

Write Effectively

A quick course for busy health workers

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أكتب بفعالية
مساق سريع للعاملين المشغولين في قطاع الصحة

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AS ALL CONTRIBUTORS TO THIS JOURNAL know, writing is hard work and effective scientific writing, in particular, requires knowledge, effort, discipline and experience. Most of us find putting all this together rather difficult, hence the ongoing demand for workshops and short courses at Sultan Qaboos University on writing academic and scientific papers. The fact that most scientific writing must be done in English, whereas most staff at SQU are not native English speakers, adds to the challenges.

Everyone who can identify with these statements will find this little book useful - it is clear, practical and to the point. Tim Albert has structured it as a short course consisting of several self-exercises. These exercises take the reader through a simple set of steps that develop a procedure for effective writing. The emphasis throughout is on brevity and clarity and the need to have a structured approach to writing. It is not a lesson in English. He points out that writing papers is primarily a craft that can be learnt, and not an art.

Albert starts by recognising that most of us find writing difficult and health workers, like everyone else, may often experience 'writer's block'. The various reasons for this are listed and the reader is guided to identify those impediments relevant to them. It is shown that some of these blocks to writing are just excuses and that most can easily be easily overcome!

The need to write from the perspective of the target audience is emphasised, i.e. to write to or for

the intended reader. Bearing this in mind, Albert provides exercises to define or identify the five key elements that need to be clear in the mind of an author who wants to write a good paper: the central message to be conveyed, the target market, the desired length and format of the article, relevant deadlines, and the pay-off or desired end result. Identifying all these issues defines the brief of the writer.

A technique for sorting all the information that must go into a paper into a logical structure is to summarise the content in a diagram known as a Spidergram. This enables the writer to collate their thoughts and information, group them in a structured way, and visualise the complete layout of the paper. For a scientific paper that is to be published in a journal, for example, the four elements that revolve around the central message are the introduction (why), methods (how), results (what was found) and discussion (what does it mean), each with subsections. I believe most scientific writers will find this simple Spidergram a very useful tool.

When it comes to putting together the paper, emphasis is placed on the importance of paragraph structure and content. Simple rules are provided with methods to accomplish this and how this may vary for different kinds of article targeting different audiences.

The various stages of drafting are covered and the main elements of self-editing are placed in two categories: macro-editing and micro-editing.

Macro-editing involves checking paragraph flows and the tone of the article to ensure that it is logical and appropriate. A useful method for checking the tone is provided by the so-called Gunning Fog test, which involves quantifying the average length of sentences and the use of excessively long words by using a simple index; high scores indicate writing that is complex and unwieldy.

Micro-editing is the tedious, but important process of reviewing all the details, attention to which is essential to make a polished manuscript. This includes checking: facts for accuracy, accidental omissions, grammar, spelling, punctuation, style and references. Layout, format and design are also important issues touched on, with examples.

Feedback and review by family, friends, colleagues, bosses and/or others before final submission is essential, but needs to be balanced in order to be constructive and helpful. The differences between appropriate and inappropriate, good and bad reviews, how to deal with them, and when to ignore them, accept them or otherwise, are touched on. Although feedback is necessary before a manuscript is submitted for formal review, not all feedback is useful. It can, if inappropriate or not handled properly, be destructive.

The book ends with a series of 16 appendices of useful, often humorous information and quotations. This book is not a course in English, but rather a set of

techniques in the method of writing. Nevertheless, several useful tips on English use do emerge and the appendices cover many common English errors.

Write effectively is an easy read and can be skimmed through in an hour or so. Working through the exercises will take longer, but is recommended for anyone having difficulty in writing. If you regularly experience 'writer's block' you will find this a useful manual and a worthwhile addition to your bookshelf. I plan to incorporate several elements and exercises from Tim Albert's book into the workshops on writing scientific papers which the Deanship of Postgraduate Studies offers to SQU staff and postgraduate students. In particular, I will recommend to colleagues the Spidergram method for sorting information and the Gunning Fog test for assessing the tone of their writing.

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