Clear and Concise Writing for Success

(or how not to annoy the reader)

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A Reviewer's Expectations

- **Interesting, innovative ideas that would contribute to the field;**

- **Solid data showing that the approach has promise;**

- **Evidence that the PI is well qualified to do the research.**

- **A crisp, specific project description with a research plan that is well thought out;**

- **Writing that is clear and concise**

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The Reality of the Grant/Peer Review

- **20 –100 proposals for reading;**
- **6 –8 proposals as primary reviewers.**

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Grant Writing is still Academic Writing

Type : Persuasive writing

Purpose: to persuade proposal reviewers to fund the proposed research studies that will lead to impactful publication.

Clarity and Simplicity of Your Ideas

Your reviewer is reading through the proposals, but she's left at the last moment. It's 6 a.m. on the day she's flying to Washington. She's sitting at the bus stop, it's raining, she has the flu, and she's got your proposal in front of her. Your writing should be able to persuade her that this is a great proposal, even under those conditions.

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George Orwell (Politics and the English Language):

- Never use a metaphor, simile, or other figure of speech which you are used to seeing in print.

- Never use a long word where a short one will do.

- If it is possible to cut a word out, always cut it out.

- Never use the passive where you can use the active.

- Never use a foreign phrase, a scientific word, or a jargon word if you can think of an everyday English equivalent.

- Break any of these rules sooner than say anything outright barbarous.

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A scrupulous writer

"A scrupulous writer, in every sentence that he writes, will ask himself at least four questions, thus:

What am I trying to say?

What words will express it?

What image or idiom will make it clearer?

Is this image fresh enough to have an effect?

And he will probably ask himself two more: Could I put it more shortly? Have I said anything that is avoidably ugly?"

George Orwell

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2 Types of Writing

Technical Writing

Assume background knowledge;

Few justifications;

Extensive use of terminology;

Few definitions and examples;

Few linking phrases.

Lay Writing

Require background

Frequent initial purpose clauses

Terminology is used with caution

More definitions and examples

Wide range of linking phrases

Yes, you can ....

- **Electron paramagnetic resonance (EPR) data reveal large differences between the ferric (13C-)cyanide complexes of wild-type human neuroglobin (NGB) and its H64Q and F28L point mutants and the cyanide complexes of mammalian myo- and haemoglobin. The point mutations, which involve residues comprising the distal haem pocket in NGB, induce smaller, but still significant changes, related to changes in the stabilization of the cyanide ligand. Furthermore, for the first time, the full 13C hyperfine tensor of the cyanide carbon of cyanide-ligated horse heart myoglobin (hhMb) was determined using Davies ENDOR (electron nuclear double resonance). Disagreement of these experimental data with earlier predictions based on 13C NMR data and a theoretical model reveal significant flaws in the model assumptions. The same ENDOR procedure allowed also partial determination of the corresponding 13C hyperfine tensor of cyanide-ligated NGB and H64QNGB. These 13C parameters differ significantly from those of cyanide-ligated hhMb and challenge our current theoretical understanding of how the haem environment influences the magnetic parameters obtained by EPR and NMR in cyanide-ligated haem proteins.**

Common Writing Problems

- **Excessive sentence length**
  - **Unclear sentences**

"most poor scholarly writing is a result of bad habits, of learning tricks of the academic trade as a way to try to fit in"

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From Wordy to Concise

render inoperative, militate against, make contact with, be subjected to, give rise to, give grounds for, have the effect of, play a leading part (role) in, make itself felt, take effect, exhibit a tendency to, serve the purpose

Action Verbs

Sentences with action verbs are natural, direct, and easy to understand.

- Make decision -decide
- Cause a decrease -decreased
- Be a failure-fail
- Have a tendency-tend

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Avoid Weak Verbs

- **be, have, do, make, cause, provide, get, seem**

Example 1

- **An increase in heart rate occurred.**

Example 2.

- **One way to improve your writing *is* to use strong verbs.**

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Avoid there is/are or it is

Example 1

It was her last argument that finally persuaded me.

Her last argument finally persuaded me.

Example 2

There are likely to be many researchers raising questions about this methodological approach.

Passive Voice Examples

Passive:

- The food was eaten at the party by the guests.
- A good time was had by all.
- The result of building a highway through the farmland was increased profit-seeking by some property owners and the eventual loss of land adjacent to the highway to contractors' commercial and residential construction projects.

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Passive Voice

There are sometimes good reasons to use the passive voice:

To emphasize the action rather than the actor.

