

Writing Readable Research

A Guide for Students
of Social Science

Beverly A. Lewin



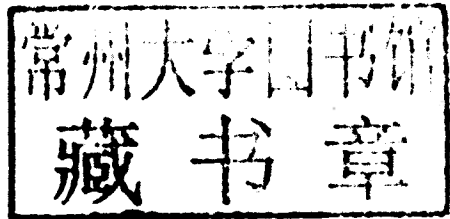
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Preface

This book evolved from the materials I've developed over the years because I could not find a satisfactory textbook. They are either so general that they do not recognize the variations among fields or they are so specific that they focus on only one genre, such as experimental articles. Similarly, while some books concentrate on very specific local issues, such as punctuation and the use of the in/definite article, others give very general suggestions but no help in implementing them, e.g., *Write clearly, concisely and correctly* when novices have no idea of what 'concisely' means, to say nothing of 'clearly'. (In this book, Chapter 4, for instance, would aid in the implementation of 'concisely' while 'clearly' should be the result of implementing guidelines in several chapters.) No book can be everything to everyone, so I have striven for a middle approach.

For non-native speakers of English

I have paid special attention to the needs of those for whom English is a foreign language, by including special material on grammar, in Chapters 2 and 3, and by trying to write simply. However, the other chapters are relevant to any new writers, including native speakers of English.

For English speakers who are new to professional writing

The intended users of this textbook are novice writers, whether graduate students or new instructors. On the other hand, they are sophisticated scientists and therefore, I have tried to include rationale and historical background for some of the guidelines I give. In addition, new professionals need to understand some of the genres they will be faced with: journal articles, (Chapters 7–11), conference texts, (Chapter 12), abstracts (Chapter 13) and professional letters (14).

For social science students

Much of this book is devoted to general writing problems, in any field (Chapters 1–6; 12–14). However, this book is primarily intended for students of social science, which I define as fields that investigate human behavior. I relied on examples from anthropology, psychology, sociology, and communications. I have come to the conclusion that there is no such thing as 'scientific writing' or even 'social science writing'. Each discipline and type of research (e.g., theoretical vs. empirical models) has its own structure and language. For example, all social sciences do not share the same Introduction-Method-

Results-Discussion division and in fact, economics papers are more similar to mathematics papers than to sociology papers. Instead, I show how to analyze the structure in the reader's field.

Some textbooks present 'made up' examples; my students have argued that such examples are misleading and irrelevant. Hence, I have mostly relied on authentic examples; where there is no citation, the example is a paraphrase of texts I have read.

I have also tried to make the book stand on its own but ideally, it should be used as a course book, accompanied by class discussions on relevant points and a course instructor or other expert available to offer feedback on the tasks. I welcome input from readers. Suggestions should be sent to: lewinb@hotmail.com

Definitions

This is not meant to be a linguistics book. I have tried to keep explanations to a minimum and to state rules in very general terms. This aim means omitting all the deviations and irregularities that English is subject to. I have tried to concentrate only on what a person needs to know in order to produce a scientific text. Even so, Chapter 3, on Verbs is the longest in the book.

In order to use this book you do have to understand a minimal number of linguistic concepts, below:

text

This word is not meant to denote '*textbook*'. It is an easy way to refer to any piece of discourse, whether partial or complete, spoken or written. It's easier than saying 'this article', 'this sentence' or 'this book'.

audience

Although this literally means '*listeners*', we use it also to refer to readers of a specific text.

speaker

This term refers to the person delivering the message, whether orally or in writing. Similarly, the *receiver* of the message could be a listener or a reader.

clause

A clause is a group of words that includes a subject and a verb. One sentence can have more than one clause, as these 3 sentences do. I avoid using the term *clause* where possible because it sounds too technical but it is necessary when referring to components of a sentence. (Here is the last sentence divided into clauses: I avoid using the term *clause* where possible/because it sounds too technical/but it is necessary when referring to components of a sentence.)

