Communicating Economics.

Lecture 2

2023/24

Today's session

- Guest expert slot
- Writing
- The policy brief

Paul Johnson CBE

- Director of the Institute for Fiscal Studies since 2011
- Frequent media commentator and regular Times columnist
- Author of Follow the Money

Paul Johnson: 'The voice you hear at every Budget, calmly explaining the numbers' © Alamy bitly

Festival of Economics.

From Economics Observatory

Festival of Economics 2024

Monday 30 September 2024 to Thursday 3 October 2024

Directed by Professor Richard Davies, Andrew Kelly, Professor Sarah Smith and Romesh Vaitilingam

Asking economists and experts from around the world the key economic questions of our time.

With the election of a new Government after 14 years, the theme of the Festival is **looking back, to look forward:**
Legacies of Empire, Inequalities, The Tyranny of Nostalgia, Sustainable Futures, Labour's first 100 days, Building a fair society, Britain's place in the world , Social mobility, The kids aren't alright, UK productivity, Tim Harford podcast
… and more!

Legacies of Empire (Tues 1st Oct, 7pm) and **Inequalities** (Thurs 3rd Ot, 7pm) are in the Wills Memorial Building and are free to UoB students
https://forms.office.com/e/dMsddn5T2C

Writing

In our time, political speech and writing are largely the defence of the indefensible. Thus, political language has to consist largely of euphemism, question-begging and sheer cloudy vagueness.

George Orwell
Politics and the English language

Clutter is the disease of American writing. We are a society strangling in unnecessary words, circular constructions, pompous frills and meaningless constructions.

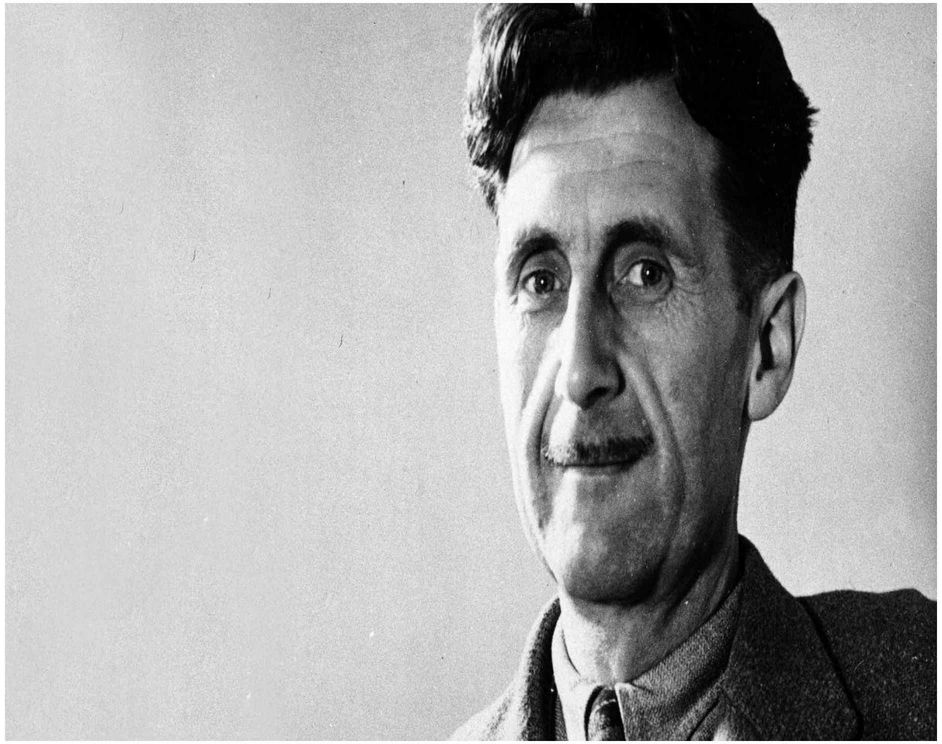
William Zinsser
On Writing Well

Why do people write in a vague or cluttered way?

How to write more clearly

Communicating Economics.

