

Jargon Reduction

One way you can use the 5-Year Old Method is through a technique I call “jargon reduction.” Now, jargon are all the technical pieces of languages that are used in explanations and definitions that may come up in lectures; that may come up in your textbooks. Now, the advantage of jargon is that, for people who already understand the underlying concepts very well, it allows you to quickly explain an even more complicated idea. The disadvantage is that in using jargon, in using complicated words, you may save time and space but you make the idea harder to understand, a little bit more dense.

So, if you’re in a class that uses a lot of jargon you can use the 5-Year Old Method to decompose the jargon into its definitions and by doing that you can aid in your own understanding. So the practice is, take passages or explanations and go through each of the complicated words that stand in for a more complex idea and replace them with their definitions, and then go through the entire explanation again with these longer definitions or explanations of the harder ideas. And by decomposing ideas in this way, you’re simplifying it to an even simpler level which aids in understanding and memorability.

So I have a passage here from the book *Inside Jokes*, which is philosophical and scientific discussion into what makes humor funny. And this is a passage which I felt was a good example, because it’s particularly dense. So the passage is:

The epistemic emotions all share a similar ineffable quality of being mental feelings—but mirth and discovery are particularly similar, in being the two most familiar positively valenced members of this class of emotions.

So, maybe if you had read the book and you’ve been reading the other passages this might make sense to you, this paragraph might make sense. And you may understand it even in the first pass, and that may be true own learnings that you’re going through; you might understand the explanation at face value. But the 5-Year Old Method pushes you to go further, to simplify things beyond what you personally need to do in order to understand the idea.

So I can simplify this by going through and finding the pieces of jargon, which are standing in for more complicated ideas, and simplify each of those in turn. So the first one is “epistemic”; epistemic emotions. So what is an epistemic emotion? Well, an epistemic emotion—epistemology, is the study of knowledge of the philosophy regarding knowledge. So it is an emotion related to knowing something. So, OK, we can kind of get an idea, maybe get an example. What would be an example of an epistemic emotion versus just a regular emotion? Well, the examples they give in the book are things like creative discovery or a type of insight, which is not the same as anger or sadness because it relates specifically to knowledge. When you gain knowledge, you have a feeling about that knowledge, a curiosity. That’s another epistemic emotion; so, breaking down that one word into a set of explanations.

Another one is the word “ineffable”, so what does the word ineffable mean? Well, maybe you’ve already heard this word before and you have sort of an understanding of what it is, but it’s useful

to break it down to its definition to make it even more understandable. So, ineffable means that “it’s impossible to describe”. So what we said in the first sentence that the emotions are related to knowing things, like curiosity and discovery. They all share a similar indescribable quality of being mental feelings, so they feel like they occur inside your head.

“[...]but mirth and discovery are particularly similar, in being the two most familiar positively valenced members...” So what does “positively valenced” mean? Well, valence is a derivative of the word value, where if something has a positive valence it means that it has a positive value. So, positively valenced means that this is a particularly enjoyable emotion, a particularly positive emotion. Anger or sadness is a particularly negatively valenced emotion.

So, breaking through this and going through it one more time, the way I’ve broken down this passage is the epistemic emotions, which are the mental emotions of knowing something (like curiosity and creative insight and discovery), they all share a similar indescribable quality of being mental feelings, so they occur inside your head.

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So ,contrasting mirth and discovery—so, the feeling of enjoyment and pleasure—as in contrast to other epistemic emotions which are negatively valenced, like confusion and frustration.

So in doing this 5-Year Old Method I’ve been speaking out loud, I’ve been going through this entire process of jargon reduction and I’ve been able to simplify this passage down to something that is even more understandable and easier for me to grasp.

So try this with your own explanations that you encounter. If you have one that has a lot of dense ideas, formulas, advanced concepts, try breaking down that jargon into its definitions as a way of starting with the 5-Year Old Method to understand and remember ideas better.