Successful Professional and Academic Writing: Organized, clear, concise, correct

A workshop and presentation for Public Health Sciences Graduate Students

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University of Alberta
Who am I?

Who Student Struggles with Writing

Five strategies to improve student writing in your courses

Entrance testing is not the answer

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January 15, 2014

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Five strategies to improve writing in your courses

How to get your students to submit better assignments.

by Roger Graves

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December 16, 2013

Entrance testing is not the answer

University students need to learn to write for different disciplines and assignments, and testing the skills they learned in high school isn't relevant to what they will need to learn.

by Roger Graves and David Stomp

About Me

As Director of Writing Across the Curriculum, I work with faculty and students

http://www.ualberta.ca/~graves1/
Writing Across the Curriculum

http://www.humanities.ualberta.ca/WAC/
Learning Objectives

By the end of this section you should:

- be familiar with the genres or conventions that apply to writing for the different areas within public health,
- recognize the conventions in your area of specialization,
- be able to identify the most appropriate method of getting your message out, and
- have reflected upon your own writing, strengths and areas of improvement, as demonstrated in your outline of proposed research.
You need both

Quantitative
- Statistics
- Numbers
- Tables
- Objectivity
- Science

Qualitative
- Sophistry
- Words
- Paragraphs
- Subjectivity
- Social science/humanities
How to succeed as a graduate student writer

Recognize and act on the idea that writing is social:

- Form writing groups (on your own or through the Centre for Writers)
- Seek out feedback from trusted readers
- Talk/email profs to seek clarification re. assignments
- Talk with senior students
- Attend job talks, research presentations
Theories of research writing

- Research is writing
- Texts are not reality but versions of reality that re-present some aspects of reality
- A thesis is one of a set of related genres that govern graduate student social activity as professionals
- Writing is a social activity—it takes place among groups of people, not individuals each working alone

Adopt a process approach

Adopt a process approach to writing:

- Gather information
- Draft the document
- Seek feedback; revise for structure and content; gather more information (if necessary)
- Edit for cohesion, style, register
Learn new genres

Identify and learn the nuances of the genres you are asked to write:

- Research posters
- Short papers
- Thesis proposals
- Grant applications
- Scholarship applications
- Opinion/editorial articles
Genres in Public Health Sciences

In groups, come up with answers to these questions:

- What do students write in Public Health Sciences courses?
- Why do they write them? To explore ideas? To be evaluated? To describe? To argue? To reflect?
- Who do they write for?
Keys to Good Writing in PHS

- Transitions/coherence (BPH Ch. 4, 5)
- Logical sequencing/organization/outlines (BPH Ch. 4, 5, 7, 8, 9, 21)
- Audience—non-technical (BPH 1, 3, 5, 8, 9, 14, 31)
- Trusted readers
- Plain language/jargon (clarity/credibility) i.e. KTE
- Structure: headings

BPH = Brief Penguin Handbook
Advice for writers

Writing for the *National Post*, Duncan Stewart argues that “without the routine of writing at least a few pages a week, I don’t think one will improve much as a writer.” He offers this advice to writers:

“1) read more,
2) write more, and
3) find your voice.”

Source: Duncan Stewart, “Good analysts are good writers,” *National Post, March 9, 2006*, 9-10.
What is style?

- Clarity
- Cohesion
- Plain language
- Parallelism
CLARITY

- Place the context of familiar information on the left, at the start of a sentence.

- Place main ideas as the subjects of sentences:

  “In the past, various techniques have been used to deposit a film or coating on a substrate located in a vacuum chamber. One technique . . .”
CLARITY

- Locate the subject and the verb close to one another.
  
  Not close:
  
  “A method for the reactive plating of substrates to produce transparent conducting films and photoactive coatings is disclosed.”

  Close:
  
  “A method is disclosed for the reactive plating of substrates to produce transparent conducting films and photoactive coatings.”
CLARITY

- Place important ideas at the end of sentences to emphasize them:

  “Obesity is increasing at unprecedented rates **worldwide.**”

  The sentence above emphasizes the scope of the problem by putting “**worldwide**” at the end of the sentence.

