

Look your best

An Insider's Insight into assessing your own writing

Many people think that a well developed writing skill is something that only authors and playwrights need. Wrong. The ability to write well is an essential life skill that allows you to get your point across, be persuasive and communicate with colleagues. Conveying your message elegantly and efficiently will make a significant contribution to your efforts to pursue a fulfilling and successful career.

Not everyone can write well, but there are a great many people who will know when you don't. Fair or not, people make judgements about your intelligence, your competence and even your integrity based on the quality of your writing. It's worth keeping this in mind in today's harried world of permanent electronic records, digital media and emails. In your haste to get things done, you're much more likely to come cross as if you are uneducated, ill-informed and even lazy! How do you ensure that your writing reflects your true capabilities?

Here we offer some insights from the Niche medical writing team, who have been writing high quality scientific documents for the pharmaceutical industry and the academic sector since 1998.

Before you start

Writing can (and should!) be a creative, uplifting and enjoyable process. However, no first draft is perfect and good writing is almost always a result of good editing.

- Read. The best place to start is to have a working knowledge of what good writing looks like.
- Beyond technical aspects the four basic categories of well-written communication are readability, correctness, appropriateness and thought.
- Readability equates to nothing more than a clear style of writing. For example, avoiding unnecessarily long, rambling sentences.
- Correctness refers to the proper positioning of elements within your article so that it can be read clearly and sensibly.
- Undertake proper preparation. Disorganised and illogical writing will be interpreted as reflecting an untrained mind.

Prepare to succeed

The most useful techniques you can use to help you edit your own work include:

- Wait before you attempt to review and edit your work.
- Perform your editing on a printed copy.
- Read your work aloud.
- Use a writing style guide to overcome your weaknesses and a checklist to ensure you cover all aspects of the editing process.
- Get someone to review your work and provide feedback.
- Practice writing including for alternate genres.
- Use online resources to check your grammar and readability.

Background

Writing can (and should!) be a creative, uplifting and enjoyable process. However, many of us are crippled by the thought of how our writing will be perceived. Once the first draft is complete, we are consumed by the herculean task of ensuring that our text is well received. Figuring out how to 'edit' your own writing is usually where the writing process becomes less 'fun'. It is important for us to appreciate that no first draft is perfect and good writing is almost always a result of good editing.

The best place to start as a writer is to have a working knowledge of what good writing looks like so that you can imitate a winning formula. Naturally, errors in spelling, punctuation and grammar will not only detract from the intended content but will also lead your reader to judge your writing (and you) negatively, perhaps to the point where they cannot appreciate your underlying message. So these basic errors need to be corrected. Following on from the importance of the technical aspects of writing are the four basic categories of well-written communication — **readability, correctness, appropriateness and thought**.

Readability equates to nothing more than a clear style of writing. It does not, as some readability experts would have you believe, result wholly from mathematical counts of syllables, sentence length or the use of abstract words. However, it is an undeniable truth that unnecessarily long, rambling sentences can be exhausting. There is a lot to be said for keeping your writing simple, maintaining focus and avoiding jargon. Above all things you must focus on carefully leading your reader through your narrative.

Correctness refers to the proper positioning of elements within your article so that it can be read clearly and sensibly – what might be termed coherence. Equally, in writing for a specific audience you need to be sure that your tone, content and language are **appropriate**.

Thought is also an important aspect. The discipline of translating thoughts into words and organising these thoughts logically has no equal. Undertake proper preparation because disorganised and illogical writing will be interpreted as reflecting an untrained mind. Intelligent content is something too frequently overlooked by many authors whose writing can come across as superficial, ignorant or biased. Intellectual competence and fidelity to the task (delivering what is expected by the reader) are crucial but perhaps the most important aspect of thought is 'analysis'. Here is where the highly intelligent are separated from those who content themselves with delivering superficial work.

Now you know

Good editing can transform a mediocre and confusing text into a great piece of literature (or business critical email). It is one of the most important aspects of the writing process – no one gets it right on the first draft.

