BOOK REVIEWS

Becoming better authors

Ideas into Words: Mastering the craft of scientific writing.

How to Write a Paper. 3rd Ed.


The Elements of Style. 4th Ed.

Authors are often ambivalent; editors love them. These are reactions to journal papers that are a pleasure to read. Irrevocably, such papers are arrivals, of authors who have taken extra steps (often many, many steps) to improve their writing. The time this entails accounts for the ambivalence of authors who may believe that their energies are better spent in other activities. But for all who want to please editors and readers the only path is to improve writing skills.

There are several ways to accomplish this goal. One is to fly to Montreal for the fall term and take the course I give at McGill on scientific presentations. If four readers do so that will double the number of students who enroll for this course in 2003.

A second way is to hire an author’s editor. This option is sometimes provided free at prestigious universities or medical schools, but usually comes with a price tag. It has been the subject of heated debate recently on the World Association of Medical Editors listserve. One contentious element is whether authors’ editors are effectively ghost writers whose contributions should, for ethical reasons, be acknowledged. This option may appear less attractive to some who would prefer that readers think all that the correct grammar, clever wording, and good punctuation has come from the author’s own hand.

A final option is to read a book on writing. I have about a dozen in my library and most are excellent. If any author were to take the time to read and follow the advice given, I have no doubt their papers would be hugely improved. (See, because of my “training”, I hesitated when I wrote “hugely” and asked myself if I was using the word correctly and if there was not a better word I could use.) I do have some favorite “how to write” books. This review touches on four recent arrivals.

The first is by Elise Hancock, Ideas into Words: Mastering the craft of scientific writing. What I like about this especially (should I have written specially or is especially correct?) is that unlike most it is structured around bullets (largish ones). By that I mean, that within broad section or chapter like chapter 5: “Writing: The Nitty Gritty” (chapter 4) there are many examples—gems actually—that cover an idea in a few sentences. An example:

Start with the question, not the answer or... Keep the reader with you, joined at the hip, by putting up a little slalom flag every time your train of thought takes a swerve or detour. (p 103)

Some other examples of the bold headings:

Above all write. Writing is what writers do. (p 24)

If you have the good luck to find a mentor (or better yet to have a mentor find you), seize the chance. Don’t insist that the mentor be a perfect human being before you will sit at those feet. (p 25)

If you lack a mentor, follow good “rules” in a flexible way. (p 26)

Hancock’s enthusiastic, lively style is so captivating that I defy any reader to only read a single page. I guarantee (money back?) that anyone who reads even part of this book will learn something of considerable value and that all their subsequent writing will improve. The only downside to this book is that some of it (for example, chapters 2 and 3) is aimed at freelance writers and will not be of use to a typical author of a scientific paper.

The second is George Hall’s third edition of How to Write a Paper. The good news is that it is mulauthored, and this means that some of the best minds focus on what they do or know best, such as the inestimable Richard Smith on “Introductions” and the equally authoritative Harvey Marcovitch on “Discussions”. The bad news is that it is multi-authored, and this means that there is not the consistency in style or focus that we see in Hancock’s book. Thus, some sections are more interesting, more fun, more useful and more relevant than others. In my view, chapters 1 to 7 are essential whereas chapters 9 to 11 (letter writing, meeting abstracts, case reports, and review papers) are variations on the main messages. The remaining eight chapters are bonuses or padding, depending on which side of the bed you got up on and whether you paid the cover price for this book. George Hall’s brief Preface does not fully explain how the new edition differs from the previous ones.

A third is The Chicago Guide to Communicating Science. This is heavier going because it is more authoritative and aimed at a broad audience of scientific writers. The chapter titles give a sense of its contents: Communicating Science, Scientific Communications, Reading Well, Writing Well, Writing Very Well, The Review Process, The Scientific Paper, Other Types of Writing, Graphics and Their Place, Technical Reports, The Proposal, For Researchers with English as a Foreign Language, Oral Presentations, The Online World, Dealing with the Press, and, In Conclusion. This book is not the equivalent of A Manual of Style; it is far more accessible, more rewarding, and entirely practical.

Finally, it would be sinful to omit the new edition of the classic, Strunk and White (now Strunk, White, and Angell). This is the bible any writer must have by their bedside. It deserves to be read and re-read until it is committed to memory. The new edition incorporates all the marvels of the previous ones and many fresh elements. It is the cheapest, the most venerable, and in many respects, the quickest fix.

All are paperbacks. All have good indexes; some include charts and figures; and the Hall book is replete with summary boxes. Go ahead: please your editors and readers; take the plunge and get one of these. Your career as an author will be amply rewarded, in spirit and pride if not in monetary terms.

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CALENDAR

17th International Conference on Alcohol, Drugs and Traffic Safety (ICADS)

7th Australian Injury Prevention and Control Conference and 2nd Pacific Rim Safe Communities Conference

European Child Safety Alliance Workshop

IRCOBI Conference: The Biomechanics of Impact

EPICOH 2004: 17th International Symposium on Epidemiology in Occupational Health

7th National Safe Communities Conference