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Guidelines for Non-Technical Writing

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The Basics!

Scientific writing does not have to be confusing, jargon filled or boring!

Clarity of communication and conveying a point is as important in communicating science as it is in other forms of non-fiction. How can we expect a member of the non-scientific community to take away key messages if we lose them in the opening paragraph?

Preparation

Target audience

- Who are they?
- What sort of prior knowledge of the topic do they have?

For example, a PhD student can assume that the supervisor reading their work will have enough technical expertise to understand complex language and higher-level scientific concepts. However, a technical salesperson reporting on product trial work for a farmer group not only cannot assume any level of technical understanding but there is also likely to be a range in any understanding across the group – *this writing style needs to be as accessible as possible.*

On-line Audience

The vast majority of scientific literature is accessible online. We can split internet consumers into two categories:

Laid-back consumers:

- Engage with social media
- Use popular news outlets for information
- Are generally more interested in entertainment than education.
- May come across 'headlines' but are unlikely to go into the content in any detail.

Information hunters:

- Set out with a specific question to reliably answer
- Research the answer from multiple sources to put their mind at ease
- Find scientific writing in open access journals, news reports, technical reports and marketing materials. Level of technical competence is unknown and likely varies.

Clarity in your message is especially important to this group.

Tone

- Are you communicating informally, formally, for the media, marketing etc.
- Can you get away with being relaxed and 'chatty' while communicating your research? An audience that can relate to you is more likely to engage.
- Overly formal or technical language for the sake of it has the potential to alienate people outside of your field and can come across as though you are 'showing off' to the non-technical

Alternatives to common phrases and words:

- **'In order to' – use 'to'**
- **'as well as' - use 'and'**
- **'due to the fact that' - use 'because'.**
- **Hitherto, therefore, furthermore etc. - useful for connecting concepts but always consider sentence length – can you reduce it and remove the need for these words?**
- **Indeed – usually unnecessary so think carefully before using**

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Main points to consider

Planning

- Useful and specific – make the information relevant, easy to find and understandable.
- Structure - identify the key points that you want to make and get to them quickly.
- Use answers to the questions ‘so what?’ and ‘why now?’ as starting points and to define what it is you want the reader to understand.
- Do not add anything that does not add value – stick to the point!

Formatting and structure

- Meaningful sub-headings - help with navigating a document and allow readers to quickly find their area of interest.
- Bullet points - structurally appealing and easy to read, which aids understanding.
- Emphasis – carefully consider the use of italics, bold font and underlining as both can be visually confusing if used inappropriately.
- Chronology – reference any processes in chronological order. This should be replicated in the sentence structure and within paragraphs with old information at the beginning and new information at the end.

Writing

- Plain English - use it. If you are not sure where to start, try looking into hemingwayapp.com for some pointers.
 - Did you know?.....1 in 20 adults in England read only to the level of the average five-year-old. Inclusion of only a little technical language can make the content inaccessible.
- Talk to the reader – use active rather than passive voice, it makes for more engaging reading. The active voice gives importance to ‘who’ performed the action and the passive voice places emphasis on the action itself. For example:
 - ‘Milk yield was increased by starch’ = Passive
 - ‘Starch increased milk yield’ = Active
- Illustrate key points using relevant examples - for example:
 - ‘The surface area is equivalent to a football pitch’
 - ‘....the same weight as a bag of flour’
- Front-load information – this is especially important if writing content for a website. People online do not ‘read’ from left to right, instead, they scan. Most focus is on the top paragraph and they look for key words in an F-shaped pattern.
 - Focus your key points at the top of the text to have the best chance of conveying the message
- Vary sentence length – mix up long and short sentences to maintain reader interest and aid comprehension.
- Place subjects and verbs close together - we learn to read and write from a starting point of ‘subject’ ‘verb’ ‘object’ and the closer we stick to this set up, the easier it is to understand what is being communicated.
 - Remove superfluous, redundant, unnecessary and excessive words – see what I did there?!

If you have any questions please contact:

British Society of Animal Science

Berewyk Hall Court, Bures Road, White Colne, Essex CO6 2QB

Tel: +44 (0)1787 221 029 Email: bsas@bsas.org.uk

Web: bsas.org.uk