Once you have a draft, be prepared to craft your text through several drafts and review cycles so that it eventually speaks clearly. In the words of Louis Brandeis, "There is no great writing, only great re-writing."

#1: Let it rest

Why do we need editors? Why don't we simply edit our own work? The answer is word-blindness (not to be mistaken with alexia). This is a special kind of word-blindness that makes it challenging to properly critique and/or correct your own work – you are simply too close to it. It's hard to edit or proofread a paper that you've just finished writing – it's still too familiar, and you tend to skip over many of your errors. Crafted from your own internal narrative, errors and omissions you were susceptible to making when you first wrote your text are just as likely to be introduced or missed when you come to review it.

There is a solution; become a different person. When you write you are transcribing your thoughts to paper (or screen), you are taking what's in your mind at that particular moment. What you produce is influenced by your training, what you know about your subject and even the mood you are in at the time of writing.

A week, a day or even an hour later, it is almost impossible to recreate an identical mental situation. You bring a new perspective to your creation if you write your text and return to it after a few days (the optimal period seems to be around 2 days if your schedule permits). However infinitesimally small, you will know more and you will very likely be in a different mood. You might also have had the opportunity to read around the subject. This will empower you to perform a more objective review. Effectively, you will have fresh eyes.

#2: Print it out

Working with the printed form is just so 20th century – no? NO! It may seem anachronistic, long-winded and environmentally irresponsible but you should consider working from printed copy if you want the best results. Here's why: as any writer or editor will tell you, critiquing someone else's work is much easier than deconstructing your own, because outside eyes bring a fresh perspective. To approach your own work critically, you need to simulate this 'outsider' perspective by viewing it in a medium other than the one you wrote it in (typically on screen).

Benefits go beyond that of simply fresh eyes. In the printed form you have, with the aid of a red pen, the opportunity to explore alternative ways of presenting your work. Not only can you correct any errors, typos and omissions that you spot, you can also introduce layers of new arguments and data (as you add, scrub out edits), improving your content.

When you print out your work it is advisable to allow yourself plenty of space to comment (print only on one side). It is also useful if you learn some basic proofreading marks to aid you in the editing process. The joy of working on hard copies is that you can always start afresh if your edits get too elaborate.

#3: Read it aloud

It can be a little intimidating but reading your work aloud is an excellent way to assess it. The best writing sounds smooth – almost as if you're speaking. Listening to your text when spoken is one of the best ways to identify areas with jangling phrasing that can make the reader stumble. The process of reading aloud (and listening) uses a different set of cerebral circuits that are independent of your internal narrative and introduces an alternate means of overcoming word-blindness.

The best results are achieved if you print your script and deliver it as if you were presenting to an audience (except with a pen ready to mark points where the text doesn't make sense or where you stumble). Resist the temptation to half-heartedly mutter through your document while reading from the screen. One benefit to this methodology is that it should make your work more approachable. For example, you shouldn't be afraid to introduce contractions – that's how us non-bots talk, isn't it? (Imagine how that last sentence would sound without contractions).

Proof correction marks

Sometimes called editorial correction or copyediting marks, they are occasionally wielded on the work of junior writers by editors. As such, they might be regarded as being redundant in the age of word processing. However, their actual purpose is the annotating of pages that have been designed professionally – the pages appear as you would expect to see in a published book or newspaper.

Using industry-standard proof correction marks is an efficient way to annotate the page with the desired corrections. When we proofread typeset page proofs there is little room to indicate what we want to change. The symbols are a short-hand instructions that tell the designer exactly what needs modifying. Once you've learned the symbols they are quicker to use than long-hand text and take up minimal space.

Proof marks are not only for noting spelling and grammar corrections. They can also be used to address:

- Misaligned text.
- Incorrect indentation.
- Inconsistent line or paragraph spacing.
- Incorrect font.
- Heading format issues.
- Widows, orphans and short lines.

