

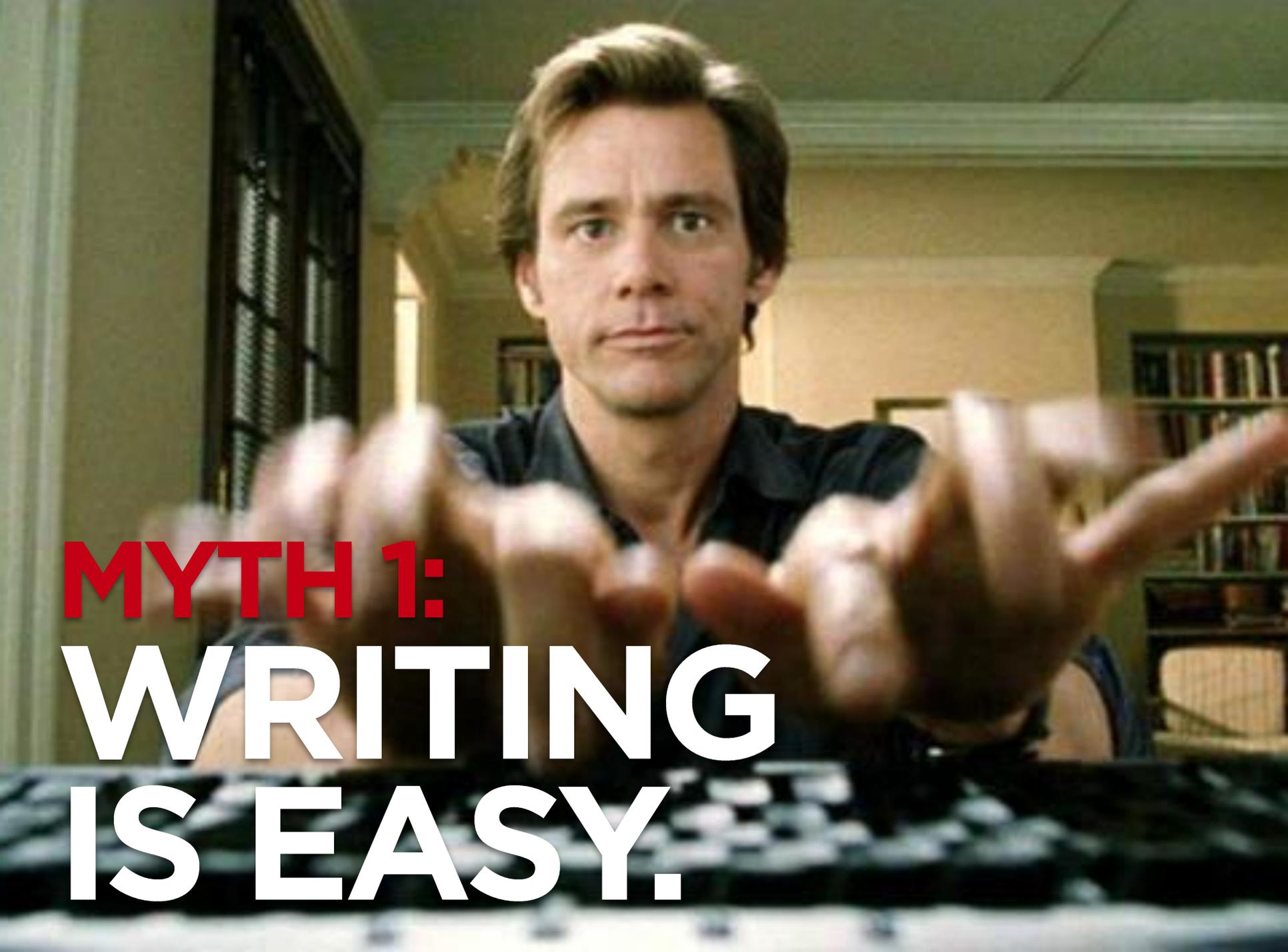
**TO WRITE WELL, FORGET
EVERYTHING YOUR HIGH-SCHOOL
ENGLISH TEACHER TAUGHT YOU**

8 MYTHS, 8 RULES

Jonathan Rick



MYTHS



MYTH 1:

**WRITING
IS EASY.**

A man with grey hair, wearing a blue and white checkered button-down shirt, is sitting at a wooden desk. He has a distressed expression, with his right hand covering his forehead. In his left hand, he holds a yellow pencil over an open notebook. The desk is cluttered with several pieces of crumpled white paper. To the left, there is a glass pencil holder filled with yellow pencils. The background is a softly blurred indoor setting, possibly an office or home study.

“Writing is easy. I just sit in front of my typewriter and wait for drops of blood to fall from my forehead onto the page.”

—Red Smith

“I write because
I don’t know
what I think
until I read
what I say.”

—Flannery O’Connor



An elderly woman with short, grey hair pulled back, wearing glasses and a green jacket, is pointing her right hand towards a green chalkboard. Her left hand is also visible, pointing towards the board. The background is a solid green color.

MYTH 2:

**I WAS
ALWAYS
TAUGHT...**

An elderly woman with short, grey hair pulled back, wearing glasses and a green jacket, is pointing her right index finger towards the left. She is looking intently at the point of her finger. The background is a solid green color, resembling a chalkboard. The text is overlaid on the lower half of the image.

**...NEVER TO
SPLIT AN
INFINITIVE.**

THIS?