George Orwell



- What am I trying to say?
- What words will express it?
- What image or idiom will make it clearer?
- Is the image fresh enough to have an effect?
- Could I put it more succinctly?
- Have I said anything that is avoidably ugly?

Practical take-aways from the workshops

Start strong: Put the pay-off first

Use the time of a total stranger in such a way that he or she will not feel the time was wasted.

Start as close to the end as possible.

Give your readers as much information as possible as soon as possible. To heck with suspense.

Readers should have such complete understanding of what is going on, where and why, that they could finish the story themselves, should cockroaches eat the last few pages.

(Kurt Vonnegut)

Organise your thoughts:

- Make sure your (economic) arguments are sound
- Think about the order of the points you want to make

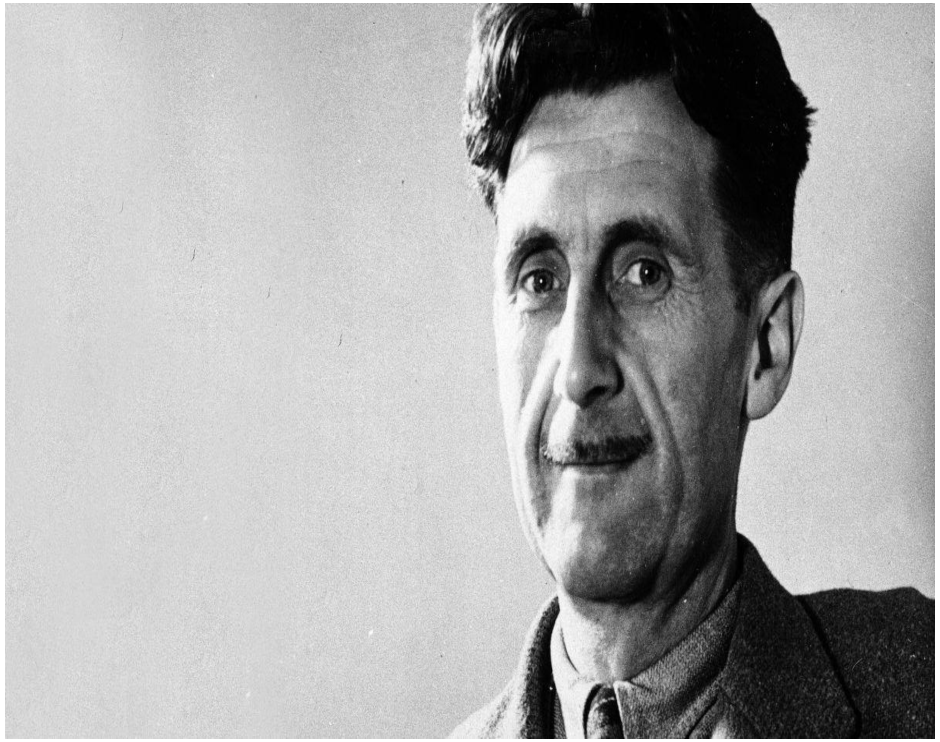
Clear thinking promotes clear language and vice versa

Pay attention to paragraphs and sentences

- Aim for short paragraphs
- Make sure a new paragraph flows well from the previous one
- Use meaningful sub-headings in a longer piece
- Aim for short sentences, particularly at the start (and end) of paragraphs
- Vary the sentence length within a paragraph

