How to Write Clearly

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Thanks to...

Valik Devi; Wiley

Mohit Paddy; Wiley

Ashish Sood; Wiley
Hook the Reader
Excite the reviewers

- Why?
  - So that they want your manuscript published

Excite readers

- Why?
  - So that they want to read your publication

The Bottom Lines
What Do Editors Look For?

- Excitement, such as
  - Novelty
    - New discovery
  - More thorough insight
  - Innovation
    - New methods, reagents, transgenic mouse
  - Substantive, clear (understandable) results
  - Scientific controversy
Expectations About Manuscripts

- Reviewers and readers
  - An interesting story that
    - Revolves around the hypothesis or question
    - Conclusion that answers the hypothesis or question
Not!

A Good Story…

Starts here

This way?
Outline

- Reviewers’ hell
- Write clearly
Please, do not write reviewers’ “Hell”!

“Hell”, El Bosch, Garden of Delights, Prado Museum, Madrid

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Critical Self-Evaluation

Does the reviewer have to work to understand your manuscript?

- No
- Yes
Worth Pondering

- Reviewers have a job and life, too! They are writing manuscripts and grant applications.

- What should you do?
  - Write thoughtfully
  - Write clearly
Goals

● Unambiguous writing
  ● Creates the least confusion
● Logical story
  ● Creates a storyline
● Clear, simple, informative figures and tables
  ● Makes the results obvious
● Place your study and results in context
  ● Brings focus on significance and impact
Guides for Writing Clearly

❖ To write for understanding…
  ● Target the audience
  ● Determine how much to tell the reviewers
  ● Be a credible writer
You want a second date

Make the first impression a good impression!
- Title and Abstract
  - Captivate the imagination of the reviewers
    - Clear writing
    - Significance
    - Impact
  - Gives reviewers something to look forward to; not dread!
Be a Credible Writer

- To attain clear understanding, clear writing is required
  - The study of writing is *NOT* a waste of time!
    - Proper grammar (punctuation, word choice, sentence structure, and paragraph organization) are essential
      - Tools to attain understanding

Benjamin Franklin
Appropriate Use of Punctuation

“Standards of punctuation in general...are approaching the point of illiteracy; self-justified philistines.”

Truss L. *Eats, Shoots & Leaves*. 2004
Keywords

✧ Most important words

● Why?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Clear Keywords</th>
<th>Vague Keywords</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rats</td>
<td>Animals</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Unclear Word Choice

Example: “Change”

- What does “change” mean?
  - Who knows?
    - Increased/decreased?
    - Longer/shorter?
    - Heavier/lighter?
    - Etc.
Vague Words to Avoid

- Modifying words (adjectives, adverbs)
  - Adjective: ‘Sick’ (sick baby)
  - Adverb: ‘Very’ (very big)

- Jargon ("out there")
  - Where?

- Euphemisms ("to pass away"; die)
Pretentious Writing

- "I'm disinclined to acquiesce to your request..."

... improvement

- "No"
  - Captain Barbossa to Elizabeth Swann

*Pirates of the Caribbean - The Curse of the Black Pearl*, 2003

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Avoid bias in your writing
Definition of Clear Writing

“Clear writing is writing that is incapable of being misunderstood” *

Quintilian, a Roman rhetoritician, who lived in the first century A.D.

* Zeiger. Essentials of Writing Biomedical Research Papers. 2000
Good Sentence Structure

- Noun verb completer
  - Jack and Jill ran up the hill
  - Keep sentences about 20 words or less (not always!)
  - Avoid starting sentences with names of authors, lab groups, or years
    - Keep the science the subject!
Avoid

- Complicated descriptions (e.g., a scientist’s directions to any where)
Parts of a Paragraph

- First sentence is special
  - Called the ‘topic sentence’

- Subsequent sentences
  - Present your line of reasoning

- Last sentence
  - Conclusion for the topic
  - Or, transition to the next topic (paragraph)
NOT!
Good Paragraph Structure

❖ Questions to ask yourself

● Does the topic sentence clearly state the main idea of the paragraph?

● Do the supporting sentences contain specific details and ideas that develop the main idea?

● Is the final sentence a conclusion; or a transition to the next paragraph?

● Do the sentences flow smoothly and logically?
Follow the Yellow Brick Road…

❖ Why use schemas, cartoons, pathway roadmaps, etc.?

● “A picture is worth a thousand words”

● However, …
… the words and figures must agree!
… really, the words and figures must agree!
… word choice should not be contradictory!
How Does Your Study Advance the Field

▶ Ask yourself questions about your study that reviewers are likely to ask

● What answers do you want or need?
  ● Write down the answers
  ● The list provides an organizational framework (outline)
Writing Checklist

♦ Content

✔ Are the major ideas developed appropriately?
✔ Are sufficient details presented to support the hypothesis, overall impact, and significance?
✔ Are irrelevant ideas removed?
If you write this way...

All of the elements are present, but where is the storyline?

...expect “rejected”

“Relativity”, MC Escher, Back in Holland, 1941-54


Thank you!

लिखना हो!