Acknowledgements

This book is the result of 25 years of teaching and studying scientific writing and reflects insight from many people. First of all, I'd like to thank those who helped directly: Amy Kohn for her patient formatting of a mass of words and Denis Shifrin for the illustration for 'passive' in Chapter 3.

Then, I'd like to thank my family—Larry, Alisa, Ilana, and Josh—for consultations and opinions on science and second language learning. I also appreciate their encouragement and patience while I've been preoccupied with this project. My lovely grandchildren contributed absolutely nothing to this book but they infuse me with love and joy, which keeps me going.

Lastly, I'd like to quote the literature. As Hanina the Sage (2000 B.C.E) said, I've learned much from my teachers, more from my colleagues, and most of all, from my students. This is my way of telling my students how much I gained from our joint work over the years.

Beverly A. Lewin

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Chapter 1

What Are the Constraints in Scientific Writing?

When I meet my classes for the first time, I explain that scientific writing is very ‘bounded’ (constrained) by layers of rules and conventions that must be observed in order for the text to be publishable. Some students are very disappointed to learn that they are not free to express themselves or be ‘artistic’ or ‘creative’. Similarly, this book is not a manual for ‘creative writing’. You are entering a discourse community that defines what and how things should be said. However, we notice that some texts are more interesting, easier to read, even more dynamic than others. So even within the constraints, to some extent, an author can express his or her individuality.

What are the constraints in scientific writing in English that we have to master in order to succeed? Actually, the constraints divide into three areas: rules imposed by the English language on any discourse, whether written or spoken; accepted practices of writing on any subject; and conventions of scientific texts in particular. Perhaps we can say these constraints can be translated into four questions: Is the text phrased in ‘good’ English? Is the writing easy to read and interesting? Is it organized and argued according to the ‘rules’ of scientific articles? Has the author observed basic social conventions? I have broken down these aspects into the following categories, and I’m sure more can be added.

Grammar and Syntax

The grammatical and syntactic rules apply to anything that is written or said in English. These rules cannot be violated in academic writing. Just to give one example, the second sentence below violates a basic rule. (The asterisk [*] signifies that the sentence is ungrammatical.)

- The computer is a wonderful invention. *He can do many things.

The error is to use *he* to refer to a computer. In English, unlike many other languages, only human beings are classified into ‘feminine’ and ‘masculine’. Everything else, such as a *chair* or *dependent variable*, is neuter and is referred

to as *it* (singular) or *they* (plural). For guidelines for using acceptable English, see Chapter 2, Nouns and Pronouns; Chapter 3, Using Verbs; and Chapter 4, Shaping Sentences.

Register

This term refers to the choice of the appropriate words and grammar for the context. A major influence on that choice, in any communication, is sensitivity to the audience. For instance, compare these two letters requesting help:

- a. Dear Professor X:
I was wondering if you would be kind enough to give me your opinion on the following ...
- b. Dear Joe:
Hi! Can you help me out? Please read the enclosed and send me feedback ASAP.

The choices for scientific texts are further refined by the 'academic' register and the sub-register for particular types of text (genres, below). The sentence * '*He can do many things*' in the above section, can be made grammatical as 'It can do many things' and might be found in a popular magazine. However, in a scientific paper, you would say 'The computer can perform many useful functions.' Similarly, scientists never *think, do, make or say* anything. Rather, they *propose* ideas, *perform* experiments, *construct* models, *claim* or *report* results. Occasionally, their results are *interesting* but never *exciting* or *terrific*.

Sometimes, scientists go overboard in translating ideas into scientific register. Consider the following three passages. Your job is to guess which one is *not* meant as a parody of academic writing.

