

OTHER THINGS EQUAL

Bush

Deirdre N. McCloskey

*University of Illinois at Chicago and
Erasmusuniversiteit, Rotterdam*

No, not as in "George W." (Molly Ivins, the funny columnist from Texas, has long called George W. just "Shrub," and has a book about him by that name.)

Not the Two Georges, I say, but "bush" as in "bush-league," a term (I recall) from baseball meaning "amateurish, unprofessional, not ready for prime time, not good enough to make it into the Major Leagues." Baseball people, and people who like to talk like baseball people, use it a lot. A "busher" is someone who strikes out looking, muffs easy ground balls, misses signs for the hit and run. (Have you noticed how games affect our metaphors? In olden days, by contrast, we got our language from serious matters like agriculture [keep your hand on the plow . . .] or the sea [. . . to the bitter end]. In our richer and more leisured times it's sports: team player, double fault, par for the course, score a touchdown. The sports metaphors, by the way, are tiresome to people who don't think it matters who wins the Superbowl. Most women, for example. Deirdre, for example. Just thought you'd want to know.)

Alexander Gerschenkron, no busher, was an economic historian at Harvard in the 1950s and 1960s, a refugee from Russia and Austria but a baseball fan then, back in the glory days of the Boston Red Sox. He used to amuse the guys at the Long Table at the Faculty Club by claiming to know Ted Williams, the great slugger for the Sox. "Williams, you know" (Gerschenkron was literate in more languages than most of us have heard of, but spoke with a heavy Russian accent) "is a very intelligent man, vell read, even in economics and economic history." Oh, is that so, Alex? "Yeah. But naturally he expresses himself in baseball langvidge." Uh-huh. Tell me what you mean. "Vell, ven he vants to describe his opinion of, say, Ken Galbraith he speaks in baseballese." (John Kenneth Galbraith, kids, is Jamie Galbraith's dad, a great economist and a big figure in Democratic politics back when Democrats were a little left wing.) Oh, yeah. How? How does he feel about Ken? "I asked him that once. He said to me, after thinking for a moment, 'Galbraith hits very high flies to very short left field'." (Laughter from the professors, in 1960 all of them men, all baseball fans at least by the assumptions of masculinity.) And who else does Williams read? "Valt Rostow" (the great, fluent, and now unfairly neglected economic historian at MIT and afterwards at the University of Texas, with Jamie). What does Williams say about

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Deirdre McCloskey: University of Illinois, UH 829, MC 228, 601 S. Morgan Street, Chicago, IL 60607-7104. E-mail: deirdre2@uic.edu

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Rostow? "He hits a home run every time he step up to the plate. . . . But he forgets to touch the bases as he runs it out." (More laughter.) (Neither Galbraith nor Rostow, as Gerschenkron would have agreed, were bushers. Maybe they weren't on the same level as Ted Williams. Certainly neither of them ever wrote a book as good as Williams' classic, *The Science of Hitting*. But they were a lot better than you or me at the scholarly baseball game.)

You want to avoid looking like a busher. *Looking* professional can be learned with a few easy rules. Actually *being* professional is harder: you have to follow *Intendete alte in gubernando* and other demanding Latin mottoes. That is, you have to be smart and read a lot and think about your reading deeply, at all hours of the day and night. Cut down on television. But I offer you some easy-to-follow advice on how, when you venture out into scientific talking or writing, to avoid at least the look of a busher. It's not a complete handbook on the rules, just a few random points to get you worried.

The advice is necessary even for the substance. Major league pitchers usually wind up to pitch in a professional-looking way. It might be a good idea to post the Necessary Conditions on your monitor for the first month or so. Once you get over your bush-league lack of shame at being a busher you'll follow the rules without being reminded, and will notice others. For the price of a little investment now in feeling ashamed you can have in the future a happier scientific career.