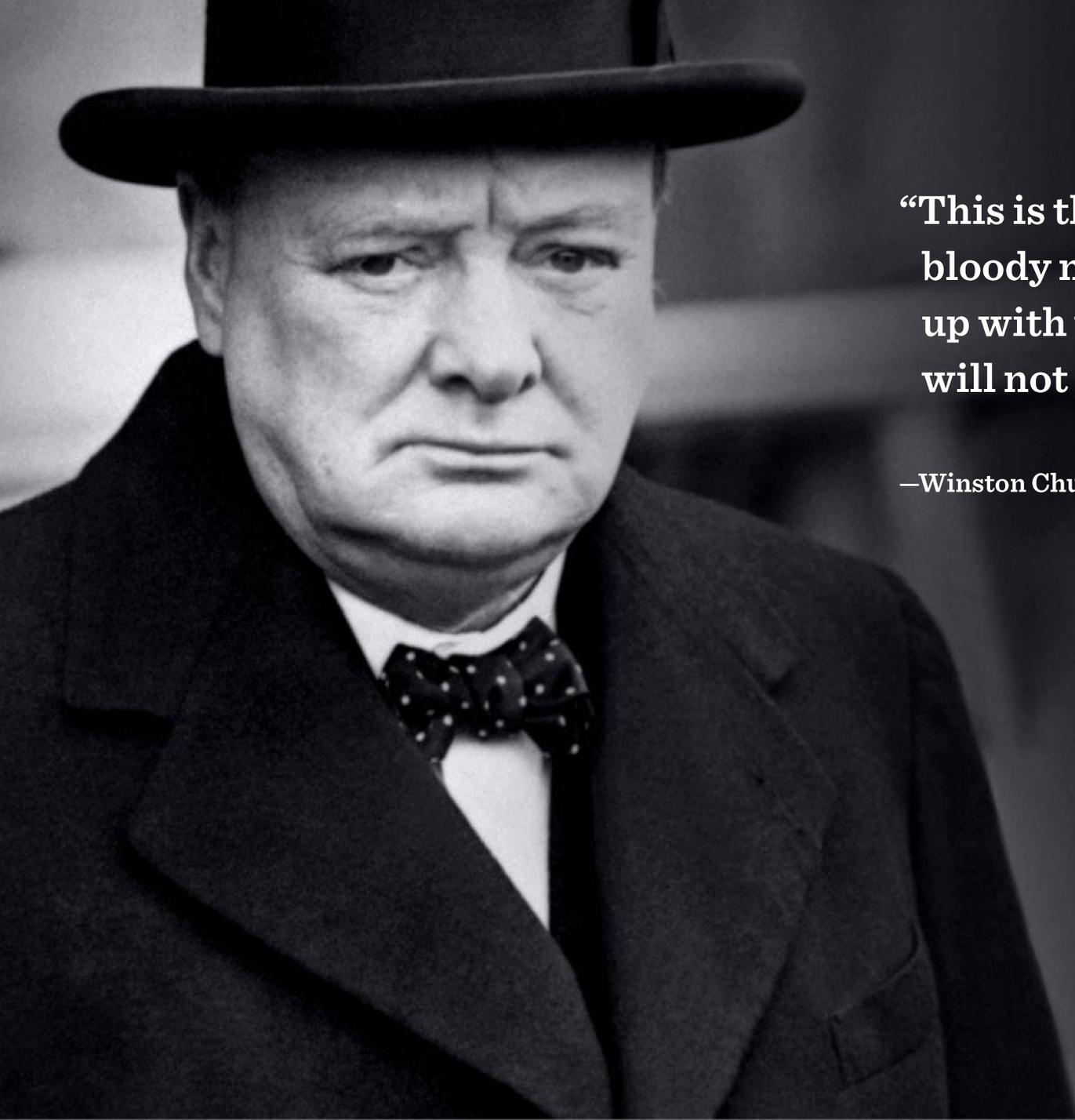
To Go Boldly

OR THIS?

To Boldly Go

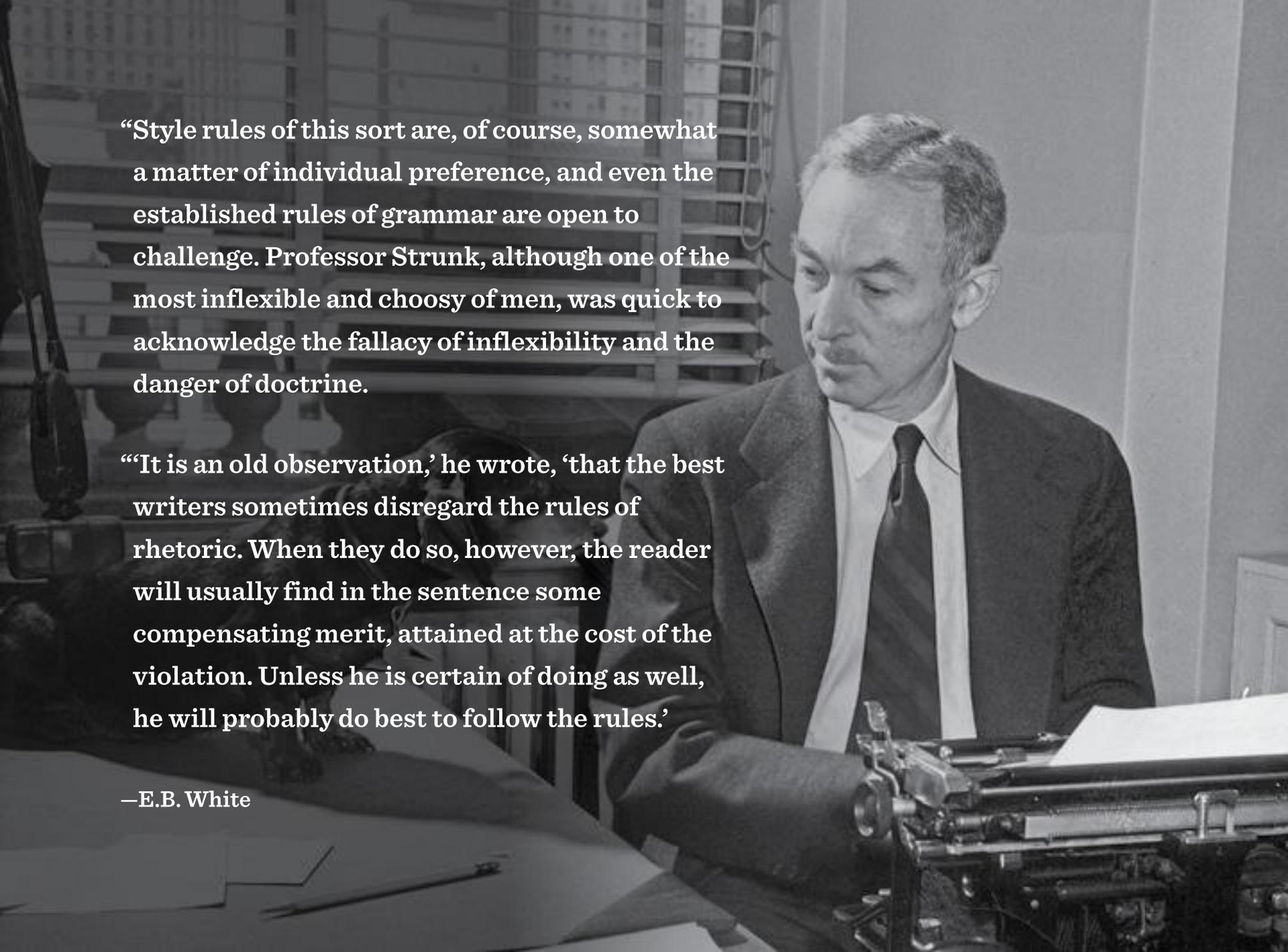
**...NEVER
TO END A
SENTENCE
WITH A
PREPOSITION.**





