



# Beyond the Book®



KISS (Keeping It Simple Isn't Stupid): Making the Complex Comprehensible – Originally presented at Text & Academic Association Annual Meeting

SPIEGLER: The essence of this panel is on making the complex comprehensible so the idea is that simplicity is good but in the service of comprehension. And textbook and professional writing is replete with overly complex descriptions and explanations and before I get into this I just realized I'm supposed to introduce myself. I was told I forgot already. I'm Michael Spiegler and I'm from Providence College and – do I have to put down my nursery school that I went to? I'm supposed to give a whole background. And what I'm going to do is introduce the topic of simplicity and then the other panelists will be a little more specific in what they do. So probably you know from reading both textbooks and other writing that things are often much more complex than they might be. Let me just give you an example to start off with.

(background conversation; inaudible)

SPIEGLER: You don't have to read the whole thing. But I would appreciate if someone would tell me what that says. Now I didn't make this up just to prove it. This is the abstract of an article in a journal that I read regularly on behavioral assessment. I have no idea what this is about and I've shown it to some statistician friends and colleagues. They have no idea what it's about either. But clearly it's very important because it's so complex. In psychology – and I'm a psychologist, I teach psychology – and in many fields, statistics is the course that everybody fears and you get the professor who gets up and puts all these things on the board and no one understands what's going on but that professor's a genius because of the complexity.

So maybe we should think the complexity might be good. So why is complexity often favored over simplicity? Well I think there are two reasons. That I think that if people don't understand you, if you write in a way where it's incomprehensible, that seems to be a sign of erudition. And I know certainly students view it that way. Consider this redone *Peanuts* cartoon. Peppermint Patty asks Franklin what are you reading? A book about psychology. From what I can understand of it it seems good. Forget it Franklin. No book on psychology can be any good if one can understand it. In a recent poll, 63% of Americans 50 years or older – I have nobody that I know is that way but they believe that things like financial statements

that we get, that they are purposely put into complicated language so that we can't understand them.

Now a second reason that I think this complexity occurs is that fuzzy language, fuzzy writing stems from fuzzy thinking. If you can't explain something simply, you get someone who says oh very complex ideas and they can't explain it simply to you, that person does not really understand it. So how do we make things simple? Well here are a few tips. The bottom line, I think, and we're talking here about textbook writing primarily, is to write for the reader. As an author you need to think as your reader thinks. What is your reader going to understand given your reader's level, given your reader's background? Not what you're going to understand and not what your colleagues are going to understand.

Write simply. The bible here as far as I'm concerned is a book that was I written I guess about almost a century ago, Strunk and White's *Elements of Style*. Well it started with Strunk and then E.B. White came in. And this is such a wonderful book. It's like about 115, 120 pages. It's a little book like this, big print. And besides giving you all sorts of tips for writing simply, it's a model of simplicity when you go into it. So you need to write in simpler terms. Let me give you an example of that. Here's a fairly simple sentence. Ten words. Nothing complex about this. But here's the same thing and it's in four words and it's a lot simpler.

Albert Einstein was a pretty smart guy and he worked with very complex ideas, I'm told. And he said that everything should be made as simple but no simpler. So that reminded me that given the energy crunch that we're into and how much electricity is involved in lighting up signs, for example – there was someone who had a sign up over a store that said fresh fish for sale here. And he was complaining about how much energy it took to light this sign up. So someone said to him you don't need to use all of that. All you need is fresh fish for sale. Obviously it's here. You're not having the sign up and then it's 10 blocks away. And then the person thought well actually you don't need – you have the other thing – what are you doing? Giving it away? So you could just have fresh fish. And come to think of it, all you need is fish. What are you going to sell stale fish? And you know what you can smell this place two blocks off. You don't need to use any electricity.

Now sometimes when we go to simplify we make it more complex. A good example of that is when we use abbreviations. So we give abbreviations for something and then we use them throughout. So here's just an example from a page and you don't have to really read this but these letters are – the yellowed ones – there are five different abbreviations used on this page but they're used more than once, some of them. There really are a total of 11 sitting up there. But just look at the number of things that are colored in there. That's in one page. And these were defined back on page one but now we're on page 175 and are you going to remember these?

But another way to do it has to do with acronyms. Now those are abbreviations also. But an acronym needs to be readable, among other things. Like scuba. Now you may not know exactly what those letters stand for but you can remember the concept and that's an easy word to say. Here's a interesting one. I'm not sure exactly how you pronounce this. This is used to explain some general concepts in reality therapy. Here's what it stands for – simple, attainable, measurable, immediate, controlled by the planner, committed to, consistently implemented. I can't even pronounce that thing. Am I going to – I think it's like SAMAC cubed but it's really SAMACCC with three C's. So this is an attempt to simplify but it just does the opposite.