Orwell’s six rules

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



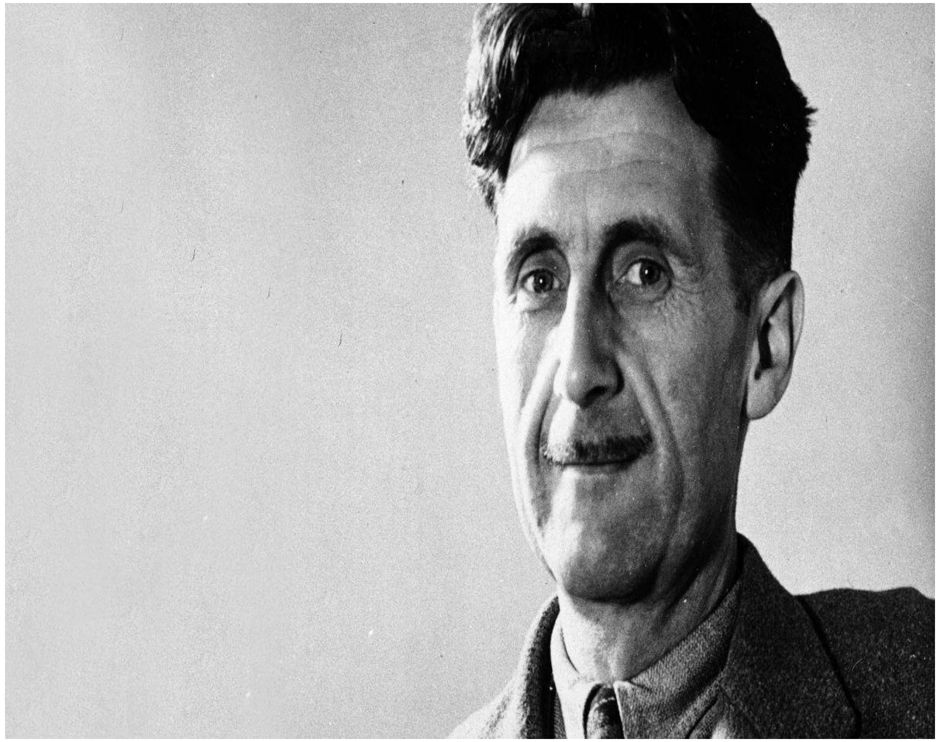
Generally, avoid common metaphors and cliches
It makes your writing seem tired, even lazy

It’s even worse if you mangle the metaphor

Tow the line	Toe the line
Moot point	Mute point
Sleight of hand	Slight of hand
Wet your appetite	Whet your appetite

Exceptions?
In its attempt to improve communication with the public, the Bank of England described the Monetary Policy Committee’s actions as “taking its foot off the accelerator” to hold the car within its “speed limit” (see Andy Haldane’s article on Everyday Economics)

Rule 2. “Never use a long word where a short one will do”