**“This is the sort of
bloody nonsense
up with which I
will not put.”**

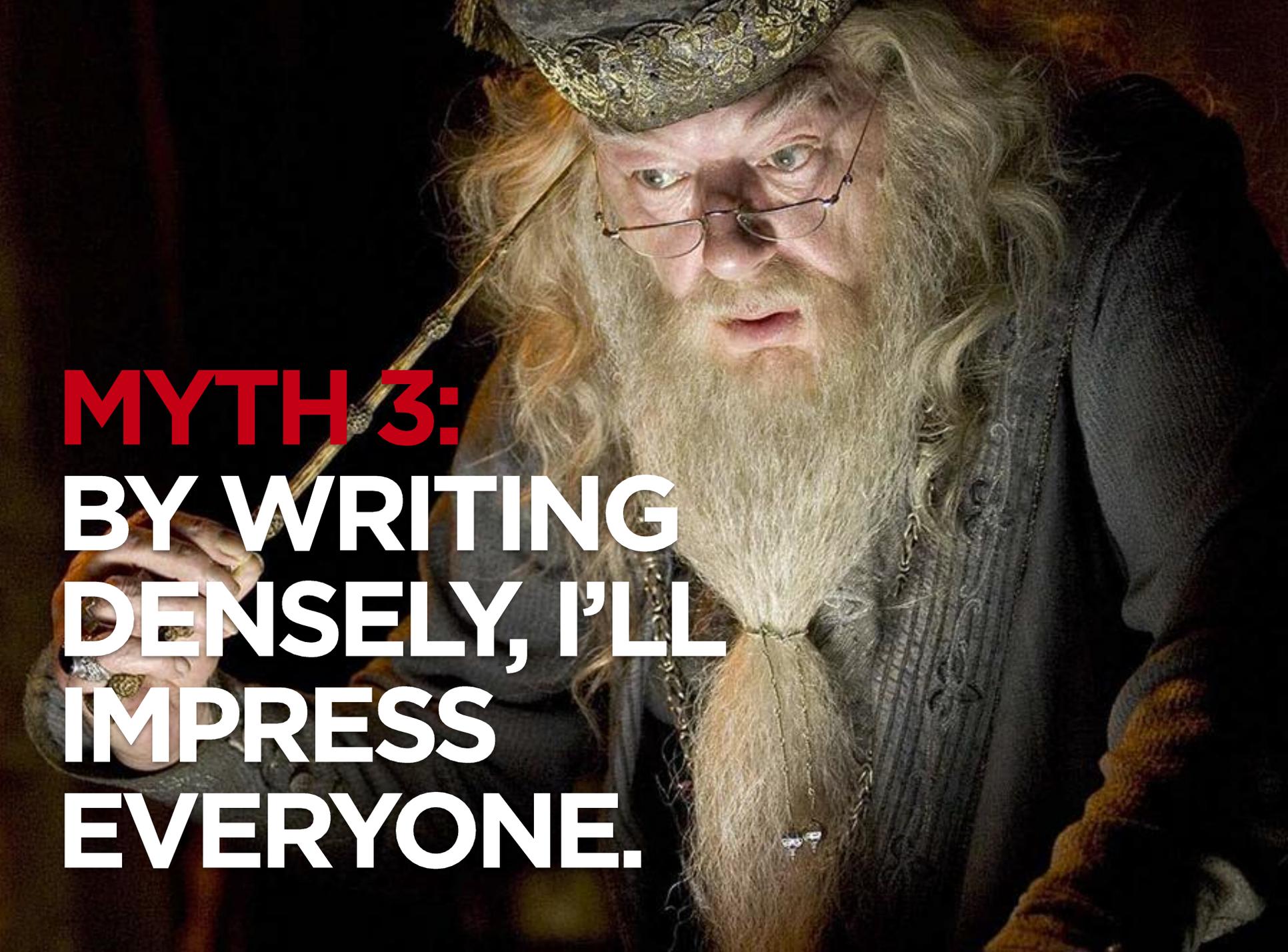
—Winston Churchill



“Style rules of this sort are, of course, somewhat a matter of individual preference, and even the established rules of grammar are open to challenge. Professor Strunk, although one of the most inflexible and choosy of men, was quick to acknowledge the fallacy of inflexibility and the danger of doctrine.

“It is an old observation,’ he wrote, ‘that the best writers sometimes disregard the rules of rhetoric. When they do so, however, the reader will usually find in the sentence some compensating merit, attained at the cost of the violation. Unless he is certain of doing as well, he will probably do best to follow the rules.’

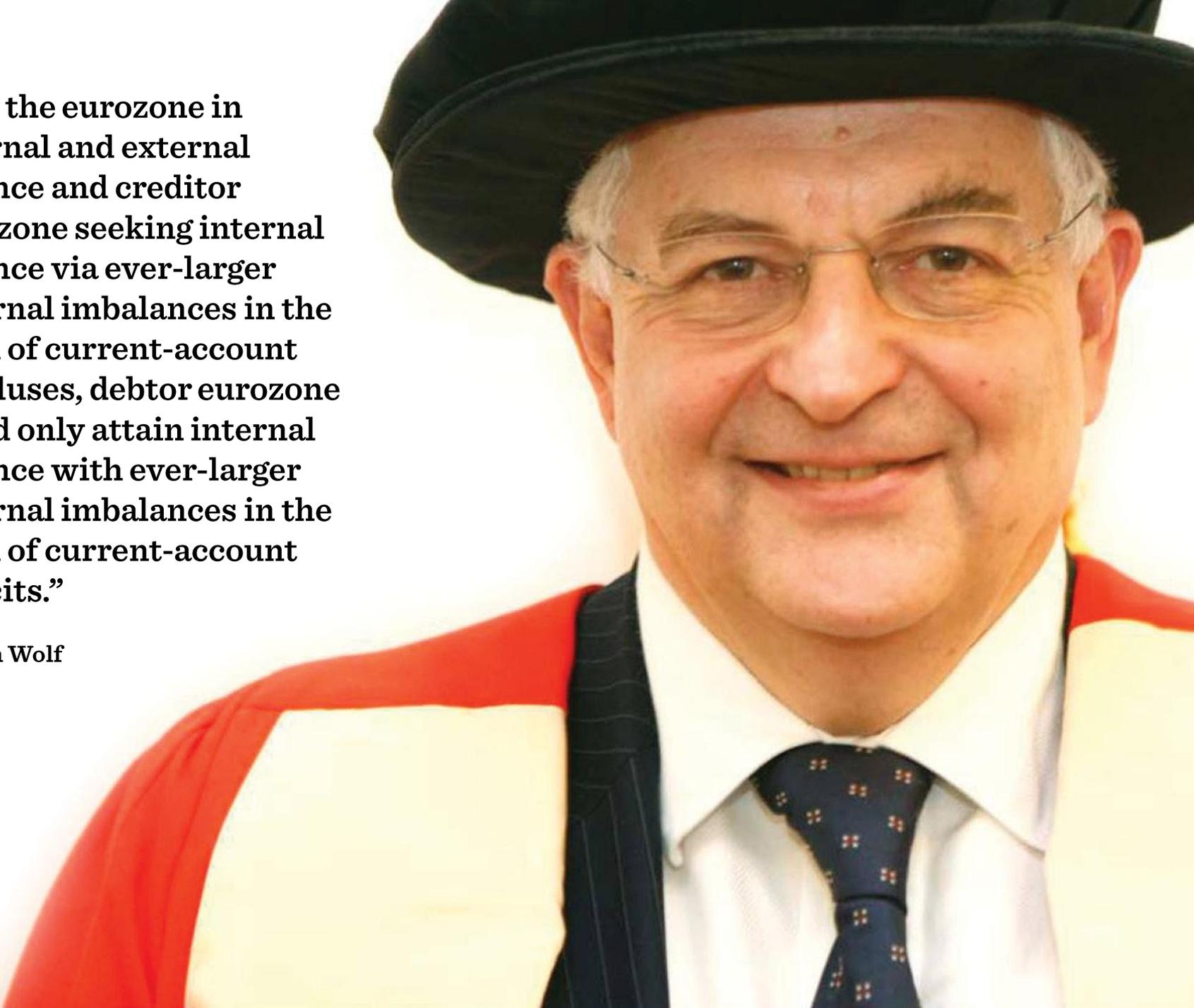
—E.B. White



MYTH 3:
BY WRITING
DENSELY, I'LL
IMPRESS
EVERYONE.

“With the eurozone in internal and external balance and creditor eurozone seeking internal balance via ever-larger external imbalances in the form of current-account surpluses, debtor eurozone could only attain internal balance with ever-larger external imbalances in the form of current-account deficits.”

—Martin Wolf



MYTH 4:
MY READERS
ARE TOO AUGUST
TO BE ADDRESSED
IN THE COMMON
TONGUE.



THIS?

I'd like you to roll out a top-down automotive cleansing initiative, which will be incentivized with fiscal remuneration.

OR THIS?

I'll pay you \$5 to wash the car.

The graph 

adjacency matrix, A .