Not all marks are created equal. They depend on the country they originated in. You can find a handy set of marks in [Appendix 1](#).

#4: Act as your own editor

It doesn't matter how good you think you are as a writer – you have to view the first words you put on the page simply as a draft. The secret to good writing is good editing. Be it email, blog, scientific article or international peace treaty, editing is what separates hastily written, randomly punctuated, incoherent rants from well-reasoned polemics. Shorter texts can be relatively easy to revisit and may not require a full-service edit. However, if you are serious about the quality of your work you will develop a formal review process that you know will address the self-editing dilemma – balancing the law of diminishing returns with a never-ending hunt for perfection.

Like any polishing process, the best way to get your documents to shine is to take a step-by-step approach to focusing on the detail. In the first draft you may want to consider the general construction of your document. By the third or fourth draft you may be down to the fine detail of achieving the right tone by changing words. Alternatively, you might feel sufficiently confident to address all aspects in one draft. Whatever your approach, don't think that assessing your own work is simply a matter of reading it through – no one is that good.

The first run through

Most writing mistakes are depressingly common; good writers just get better at catching them before they hit the page. It is often advisable to target these big-ticket items before getting into the detail.

Structure: The structure of any article is what your writing hangs on to. It doesn't matter how perfectly the individual sentences are phrased if the whole thing is a nonsensical mess. For emails and other short writings, the old favourite of an introductory 'topic' sentence followed by supporting paragraphs and a conclusion is hard to fault. This is a great place to show

Often when something you've written 'just doesn't work' for people, you will find that it is the structure that's to blame. They might not be able to put the problems into words, but readers naturally feel something's off when your narrative doesn't fit a logical structure.

consideration for your audience. Is your writing easy to engage with? Have you used a logical structure? A series of never-ending, unrelenting paragraphs will discourage readers. Break things up into concise points and, where necessary, inserting subheadings – as you can see with this Insider's Insight, without subsections you would just be looking at a stark wall of text.

For longer pieces, structure is something that needs a great deal of attention. Writing a continuous stream of consciousness in text rarely reads well. Assuming that you have a suitable structure you should check that the headings and subheadings are appropriate and logical. The narrative needs to flow and arguments need to build. You have to think about what you're trying to say in each chapter, sub-section and paragraph, giving due consideration as to whether it's working or if one or other parts of your text would be better placed elsewhere. It's normal (and even desirable) that the structure of your work changes markedly in the early stages of drafting; it's a sign that you're developing the piece as a whole, rather than just fixing small problems.

Technicalities: Early drafts are a good point to check the technicalities of your text. Many might save this level of review until later. However, in addition to drawing you into the process of review (and away from that of continued creation) it allows you to take a helicopter view of your writing. Here you might check that you have used the same fonts throughout and the right fonts are used for the right level of heading. Have you used the same style throughout (see Using a Style Guide, page 5)? If you have used bullet points, have you presented them in the same way in all cases? This can be a good opportunity to ensure that all abbreviations are defined on first use.

By viewing your text dispassionately, focusing on the form rather than the content introduces an opportunity to see it in a way you won't get from the inside. It should become obvious if you have used particularly long paragraphs or sentences. Have you introduced too many subheading levels? Have you included unnecessary information or over-focused on one specific aspect? Could it be shorter? Don't rely too heavily on your word processor's spellchecker.

The curse of knowledge

The more you know about a topic, the harder it is to imagine what it was like NOT to know it. This is a pervasive cognitive bias that has been termed the 'curse of knowledge', where an author assumes that their readers know what they know. It's a frequently noted source of poor writing (and bad communication in general) and one of the quickest ways to alienate your reader [1].

Assuming reader insight can often be seen in improper pacing or omission of information. Time and again enthusiastic authors introduce terms on page 1 (for example) that are not defined until page 3, an important study technique isn't mentioned until the results, or the writer assumes the reader is familiar with disease-specific terminology.