Individual words

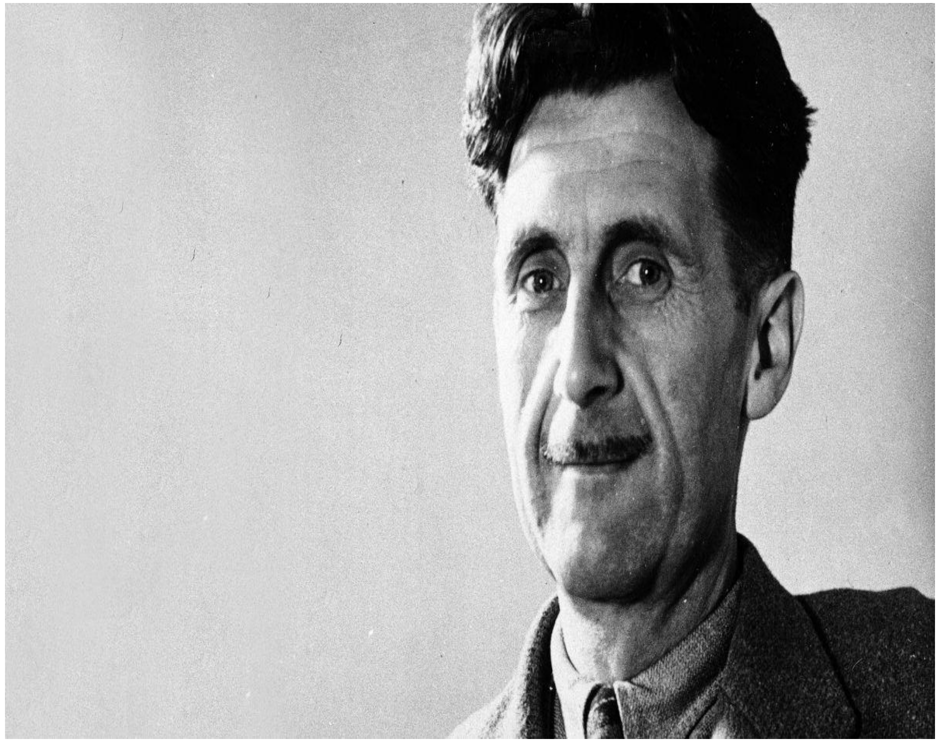
- Numerous
- Utilise
- Remainder

Phrases

- With the exception of
- Due to the fact that
- For the purpose of
- In actual fact

If you wouldn’t say it, don’t write it

Rule 3. “If it is possible to cut a word out, always cut it out”

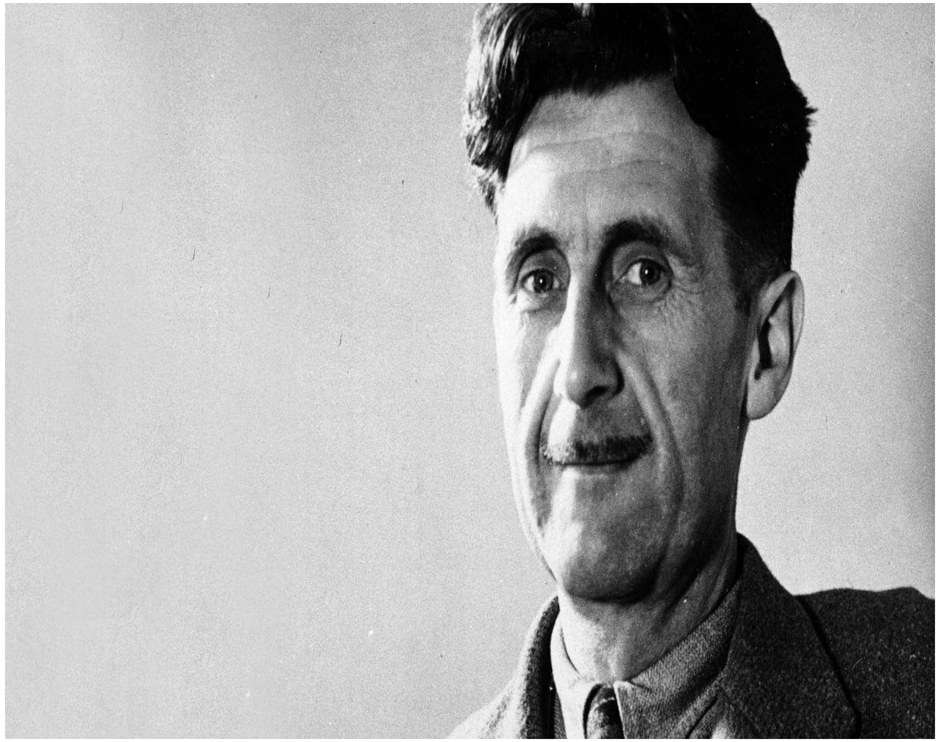


- Adverbs (“smiled happily”)
- Adjectives (“tall skyscraper”)
- Qualifiers (“sort of”)
- Filler phrases (“It’s interesting to note that…”)

Look at every word and phrase and scrap it if it isn’t useful

“Prose consists less and less of words chosen for the sake of their meaning and more of phrases tacked together like the sections of a pre-fabricated henhouse” (William Zinsser)

Rule 4. “Never use the passive when you can use the active”