So, just for example, some social graces:

Don't ever under any circumstances use the opening line when you encounter a famous economist, "You won't remember me, but we've met." People are not flattered by it, only embarrassed. The polite make it a rule to deny vehemently that they have in fact no memory of you. You make yourself pathetic by saying it, and open yourself to the sardonic thought: "Of course I don't remember you, you insignificant little worm." If you don't have self-respect at least don't broadcast that you don't.

Never use the undergraduate and very bush-league locution, "Just one quick question." Teach your undergraduates not to use it. Again it's a matter of treating yourself with self-respect. You don't need to apologize for asking questions. We economists are paid to answer questions. Ask away. The answer lady.

Never start by saying, "I have two questions." Just ask them.

The question "Did you get my e-mail?" is epistemologically and pragmatically unsound, and bush league. Eliminate it from your repertoire. What e-mail, you idiot? The one you sent two minutes after the first one you sent today at 2:35 p.m., or the one you sent two months ago, or the one last week, or what? Asking it gives a distinctly bush impression.

Don't call professors (or anyone else except a sawbones) "Doctor." There's an inverse snobbery here. At places like the University of Chicago people call each other by "Mr." or "Ms.," never "Dr.," except the sillies over at the Medical School, who insist on it. At Chicago even the secretaries realize that the professors are embarrassed to be called "Dr." The creator of the late-lamented Good Old Chicago School and himself a Nobel prize among the many produced by that School, Theodore Schultz, would always refer to his old friend Margaret Reid, a research professor at Chicago (and the unacknowledged inventor of permanent income and of household economics) as "Miss Reid," in the style of your (great-) grandfather's generation. He would have thought it bush-league to call her "Dr." and presumptuous in public to refer to someone worthy of

such honor just "Margaret." At less distinguished institutions "Dr." prevails, the less distinguished the more prevalent.

Don't forget to thank people for inviting you to give papers or conference presentations. George Bush the Elder was good at this: his little thank-you notes were famous. Keep tabs and thank people in your published work, generously. Lack of generosity is bush, because it tips people to your lack of self-confidence. Give credit well beyond what is due.

Do not request "feedback" on the wretchedly written draft you have sent unsolicited to your victim. This frightfully bush word manages to suggest that the recipient is waiting by the mailbox eager to spend hours and hours correcting your elementary errors in grammar and in economics. You imply that the recipient has no intellectual life of her own. I do not mean that you shouldn't send papers out for comment. Just don't expect much, or indicate by anything in the cover letter (an essential item, or at least a scribbled note on the first page of the paper) that you have hopes. When I gave a paper to Milton Friedman in 1970 he accepted it under the condition that I not expect comments. I agreed, of course, and he sent me brilliant comments. Harry Johnson likewise said when I pressed a different paper on him, "I may or may not read it. Don't ask me about it again, understand?" Yes, Harry. And he too sent me brilliant comments. It's your responsibility to catch the reader's attention with the obvious excellence of *the paper itself*. Start by making the first page interesting. Then the second. Then the third. (In none of these, incidentally, will you give one of those bush-league "roadmaps" to what you are going to say.) Craven appeals are a poor substitute for taking your responsibility as author seriously. And "feedback" is a bush-league word for such an asymmetry in the author-reader relationship.

Never send your paper about subject R to Professor (not Dr.) M who has written extensively on subject R unless your paper engages with Professor M's ideas, or at least mentions her work. You need not praise her work but you must engage. It is very, very bush to screw this up, and is an excellent way of making an enemy for life. I have forgiven, as is my Christian duty, the numerous people who have done it to me. (I have a complicated CV and I've long since given up expecting people to grasp that I have interests in E but also in R, in H but also in L.) Be warned that other people are not so sweet as I am. The trouble is that Professor M has an inflated opinion about how many subjects upon which she has had something intelligent to say. Everyone does. It's human nature, especially academic human nature. So it's up to you to be careful, if you don't want to look like a bush leaguer. Ask yourself, "Has M ever written on this subject? Yes, of course, because that's the reason I'm sending the paper to her. Uh-oh. Have I mentioned her work? Have I read it? Do I even know what she has written? Uh-oh. I better read it, or not send the paper."

