

# Strategies for Effective Writing



# Key Topics

- Using Concrete Words
- Building Forceful Sentences
- Writing Process
- Editing & Proofreading
- Hands on Activities
- Appendix 1- Scientific Writing: 10 Basics

‘Prefer the specific to the general, the definite to the vague, the concrete to the abstract.’

William Strunk, Jr., *Elements of Style*, Longman: 1959

## **Use concrete words:**

- be precise
- add details
- be understandable and direct
- remove jargon

# Be Precise

- Don't be satisfied with a description of something as fast, slow, good, bad, unusual, interesting
- These words create a positive or negative emotion, but don't carry much information
- Use measures and quantities when possible; say how fast or slow, or why something is good, bad, unusual, or interesting

---

Per capita income rose slightly.

Versus (Vs.)

Per capita income rose 3% to \$732.

The patient was very fat. Vs. The patient was obese.

# Add Details

- Make sure the reader understands clearly what is meant
- When possible, use concrete words that will build pictures in the reader's mind

---

Rural infrastructure development has the capacity to catalyze significant non-farm employment.

Vs.

Building roads, schools, hospitals, dams, and other public works can provide many jobs off the farm for rural people.

# Be Understandable

- Use words the reader can understand
- Do not use contractions (don't, we'll)
- Do not use double negatives in the same sentence
- Consider the intended reader's educational level
- Watch for words that are highly specialized

-----

-  
The area has an annual surplus of moisture.

Vs.

The area has more than enough water each year.

Women are involved in the disposal of the output of rice production.

Vs.

Women market and sell the rice

# Be Direct

- Use the simple, direct word rather than the longer word or expressions
- 

Adequate vs. enough

Commence vs. begin

Despite the fact vs. although

In some cases vs. sometimes

Prior to vs. before

Purchase vs. buy

Subsequent vs. next

Utilize vs. use

# Remove Jargon

Jargon is terminology which is especially defined in relationship to a specific activity, profession, or group; the term covers the language used by people who work in a particular area or who have a common interest.

Much like slang, it can develop as a kind of short-hand, to express ideas that are frequently discussed between members of a group; it can also be developed deliberately using chosen terms.\*

A standard term may be given a more precise or unique usage within a field; this causes a barrier to communication with those not familiar with the language.

\* When writing for a specific audience, jargon can be used.

Wikipedia [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jargon](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jargon) (accessed 08 Sept. 2009)

On average, among adults total food intake was higher for males than for females.

Vs.

On average, men ate more than women.

- - - - -

I hope this project will initiate a mutually rewarding editor/author relationship.

Vs.

I hope we will all work well together.

# Examples of Four Keys

‘Deepwater rice copes efficiently with the rapid rise in water due to its quick growth habit and its floating characteristics.’

Vs.

‘Deepwater rice copes efficiently with the rapid rise in water because it grows quickly and it floats.’

---

‘There is much anxiety on the part of the people with reference to the rising cost of food.’

Vs.

‘People worry because food prices are rising.’

# Building Forceful Sentences – Use of Verbs

- Make verbs, nouns, and pronouns—in that order—do most of the work
  - Verbs and nouns are the strongest parts of speech
  - Adjectives and adverbs are useful, as long as they are precise; they can be changed into verbs or nouns, giving the sentence added force
  - Nouns also can be changed into verbs for greater force
- Use verbs in the active voice
  - Verbs can be active or passive
  - In the active voice, somebody does something; in the passive voice, something is done
  - Active voice carries the action; the passive voice has it carried
  - Active verbs need fewer words and meaning is clearer

Tests were conducted to determine the rate of diffusion.

Vs.

The staff ran tests to find the rate of diffusion.

---

The possible causes of the disease are now being looked into by the institute's specialists.

Vs.

The institute's specialists are studying possible causes of the disease.

# Strong Verbs

- Use strong verbs and avoid weak ones
  - Avoid the verb ‘to be’ in all its forms - am, are, is, was, were, have been, am being; it is the weakest and most passive of all verbs as it just sits there
  - Also avoid the verb ‘to get’ as it has many uses
  - Look for stronger verbs to take the place of these

-----

The farming of tilapia is a lucrative business in the Philippines.

Vs.

Fish farmers in the Philippines are making profits growing tilapia.

# Nouns as Nouns

- Break up noun strings
  - Don't string them together as adjectives
  - Two nouns combined into a single expression is OK (e.g. 'energy resources' or 'Anopheles mosquito.')
  - Three or four nouns in a row are harder to read; the density of information is so great that it can be impenetrable

The following material substitution and process changes were effected.

Vs.

We made the following changes in materials and processes.



Guidelines enforcement for laboratory worker safety is a management responsibility.

Vs.