matrix giving the number of 3 step

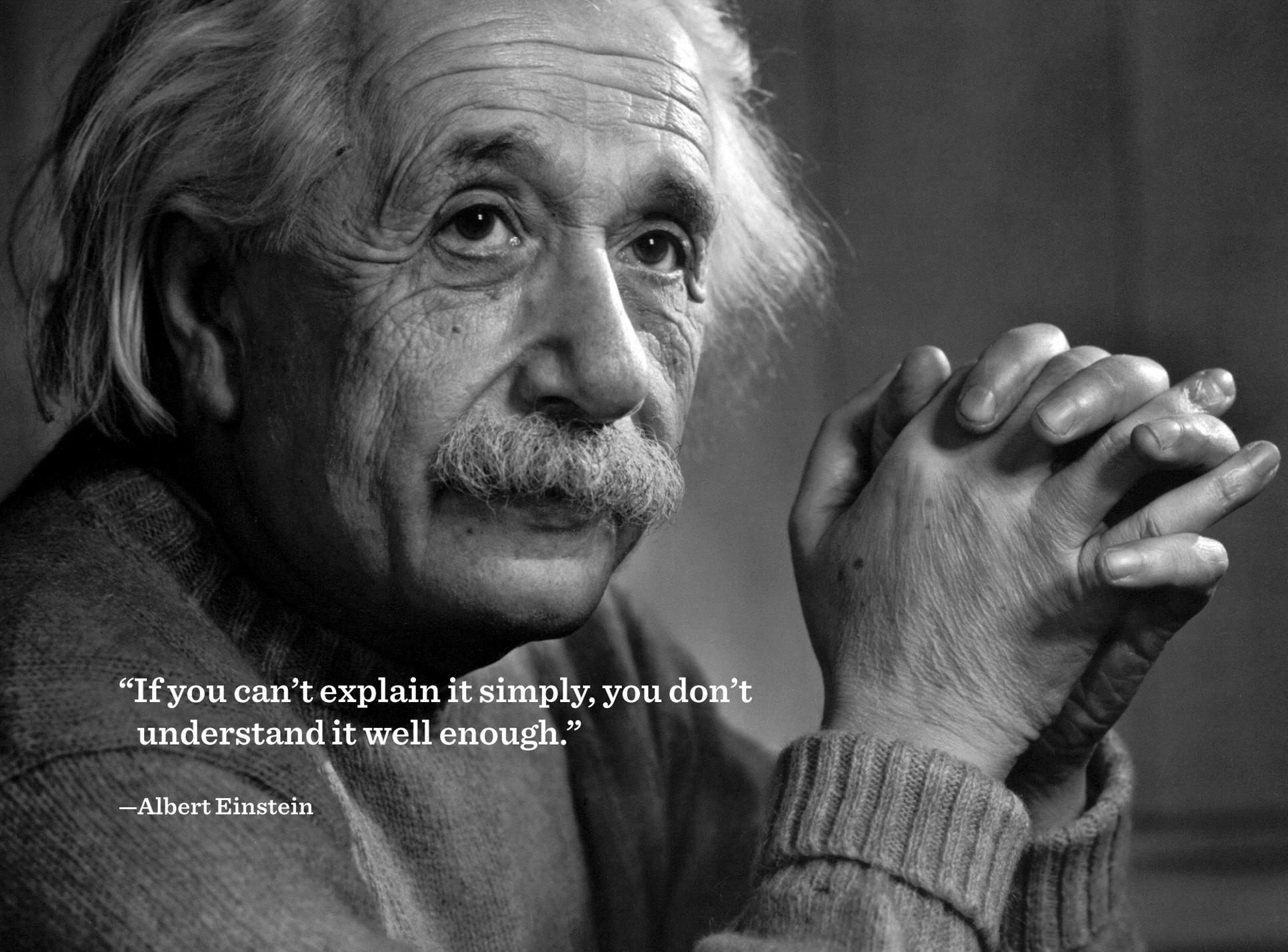
generating function for walks from

1.)
$$\begin{pmatrix} 1 & 0 & 1 & 0 & 1 \\ 1 & 0 & 2 & 1 & \\ 2 & 0 & 0 & & \\ 1 & 0 & 0 & & \end{pmatrix}$$

MYTH 5:

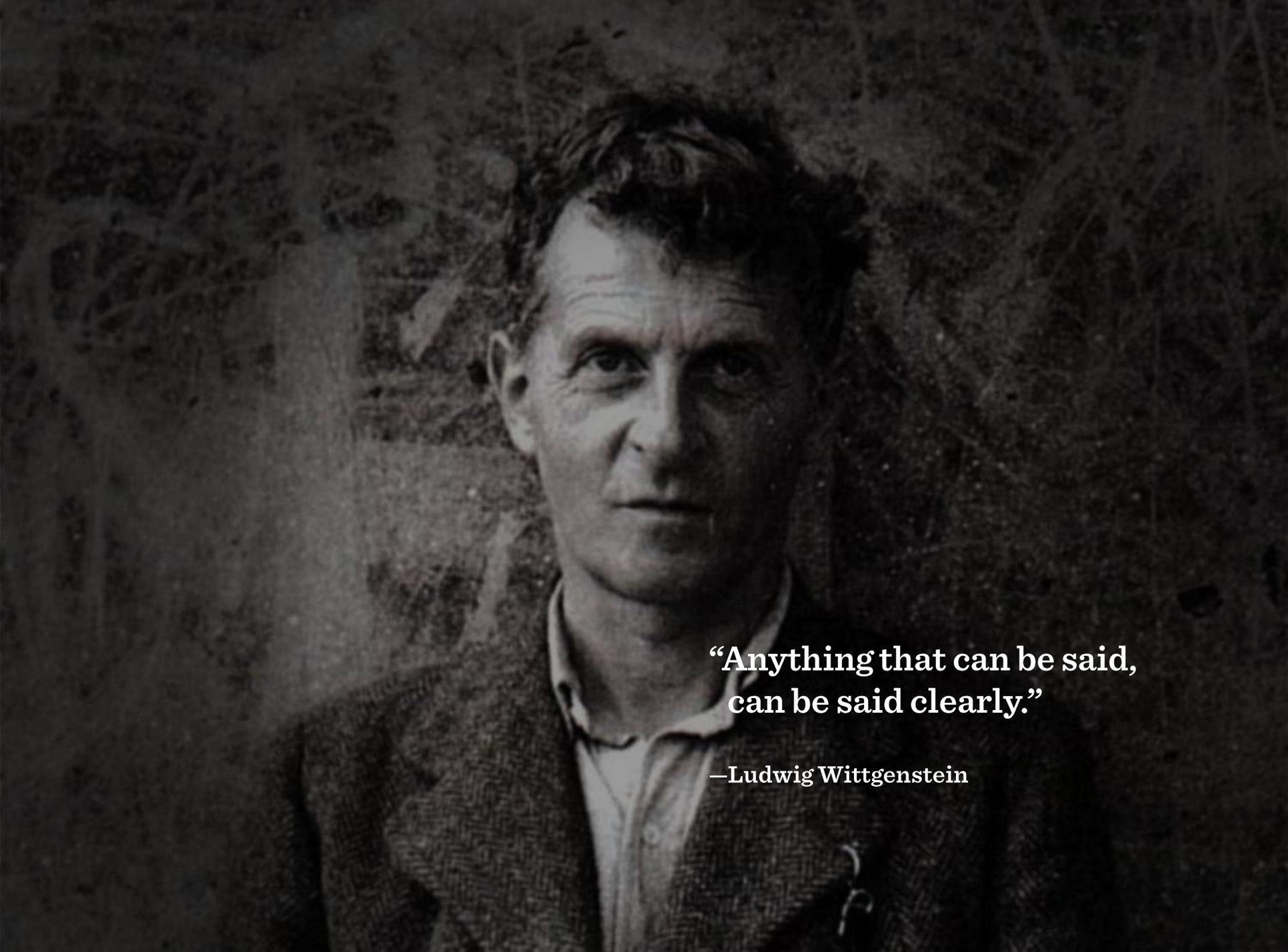
**MY SUBJECT IS
TOO COMPLEX
TO BE
SIMPLIFIED.**





“If you can’t explain it simply, you don’t understand it well enough.”

—Albert Einstein

A black and white portrait of Ludwig Wittgenstein, showing him from the chest up. He has short, dark, wavy hair and is looking directly at the camera with a neutral expression. He is wearing a dark, textured jacket over a light-colored collared shirt. The background is a dark, textured wall.

**“Anything that can be said,
can be said clearly.”**

—Ludwig Wittgenstein

THIS?

Our mission is to become the international leader in the space industry through maximum team-centered innovation and strategically targeted aerospace initiatives.

OR THIS?

I believe that this nation should commit itself to achieving the goal, before this decade is out, of landing a man on the moon and returning him safely to the earth.

“IT’S TOO COMPLEX”

KEVIN SPACEY PAUL BETTANY JERRY BRONZ JONAS QUENTZ FIONA SHAW AMY POE FERRELL
with JOHN TURTURRO and STEVE TUCKER

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BE SMARTER.
OR CHEAT.