Some papers are sprinkled with excessive abbreviations (ask yourself: is it for the reader's benefit or only because it's simpler to type?). Others introduce unnecessary jargon. We can only assume that this is because the writer is so familiar with their work that they've lost the reader's perspective. It takes practice to overcome this problem, but it is worth the effort.

Write (and edit) responsibly

The mere thought of editing your own writing can be daunting. Make it simpler. Write with editing in mind by breaking down the work into smaller, more manageable tasks. We also recommend that you write with a handy copy of Strunk and White's how-to guide on writing good, clear English (or other such guide) by your side [2]. Focus on a different aspect with each editing round: one read-through might be just to check for punctuation, another can be dedicated to looking at the use of abbreviations, and so on. This way, the editing will seem less overwhelming and more like a series of easily completed projects.

Jargon abbreviation, and business speak

Unpleasant jargon like 'utilise', 'endeavour' or 'communicate' – instead of 'use', 'try' or 'chat' – creep into our writing when we try to be formal or sound smart. It's the kind of writing that George Orwell protested against in his essay, "Politics and the English Language" (1946). Orwell contested that false intellectualism often obscures your argument when he wrote: "Never use a long word when a short one will do." Equally, how you use abbreviations tells the reader quite a lot about you [3].

Clichés:

Clichés are *as common as muck* but at least they can be *low-hanging fruit* when it comes to improving your writing. If you're not sure whether a phrase is a cliché, it's better to just avoid it (cringeworthy, right?). Clichés are stale phrases that have lost their impact and novelty through overuse. Once, "*The grass is always greener on the other side*" was a witty observation, now it's a cliché. Again, Orwell said it well: "Never use a metaphor, simile, or other figure of speech which you are used to seeing in print." Be careful; today's memes very quickly become tomorrow's clichés.

Passive voice:

Science writers often fall into writing in the passive voice. In most cases, the subject of the sentence should be the person or thing taking action, not the thing being acted on. For example, "This article was written by Justin" is written in the passive voice because the subject ("this article") is the thing being acted on. The equivalent active construction would be: "Justin wrote this article." Prose written in the passive voice tends to have an aloofness and passivity to it, which is why it's important to know when it's appropriate to write an active sentence.

Rambling:

When you're not quite sure what you want to say it's easy to ramble around a point, phrasing it in three or four different ways and then, instead of cutting them down to a single concise sentence, slapping all four together into a clunky, unclear paragraph. A single direct sentence is almost always better than four that stumble around a point.

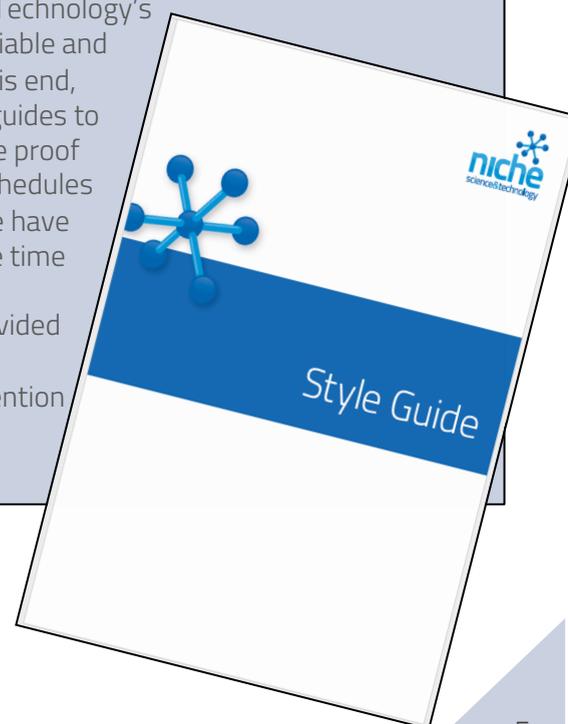
Overwriting:

It's relatively easy to write too much. Science writers in particular are eager to show how much they know about a subject. Often it's a lot easier to throw words at a problem than to take the time to find the right ones. As the 17th-century writer and scientist, Blaise Pascal (no, it wasn't Mark Twain) wrote, "I have made this longer than usual because I have not had time to make it shorter." The rule for most writers is: if in doubt, cut it out. Novelist Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch exhorted a version of the oft-repeated phrase, "In writing you must kill all your darlings." Cutting your word count will tighten your work and make what you're trying to say clearer. Write economically.