Management is responsible for enforcing guidelines for the safety of laboratory workers.

# Related Words

- Keep related words together
  - Reader must be able to see relationships between building blocks in a sentence
  - If two words or phrases are close together, the reader can tell easily that they are related to each other
  - If they are separated by other words, the reader may be confused

---

**Early** in each year, the government must be able to **estimate** the amount of the crop that will be harvested.

Vs.

The government must be able to **estimate early** each year the amount of the crop that will be harvested.

# Agent and Verb

- Tie the agent to the verb
  - Agent is the person or thing that is responsible for the action in a sentence
  - Active sentences make the agent the subject of the sentence
  - ‘Who does what?’ -- bring the agent and the action together

---

A need for reevaluation of the experimental results is seen to exist.

Vs.

The researchers need to reevaluate the results of our experiment.

# Four steps to untangle complex sentences

- Find the action
- If the action isn't already in a verb, make it a verb
- Find who/what did the action or (in a passive sentence) had it done to
- Put that subject close to the verb

Source: *Editing and Publication: A Training Manual*, by Ian Montagnes. Published by the International Rice Research Institute and the International Development Research Centre, 1991. (PDF document, 1313Kb) [www.authoraid.info/resource-library](http://www.authoraid.info/resource-library) (accessed 08 Sept. 2009)

# Writing Process

- Write quickly
  - Don't ponder over words; keep going; leave gaps if necessary; aim for a natural flow
- Write in your own voice
  - Express yourself in your own way will help you to say what you mean more exactly; if your reader can 'hear' your voice, reading will be easier
- Write without interruption
  - Try to find a time and place where you can think and write without distractions

- Write without editing
  - Don't try to get it right first time
  - Resist the temptation to edit as you go; you will tend to get stuck and waste time
- Keep to the plan of your outline
  - Use the sentences from your outline to focus what you want to say
  - If you find yourself wandering from the point, stop and move on to the next sentence in the outline

Source: FAHUMA [www.fahamu.org/WFCEng/sitemap.html](http://www.fahamu.org/WFCEng/sitemap.html)  
(accessed 08 Sept. 2009)

# Editing Hints

- Read the paper once all the way through
- Read to edit
- Reread all the way through out-loud
- Look for
  - Passive voice
  - Inconsistent verb tenses and subject/verb disagreement
  - Improper pronoun references
  - Comma splices, run-on sentences, sentence fragments
  - Jargon

# Before You Proofread

- Be sure you've revised the larger aspects of your text
  - Organization/development of whole paper, sections or paragraphs
- Set your text aside for a while (15 minutes, a day, a week) between writing and proofing
- Eliminate unnecessary words before looking for mistakes
- Know what to look for
  - Have a colleague or editor read/critique the paper

# Proofreading Hints

- Review problem areas
- Eliminate unnecessary words before looking for mistakes
- Read the entire paper - from back to front; bottom to top
  - A different perspective/can catch grammatical mistakes
- Read the paper out-loud or have someone else read it
- If you tend to make many mistakes, check separately for each kind of error
- End with a computer spelling check, or reading backwards word by word; this will not catch all errors (e.g., 'they're,' 'their,' 'there' or 'he' for 'the')
- Use 'reading level check' in Word.

Source: The Writing Center: University of Wisconsin - Madison

[writing.wisc.edu/Handbook/Proofreading.html](http://writing.wisc.edu/Handbook/Proofreading.html) (accessed 08 Sept. 2009)

# Sources for More Material

- AuthorAID
- [www.authoraid.info/resource-library](http://www.authoraid.info/resource-library)
- Academic Writing in English
- [www.helsinki.fi/kksc/language.services/AcadWrit.pdf](http://www.helsinki.fi/kksc/language.services/AcadWrit.pdf)
- Duke University Writing Studio
- [uwp.duke.edu/wstudio/resources/writing.html](http://uwp.duke.edu/wstudio/resources/writing.html)
- Editing Your Own Papers and Proposals
- [www.authoraid.info/en/resources/details/595/](http://www.authoraid.info/en/resources/details/595/)
- Effective Medical Writing (Singapore University)
- [smj.sma.org.sg/4907/4907emw1.pdf](http://smj.sma.org.sg/4907/4907emw1.pdf)

# Sources continued

- Exemplar: Words in Context (search tool)
- [www.springerexemplar.com](http://www.springerexemplar.com)
- Structured Abstract: Essential Research Tool
- [www.mlanet.org/p/cm/ld/fid=517](http://www.mlanet.org/p/cm/ld/fid=517)
- Writing Center/University of Wisconsin - Madison
- [www.wisc.edu/writing/Handbook/index.html](http://www.wisc.edu/writing/Handbook/index.html)
- Toolkit for Making Written Material Clear and Effective
- [tps://www.cms.gov/Outreach-and-Education/Outreach/WrittenMaterialsToolkit/index.html](https://www.cms.gov/Outreach-and-Education/Outreach/WrittenMaterialsToolkit/index.html)  
[I?redirect=/WrittenMaterialsToolkit/](https://www.cms.gov/Outreach-and-Education/Outreach/WrittenMaterialsToolkit/index.html?redirect=/WrittenMaterialsToolkit/)

# Hands On Activities

Proceed to the 'Hands On Activities' for the Strategies for Effective Writing module.