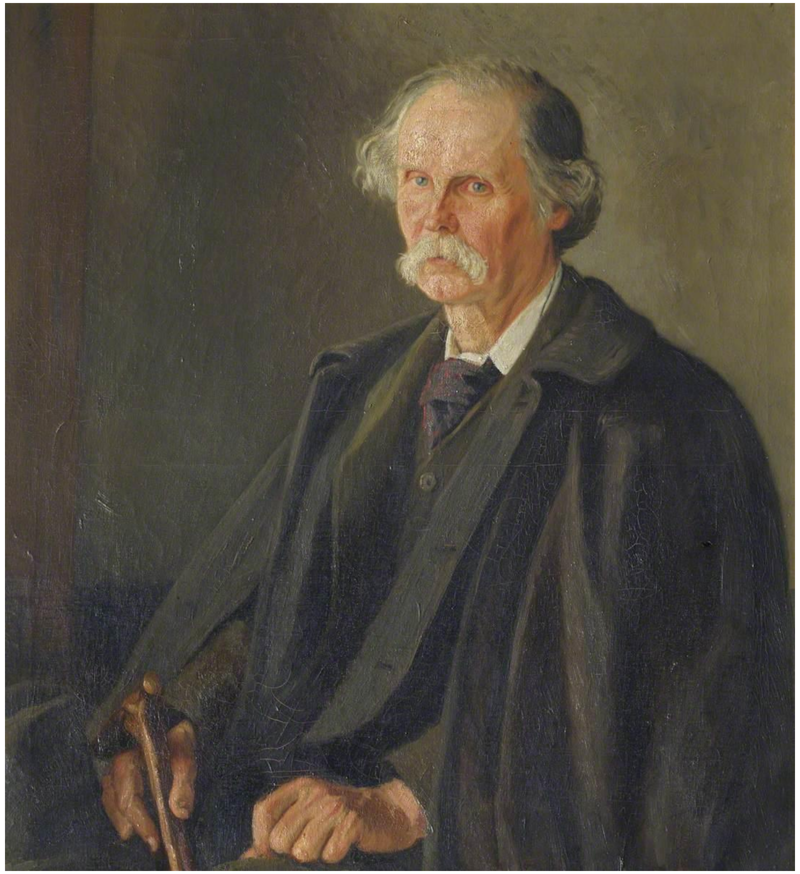


- The interest rate was raised today by the Monetary Policy Committee
- The Monetary Policy Committee raised the interest rate

- Sentences in the active tense are typically clearer, shorter and more dynamic

- Also, use positive expressions not negative ones
  - The Monetary Policy Committee *did not pay attention to* lobbying from the house-builders federation
  - The Monetary Policy Committee *ignored* lobbying from the house-builders federation

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



"I had a growing feeling in the later years of my work at the subject that a good mathematical theorem dealing with economic hypotheses was very unlikely to be good economics: and I went more and more on the rules-**--(1) Use mathematics as a short-hand language, rather than as an engine of inquiry. (2) Keep to them till you have done. (3) Translate into English. (4) Then illustrate by examples that are important in real life. (5) Burn the mathematics.** (6) If you can't succeed in 4, burn 3. This last I did often."

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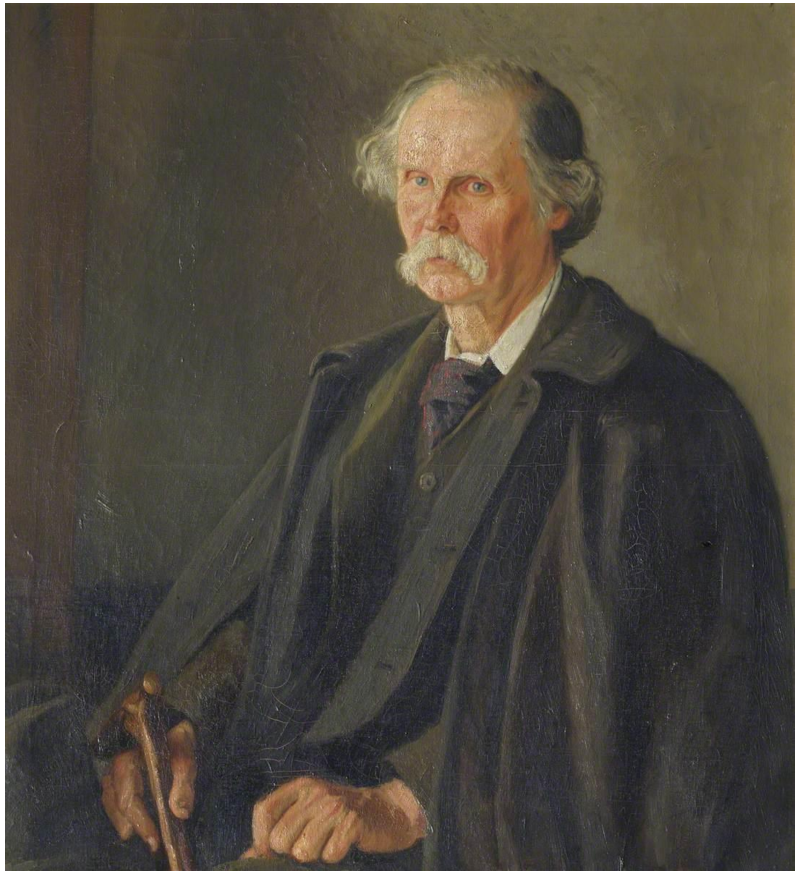