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“IT’S TOO DRY”

The Washington Post

WorldViews

9 questions about Syria you were too embarrassed to ask



By Max Fisher August 29, 2013 [Follow @Max_Fisher](#)



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FREE THE POST'S JASON REZAIAN

Jason's been in an Iranian prison

222

days

Join more than 150,000 others and

The Washington Post

WorldViews

9 questions about Syria you were too embarrassed to ask



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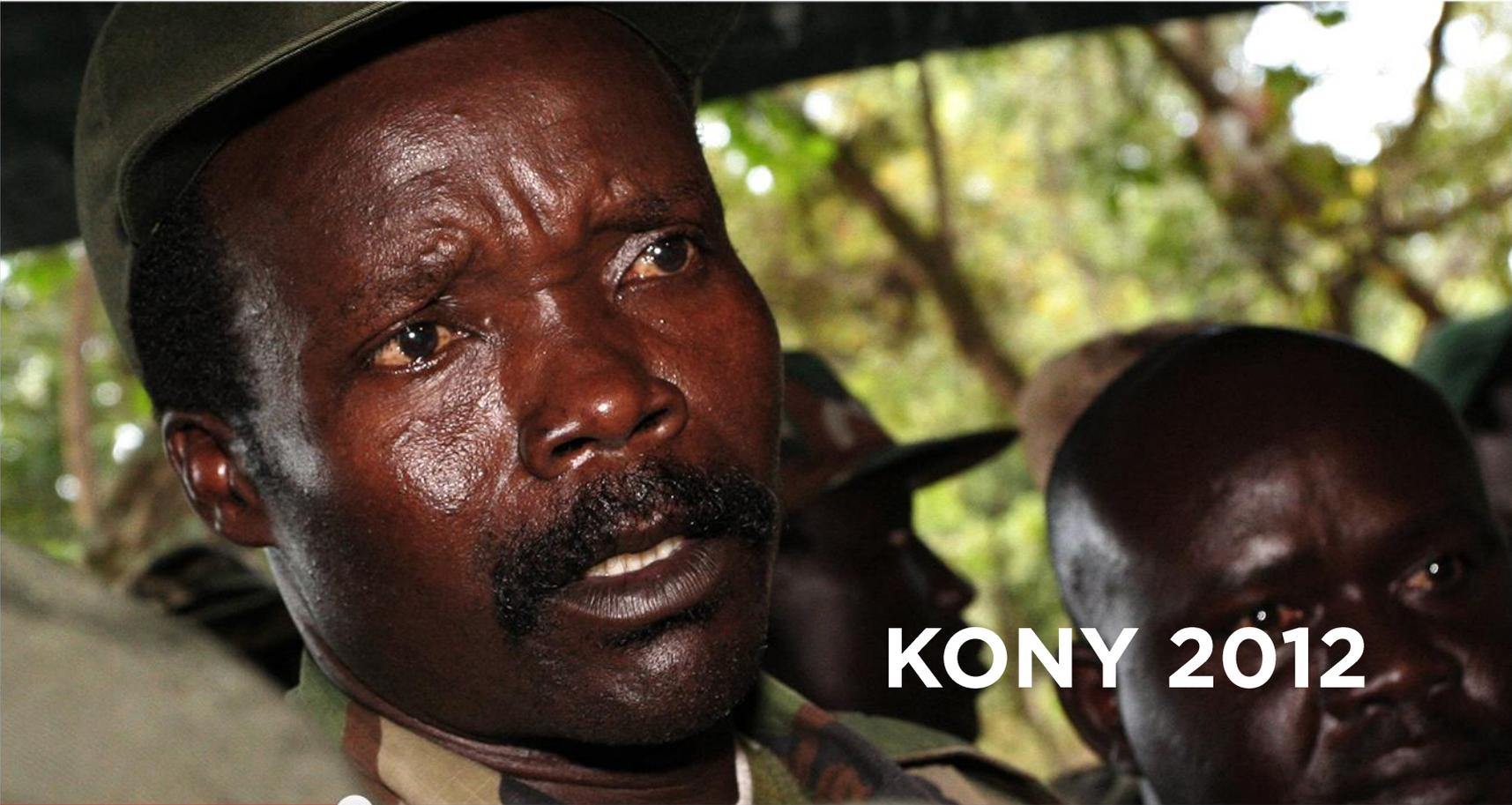
THE 11TH MOST-POPULAR PIECE OF CONTENT ON FACEBOOK IN 2013



Advertisement
Jason's been in an Iranian prison
222
days

Join more than 150,000 others and

“IT’S TOO LONG”