Using a writing style guide

Writing style guides can be helpful in developing a good style of writing. Many well-recognised commercial guides are available. They ensure that all authors working on a project adopt a similar style and provide direction when contributors are unclear as to how to proceed. Guides can be a simple sheet of "do's and don'ts" (often termed writing conventions) or complex documents providing instruction on English usage and project-specific phraseology. When used across a team preparing a large submission with multiple authors they serve to standardise the language of clinical source documents and expedite document delivery.

Quality and consistency are at the heart of Niche Science & Technology's philosophy, ensuring a reliable and dependable service. To this end, we have created writing guides to ease production, minimise proof corrections and enable schedules to be met. One benefit we have found is a reduction in the time required for document preparation. We have provided an example of a simple programme writing convention guide, often used by our teams ([Appendix 2](#)).



Deploy resources

Writers generally work alone. We research, draft, edit, proofread and submit – all as a party of one. It's difficult to obtain an objective review of our work. Wracked by self-doubt, harried by unsympathetic critics, as writers we begin to wonder whether we even have the right to comment, to have an opinion. Are we over-estimating our abilities? We often wonder whether what we are writing is 'publishable'. This can result in creative constipation. Obviously, when we write for a client they remain the ultimate arbiter of quality but we often feel the need for some kind of 'second opinion' before we expose ourselves to a paying audience – particularly clients. There are some resources that can help you out.

First, whether or not you are a professional writer, someone at some time is going to read your work – you need to become comfortable with sharing your writing. Start with someone you trust if you are particularly nervous. If you ask for help only on specific issues – spelling, grammar, continuity, etc. – it might ensure you get advice that's not too heavy-handed. You don't want outside editors suggesting changes you're not comfortable making.

Online readability checkers (Grammarly, Hemingway or Readable for example) can flag common writing, spelling and grammatical errors [4]; they are great for catching simple mistakes and cleaning up drafts of your work. Software programs like SmartEdit (www.smartedit.com) will point out issues like:

- Repeated use of words and phrases.
- Over-use of adverbs and clichés.
- Misused words (such as breathe instead of breath).
- Overly long sentences.
- Misnamed proper nouns.
- Excessive use of punctuation (particularly semi-colons and exclamation marks).

However, grammar checkers are not perfect. They work with a limited set of rules, so you can't be certain that they will identify every error and they can also make mistakes. They rarely provide thorough explanations that might help you understand why a sentence should be revised. They are always keen to point out the use of passive voice and yet, much of science is written in the passive voice. You might also want to consider carefully the possibility of intellectual property issues if you are using an online service and the writing is for a commercial client.

First impressions

"It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity..." Want to know more? Of course you do, it is the opening line from Charles Dickens' 'A Tale of Two Cities' (1859) – one of the bestselling novels of all time having sold over 200 million copies. The beginning of anything you write is an aspect that you need to focus on. You need to capture your reader's attention with those first few words, your opening sentence and/or your first paragraph.

Whether you're writing a novel, a scientific article or an email, you should spend a disproportionate amount of time working on those first few sentences, paragraphs or pages. Many challenges that can be glossed over in the middle of your text, for example if you are writing about a tedious subject, can easily be your undoing at the start.

Hooking the reader is a term you will hear often. Its importance cannot be overstressed. You must make the reader want to read more and you must do it quickly. Huge competition exists for attention in the scientific literature, with more than 2.5 million new items being added each year [5]. We are also bombarded with news articles, e-newsletters, blogs, podcasts, videos, etc. Even with powerful online search engines, it is getting harder for scientists to keep up to date and for authors to get their voices heard [6]. Better hook your reader with your first line.

