The Curse of Knowledge

In chapter three, Steven Pinker talks about the curse of knowledge and how it has had such a big negative impact on all writing prose for centuries. On page 60 in his book, The Sense of Style, Pinker gives examples of the type of stupidity that falls under this illusion of knowledge. For example, he talks about false consensus (people who make a personal decision believe that everyone else would make that same decision), illusory transparency (people who know the background of a conversation think that the readers also know that background and could sense sarcasm), mindblindness (failure to mentalize or lack of a theory of mind). An example of mindblindness would be like playing hide and go seek and one person knows where the other is hiding so he looks in that direction thinking that the person who is seeking will somehow already know that as well. Pinker believe, "adults are particularly accursed when they try to estimate other people's knowledge and skills."

Pinker describes the curse of knowledge to be the single best explanation of why people write bad prose. He says, "it simply doesn't occur to the writer that her readers don't know what she knows." He also believes that, "the better you know something, the less you remember about how hard it was to learn." I completely agree with this statement because if you think back to when you were a toddler trying to learn how to talk or walk, you don't remember how hard it was because talking and walking is all we do now.

Pinker explains that there is a way to lift the curse of knowledge, but it will take more than the old remedy of pretending the reader is over your shoulder. Another way to exorcise the cure of knowledge would be to eliminate the use of jargon, abbreviations, and technical vocabulary. The writer needs to remember that the few minutes he is taking to write out the abbreviations or the regular English words instead of the technical vocabulary, it is saving the reader hours of trying to read what is written and investigate the text at the same time.

By reading chapter three, Pinker has given me some great examples of how to improve my writing and why it is so important to my audience that I do so.