Writing Readably About Research

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Writing Readably About Research

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Overview

• Background
• General pointers for writing readably
• Preparing readable papers and proposals
• Writing readably for general audiences
• Writing readably for non-native users of English
• Some resources

(Note: Let’s make this session interactive.)
Background
A Little About My Background
Some Aspects of My Background

• MD/MPH focusing on science communication
• Teacher of science writing, science editing, and related subjects
• Coordinator of science journalism MS program
• Lead author of *How to Write and Publish a Scientific Paper*, 8th edition
• Major participant in AuthorAID ([www.authoraid.info](http://www.authoraid.info))
• Recipient of fellowship to evaluate EIS course
• It’s good to be back!
Why bother writing readably about research?
Why bother writing readably about research? Some reasons:

• Is considerate of others
• Helps retain attention
• Promotes understanding
• Helps avoid misinterpretation
• Fosters acceptance
• Ultimately can save time
• Can be enjoyable too
Do not merely write in a way that can be understood; write in a way that cannot be misunderstood.

Adapted from Quintilian
General Pointers for Writing Readably
Case to Consider

Dr. MD-MPH’s writing tends to be misunderstood. Peer reviewers misinterpret her papers, and they sometimes say content is missing when in fact she included it. Team members have trouble following her instructions and protocols. Readers often miss key points in her email. Even when she writes lay summaries, reporters don’t seem to grasp what she is trying to say. A problem might be that Dr. MD-MPH’s writing is not very readable. What tips do you have for making her writing more readable?
A Dozen General Pointers for Writing Readably

1. Know your audience(s).
2. Follow expected structures (for example, IMRAD for scientific papers).
3. Make visible the structure of your writing—for example, through
   - Subheadings
   - Numbered or bulleted lists
   - Use of white space
4. Avoid very long paragraphs.

5. Avoid very complex or very long sentences.

6. In sentences, place related content close together.

7. Precede details with overviews—for example,
   - Titles
   - Abstracts
   - Topic sentences
Writing Readably: A Dozen General Pointers (cont)

8. Where feasible, use simple, common terms.
9. Define terms that may be unclear to readers.

10. Remove clutter—for example,
    – Delete tangential content.
    – Discard needless words.
    – Condense wordy phrases.
    – Simplify graphics if appropriate.

11. Avoid excessive use of acronyms.
Writing Readably:
A Dozen General Pointers (cont)

12. Where appropriate, use graphics as well as text.
   – As noted, keep graphics uncluttered.
   – Label graphics adequately.

Note: Readers should be able to understand the graphics without reading the main text of the piece.
Also

- Check with sample audience members.

- Revise, revise, revise. (Readable writing generally is much-revised writing.)
Preparing Readable Papers and Proposals
Preparing Readable Papers and Proposals

• Follow the general tips for writing readably.
• Provide an accurate, concise title.
• Devote particular care to items providing overviews—for example,
  – Abstracts
  – “Key points” lists
  – Specific aims sections of proposals
• If permitted, make ample use of subheads.
Preparing Readable Papers and Proposals (cont)

• In general, use active voice.
• If appropriate, use italics or boldface for terms being introduced.
• Consider including a table of abbreviations.
• Cite tables and figures as soon as readers might want to look at them.
• Place references immediately after what they refer to.
A Related Item

Respond readably to reviewers and editors.

– Reply point by point to requests for revisions.
– If possible, clearly identify changes made—for example, through use of highlighting or Track Changes.
Writing Readably for General Audiences
Any tips for making writing readable for general audiences?
Writing Readably for General Audiences

• Follow the general tips for writing readably.
• Analyze the specific audience.
• Provide multiple “points of entry”—for example,
  – Title
  – Blurb under title
  – Sidebars
  – Pull quotes
  – Photos and other graphics
Writing Readably for General Audiences (cont)

• Provide human interest. In other words, include people:
  – Researchers
  – Clinicians
  – Other professionals in public health and medicine
  – Patients (and people trying to avoid becoming patients)
  – Policymakers
  – Others
Writing Readably for General Audiences (cont)

• Use narrative (storytelling).
  – for the piece as a whole (example: Berton Roueché’s real-life epidemiologic detective tales)
  – as anecdotes to support points and enliven text

• Include concrete examples.

• Relate the unfamiliar to the familiar, for example by using analogies.

• Limit use of specialized terms (jargon).
Writing Readably for General Audiences (cont)

• Consider introducing new terms gently, by providing the concept before the term.

• Make relationships between ideas clear.
  – Present steps in reasoning.
  – Use transitions well.

• Present numbers and sizes effectively.
  – Use familiar units.
  – Compare sizes to those of familiar objects.
Writing Readably for General Audiences (cont)

• Respectfully counter misconceptions.
  – A technique: the transformative explanation

• Check the pacing—for example,
  – Distribution of difficult content
  – Distribution of “goodies”

• Note sources of further information.
  – Online
  – Other
Writing Readably for Non-Native Users of English
Case to Consider

Dr. EIS-Grad will draft some English-language material intended for colleagues overseas. He wants the materials to be easily understood by these colleagues, who have various native languages. What tips do you have for him?
These days, nearly all writing about research has audiences that include non-native users of English.

Two approaches to writing for audiences with many non-native users of English

- Globalization (good choice when readers have various native languages)
- Localization (can be a good choice when readers all have the same native language)
Writing Readably for Non-Native Users of English

- Know that conventions for structuring documents may differ.
- Know that visual conventions may differ.
- Recognize cultural differences in directness of expression.
- Avoid cultural references that may be unclear.
- Beware of using humor or irony.
- Avoid idioms that may be unclear.
Writing Readably for Non-Native Users of English (cont)

• Use largely subject-verb-object sentence structure.
• Use mainly simple verb forms.
• To guide readers, punctuate liberally.
• Try to avoid terms with multiple meanings.
• If the longer phrasing is likely to be clearer, use it. (example: “the experiment that they did” rather than “the experiment they did”)

Writing Readably for Non-Native Users of English (cont)

• Include units of measure familiar to the audience.

• Write dates in ways interpreted consistently (example: “8 May 2017” rather than “5/8/17”).

• Perhaps try to choose terms that the readers can easily pronounce.

• If feasible, pilot-test the materials.
Some Resources on Writing Readably

• *The Elements of Style*, by Strunk & White

• *The Elements of International English Style*, by Edmond H. Weiss


• “Writing Accessibly About Science” (available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YT8DMcw-9Zk)

• http://www.plainlanguage.gov/
Thank You!
Questions and Answers

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Thank You Again!