  “Obesity worldwide is increasing at **unprecedented rates.**”

  In this second example, the emphasis is on the rate of increase.
Place one point in each syntactic structure or unit containing a subject and verb:

“Highly transparent conducting ZnO films have been deposited using ion-beam-assisted reactive vacuum deposition.”
CLARITY

- Place old information that links back in the subject position, and put new information that you want readers to attend to at the point of emphasis:

“A major strength of this study was the detail with which the variables were collected. This detail allowed for more precise estimates [data] of the effect of alcohol. Using data on consumption . . .”
Use verbs rather than nominalizations to express action in your sentences:

**Nominalizations**

“This trial will involve the process of construct validation, with the ultimate goal of contributing knowledge to the validity of the interpretations that are made on the basis of the exam mark.”

**Revised**

“This trial examines the process of construct validation. The process aims to contribute knowledge that will help instructors interpret grades validly based on the exam mark.”
Various techniques have been used to deposit a film or coating on a substrate located in a vacuum chamber. One technique simply is to vaporize a metal thermally. Another technique is referred to as chemical vapour deposition . . .
Link sentences from end to start:

“There are no universal guidelines for the level at which glucose intolerance should be labeled as gestational diabetes, making the diagnosis of gestational diabetes controversial. Currently, for a diagnosis of gestational diabetes, the criteria . . .”
PARALLELISM

- Use matching grammatical structures when you write lists of items.

Not parallel

Arenadeck® is:

- non-absorbent

- Provides sound and thermal insulation

Parallel

Arenadeck®

- Provides sound and thermal insulation

- Resists contamination
What is plain language?

- A worldwide effort to improve the clarity and accessibility of how legal contracts, government documents, and other important information is written.

- Write short sentences, using specific, uncomplicated terms that most readers can understand.

- A good basis for writing lay summaries.
Plain language guidelines

- Plain language involves an ethical relationship between reader and writer
- Writers want to communicate clearly with readers
- Take your readers’ point of view
- Organize ideas around what your reader needs to know
Know your readers

- What level of knowledge do they have?
- What is their cultural background?
- What is their income level?
- What do they want to know?
- What information will they use most frequently?
- What questions are they asking about the topic you are writing about?
Ways to organize information

- A series of questions and answers
- Put the most important information first
- Include everything readers need to know to understand and/or to act
- Use bullet points to emphasize main ideas or points
Word-level plain language

- Use words that are accurate, appropriate, and familiar.
- Use technical jargon sparingly; do not use business jargon at all.
- Use active verbs most of the time.
- Use strong verbs (not nouns) to carry the weight of your sentences.
Sentence-level plain language

- Be concise
- Vary sentence length and sentence structure
- Use parallel structure (especially in lists)
- Put your readers in your sentences
- Begin most paragraphs with topic sentences
- Use transitions to link ideas
Keep sentences short

- Working memory can only process about 25 words in a chunk.
- Use 25 words as your limit for sentences.
- Aim for 15 to 22 words (or 2 ½ to 3 lines of type in a document).
- Keep paragraphs short.
  - What is short? 6 to 8 lines of text.
What’s wrong with long?

- Readers miss important points due to overextending memory
- They may not reread long sentences
- They may stop reading your document altogether.

Exceptions?
  - When an idea makes more sense in one long sentence than in several short sentences, use a longer sentence.
How do I shorten sentences?

- Include only one or two ideas in a sentence.
- Explain qualifiers or modifiers to an idea in separate sentences.
- Explain any conditions attached to the main idea in separate sentences.
- Avoid using “and” to connect ideas that can be rewritten in separate sentences.
What to avoid in shortening sentences?

- Don’t sacrifice clarity to keep a sentence short.
- Link related ideas by using *that*, *which*, or *who*.
- Don’t shorten sentences by leaving transitions out.
Use simple sentence structures

- Simple sentence structures ensure that your writing is direct, positive, and active

- Use simple, declarative sentences (subject + verb + object)

- Example
  “Your refund arrived today.”
Three tips

1. Connect modifiers to the words they modify:

**Not** “Please let me know whether you can meet the newest deadline as soon as possible.”

**Instead** “As soon as possible, please let me know whether you can meet the newest deadline.”
Tip #2

- If the paragraph exceeds 6 to 8 lines of text, change the format or use bullets to list information.

