can see something that the reader has not yet noticed, and he orients the reader’s gaze so that she can see it for herself. The purpose of writing is presentation, and its motive is disinterested truth. It succeeds when it aligns language with the truth, the proof of success being clarity and simplicity. The truth can be known, and is not the same as the language that reveals it; prose is a window onto the world. The writer knows the truth before putting it into words; he is not using the occasion of writing to sort out what he thinks. Nor does the writer of classic prose have to argue for the truth; he just needs to present it. That is because the reader is competent and can recognize the truth when she sees it, as long as she is given an unobstructed view. The writer and the reader are equals, and the process of directing the reader’s gaze takes the form of a conversation.

A writer of classic prose must simulate two experiences: showing the reader something in the world, and engaging her in conversation. The nature of each experience shapes the way that classic prose is written. The metaphor of showing implies that there is something to see. The things in the world the writer is pointing to, then, are concrete: people (or other animate beings) who move around in the world and interact with objects. The metaphor of conversation implies that the reader is cooperative. The writer can count on her to read between the lines, catch his drift, and connect the dots, without his having to spell out every step in his train of thought.

Classic prose, Thomas and Turner explain, is just one kind of style, whose invention they credit to seventeenth-century French writers such as Descartes and La Rochefoucauld. The differences between classic style and other styles can be appreciated by comparing their stances on the communication scenario: how the writer imagines himself to be related to the reader, and what the writer is trying to accomplish.

Classic style is not a contemplative or romantic style, in which a writer tries to share his idiosyncratic, emotional, and mostly ineffable reactions to something. Nor is it a prophetic, oracular, or oratorical style, where the writer has the gift of being able to see things that no one else can, and uses the music of language to unite an audience.

Less obviously, classic style differs from practical style, like the

---

* To avoid the awkwardness of strings of he or she, I have borrowed a convention from linguistics and will consistently refer to a generic writer of one sex and a generic reader of the other. The male gender won the coin toss, and will represent the writer in this chapter; the roles will alternate in subsequent ones.
language of memos, manuals, term papers, and research reports. (Traditional stylebooks such as Strunk and White are mainly guides to practical style.) In practical style, the writer and reader have defined roles (supervisor and employee, teacher and student, technician and customer), and the writer’s goal is to satisfy the reader’s need. Writing in practical style may conform to a fixed template (a five-paragraph essay, a report in a scientific journal), and it is brief because the reader needs the information in a timely manner. Writing in classic style, in contrast, takes whatever form and whatever length the writer needs to present an interesting truth. The classic writer’s brevity “comes from the elegance of his mind, never from pressures of time or employment.”

Classic style also differs subtly from plain style, where everything is in full view and the reader needs no help in seeing anything. In classic style the writer has worked hard to find something worth showing and the perfect vantage point from which to see it. The reader may have to work hard to discern it, but her efforts will be rewarded. Classic style, Thomas and Turner explain, is aristocratic, not egalitarian: “Truth is available to all who are willing to work to achieve it, but truth is certainly not commonly possessed by all and is no one’s birthright.” The early bird gets the worm, for example, is plain. The early bird gets the worm, but the second mouse gets the cheese is classic.

Classic style overlaps with plain and practical styles. And all three differ from self-conscious, relativistic, ironic, or postmodern styles, in which “the writer’s chief, if unstated, concern is to escape being convicted of philosophical naiveté about his own enterprise.” As Thomas and Turner note, “When we open a cookbook, we completely put aside—and expect the author to put aside—the kind of question that leads to the heart of certain philosophic and religious traditions. Is it possible to talk about cooking? Do eggs really exist? Is food something about which knowledge is possible? Can anyone else ever tell us anything true about cooking? ... Classic style similarly puts aside as inappropriate philosophical questions about its enterprise. If it took those questions up, it could never get around to treating its subject, and its purpose is exclusively to treat its subject.”

The different prose styles are not sharply demarcated, and many kinds of writing blend the different styles or alternate between them. (Academic writing, for example, tends to mix practical and self-conscious styles.) Classic style is an ideal. Not all prose should be classic, and not all writers can carry off the pretense. But knowing the hallmarks of classic style will make anyone a better writer, and it is the strongest cure I know for the disease that enfeebles academic, bureaucratic, corporate, legal, and official prose.

