

Fourteen Steps to Writing Clearly

San Francisco Edit

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Writing clearly is a worthwhile goal for any scientist, at least any scientist who expects to be published in a major journal.

Writing well means presenting your argument and evidence in a clear, logical, and creative way. An interesting argument hidden in flowery prose is of no use to anyone.

Clear writing takes effort. Besides requiring knowledge of basic grammar and syntax, it requires a good ear, a sense of proportion, and an ability to critique oneself.

Ultimately, anyone who wants to write clearly needs to develop a critical sense. You need to be able to judge your own writing objectively and, putting aside the brilliance of the content, honestly evaluate its ability to communicate.

Below are a few tips useful to anyone writing for scientific journals.

By critiquing your papers with the following ideas in mind, you'll definitely sharpen your writing and improve your odds of publication.

- 1. Determine what you're trying to say before writing it.** Figure out precisely what you want to say. This may sound obvious, but many do not bother to do it. Knowing what you want to say beforehand maximizes the odds of producing an organized, persuasive paper.
- 2. Think in terms of an outline.** To ensure a logical flow, start by making an outline (even if it's in your head). Please see our newsletter "Eight Steps to Developing an Effective Outline"
- 3. Write direct sentences.** Have only one idea or point per sentence. Keep sentences simple and short. Use two sentences rather than joining them with "and".
- 4. Be brief.** Conciseness is important in writing research papers. Learn to look for long phrases that can be shortened.
- 5. Organize your thoughts.** Be sure that every paragraph has a clear topic sentence and that the paragraph content supports the topic. Remember, the goal is to report your findings and conclusions clearly, with as few words as necessary.

6. Substitute action verbs for "to be". "To be" is an important verb, but it weakens the text when used excessively. For example, think about changing "is a summary of" to "summarizes".

7. Be sparing with adjectives & adverbs. Try to remove unspecific modifiers such as "very," "extremely," and "highly". When you do use modifiers, make them as specific as possible. For example, try changing "a very good response" to "the expected response".

8. Be as precise as possible. Avoid phrases such as "a number of" and "a quantity of". If you can, replace these with a word such as "many," "few," or "some," or, even better, the actual number.

9. Avoid unnecessary constructions and prepositions. Phrases such as "It is clear that" and "The fact is that" are empty verbiage. Assuming you believe what you are about to say, just say it.

The same is true for prepositional phrases such as "In order to" or "In an attempt to." "In order to understand this reactions, we . . ." is better said as "To understand this reaction, we. . ."

10. Look for omissions. Did you forget an essential sentence or two in your conclusion that explains your thought processes to someone who doesn't think about these issues every day?

11. Look for repetitions. When you see the same word used repeatedly, consider using synonyms. Although repeating a word or phrase is sometimes effective rhetorically, it can also make your sentence structure clumsy.

12. Write as you speak. Wherever possible, use words you ordinarily speak and hear. If you can't hear yourself saying it, then don't see yourself writing it.

13. Leave it alone for a while. Of course, there's not always time, but do this whenever you can. You will be surprised how many flaws will appear in your manuscript when you put it aside for a while.

14. Edit, edit, edit.