When you do get comments don't act like you resent it. For example, do not say things like, "I will only follow some of your advice." No one gives a hoot whether you follow advice or not—she's not trying to take over the writing of your dumb paper; she'd be ashamed; it's not about your ego and hers, but about our shared standards as scholars and our duty to maintain them. The resentful "I won't take advice" makes you look graceless and pig-headed. No one can do you a greater favor than picking your paper to pieces *before* it gets published. It may hurt your pathetic, bush-league ego, but try to grow up and take criticism like an adult. Weep in private if you must,

but then look on the advice as a favor. It is, a very expensive one. Some men of my acquaintance send their papers out for comment but then get angry if they get any. Only one woman has done it to me. Lots of guys. I can name two such men, one of whom will surely get the Nobel prize within the next three years and the other who has a shot at it if he lives long enough. Yet they are in this respect bush leaguers.

Are you getting the idea? To avoid being bush you have to act like a considerate and thoughtful and competent and fully professional adult, even if you aren't one. Only the rare geniuses, the Sandy Grossmans of our field, can get away with acting like amateurish jerks. It's like that in baseball, too. The 95 m.p.h. fastballers with good control can act like bush leaguers and still get major league contracts. Not you and me.

And you have to *write* like an adult. Don't worry, I'm not going to launch on one of my numerous failed attempts to get economists to take a professional attitude towards writing. I've concluded it's pretty much hopeless. I'm resigned to my colleagues being wholly ignorant of, say Strunk and White, *The Elements of Style*, which even their freshman students are required to have mastered, not to mention more advanced books. But let me see if I can get you to avoid at least these three tiny and pretty easily corrected but revealing signals of a busher at the plate:

Don't mess up the most elementary rules of punctuation. This is grown-up stuff which you should be ashamed to get wrong. For example, in typescripts a period always has two spaces after it; a comma or semicolon, one. Learn the difference between a semicolon (;) and a colon (:). Add commas by sound, not by rule. (It is *not* for example a "rule" that every instance of "for example" or other phrases found often at the beginning of sentences needs to be hedged by commas.) Never use quotation marks on block (as against run-in) quotations. Learn how to place the parenthetical citation after a direct quotation in the author-date system: "The safest rule is that the colon indicates an illustration to follow" [McCloskey, 2000, 62]. Not, as the poor bushers do: "... an illustration to follow." [McCloskey, 2000] (The bushers always cite whole books and articles without specifying the page referred to.) Words left out within a sentence get three dots of ellipsis. . . But words left out that bridge two sentences get four. . . And so forth. It's going to require a little study. Notice how the major leaguers punctuate. But believe me, nothing looks more bush than punctuation that would disgrace a fifth-grade boy. (Incidentally, a lot of men have *handwriting* that would disgrace a fifth-grade boy; it makes them look bush; and it's easy to fix, in a few days of paying attention to such arcane matters as the difference between M and m, E and e.)

Never right justify a typescript. That is, don't make the margin on the right side even, as it is in actual printing. Believe me on this one. It's very bush.

Don't keep outlining what you are going to say. Just say it. You'll never find the major leaguers of economic writing wasting their breath "telling what they're going to say." It's idiotic. It's bush.

I'll resist putting in here everything I don't like about modern economics: the bush-league confusion of statistical with substantive significance, the bush-league confusion of theorem-proving with thinking, the bush-league confusion of regression on ready-made data with actual empirical research, the bush league ignorance of history, or of the past literature of economics, or of actual business practice, or of the

intellectual context in which economics and an economy lives. Let's keep it simple, and confined to the busher's failings you can learn to avoid right away.

Don't lean too far off first base unless you really are in the middle of stealing second. Don't telegraph your pitches. Field the ball, don't let it field you.

Don't be a busher.

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