Another thing is to give the reader only what he or she needs. I remember when my daughter Heather came to me one day and she said – she was like four or something – and she says Daddy where did I come from? Oh no. Four years old. So we sit down and when a man and a woman love each other and we – I start this off. And I'm going through this whole long thing and bringing in my biology and everything and when I finish she looks at me quizzically and says Nigel comes from Woonsocket. Where do I come from? Give the reader what they need.

So making it simple is something that we really need to do. Let me give you one last tip. And that is to use pedagogy to make it simple. Here are just two examples. One is repetition. If something is important enough for people to learn – we know that in the classroom we'll repeat things. Although often in the classroom we'll feel a little bit funny about doing that. And when we write in textbooks you see all the time as was said previously. And I don't think you should be apologetic about that. Not continually repeat things, but there's something called planned redundancy. It should be out there and that is one of the things that can take something complex and the repetition will simplify it.

Another thing is to use active learning. When learners do – they teach themselves – they learn it better. And just the other day on a text that I'm working on I thought well here's a concept that students have trouble with all the time so I'm going to make a little diagram, a two-by-two matrix, a box thing, and fill this in for them and they'll look at that and it'll be clear. Then I realized it would be better if they filled in the boxes. So I have the outline of it and then there's a simple thing to put a couple of words in each one and I believe that by doing that, that will simplify it for them. So what we want to do is make it simple to make it comprehensive. It's not easy. One of the things that's involved – we talked about Strunk and White and making it simpler. I once got a review of a book to be revised, the old edition, and it said you need to lower the level of the language.

Now I love to write long, complex sentences. That's fun. But that doesn't work. And how do you lower the level of the language? Well it's simply that you cut down the number of syllables per word and the number of words per sentence. That's the basic formula. And at first I really balked at this, but you know if you

do it it's better writing. And I'll just leave you with one other quote which I think is worth keeping in mind.

## APPLAUSE

MORRIS: Hi there. I'm Karen Morris. I'm from Rochester, New York. I teach in the law field. And I'm going to do this presentation and I hope it's not too simple but this is what comes to my mind when I think about presenting on the topic of simplicity. There is a green sheet. You have handouts actually from all of us so you might be a little overwhelmed minus the green sheet, green chosen since we are in Vegas and money in Vegas is a big deal. So I call it KISS versus kiss of death. KISS is if it's simple and kiss of death is what will happen to your book if it's not simple. You may not get past the editor. It may not sell. If it does your students will be frustrated. So we want to keep it simple.

These are steps to simplify the presentation of a concept in a textbook. The first is – and Paul touched on it also by reference fuzzy thinking. You must know the concept you're teaching fully. Sometimes when I'm in – I'm writing a chapter, there's part of the material I come upon that I need to write on and it's new to me. Put the writing aside, go to the research material, learn it and only then sit down to write it. Because if you don't know it well it's like you can't teach it well and of course you – then you can't write it well. Paul also mentioned know your audience. This is critical. What is it that you're writing? We all write textbooks. We're encouraged to take our content and try and make it into a mass media book. Those are different audiences.

I also write treatise. One of my books is a treatise for lawyers. That's a very different audience than the mass market audience is and that my textbook audience is. So now you want to identify who your audience is and you got to parse it pretty exactly. What is the course level? Is it a 100-level course or is it a 400-level course? And that alone's not enough. Is it 100 or is it 200? And the levels are going to be different depending on that. What is the student level? Is it a two-year level you're writing for, a four-year level? Are you writing for AS degree? Well I teach at a two-year school so am I writing for AS degree students, who are those who are then going to go on to a four-year school, or is it an AAS degree? One of my books is hotel law. The level I've chosen to write at is for the AAS degree folks, those who are only there for two years. They plan to get their degree and go into the market. It's a different level and my textbook in hotel and restaurant law is quite different than one geared to four-year students. So you want to know the level of your student.

Assess what, if anything, your audience knows about the concept. You want to be clear and instructive and simple but you don't want to be insulting. And again I hope with what I'm giving you today I'm not being insulting because it does seem simple. And if you want to address, or you have some question about whether your audience knows something that you're referencing but you think it's too simple and

too elementary for much of your audience you can always add it in an index or in a footnote. So finding the right balance so as not to be insulting but yet to be clear and simple is not always easy and needs some thought.