- After long debate, the proposal was endorsed by the long-range planning committee.

To keep the subject and focus consistent throughout a passage.

- The data processing department recently presented what proved to be a controversial proposal to expand its staff. After long debate, the proposal was endorsed by . . . .

To be tactful by not naming the actor.

- The procedures were somehow misinterpreted.

To describe a condition in which the actor is unknown or unimportant.

- Every year, thousands of people are diagnosed as having cancer.

To create an authoritative tone.

- Visitors are not allowed after 9:00 p.m

Most unclear sentences result from nouns formed from:

Verbs:

discover-discovery

resist -resistance

react-reaction

fly -flying

The discovery of vs. We discovered

Adjectives:

different -difference

proficient -proficiency

important –importance

careless -carelessness

The difference of vs. It is different

Vague Nouns

Try to avoid using vague, all-purpose nouns, which often lead to wordiness.

--factor, aspect, area, situation, consideration, degree, case . . .

Change:

- Consumer demand is rising in the area of services.

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Noun Strings and Terminology

Unless your readers are familiar with your terminology, avoid writing strings of nouns (or noun strings!).

- patient program satisfaction
- student-professor relationship factors
- processing step change
- program implementation process evaluation

Change:

- CHS has a hospital employee relations improvement program.

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Avoid Ungrammatical Forms of Words

Words with the suffixes –ability, -zation, -ologyor -ized.

- **<u>Changeabilityof X occurs when Y is added.</u>**
- X can change when Y is added.

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Trim your clauses or phrases

Eliminate unnecessary prepositional phrases.

- **The opinion of the working group.**
- The working group's opinion.

Change:

The obvious effect of such a range of references is to assure the audience of the author's range of learning and intellect.

Avoid:

- **Recent studies described/reported that …**
- **The experiment shows that …**

Change:

Our recent studies reported that fruits and vegetables are important source of vitamins (13 words)

Snapshots at jasonlove.com

"For *snoring?!* Hell, that's nothin'. I once shot a man for ending a sentence in a preposition."

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Avoid phrases or clauses between the subject and the predicate

Sentences are better understood if the subject and verb are not interrupted.

Change:

The Emergency Department, in order to drain skin abscesses, is performing more surgical procedures at an increasing rate

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Use Simpler Vocabulary

Fewer is better

- **A large number of = many**
- **Along the lines= like**
- **As a general rule= generally**
- **Exhibits the ability= can**
- **On the occasion of= when**
- **Is equipped with= contains**
- **In the light of the fact = because**

Less complex is better

- **Utilize:**
- **Ameliorate**
- **Comprehend:**

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Avoid Redundancies

- circle around
- final outcome
- new innovations
- particular interest
- summarize briefly
- shorter/longer in length
- puzzling in nature
- completely eliminate
- basic fundamentals
- estimates roughly at
- period of time
- main essentials
- true facts

Avoid Useless and Emotional Words

Really, always, very, quite, extremely, severely, clearly, certainly, essentially, actually:

- **I believe the results clearly show that the our study proved the hypothesis.**

- The results show that …

Change:

"I would like to take this opportunity to extend to you a hearty congratulations."

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Write Shorter Sentences

- **Easy to understand (≈20-22 words);**
- **Emphasize the idea;**
- **Weigh more;**

Change:

- **It is generally accepted in the field of medicine that rheumatic fever is an autoimmune disease.**

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Use Clear Pronouns

- **Laboratory animals are not susceptible to these diseases, so research on them is hampered.**
- Research on these diseases is hampered because laboratory animals are not susceptible to them.

- **We have a clearer understanding of the signals controlling formation of memory CD8 T cells during bacterial infection, and this will greatly impact new generation vaccines and immunotherapies.**
- … This knowledge will greatly impact new generation vaccines and immunotherapies.

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Can we re-write this?

With the emergence of Community Acquired Methicillin Resistant *Staphylococcus aureus* (CA-MRSA) skin infections, we wish to prove that over the last fifteen years, the Pediatric Emergency Department is performing more surgical procedures in order to drain skin abscesses at an increasing rate.

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George, lastly

- "One cannot change this all in a moment, but one can at least change one's own habits, and from time to time one can even, if one jeers loudly enough, send some worn-out and useless phrase—some 'jackboot,' 'Achilles' heel', 'hotbed,' 'melting pot,' 'acid test,' 'veritable inferno,' or other lump of verbal refuse—into the dustbin, where it belongs."

Thank you!