At first glance classic style sounds naïve and philistine, suited only to a world of concrete goings-on. Not so. Classic style is not the same as the common but unhelpful advice to “avoid abstraction.” Sometimes we do have to write about abstract ideas. What classic style does is explain them as if they were objects and forces that would be recognizable to anyone standing in a position to see them. Let’s see how classic style is used by the physicist Brian Greene to explain one of the most exotic ideas the human mind has ever entertained, the theory of multiple universes.

Greene begins with the observation by astronomers in the 1920s that galaxies were moving away from each other:

If space is now expanding, then at ever earlier times the universe must have been ever smaller. At some moment in the distant past, everything we now see—the ingredients responsible for every planet, every star, every galaxy, even space itself—must have been compressed to an infinitesimal speck that then swelled outward, evolving into the universe as we know it.

The big-bang theory was born.... Yet scientists were aware that the big-bang theory suffered from a significant shortcoming. Of all things, it leaves out the bang. Einstein’s equations do a wonderful job of describing how the universe evolved from a split second after the bang, but the equations break down (similar to the error message returned by a calculator when you try to divide 1 by 0) when applied to the extreme environment of the universe’s earliest
moment. The big bang thus provides no insight into what might have powered the bang itself.

Greene does not tut-tut over the fact that this reasoning depends on complex mathematics. Instead he shows us, with images and everyday examples, what the math reveals. We accept the theory of the big bang by watching a movie of expanding space running backwards. We appreciate the abstruse concept of equations breaking down through an example, division by zero, which we can understand for ourselves in either of two ways. We can think it through: What could dividing a number into zero parts actually mean? Or we can punch the numbers into our calculators and see the error message ourselves.

Greene then tells us that astronomers recently made a surprising discovery, which he illustrates with an analogy:

Just as the pull of earth’s gravity slows the ascent of a ball tossed upward, the gravitational pull of each galaxy on every other must be slowing the expansion of space. . . . [But] far from slowing down, the expansion of space went into overdrive about 7 billion years ago and has been speeding up ever since. That’s like gently tossing a ball upward, having it slow down initially, but then rocket upward ever more quickly.

But soon they found an explanation, which he illustrates with a looser simile:

We’re all used to gravity being a force that does only one thing: pull objects toward each other. But in Einstein’s . . . theory of relativity, gravity can also . . . push things apart. . . . If space contains . . . an invisible energy, sort of like an invisible mist that’s uniformly spread through space, then the gravity exerted by the energy mist would be repulsive.

The dark energy hypothesis, however, led to yet another mystery:

When the astronomers deduced how much dark energy would have to permeate every nook and cranny of space to account for the observed cosmic speedup, they found a number that no one has been able to explain . . . :

\[0.000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000
Of course! As long as there are many planets, one of them is likely to be at a hospitable distance from the sun, and no one thinks it’s sensible to ask why we find ourselves on that planet rather than on Neptune. So it would be if there are many universes.

But scientists still faced a problem, which Greene illustrates with an analogy:

Just as it takes a well-stocked shoe store to guarantee you’ll find your size, only a well-stocked multiverse can guarantee that our universe, with its peculiar amount of dark energy, will be represented. On its own, inflationary cosmology falls short of the mark. While its never-ending series of big bangs would yield an immense collection of universes, many would have similar features, like a shoe store with stacks and stacks of sizes 5 and 13, but nothing in the size you seek.

The piece that completes the puzzle is string theory, according to which “the tally of possible universes stands at the almost incomprehensible $10^{500}$, a number so large it defies analogy.”

By combining inflationary cosmology and string theory, the stock room of universes overflows: in the hands of inflation, string theory’s enormously diverse collection of possible universes become actual universes, brought to life by one big bang after another. Our universe is then virtually guaranteed to be among them. And because of the special features necessary for our form of life, that’s the universe we inhabit.

In just three thousand words, Greene has caused us to understand a mind-boggling idea, with no apology that the physics and math behind the theory might be hard for him to explain or for readers to understand. He narrates a series of events with the confidence that anyone looking at them will know what they imply, because the examples he has chosen are exact. Division by zero is a perfect example of “equations breaking down”; gravity tugs at a tossed ball in exactly the way it slows cosmic expansion; the improbability of finding a precisely specified item in a small pool of possibilities applies to both the sizes of shoes in a store and the values of physical constants in a multiverse. The examples are not so much metaphors or analogies as they are actual instances of the phenomena he is explaining, and they are instances that readers can see with their own eyes. This is classic style.

