

## Academic writing is getting harder to read—the humanities most of all

We analyse two centuries of scholarly work



Photograph: Getty Images

Dec 18th 2024

Academics have long been accused of jargon-filled writing that is impossible to understand. A recent cautionary tale was that of Ally Louks, a researcher who set off a social media storm with an innocuous post on X celebrating the completion of her PhD. If it was Ms Louks’s research topic (“olfactory ethics”—the politics of smell) that caught the attention of online critics, it was her verbose thesis abstract that further provoked their ire. In two weeks, the post received more than 21,000 retweets and 100m views.

Although the abuse directed at Ms Louks reeked of misogyny and anti-intellectualism—which she admirably shook off—the reaction was also a backlash against an academic use of language that is removed from normal life. Inaccessible writing is part of the problem. Research has become harder to read, especially in the humanities and social sciences. Though authors may argue that their work is written for expert audiences, much of the general public suspects that some academics use gobbledygook to disguise the fact that they have nothing useful to say. The trend towards more opaque prose hardly allays this suspicion.

To track academic writing over time, *The Economist* analysed 347,000 PhD abstracts published between 1812 and 2023. The dataset was produced by the British Library and represents a majority of English-language doctoral theses awarded by British universities. We reviewed each abstract using the Flesch reading-ease test, which measures sentence and word length to gauge readability. A score of 100 roughly indicates passages can be understood by someone who has completed fourth grade in America (usually aged 9 or 10), while a score lower than 30 is considered very difficult to read. An average *New York Times* article scores around 50 and a CNN article around 70. This article scores 41.

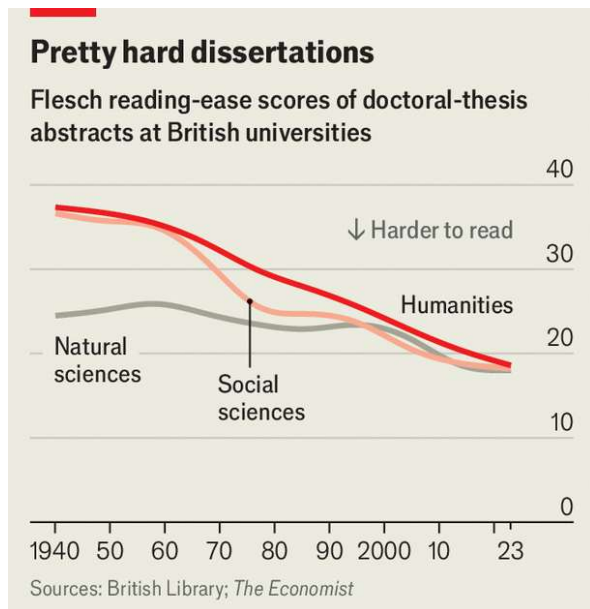


Chart: *The Economist*

From “asymmetric allylation of aldehydes” to “pneumatological and apocalyptically eschatological foundations”, PhD abstracts had an unmistakably scholarly aroma. We found that, in every discipline, the abstracts have become harder to read over the past 80 years. The shift is most stark in the humanities and social sciences (see chart), with average Flesch scores falling from around 37 in the 1940s to 18 in the 2020s. From the 1990s onwards, those fields went from being substantially more readable than the natural sciences—as you might expect—to as complicated. Ms Louks’s abstract had a reading-ease rating of 15, still more readable than a third of those analysed in total.

Other studies of academic writing have similar findings: scientific jargon and acronyms are on the rise. The blame does not fall solely on authors. Specialisation and advances in technology require more precise terminology and a doctoral thesis often covers some of the most obscure research topics. With millions of views, Ms Louks might lay claim to one of the most-read PhD abstracts of all time. She has since posted, “I love that I have somehow equipped everyone with new terminology and frameworks!” But surging interest in olfactory ethics aside, the trend towards illegible academic writing stinks. Clear prose would be a breath of fresh air. ■