I think with many concepts, particularly in law, there are layers to the understanding. And you have to piece apart those layers and present the material in layers. So for example if I'm writing about the tort interference with contractual relations, it happens in the layout of the course torts come before the study of contracts. One of the important business torts in a business law course is interference with contractual relations. Well before I can talk about the tort, I have to do a little discussion about contracts. That's the layering. Understand contracts a little so that you can understand the tort. Otherwise the tort will be totally lost.

Another is employment discrimination. Well what exactly is discrimination? And against whom is it outlawed? The protected classes – race, religion, color, national origin, disability, etc. Those are layers that have to be peeled off and presented before the concept of employment discrimination can be understood by the audience. So that layering is important. And then provide learning exercises before moving on to the next layer to help simplify for the audience and to drive the point home for your reader before moving on to the more complex. Use diagrams and charts to underscore the connection between the various layers.

Next equate the concept to something your audience knows. Give examples. This morning on *Good Morning America* we learned that Britney Spears' sister who – had her baby. You may remember when she was announced to be pregnant. She was a big Disney actress. She was adored by many of the younger set, young teens and she turns up pregnant. Not the role model that Disney or many parents want to present. But today she had her baby so if I was doing a class today I would discuss that and talk about statutory rape. She's I believe 16 or 15 and statutory rape though is of course intercourse with somebody who's under the legal age. In half the states it's 16 and in another half of the states it's 17. So there's a great lesson about statutory rape that students will understand. So give examples and hypotheticals that are relevant to their lives.

Include various learning exercises. Edit the text repeatedly – this is another way to check your writing to make sure that it is simplified. Write it. Put it aside. Go back maybe the next day. Then put it aside and go back in a week. It looks very different several days or a week down the road than it looks the night you wrote it and the day after you wrote it. So you'll look at it with a fresh eye and be able to simplify the reading and the presentation. Use online supplements. Expand the text, add examples, use up-to-the minute news. We heard a lot about what we can do online to expand the audience for our books and enhance the material that we provide – a lot of extra work for the author. I think that's a separate issue that ought to be addressed. Where does that time come from? But it's – clearly online can go a long way to expanding further on what we put in the textbooks.

So those are some thoughts on the actual writing of the textbook. I also think that there's some issues about simplifying the process of writing. So I'm going to spend the few minutes I have left on that. For many of us, writing textbooks is not the primary pursuit of our work lives. For many of us it's teaching, it's something else and the writing is a second or a third pursuit. So making it simple is important. Organize your work space. Desk – great if you can have a separate desk for your writing. That's like the ultimate. Research material – do not be a spendthrift on research material. This is not the place to save money. You are presenting yourself as someone who knows your field. The field changes. You need to always keep up. Do not think twice about spending money on whatever you need for research.

Music – I love having music in the background. I do not think twice about buying whatever CDs I want so that I'm comfortable when I'm writing. Motivation material – this also helps me. I'm doing a book on lessons in law from Harry Potter's adventures. That desk has pictures all around of Harry and Ron and Hermione. It's got witches hats, it's got stuffed animals of wizards and the three-headed dragon. That helps me. So set your environments. Outline the book. Outline each chapter. Budget your time and comply with that. We heard that today. Boy that's critical. So and then you don't have the stresses. If you stick with your budgeting, be realistic when you plan ahead how much time are you going to invest and where are you going to get that time so that you can indeed take that time for the writing, and then you don't have the stresses.

Let me just look at – I probably have a little time left. Solidify your relationship with your publisher. We heard this today too and I've had numerous publishers, the best relations are where I have a one-on-one where I know the person on the other side. I'll travel to meet the person. I don't want to be a name. I want to be a face, I want to be a personality that whoever I'm dealing with knows and thinks about when issues come up. Don't promise what you can't deliver, obviously. Clarify allocation of assignments with coauthors. I have six – have had six different coauthors. We're going to hear from Steve Gilling (sp.?) tomorrow about coauthors. Go hear him if you have coauthors and be real clear. If you're not everything gets complicated. The process of writing and achieving what you want gets complicated.

Finally – and this is critical – organizing other components of your life so during writing time the book has your full attention and your mind is uncluttered. If you're thinking about all the other things that you're not getting done because you're writing, you're not going to write well and you're not going to write simply and so it's again the budgeting of time. And when you budget don't overlook activities that make you happy, the things you like to do – that's important so that you're in a comfortable frame of mind when you write and discuss ahead with your significant other. Writing of course takes time and that's time that you're going to steal from a lot of different places, including your significant other. So make sure he or she is onboard.

So those are some thoughts. I hope they're helpful.

APPLAUSE

MORRIS: Thanks. Would you like this?

F: No. That's OK.

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