Some wise words...

Many guides on writing will tell you to follow "the three C's", clear, concise and correct, in order to make your work easier to read. Some of our greatest authors seem to endorse at least two of these properties:

Be concise:

"Whatever in a work of art is not used, is doing harm." – C.S. Lewis

"This report, by its very length, defends itself against the risk of ever being read." – Winston Churchill

"If you can't explain it simply, you don't understand it well enough." – Albert Einstein

Be clear:

"One should not aim at being possible to understand, but at being impossible to misunderstand." – Quintilian (Marcus Fabius Quintilianus, 1st century AD)

"Simplicity is the ultimate sophistication." – Leonardo da Vinci

"The most valuable of all talents is that of never using two words when one will do." – Thomas Jefferson

Be confident and brief

People read things because they want to be informed and they will quickly stop reading if they think you aren't sure of what you are talking about, especially if you are writing scientific articles. Writing in 1911, Sir Andrew Macphail, the father of medical writing noted, "Good writers employ words; and they compel each word to give a proper account of itself [7]."

Discard social modesty and give your language authority and purpose. This is especially important if you're writing an opinion based article, blog or email. When you make a point throw yourself fully behind it. Be clear and assertive. Don't give your reader the impression that you don't fully support the point you are making.

You might water down the authoritative tone if you are writing for a less formal audience. In such cases you can make your writing more approachable by including phrases like "I think" and "in my experience" in your writing and you might also include more adjectives.



From time immemorial there have been people ready and eager to 'help' with useful comments on your work. As H.G. Wells put it, "No passion in the world is equal to the passion to alter someone else's draft."

"One should use common words to say uncommon things."
 – Arthur Schopenhauer

As a language, English offers many different ways of saying the same thing. Where possible, avoid "to be" verbs which can weaken the words that follow. Replace "am," "is," "are," "was," "were," "been," and "being" with stronger alternatives. Weak adjectives also spoil your writing. When describing nouns and pronouns, use more powerful adjectives and avoid the words "really" or "very." Avoid zombie nouns [8].

Table 1: Concise replacements for verbose text

Verbose	Concise
a majority of	most
a number of	many, several, numerous
are known to be	are
at the present time	now
could potentially	may
fewer in number	fewer
in order to	to
in the course of	during
in the event that	if
it is possible that	may
it would appear that	apparently
the authors	we

When in doubt, find a verb that says it better. You should also hunt down and eliminate repetitive phrases, verbose writing (Table 1) and filler words like 'there', 'here' and 'it'. In addition, avoid wishy-washy sentences that include "I believe" "In my opinion" or "I guess" and remove empty filler phrases to unclutter your text:

- it appears;
- as a matter of fact;
- it seems to be;
- as already noted;
- as such;
- in other words;
- it is important to note;
- it is known that;
- it has been reported that;
- Interestingly;
- needless to say.

"Your manuscript is both good and original, but the part that is good is not original, and the part that is original is not good."
 – Samuel Johnson

Prepare to be better

A writer's ultimate goal should be to become a master of their craft. The best way to address this ambition is to take responsibility for their own development. We all need to be open to continued learning so that next time we are faced with a challenge we are best placed to rise to it. With this in mind you should:

Keep reading, particularly in the field in which you generally work. Regular reading is one of the best ways to become a better writer. Obviously, reading opens your mind to new voices and styles of writing, but that isn't the only reason; your fields are constantly changing and it should provide you with a ready grasp of the field's (current) associated syntax. We cannot expect to remain up-to-date on everything. You probably won't realise that your reading is making you a better writer.

Take time to study examples of best practice in leading publications. Reading high-quality writing gives you a good idea of structure for different types of documents that you can use as a guide. It also gives you a benchmark and a standard to which you can aspire. Whatever your business role, it is useful to build a resource library of example texts relevant to your field so you can cross-reference them easily.