Michelle Leonard, Science & Technology Librarian, Marston Science Library, University of Florida contributed to the development of this module.

Last Updated 2016 04

# Appendix 1: Scientific Writing: 10 Basics

Barbara Gastel, MD, MPH

VIBS 443/VIBS 602

20 January 2012

[http://www.academia.edu/1746149/Scientific\\_Writing\\_10\\_basics](http://www.academia.edu/1746149/Scientific_Writing_10_basics)

# The Basics

1. Write to communicate, not to impress.
2. Follow the instructions.
3. Use good models.
4. Gather plenty of suitable information.
5. Organize the information carefully.
6. Set aside blocks of time for writing.
7. Keep your audience in mind.
8. Write readably.
9. Credit sources adequately.
10. Revise, revise, revise.

# 1. Write to communicate, not to impress.

- Desirable impression: that the material is clear and interesting
- Undesirable impression: that you're surely more intelligent than the reader
- Good writing is largely "invisible writing."

## 2. Follow the instructions.

- Surprisingly, this guideline is often ignored.
- Of course, carefully follow the instructions in this class.
- Good practice in this class: following a journal's instructions, as if you were to submit your paper
- A good resource:  
[mulford.meduohio.edu/instr/](http://mulford.meduohio.edu/instr/)

# 3. Use good models.

- Good scientific writing: largely a matter of imitation
- Possible partial models to use in this class (in addition to examples provided):
  - Opinion pieces and review articles in general medical journals, such as the *New England Journal of Medicine*
  - Opinion pieces and review articles in some basic science journals

## 4. Gather plenty of suitable information.

- An article can be no better than the information gathered.
- Important: good literature searching skills
- An excellent resource: biomedical science librarians
- Note sources of information, to avoid problems later.

## 5. Organize the information carefully.

- Robert A. Day: “The preparation of a scientific paper has less to do with literary skill than with *organization*.”
- Time invested in organization can save much time later.
- How might you go about organizing the information?

## 6. Set aside blocks of time for writing.

- Block out times for writing.
- Consider having regularly scheduled times to write.
- Choose the times according to when you tend to function best.

# 7. Keep your audience in mind.

- Gear the content to the readers' knowledge.
- Gear the content to the readers' interests.
- What's the audience for the writing assignment in this course?

# 8. Write readably.

- Generally avoid
  - Very long paragraphs
  - Very long sentences
- Consider using
  - Headings
  - Bullets
  - Italics and boldface (but don't overuse these)
  - Easy-to-understand graphics

# Write readably (cont)

- Where feasible,
  - Use simple, common words
    - attempt→ fundamental→
  - Delete needless words
    - red in color→ totally destroyed→
  - Condense wordy phrases
    - at this point in time→ in the event that→
  - Use verbs, not nouns made from them
    - produce relief of→ provide an explanation→

# 9. Credit sources adequately.

- In general, use your own words.
- When using others' words:
  - Put the material in quotation marks if it's short.
  - Indent it if it's long.
  - Cite the source.
- Cite the source if a fact or idea isn't your own (and isn't common knowledge).

# Credit sources adequately

- Follow instructions for
  - Citing sources in text (by name and date or by number)
  - Preparing the reference list

# Some Resources

- “Documenting Sources” (from Texas A&M writing center):  
[writingcenter.tamu.edu/2005/how-to/research-documentation/documenting-sources/](http://writingcenter.tamu.edu/2005/how-to/research-documentation/documenting-sources/)
- Citation Style Guides (from Texas A&M library): [library.tamu.edu/help/help-yourself/citing-sources/citation-styles](http://library.tamu.edu/help/help-yourself/citing-sources/citation-styles)

# 10. Revise, revise, revise.

- A story: editor of the *Journal of Clinical Investigation*
- Excellent that revision is built into this course
- In revising, make good use of feedback from others.

# Recap: The Basics

1. Write to communicate, not to impress.
2. Follow the instructions.
3. Use good models.
4. Gather plenty of suitable information.
5. Organize the information carefully.
6. Set aside blocks of time for writing.
7. Keep your audience in mind.
8. Write readably.
9. Credit sources adequately.
10. Revise, revise, revise.