BIOL3004
Scientific writing and publishing

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Lecture outline
• Role of scientific writing in research
• Features of scientific writing
• Scientific paper
  • Why, where, when, how to publish a scientific paper
  • Sitting down to write a scientific paper
• Other types of scientific texts and presentations

Research project
• Identify significant biological question
• Research plan
• Experimental work/ theoretical analysis
• Publication/ presentation

Scientific writing represents a significant part of all stages of a research project

Why publish a scientific paper?
• For other researchers to learn about your work
• Scientific publications are the most important indicator of a scientist's track record
• A research project is unfinished without a publication

Ingredients of good science paper
• Novelty of research
• Comprehensive coverage of relevant literature
• Good analysis (including statistics)
• Thought provoking discussion

Ingredients of good science reporting
• Clarity
• Good organization
• Appropriate use of figures and tables
• Right length (= short)
• Writing to intended audience

Some major features of scientific writing
• Communicate information in concise and logical way
• Make your paper stand out: convey how your results have changed the world
• Audience, format (eg. required by journal), established mechanics (grammar, spelling) and politics impose constraints on the scientific writing
• The secret is to match the mind of the reader
• In scientific writing there is no such thing as "writer’s block": when you have done the work, the ideas are there
• Scientific writing is a thankless job: satisfaction must come from the writer for doing a good job; don’t expect satisfaction from other people
Scientific writing

Scientific writing is about clarity.

Sloppy manuscript = sloppy science

Best writing cannot save a flawed study

The fools collect facts, the wise select them (Powell 1888)

What does a reader expect from a scientific paper?

Questions a reader will ask:
- What is the paper about?
- Is the paper interesting?
- What will I gain from it by reading it?
- How difficult is it to find the interesting information? Will the rewards outstrip the effort?

Be a reader: read many papers
- Think about their quality
- Learn how it is done well
- Recognize when it is not done well

What, where and when to publish

- Publish when you have something reasonably complete to say
- Reach the readers you want to reach
- Consider impact factor of journal

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Impact factor = average number of citations in a given year of articles published in that journal in the preceding two years

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<th>Journal</th>
<th>Impact Factor</th>
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<tr>
<td>Nature</td>
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<td>Science</td>
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<td>Cell</td>
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<td>Soap and Cosmetics</td>
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The process of publishing a scientific paper

Authors → Target journal

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategic questions</th>
<th>Structural outline</th>
<th>Drafts</th>
<th>Final</th>
<th>Peer review</th>
<th>Submit to journal</th>
<th>Cover letter</th>
<th>Approvals</th>
<th>Quality control</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
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<td>Revisions</td>
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Publication: proofs, online, printed, reprints

Learn to live with rejection
Planning

- Outline the story as information flowchart
- You want to decide where you are going to end and what the steps along the way will be
- Eliminate extraneous information and dead ends
- If this is done well, the reader encounters new concepts in a logical order and is led through the story
- If this is done badly, concepts appear without adequate explanation and the reader is confused
- Don’t be tempted to include everything you know

Example of scientific story

1) Pigs are large, domesticated quadrupeds
2) Flight is generally associated with possession of wings
3) This story is about evidence for porcine flight
4) How does one define flight?
5) What is the evidence for porcine flight?
   - Descent profiles when dropped
   - Evidence for ascent when accelerated
   - Ability to flap artificial wings
   - Unassisted flight when alarmed
   - Variation between breeds (genetic influences)
6) The specificity of pig flight (Do cows fly?)
7) Conclusion. Pigs fly under some circumstances, but so would any large object

In this story, information about the pig diet and digestive tract, or swine influenza virus, or the percentage bacon yield from different breeds would be irrelevant.

Style

- Writing style is subjective; there is no right or wrong
- Remember the key objectives of scientific writing
  - Clear
  - Not complex
  - Not ambiguous
  - Precise
  - Genetically
  - Forthright
  - Sincere, straightforward
  - Not pretentious, arrogant
  - Familiar
  - Avoid jargon
  - Define unfamiliar
  - Concise
  - Avoid redundancy: interesting to note, as a matter of fact
  - Fluid
  - Eliminate discontinuities
  - Scientific writing does not have to be dull

Being critical

- You need to be critical of the work of others but most importantly of your own work
- There is no such thing as scientific fact; science is based on observation, experimentation and interpretation
- It is important to identify what is not known
- Critical assessment presents enough information to recognize the merits of a particular interpretation

Uncritical: Nerk et al. (1915) showed that pigs could fly.
Critical: Nerk et al. (1915) claimed that pigs could fly based on a significant divergence from vertical descent when pigs were dropped off a large cliff. The experiment was flawed by the lack of appropriate controls, such as cows.

