

EDITORIAL

Writing for readers

A fog has settled on scientific English. Well-written English effortlessly communicates the writer's intent to the reader. Unfortunately, far too often, science is written in a form which renders the content hard to understand, and which makes unreasonable demands on the reader.¹⁻⁴ English is a very flexible and fault tolerant medium of communication, and good writing is helped by a number of simple rules of structure. These recognise the form in which the human brain is optimised to take in written information. Short, active sentences, concise choice of words and the ruthless elimination of redundancy serve the reader far better than long paragraphs, tortured sentence structure, passive sense and subsidiary clauses.

This problem is not a function of translation. Some of the worst offences are committed by native speakers of English and of American English, and examples are found throughout the scientific literature. It also includes textbooks, journal articles, web sites and even advertising. A myth has somehow grown up that obscure, turgid scientific writing lends gravitas and quality to a paper, when the opposite is the case. Unfortunately, many whose native tongue is not English take note of such writing, and also come to believe that it is 'the right thing to do'.

Poor writing has damaging consequences for all journals. An expectation develops that a journal is merely a depository for citable scientific papers, regardless of their readability, and this becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. We believe that quality of writing is the key to the readability of the EJSO, and particularly for our polyglot international readership. This is the key to the long-term value of the journal. Such quality can be difficult to define, but you know it when you see it.

Broadsheet newspapers and magazines such as Time and the Economist set the pace for clarity of message and simplicity of writing in English. Harry Potter soars to the literary heights on his broomstick with the magic formula.

How can we change scientific writing for the better? Most manuscripts can be improved with careful attention to style at the outset. This works to the benefit of authors, to editors, and particularly to readers. The Editorial team at the EJSO devotes a substantial effort to the improvement and readability of manuscripts, tables and figures, and to helping our diverse linguistic authorship. However, our resources are finite. We have thus prepared a simple style guide for our website (www.ejso.com) to which we will direct all of our authors as a guide to linguistic and editorial policy on writing. In the longer term, we must sustain the written word through education and a renewed emphasis on essay writing. In the meanwhile, we hope that you will continue to enjoy your journal, and contribute to it.

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