KONY 2012

7:22 / 29:58

▶ 🔊 🔍 ⏪ ⏩



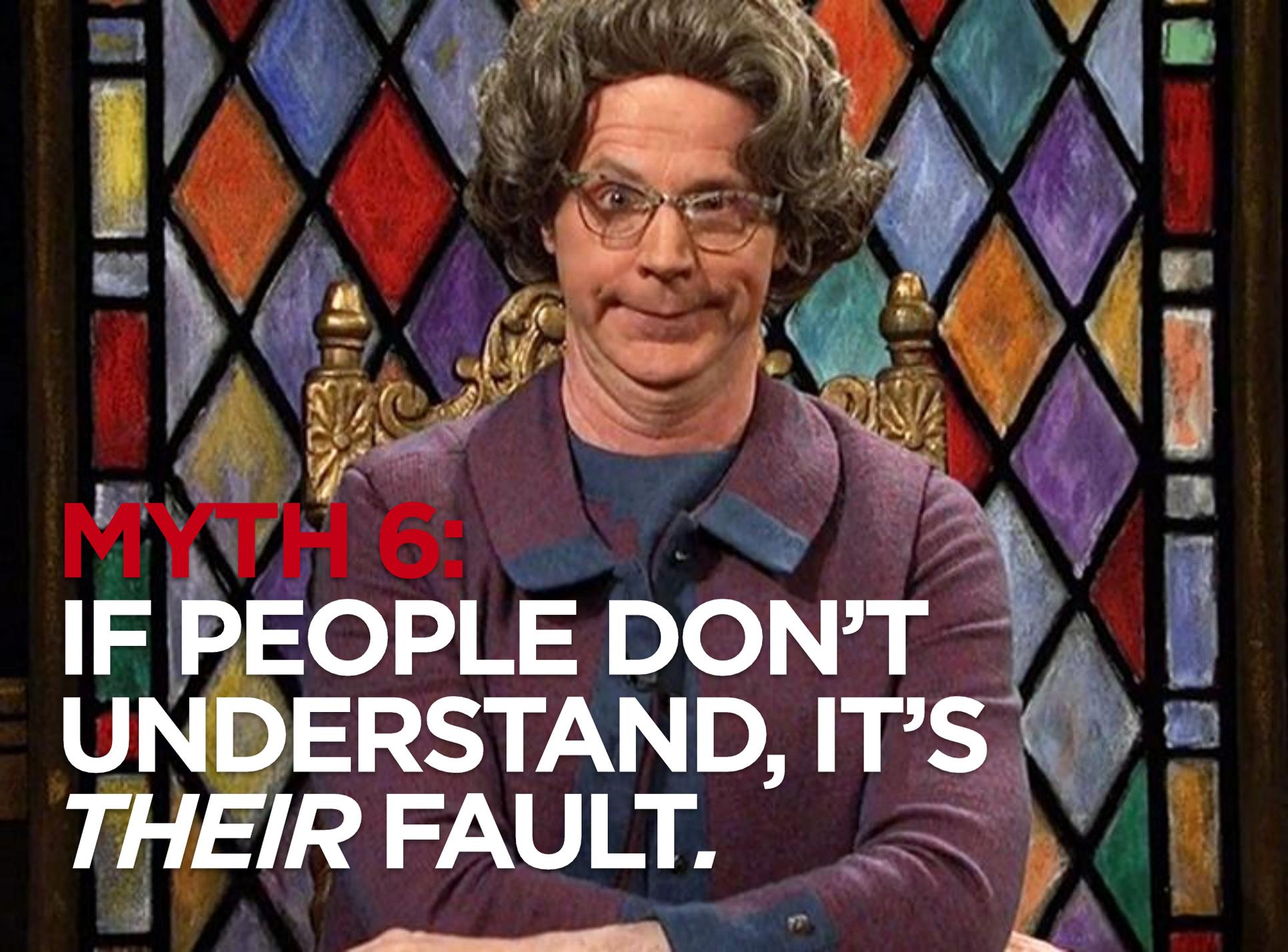
100 MILLION VIEWS

KONY 2012

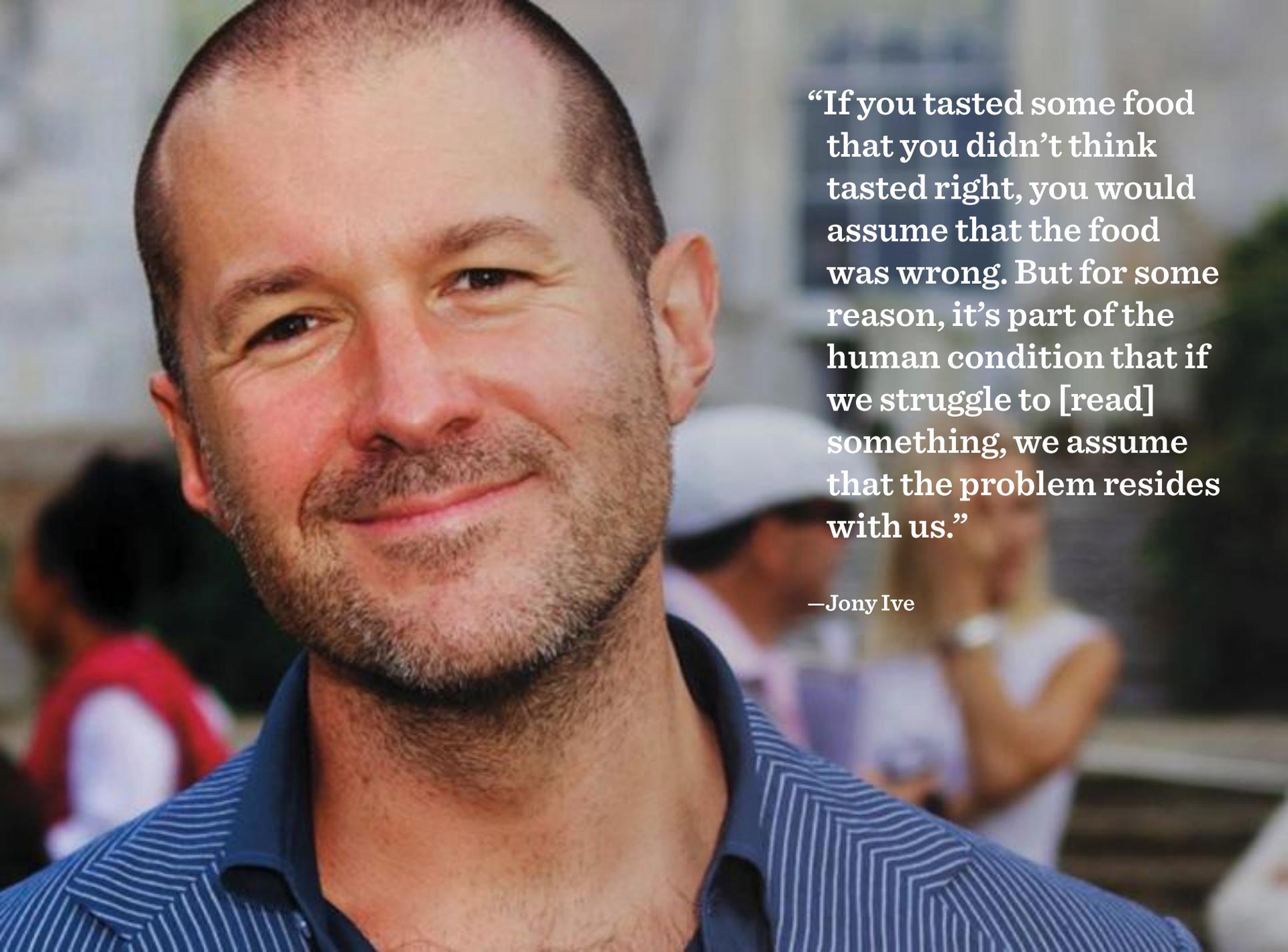


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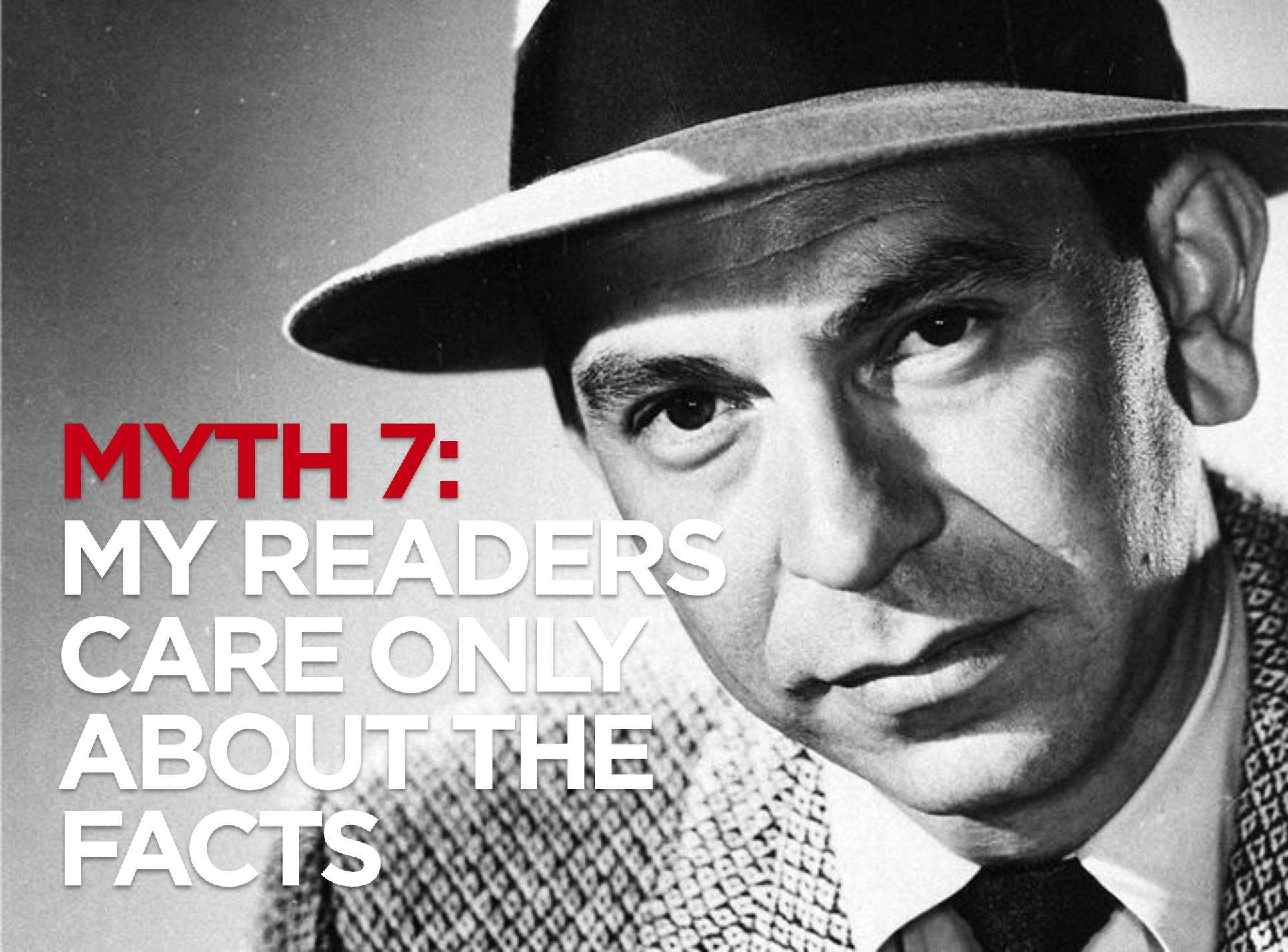


MYTH 6:
IF PEOPLE DON'T
UNDERSTAND, IT'S
***THEIR* FAULT.**



“If you tasted some food that you didn’t think tasted right, you would assume that the food was wrong. But for some reason, it’s part of the human condition that if we struggle to [read] something, we assume that the problem resides with us.”