Freely express your thoughts, setting them down on paper as thoroughly and as fast as you can. Don't let your perceived limitations inhibit the creation of your first draft. The process of creation is never easy and you should be prepared to work hard in turning drafts into final copy that readers can enjoy. As the British author, linguist and lexicographer Dr Samuel Johnson (1709–1784) noted: "What is written without effort is, in general, read without pleasure." It is your role to explore all options that may ease the reader through all the twists and turns of your text, delivering them to the end duly edified but not exhausted.

"Once you've got to the end, and you know what happens, it's your job to make it look like you knew exactly what you were doing all along." – Neil Gaiman

"So the writer who breeds more words than he needs is making hard work for the reader who reads."

– Dr Seuss

Test your readability. There are several systems devised to provide you with a score for readability. Obviously, systems like the Gunning-Fogg Index and the Flesch-Kincaid Reading Ease Score only go so far in determining true readability and, as a quick scan of the scientific literature reveals, readability is particularly relevant when writing for lay persons or social media. You might however be surprised to learn that many peer-reviewed scientific articles perform poorly, often containing too many long sentences and complex words. A realistic target for academic authors is a Flesch score of above 30. It has been suggested that the scientific writing style may overemphasize an approach that paradoxically makes transfer of information unreasonably difficult [9].

Know your writing weaknesses, review past writing to see if you can spot any recurring mistakes or bad habits. You will have a 'style' to your writing – many writers call it their 'voice'. Look for both strengths and weaknesses in your writing. It is worthwhile starting your own style guide to record clichéd phrases, words you know you overuse, grammar mistakes you're prone to making and so forth. Include details on your writing style commented on previously by your reviewers, clients or editors. Use it as a checklist when reviewing any new piece of writing.

Practice, practice, practice. The best way to get better at anything is to do it repeatedly. As part of that process, write something that falls outside your comfort zone. For example, it can be beneficial for medical writers to try their hands at creative writing, travel journalism or fiction. Starting a blog can be helpful in making you focus on creating text that may be useful to others. Attending a writing course is another way of learning best practice – courses are usually focused on specific types of writing (scientific manuscripts, journalism etc.). Take a refresher course from time to time.

Ask for feedback. Good writers take criticism on the chin and say 'thank you' sincerely to anyone providing helpful comments and opinion. Good writers combine external voices with their own internal narrative to make their work better. Good writers are excited by (or at least resigned to) the fact that first drafts need work. The mark of a true champion is a commitment to the craft. It's not about writing in spurts of perfect inspiration resulting in poetic prose. It's about the slog, doing the work, day-in and day-out.

"Remember the waterfront shack with the sign **FRESH FISH SOLD HERE**. Of course it's fresh, we're on the ocean. Of course it's for sale, we're not giving it away. Of course it's here, otherwise the sign would be someplace else. The final sign: **FISH**." – Peggy Noonan

An interview with our House Editor

Q What do editors look for?

A Make your text as concise as you can. Less is more. During my editing, I'll often ask myself, "How can I say the same thing in fewer words?" People don't have time to read long emails never mind prosaic, full-length articles. Keep your writing short and sweet. Brief, punchy sentences are easier to grasp and will get the reader thinking they are streaking through your article, convincing them that they will soon finish it with little effort. And if nothing else, less text equals fewer mistakes. Editors will also be grateful for your brevity.

Q What would you say is the most useful skill to learn beyond basic grammar?

A Consider the point of writing your article or email as if no one is going to read it. You must work on catching your reader's interest. We all have so little time and we are bombarded with so much information that you need to get people to commit to reading your work. Whether it's the headline of a blog post or an inter-office memo, or a subject line for an email, your headlines will either capture your reader's attention, and get them interested in what you have to say (and to read on), or not. Convince your audience that they will be using their time wisely if they read to the end – that they will learn something valuable. Reference to lists (The 5 Greatest Things) and questions (Are You Winning?) work very well as subject lines.