Some economics jargon offers a precise definition of a specific complex idea:

- Moral hazard problem
- Sunk costs
- Comparative advantage
- Zero-sum game

Ok to use for the right audience but:

- Use sparingly (one or two terms)
- Provide a clear explanation

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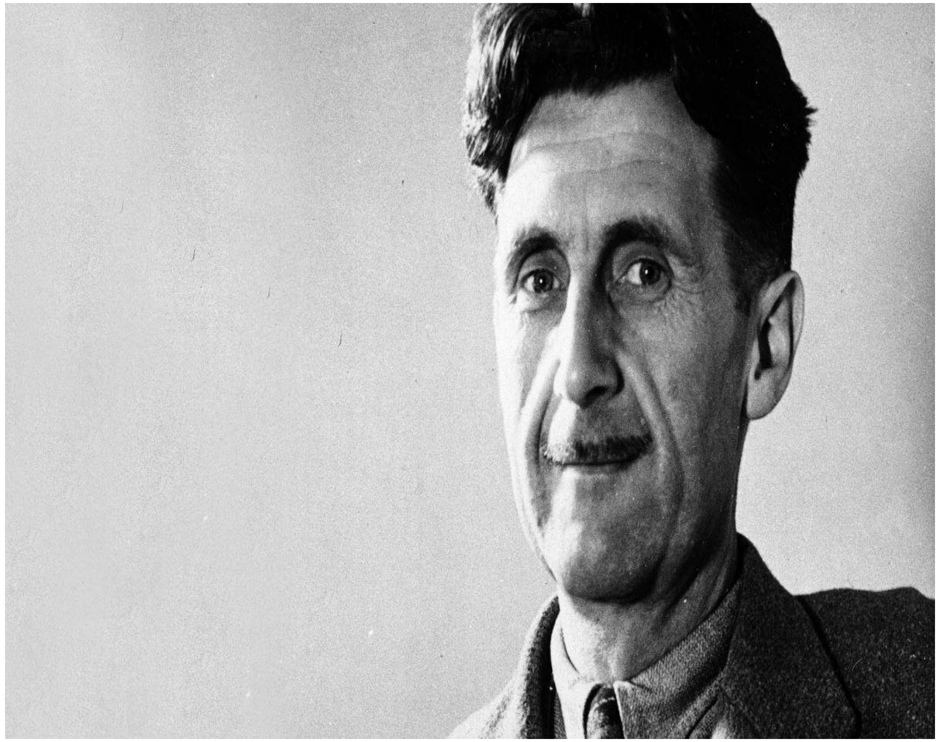