Not “The manual is divided into three section that are tailored to the background knowledge of various users such as the first time user who doesn’t know how to turn the program on to the novice user who is ready to learn more advanced functions to the expert user who want to adapt the source code of the program.”

Instead “The manual is divided into three sections tailored to the user’s background knowledge:
- First-time users who can’t turn on the program
- Novice users ready to learn more advanced functions
- Expert users who want to adapt the source code of the program.”
Tip #3

- If you use bullet points, use parallel structure for parallel ideas

Not “To access the font formatting instructions follow these steps: 1) click on the help icon on the main toolbar, 2) next you need to scroll through the options until you find formatting, 3) next users would want to click on the “font” choice.”

Instead “To access the font formatting instructions follow these steps:

1. Click on the help icon on the main toolbar
2. Find the formatting option
3. Click on the “font” choice”
Readability and document design

- Add white space: paragraph breaks
- Use bolding to highlight and enable skimming
- Use bulleted lists
- Use headings
Target: Lay Summaries

- Our first task is to define the genre as clearly and as specifically as possible.
- Our goal is to understand what we’re aiming for.
- Only then can we make good choices about how to revise our own writing.
Lay Summaries

In groups, count these items:

- Number of paragraphs:
- Number of sentences in each paragraph:
- Number of words in each sentence:

Divide the work up within your group—each person takes one paragraph, for example.
## Totals

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Paragraphs</th>
<th>Sentences</th>
<th>Words/sent.</th>
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Fry’s readability score

- Randomly select three sample passages and count exactly 100 words beginning with the beginning of a sentence. Don't count numbers. Do count proper nouns.

- Count the number of sentences in the hundred words, estimating length of the fraction of the last sentence to the nearest 1/10th.

- Count the total number of syllables in the 100-word passage. If you don't have a hand counter available, an easy way is to simply put a mark above every syllable over one in each word, then, when you get to the end of the passage, count the number of marks and add 100.

- Enter graph with average sentence length and number of syllables; plot dot where the two lines intersect. Area where dot is plotted will give you the approximate grade level.
Plot your scores

http://www.on.literacy.ca/pubs/clear/20.htm
Beyond formulas: sentence types

- Identify the sentence styles used:
  - Simple (subject + verb + other)
  - Compound (simple sent. + [and/but/;] simple sent.)
  - Complex (dependent phrase/clause + main clause [simple sentence])
  - Compound-complex [simple + simple + dependent phrase/clause]
### Analysing your own draft

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Linguistic registers

- Levels of formality
- Level of difficulty of vocabulary
- Number of words in English: roughly 1 million
- Number of words in all of Shakespeare: 24,000
- Technical writing varieties of limited English: 1,000
Reability factors

- Readability studies of printed materials about cancer have shown them to be written at a Grade 10 level or higher, which leads to the following problems for seniors:
  - information overload
  - unclear messages
  - difficult vocabulary
  - incomprehensible technical language
  - uninviting tones
  - content that does not specifically target their cohort
  - little organization

Guidelines for revising your own drafts

- Break the text into paragraphs
- Vary your sentence length
- Vary your sentence types
- Search for simpler words/vocabulary
- Spell out acronyms
- Define technical terms in your sentences
Guidelines for revising your own drafts

- Put actors (you, the reader) into your sentences
- Make your organizational patterns clear (narrative, analysis)
- Use transitional words and phrases
Readability in other genres

Anticoagulant Patient Information Material Is Written at High Readability Levels. Carlos A. Estrada, MD, MS; Mary Martin Hryniewicz, RN, MSN; Vetta Barnes Higgs, MD; Cathy Collins James C. Byrd, MD, MPH

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Brochure Name</th>
<th>Source (See Appendix)</th>
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<th>Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level</th>
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<td>What is Arrhythmia?</td>
<td>American Heart Association</td>
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<td>7.2</td>
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<td>Detecting Atrial Fibrillation for Stroke Prevention</td>
<td>National Stroke Association</td>
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<td>Anticoagulant Information†</td>
<td>American Heart Association</td>
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*Brochure contains <30 sentences.
†Brochure posted on the Internet.
Discussion

- If writing is social in important ways, how do we create social structures to improve student writing?

- As graduate students move from reporters of knowledge to producers, how do you learn advanced discourse practices in your field?

- As graduate students, how do you advance your careers and improving our own writing ability?