Style: some suggestions (1)

- Sentences
  - 1 idea/sentence
  - Concise (20-30 words: breath test)
- Paragraphs
  - 1 topic/paragraph
  - Start with lead sentence
  - Transitions (flow)
- Introduction
  - Funnel method: known, unknown, question

Style: some suggestions (2)

- Avoid long sentences
- Use active verbs: it makes sentences shorter!
  - ‘We found’ not ‘It was found’
- Avoid writing empty phrases that add nothing
  - Plays a key role, the fact that, the presence of
- Avoid redundancy
  - Already existing, alternative choices, at the present time
- Avoid cliches
  - It has long been known that pigs fly under certain circumstances (+ I haven’t bothered to look up the reference)
- Don’t plagiarize
  - If precise wording is absolutely crucial, use quotations and provide the reference and acknowledge the author
Style: some suggestions (3)

- Restrict use of adjectives and adverbs
  - Especially pseudo-quantitative ('large, remarkable, striking')
  - Adjectives: use ‘of’ instead
  - Try deleting all adjectives and adverbs and see which made any contribution
- Avoid repeated sentence constructions
  - e.g. ‘however, furthermore’ over and over again
- Don’t use editorial commentary
  - Now I am going to tell you about early experiments on flying guinea pigs and we’ll come to full sized pigs later.
- Avoid jargon, conversational and vernacular styles
  - Scientific English is an international language
    - ‘It’s pretty obvious that pigs would fly if they could shift their bums’: colourful, but incomprehensible to the average literate German
    - ‘The problem with pig aviation lies in the uneven distribution of weight towards their posteriors’: may be boring, but brings home the bacon

Style: some suggestions (4)

- ‘Which/that’
  - Use “that” for defining clauses (tells us which one)
    - We will select the option that measures porcine flight accurately
  - Use “which” for non-defining clauses (adds a fact about known option)
    - We will select the Option A, which measures porcine flight accurately
- Don’t use no double negatives
  - Just between you and I, case is important
    - Not all unfamiliar words start with uppercase
- Check PubMed if in doubt about the case
  - Since pigs do not fly voluntarily, the experiment involved dropping the animal from a large cliff
- Remember to never split the infinitive
  - ‘And/or’: should be left to lawyers
  - ‘Since’: is a temporal expression (use ‘because’).

The layout of a scientific paper

**Suggestion for order of writing**

1. **Title**
   - often the only part read
   - The paper will not make an impact if it doesn’t grab someone browsing the long list of titles in J.
2. **Abstract**
   - The next most read part of a paper
   - Easily accessible (PubMed)
   - Summarizes the story in a very condensed form
   - Will be read only if the title catches the readers attention
3. **Introduction**
   - provides the reader with indication what is to come
   - Watch for “no content” statements, cliches, plagiarising
     - Since time immemorial man has been interested in the aeronautical behaviour of his fellow inhabitants of the earth.
   - Don’t make claims that imply the writer is going to solve the lack of knowledge
     - Pig flight has been investigated extensively as a model for mammalian aviation in general, or ‘despite intensive study, little is known about pig flight’.
   - Set the scene and grabs the reader’s interest
     - Nobody has ever seen a pig fly, but the phrase ‘pigs might fly’ is part of the vernacular.

Starting (1)

- **Title**
  - Often the only thing many people may read
  - The paper will not make an impact if it doesn’t grab someone browsing the long list of titles in J.
2. **Porcine Aviation**
   - Studies of the aerodynamics of large living falling bodies: likely to be consigned to the large body of uncited and unread literature
   - Definitive proof that pigs can fly: will be a citation classic
   - Do pigs fly?: rhetorical questions in titles are not recommended
The middle

- Very few people will read the entire paper
- Papers are not read in a linear progression, but readers try to grasp the whole picture as quickly as possible
- The established journal format helps readers find the relevant sections
- Use **signposts** to guide the reader (e.g., subheadings)

How to finish

The end of the paper should provide reader with closure
- Conclusion treats results as a whole (Discussion treats them individually)
- Finishing statement difficult
  - Avoid motherhood statements
    - ‘Porcine aviation is bound to be an exciting and fruitful area of future research.’
  - Better to sum up and echo the opening
    - ‘Clearly the old cliche that pigs might fly has some basis in fact.’
  - Can finish with future directions, but be specific and avoid generalized clichés (e.g., observe that more research is needed.
    - ‘The one key experiment that has yet to be performed is to drop a pig from an aeroplane. Survival of such a fall would provide definitive proof that pigs really can fly.’

References

- Scholarship in references is very important
- Remember other workers in the field will review the paper
- Use a reference manager program

Authorship

- Who should be an author? In what order?

The University of Queensland: Handbook of University Policies and Procedures (HUPP)
4.20.2 Procedures for the Conduct of Research
3. Statement of Authorship
3.1 The minimum criterion for authorship is participation in the conceptualisation, execution or interpretation of part of the research. Participation must be sufficient for her/him to take public responsibility for the publication.
Other types of scientific writing

Similar principles apply to any type of scientific writing, but the purpose and constraints may be different:

- **Review article**: adjust to the readers, use subtitles
- **Thesis**: break down into chapters to reduce the size of task
  - Introduction ~ review article, individual chapters ~ scientific papers
  - At UQ you can use published papers as substitute for chapters
- **Book**: ~ thesis
- **Report**: ~ scientific paper
  - Instructions: main constraints audience and format
- **Correspondence**: main constraints audience and mechanics
- **Grant proposal**: focus on aims and expected outcomes; main constraints format, politics, audience
- **Presentations**: oral, poster: more opportunities to make exciting

Further reading

- Author: Zeiger, Mimi
  - Title: Essentials of writing biomedical research papers
  - Publisher: McGraw Hill, 1999
- Author: Day, Robert A
  - Title: How to write & publish a scientific paper
  - Publisher: Cambridge, England : Cambridge University Press, 1998
- Author: Alley, Michael
  - Title: The craft of scientific writing
  - Publisher: New York : Springer, 1996
- Authors: Janice R. Matthews, John M. Bowen, Robert W. Matthews
  - Title: Successful Scientific Writing: A Step-By-step Guide for Biomedical Scientists
  - Publisher: Cambridge University Press, 2001