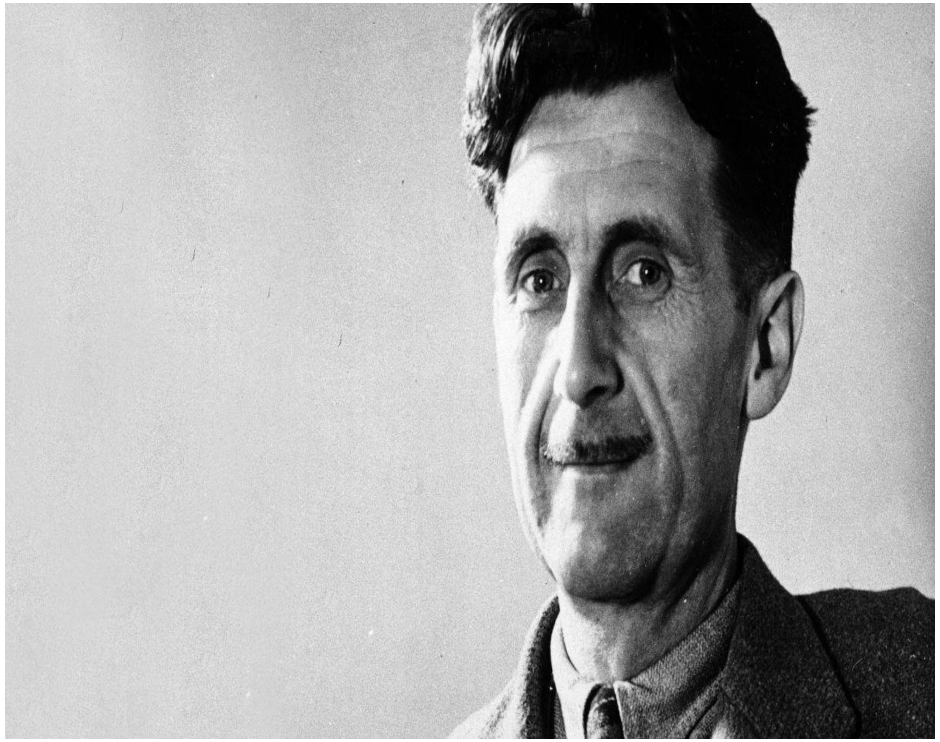
Write like a person not an economist

Avoid using the private vocabulary of economics as a crutch

Although these words aren't jargon, choose others:

- Individuals
- Consumption
- Employment

Rule 6. “Break any of these rules sooner than say anything barbarous”



Although Orwell couched his rules in absolute terms, they are guides not laws. For example, Orwell himself uses the passive tense many times in his article.

Compare

- France beat Brazil
- Brazil were beaten by France

- Lee Harvey Oswald shot Kennedy
- Kennedy was shot by Lee Harvey Oswald

The pandemic has hit Colombia hard and left strong marks on all dimensions of well-being, including employment and incomes. COVID-19 has caused over 125,000 lost lives in the country, set back income growth for years and destroyed over 5.4 million jobs.

The onset of the pandemic prompted a shift in consumption patterns from services to goods (especially durable goods) consumption.

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COVID shifted spending from services to goods

Policy brief – introduction

Communicating Economics.

TRANSPARENCY INTERNATIONAL

Home Office

THE WORLD BANK

WORLD ECONOMIC FORUM

The brief

Suppose you are working as an economist in a (public/ private/ not-for-profit) organisation.

Your job is to communicate the research – and the implications of the research – to the non-economists in the organisation.

LLOYDS BANK

World Health Organization

Triodos Bank

Foreign, Commonweal
& Development Office

CBI

The policy brief is worth 50% of your mark

- You need to pick:
  - A research paper to write about (you should have done this already)
  - A relevant organisation
    - You need to write about the implications of the research. The organisation can be one of the ones we have suggested, or a different one. You will have to tell us your organisation when you hand in the brief.

- The brief must be MAX two pages
  - In addition, you will need to hand in your reflective journal (not included in the page limit). This won't be marked, but there will be a 5-point penalty for non-submission

- Look at the assignment brief (marking guidelines)
- We will discuss how to write the policy brief in the workshops next week

What you need to do next

Hand in your opinion piece (30th September)

Prepare for the workshops (see the Overview for weeks 1 – 5 on BB)

- Read the guides to writing a policy brief and the examples
  - Think about the purpose, audience, structure, tone and language

Fill in the reflective journal