—Jony Ive

A black and white close-up portrait of a man wearing a dark fedora hat. He is looking slightly to the right of the camera with a serious expression. He is wearing a patterned jacket over a white shirt and a dark tie. The background is a plain, light-colored wall.

MYTH 7:
MY READERS
CARE ONLY
ABOUT THE
FACTS



“Have you heard me talk
about the Paris café?”

—Jonah Peretti



MYTH 8:
A HEADLINE
MUST NEVER
BE CUTE.

THIS?

**Aberrational Behavior
and the Casual Effect
of Incentives**

OR THIS?

**Freakonomics: A Rogue
Economist Explores
the Hidden Side of
Everything**

HEADLINE

SOURCE

10 Truths About America's Entitlement Programs That Will Blow Your Mind



7 Important Tax Facts About Medical and Dental Expenses



75 Facts About the 75th Secretary of the Treasury



President Putin's Fiction: 10 False Claims About Ukraine



THE ORIGINAL LISTICLE



CONTENT	HEADLINE
Report, Article, Presentation	Title
Memo	RE:
Email	Subject Line

1. Everything You Know About Writing Is Wrong: 10 Myths, 10 Rules
2. 10 Myths and 10 Rules of Good Business Writing
3. Everything You Need to Know About Writing
4. You Need Not Be Shakespeare to Write Well. Just Learn These 20 Myths and Rules
5. Most Business Writing Is Lousy. Here's Why— And How to Fix It
6. To Write Well, Forget Everything Your High-School English Teacher Taught You
7. Writing Isn't Easy, but It Can Be a Lot Easier With These 15 Easy Rules
8. If Steve Jobs Wrote As Well As He Delivered Presentations, This Would Be His Playbook

CLICKS

10

1. Everything You Know About Writing Is Wrong: 10 Myths, 10 Rules

10

2. 10 Myths and 10 Rules of Good Business Writing

10

3. Everything You Need to Know About Writing

10

4. You Need Not Be Shakespeare to Write Well. Just Learn These 20 Myths and Rules

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5. Most Business Writing Is Lousy. Here's Why— And How to Fix It

23

6. To Write Well, Forget Everything Your High-School English Teacher Taught You

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7. Writing Isn't Easy, but It Can Be a Lot Easier With These 15 Easy Rules

10

8. If Steve Jobs Wrote As Well As He Delivered Presentations, This Would Be His Playbook

LET'S RECAP THE MYTHS

1. Writing is _____.
2. I was always _____.
3. By writing _____, I'll impress everyone.
4. My readers are too august to be addressed in the
_____.

THE MYTHS, CONTINUED

5. My subject is too _____ to be simplified.
6. If people don't understand, it's _____ fault.
7. My readers care only about _____.
8. A _____ must never be cute.

Rules

RULE 1

Break up
noun clusters

THIS?

**The National Electric
Transmission Congestion
Study**

OR THIS?

**The Study of Congestion
in National Electric
Transmission**

THIS?

User menu global search

OR THIS?

Global search in the
user menu

RULE 2

**Make every verb
count**

Angela **went out** to the
street, **looking** for help.

Angela went out to the street, looking for help.

Angela **sprinted** out to the street, **screaming** for help.

Angela went out to the street, looking for help.

Angela sprinted out to the street, screaming for help.

Angela **stumbled** out to the street, **whimpering** for help.

Angela went out to the street, looking for help.

Angela sprinted out to the street, screaming for help.

Angela stumbled out to the street, whimpering for help.

Angela **strolled** out to the street, **seeking** a neighbor.

THIS?

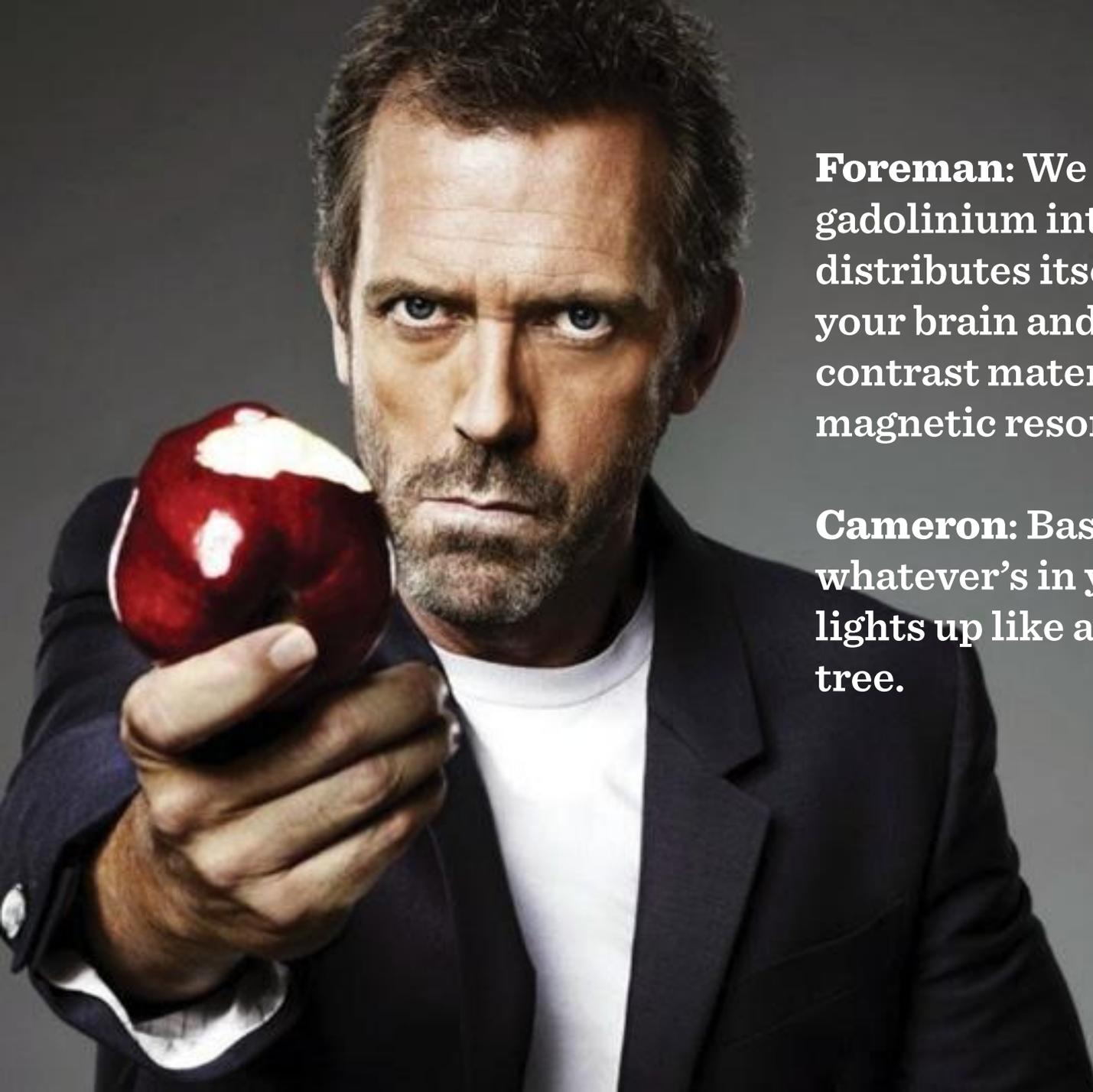
Was responsible for organizing a gathering of peer professionals to discuss possible steps toward improving relations among diverse department entities

OR THIS?

Initiated and managed a conference of fellow IT specialists to ensure cooperation and communication across division lines

RULE 3

Embrace analogies



Foreman: We inject gadolinium into a vein. It distributes itself throughout your brain and acts as a contrast material for the magnetic resonance imager.

