

CHAPTER 13

THE BIG PICTURE

If you ask a roomful of academics to characterize stylish academic writing, at least a few will inevitably reply that the authors they most admire are those who “express complex ideas clearly.” Some might embellish the point, noting that stylish academic writers express complex ideas clearly and *succinctly*, clearly and *elegantly*, clearly and *engagingly*, or clearly and *persuasively*. Others will propose variations, stating that stylish academic writers express complex ideas in language that *aids* the reader’s understanding or *challenges* the reader’s understanding or *extends* the reader’s understanding. Central to all these definitions, despite their differing nuances, is the elusive art of abstraction; that is, the stylish academic writer’s ability to paint a big picture on a small canvas, sketching the contours of an intricate argument in just a few broad strokes.

Paradoxically, the most effective academic *abstracts*—a noun I use in this chapter to designate any summary statement of academic purpose, such as a grant proposal, article synopsis, or book prospectus—are often highly *concrete*, harnessing the language of the senses as well as the language of the mind. Performance scholar Sally Banes, for example, uses the sensual word “stink” to communicate the physical and symbolic importance of odor in Western theater: