



MAKING CLEAR CONNECTIONS: THE CURSE OF KNOWLEDGE

Once I know something, I find it hard to remember what it was like not to know it. As a result, I have a hard time communicating what I've learned. I use jargon – specialized words that experts in the field know. I don't include examples and evidence that seem obvious to me. I expect my readers to reach conclusions, but forget to point out the connections that will help them reach those conclusions.

To overcome this Curse of Knowledge, I need to empathize with my reader. It helps me to pretend I am writing to one particular person. Sometimes I write to my sister. Sometimes I write to my niece. Sometimes to a friend. John Steinbeck said that he wrote to his mother.

When I write to a person whose opinion and intelligence I admire, but who isn't familiar with the subject, I find it easier to imagine the questions I need to answer, the language I need to use (and avoid), and the connections I need to make.

But from experience I know that the Curse of Knowledge is always lurking, so I have one last line of defense: I ask a friend to read and talk to me about my draft. This happens late in the process, when I've reached the point where I think the piece is done.

Invariably, this conversation reveals a section or paragraph, even a sentence, where I failed to communicate as clearly and completely as I hoped. I don't find it easy to hear the news, but I carry it gratefully back to my desk where I revise again, and, hopefully for the better.

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