It may not be a coincidence that Greene, like many scientists since Galileo, is a lucid expositor of difficult ideas, because the ideal of classic prose is congenial to the worldview of the scientist. Contrary to the common misunderstanding in which Einstein proved that everything is relative and Heisenberg proved that observers always affect what they observe, most scientists believe that there are objective truths about the world and that they can be discovered by a disinterested observer.

By the same token, the guiding image of classic prose could not be further from the worldview of relativist academic ideologies such as postmodernism, poststructuralism, and literary Marxism. And not coincidentally, it was scholars with these worldviews who consistently won the annual Bad Writing Contest, a publicity stunt held by the philosopher Denis Dutton during the late 1990s. First place in 1997 went to the eminent critic Fredric Jameson for the opening sentence of his book on film criticism:

The visual is essentially pornographic, which is to say that it has its end in rapt, mindless fascination; thinking about its attributes becomes an adjunct to that, if it is unwilling to betray its object; while the most austere films necessarily draw their energy from the attempt to repress their own excess (rather than from the more thankless effort to discipline the viewer).

The assertion that “the visual is essentially pornographic” is not, to put it mildly, a fact about the world that anyone can see. The phrase “which is to say” promises an explanation, but it is just as baffling: can’t
something have “its end in rapt, mindless fascination” without being pornographic? The puzzled reader is put on notice that her ability to understand the world counts for nothing; her role is to behold the enigmatic pronouncements of the great scholar. Classic writing, with its assumption of equality between writer and reader, makes the reader feel like a genius. Bad writing makes the reader feel like a dunce.

The winning entry for 1998, by another eminent critic, Judith Butler, is also a defiant repudiation of classic style:

The move from a structuralist account in which capital is understood to structure social relations in relatively homologous ways to a view of hegemony in which power relations are subject to repetition, convergence, and rearticulation brought the question of temporality into the thinking of structure, and marked a shift from a form of Althusserian theory that takes structural totalities as theoretical objects to one in which the insights into the contingent possibility of structure inaugurate a renewed conception of hegemony as bound up with the contingent sites and strategies of the rearticulation of power.

A reader of this intimidating passage can marvel at Butler’s ability to juggle abstract propositions about still more abstract propositions, with no real-world referent in sight. We have a move from an account of an understanding to a view with a rearticulation of a question, which reminds me of the Hollywood party in Annie Hall where a movie producer is overheard saying, “Right now it’s only a notion, but I think I can get money to make it into a concept, and later turn it into an idea.” What the reader cannot do is understand it—to see with her own eyes what Butler is seeing. Insofar as the passage has a meaning at all, it seems to be that some scholars have come to realize that power can change over time.

The abstruseness of the contest winners’ writing is deceptive. Most academics can effortlessly dispense this kind of sludge, and many students, like Zonker Harris in this Doonesbury cartoon, acquire the skill without having to be taught:

Just as deceptive is the plain language of Greene’s explanation of the multiverse. It takes cognitive toil and literary dexterity to pare an argument to its essentials, narrate it in an orderly sequence, and illustrate it with analogies that are both familiar and accurate. As Dolly Parton said, “You wouldn’t believe how much it costs to look this cheap.”

The confident presentation of an idea in classic style should not be confused with an arrogant insistence that it is correct. Elsewhere in his essay, Greene does not hide the fact that many of his fellow physicists think that string theory and the multiverse are extravagant and unproven. He only wants readers to understand them. Thomas and Turner explain that the reader of classic prose “may conclude that a text is masterful, classic, and completely wrong.”

And for all its directness, classic style remains a pretense, an imposition, an stance. Even scientists, with their commitment to seeing the world as it is, are a bit postmodern. They recognize that it’s hard to know the truth, that the world doesn’t just reveal itself to us, that we understand the world through our theories and constructs, which are not pictures but abstract propositions, and that our ways of understanding the world must constantly be scrutinized for hidden biases. It’s just that good writers don’t flaunt this anxiety in every passage they write; they artfully conceal it for clarity’s sake.

Remembering that classic style is a pretense also makes sense of the seemingly outlandish requirement that a writer know the truth before putting it into words and not use the writing process to organize and clarify his thoughts. Of course no writer works that way, but that is