Cameron: Basically, whatever's in your head lights up like a Christmas tree.

THIS?

State Farm is there.

OR THIS?



THIS?

A pomelo is the largest citrus fruit. The rind is very thick but soft and easy to peel away. The resulting fruit has a light yellow to coral pink flesh and can vary from juicy to slightly dry and from seductively spicy-sweet to tangy and tart.

OR THIS?

A pomelo is basically a supersized grapefruit with a very thick and soft rind.

RULE 4

Humanize
big numbers

THIS?

The U.S. federal budget is about \$4 trillion a year.

THIS?

The U.S. federal budget is about \$127,000 a second.

THIS?

In one second, the federal government spends what two typical American families earn in an entire year.

THIS?

A medium-sized bag of movie popcorn contains 37 grams of saturated fat. The USDA recommends that you eat no more than 20 grams of saturated fat per day.

OR THIS?

A medium-sized bag of movie popcorn contains more artery-clogging fat than bacon and eggs for breakfast, a Big Mac and fries for lunch, and a steak with all the trimmings for dinner. Combined.

RULE 5

**Surprise
your readers**

THIS?

Forgive and forget.

OR THIS?

Forgive and remember.

THIS?

Our treatment isn't making him better. It's making him worse.

OR THIS?

Our treatment isn't making him better. It's killing him.

RULE 6

Write the way
you speak

THIS?

To avert the all-too-common enactment of requirements without regard for their local cost and tax impact, the commission recommends that statewide interest should be clearly identified on any proposed mandates, and that the state should partially reimburse local government for some state imposed mandates and fully for those involving employee compensations, working conditions and pensions.

OR THIS?

The state of New York often passes laws telling local government what to do. These laws have a name. They are called “state mandates.” On many occasions, these laws improve life for everyone in the state. But they come with a cost. Too often, the state doesn’t consider the cost to local government, or how much money taxpayers will have to shell out. So we have an idea. The state should pay back local government for some of these so-called mandates.

RULE 7

Favor
contractions

THIS?

Do not wait! Our special sale will not last for long!

OR THIS?

Don't wait! Our special sale won't last for long!

INSTEAD OF THIS	TRY THIS
what is up	what's up
it is	it's
that is	that's
do not	don't
she is	she's
there is	there's
I have	I've
I would	I'd
you will	you'll

RULE 8

**Avoid
walls of text**

THIS?

They have an outdated list of reporters/influencers. which we haven't received yet. Today is start day, so we haven't put anything together. Would like your suggestions. They don't have tagline or elevator pitch. They haven't done any PR for six years. I asked last week about their testimonials, and they said most were old, so I asked them to come up with others. We can explore Moyers. Agree on infographic. You can mention that on call. Am introducing you as a member of our team.

OR THIS?

They have an outdated list of reporters/influencers, which we haven't received yet. Today is start day, so we haven't put anything together. Would like your suggestions.

They don't have tagline or elevator pitch. They haven't done any PR for six years. I asked last week, about their testimonials; they said most were old, so I asked them to come up with others.

We can explore Moyers.

Agree on infographic. You can mention that on call.

Am introducing you as a member of our team.

THIS?

Modern product liability legal standards distinguish three categories of product defects: Manufacturing defects occur when the product departs from its intended design, regardless of the level of care exercised by the manufacturer. Design defects occur when the reasonably known risks of harm posed by the product could have been reduced or avoided by the adoption of safer commercial technologies or product alternatives. And inadequate instructions or warnings defects: occur when the reasonably known risks of product-related injuries could have been reduced or avoided by reasonable instructions, labels, or warnings.

OR THIS?

Modern product liability legal standards distinguish three categories of product defects:

1. **Manufacturing defects:** when the product departs from its intended design, regardless of the level of care exercised by the manufacturer
2. **Design defects:** when the reasonably known risks of harm posed by the product could have been reduced or avoided by the adoption of safer commercial technologies or product alternatives
3. **Inadequate instructions or warnings defects:** when the reasonably known risks of product-related injuries could have been reduced or avoided by reasonable instructions, labels, or warnings.

THIS?

Lorem ipsum dolor sit amet, paulo essent et pri, viderer oportere ut sit. Quando disputando nam ex.

Qui graeci molestiae in, cibo lucilius vim ut. Pri noluisse menandri salutandi ei, in nec utroque cotidieque. Veniam veritus detracto duo ea, ancillae moderatius has ad, eum et nihil dolor scaevola.

Ut voluptua moderatius eum, ne copiosae definitionem vis. Eirmod suscipiantur sed eu, fugit posidonium at sed. Sit id mazim impedit salutatus.

OR THIS?

LOREM

Lorem ipsum dolor sit amet, paulo essent et pri, viderer oportere ut sit. Quando disputando nam ex.

IPSUM

Qui graeci molestiae in, cibo lucilius vim ut. Pri noluisse menandri salutandi ei, in nec utroque cotidieque. Veniam veritus detracto duo ea, ancillae moderatius has ad, eum et nihil dolor scaevola.

DOLOR

Ut voluptua moderatius eum, ne copiosae definitionem vis. Eirmod suscipiantur sed eu, fugit posidonium at sed. Sit id mazim impedit salutatus.

THIS?

Business Insider raised \$12m in March, at a \$100m valuation, after *Mashable* raised \$13m in January. Vox Media raised \$46.5m in November, at a valuation of \$380m. Automattic, the owner of WordPress.com, raised \$160m in May, valuing the company at \$1.16bn. And then, dwarfing all the others, Vice Media raised an eye-popping \$500m, in a deal which valued the company at \$2.5bn.

OR THIS?

Publication	Capital (Millions)	When
Mashable	\$13	January
Business Insider	\$12	March
Automattic	\$160	May
Vice Media	\$500	September
Vox Media	\$46.5	November

AND NOW, THE RULES

1. Break up noun _____.
2. Make every _____ count.
3. Embrace _____.
4. _____ big numbers.

THE RULES, CONTINUED

5. _____ your readers.
6. Write the way you _____.
7. Favor _____.
8. Avoid _____ of text.

A top-down view of a yellow-lined notebook on a wooden surface. The notebook is partially open, with one page rolled up. A yellow pencil lies on the right side of the open page. The text 'Your Turn!' is written in the center of the page in a black, cursive font.

Your Turn!

THIS?

Piers Morgan says he's a big fan of Aaron Sorkin's writing. So big, in fact, that Sorkin's latest show inspired him to infuse his own reporting with the zealotry of a convert. And yet, Morgan's passion runs only so deep.

OR THIS?

Piers Morgan says he's a big fan of Aaron Sorkin's writing. So big, in fact, that Sorkin's latest show inspired him to infuse his own reporting with the zealotry of a convert. And yet, Morgan's passion runs only so deep.

THIS?

social/digital media

THIS?

social/ digital media

THIS?

social / digital media

|

THIS?

towards

OR THIS?

toward

“S”

THIS?

He wasn't a saint. None of us are.

OR THIS?

He wasn't a saint. None of us is.

"NONE"

THIS?

This book is dedicated to my parents, Ayn Rand and God.

OR THIS?

This book is dedicated to my parents, Ayn Rand, and God.

COMMA

THIS?

Let's write a blog in
response to that op-ed.

OR THIS?

Let's write a blog post in
response to that op-ed.

"BLOG"

THIS?

We should develop a series of strategic partnerships with environmental nonprofits.

OR THIS?

We should develop a series of partnerships with environmental nonprofits.

“STRATEGIC”

THIS?

He earned plaudits for his management of the 2009 fiscal crisis that caused large cuts to the university's endowment.

THIS?

He earned plaudits for his management of the 2009 fiscal crisis which caused large cuts to the university's endowment

THIS?

He earned plaudits for his management of the 2009 fiscal crisis, which caused large cuts to the university's endowment.

“WHICH”



@jrick



jonathan@jonathanrick.com