1. (I have intentionally omitted this title.)
Objective consideration of contemporary phenomena compels the conclusion that success or failure in competitive activities exhibits no tendency to be commensurate with innate capacity, but that a considerable element of the unpredictable must inevitably be taken into account. (Strunk & White, 1959: 17)
2. 'Dialectic desublimation and constructivist neocapitalist theory'
If one examines textual desituationism, one is faced with a choice: either accept dialectic desublimation or conclude that the purpose of the participant is deconstruction, given that constructivist neocapitalist theory is invalid. Any number of discourses concerning Baudrillardist hyperreality may be found. (Scuglia & Hamburger, 2004: 1)
3. 'Ethical issues in the ethnography of cyberspace'
For example, the increased importance of performance means there is a substantial potential for a substantive 'resocialing' of work

in organizations, just as the decline of Modernism opens space for collective, situated ethics as opposed to individualized categorical imperatives. (Hakken, 2000: 170)

So which one is not a parody? Well, did you recognize (1) as George Orwell's 'translation' of a passage from the Bible (*Ecclesiastes*) into what we would call 'academic register'? The original English reads like this:

I returned, and saw under the sun, that the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, neither yet bread to the wise ...; but time and chance happeneth to them all.

And the second? It is completely meaningless and was randomly generated by a computer program called 'the Postmodern Generator'.

The third passage is not meant to be a parody, but it is so liberally sprinkled with 'buzzwords' that it seems like a parody. Even in context, it is difficult to understand.

The moral of the story is that you have to tune your text to the correct register but still find a happy medium between popular, informal language and overblown, esoteric, overly abstract jargon. I grant that you may find yourself swimming against the tide.

Style

In any field, or language, a text must be easy to understand and read. Sentences should not be too complex or too simple, heavy, or staccato. Redundant words dilute ideas. (See Chapter 5, Being Concise.) Repetitious sentence structure bores the reader. (See Chapter 4, Shaping Sentences, and Chapter 8, Review of Literature.) For instance, some reviews of literature look like this:

- Smith found X. Jones found Y. Cohen and Smith reported Z.

The sentences all follow the Subject–Verb–Object pattern. In addition, the author repeated *found* instead of using synonyms, which makes his prose grammatical but very monotonous.

Textual Cohesion

The reader looks for clear signals of organization in the text as a whole and between sentences and paragraphs. The sentences in the section above:

- Smith found X. Jones found Y. Cohen and Smith reported Z.

look like a supermarket list. There are no connections among these findings. (See Chapter 6 on Cohesion and Connectives.)

Cohesion also means that your reader can keep track of the people and places you've spoken about, and that your use of pronouns is consistent. (See Chapter 2, Nouns and Pronouns.)

Social Realities and Conventions

In addition to language constraints, a text must also reflect the given social 'rules' of the time and place in which it is written. Your audience will forgive you for breaking a grammatical rule but not for breaking a social rule, and possibly offending someone. To illustrate a simple 'social rule', let's look at the following quotation:

Whenever a scientist communicates, even the most mundane and seemingly innocuous descriptions, he [sic] is persuading his audience, literally commanding them to adopt his point of view. (Weimar, 1977: 1)

When this text was published in 1977, it was acceptable to use masculine pronouns when referring to an unknown person, and maybe even most scientists *were* male. However, today one must acknowledge that a scientist or almost anyone else could be female and so we use *he or she* is persuading, *his or her* audience, and so on. If you notice, I added [sic] after the word *he* to indicate that was not my mistake but was in the original text. In general, for most publications in the social sciences, you now have to use the politically correct language stipulated in the style manuals of the American Psychological Association (2001) (APA), American Sociological Association (1997) (ASA) or in the particular style manual for your intended journal. These requirements ensure unbiased language when referring to both genders, all ethnic groups, and people with various physical attributes or sexual orientations.

When I use the words *politically correct*, I don't mean it sarcastically, although political correctness has been taken to extremes in some cases. I believe that being politically correct represents a modern understanding that words sometimes shape reality. Today's politically correct language is an attempt to get people to think differently about certain groups in society by changing their labels. For instance, if you speak about a *handicapped* person, it sounds as if the defect is in that person, not in an environment that is inhospitable to his or her difficulty. Would you say that someone like Stephen Hawking is handicapped? If you believe that words influence attitudes, you will welcome these changes, although there is a lot of work involved in using language that treats everyone with respect. (See Chapter 9, Methods.)

The sensitivity to the people you write about extends to the colleagues whose work you cite. What attitude towards fellow researchers is reflected in the following text?