away in a tragically short period of time. As such, PhD students must take initiative in maximising their chances when they become available. Seek out what can be done given contextual circumstances, rather than waiting for opportunities to present themselves unprompted.

**5. *Never use a foreign phrase, a scientific word, or a jargon word if you can think of an everyday English equivalent.***

The fifth rule in Orwell's list is perhaps only partially applicable to PhD research publications. Particularly in scientific subjects, the use of technical vocabulary is unavoidable. Even in the arts and humanities, foreign words frequently can capture a notion that eludes the boundaries of the English language: *glasnost*, *zeitgeist*, *détente* and so forth. Once again, the use of specified words should not be pretentious, nor detract from the lucidity of research. One potential strategy is to include approximate English translations or explanations for more esoteric language.

**6. *Break any of these rules sooner than say anything outright barbarous.***

In all areas of academic life, the avoidance of barbarity should be encouraged. There is often little to gain from cruelty towards the work of others. Commonly, such conduct is merely a way of exerting power over those less senior, and is almost never constructive. Criticism is a necessary element of the PhD experience. However, it is most effective when it is used to improve research, rather than to belittle work. 'Be kind' has emerged as a maxim of the Coronavirus-era, and it is a motto which all academics should observe.

### **Respect, not rigidity**

Overall, few would argue that Orwell's six rules of writing do not provide a solid base around which to centre prose. Orwell did not intend his guidelines to be used by postgraduates, but PhD students can find value in several different aspects of the guidelines, particularly in relation to the economy and clarity of writing.

Orwell's recommendations command respect, even in the twenty-first century. However, it is also rather tyrannical to suggest that a rigid set of rules should dictate universal writing habits. In this blog alone, Orwell's rules have probably

The deployment of the English language is a highly-personalised action, and one which lends human beings a sense of individual character. PhD projects can benefit from a stamp of personality. If it takes breaking some of Orwell's rules to achieve this in a dissertation, PhD students should proceed with confidence. Moderation, as always, is key.

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