Q Can you give one piece of advice to those who want to write well?

A Unfortunately, few of us are natural writers. There are a lucky few who find writing simple – for the rest of us, becoming a good writer takes time and effort. Improved writing will not happen overnight, but it will happen. Your skills will develop with a concerted effort, practice, patience and pain (from the many ready critics). Good writers understand this is more than a profession or hobby. It's a calling, a vocation. If nothing else, enjoy being creative. Good writers aren't perfectionists, but they've learned the discipline of getting work out the door, of putting their work out there for the world to see (and comment on). In what will seem no time at all you will be able to look back on a portfolio of documents of different shapes and sizes, all written by you.

Use a checklist

	✓		✓
Spelling and Grammar		Bullets/Lists	
Abbreviations/Capitalisation		Numbers/Units	
Figures and Tables		Dashes and Hyphens	
Filler Words/Empty Words		Long Sentences/Paragraphs	
References/Sources		Headings/Subheadings	

And finally (for scientists)...

Francis Crick, who with James Watson won the Nobel Prize for their work on DNA wrote: "There is no form of prose more difficult to understand and more tedious to read than the average scientific paper [10]." No doubt a host of undergraduate scientists over the years have empathised with Crick's observation. Scientific writing is not only used to describe complex and hard to understand situations, it also dictates that the writing follows a somewhat unnatural language, style and format.

Although it can take years to adjust, most scientists come to believe that objectivity required in scientific writing demands they obliterate themselves from their narrative, preferring to write in the passive voice. Incorporation of abstract nouns serves as the cherry on the cake [11]. A regular commentator on scientific publications from the 1980s, Alex Paton asked, "Why is it that intelligent people (among whom I include doctors) become imbued with verbosity the moment they put pen to paper [12]?" It has been a long-standing issue. In 1911, Sir Andrew Macphail noted: "There is probably more bad writing in medical journals than in any other kind of periodical [13]."

Even rigidly structured scientific communications have sufficient room to tell a compelling story and journal editors are sure to welcome well-structured and well-written manuscripts. Authors need to believe that it is possible to create articles that not only communicate the science clearly but are also a pleasure to read. In the words of Samuel Johnson: "The two most engaging powers of an author are, to make new things familiar, and familiar things new."

And finally (for everyone)...

In the words of Alex Paton, "Don't believe people who tell you that writing is easy." However, good writing skills are well worth cultivating. They allow you to communicate your message with clarity and ease to a far larger audience than you are likely to achieve through face-to-face or telephone conversations. Nearly everybody is required to write emails and other communications to fellow workers and managers, while in roles that carry accountability, you need to be able to document clearly the tasks that you have done.

In short, good writing skills are highly important in the workplace. Clear, succinct, convincing writing will differentiate you as a great thinker and a valuable asset to your team. If you are sending emails full of typos, poorly constructed sentences and grammatical errors, then it implies that you take a similar attitude towards your work. Therefore, good writing skills not only improve communication in the workplace, but can also have an effect on how you are perceived.

Poor writing is often a red flag that an employee is not suited to more senior positions and, as such, can be a hindrance to promotion. Inescapably, people with poor writing skills or poor attention to detail simply come across as having a lower level of intelligence. In contrast, employees with excellent writing skills are generally viewed as being a hot commodity. You should need no more convincing than companies around the world spending considerable sums of money improving their employees writing skills.

Next steps

Take it from a professional writer: these skills can be learned, but it takes time; you're not going to become a perfect self-editor overnight. It's easy to miss errors in your own writing, especially if English is not your first language. The task of editing a large or complex document can be overwhelming if you're under strict timelines. If this is true for you we are always here to help.

Please contact me at the email address below if you would like further help and advice on writing.

Dr Justin Cook
Head of Medical Writing
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Get in touch



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Appendix 1: Proof Correction Marks

Available for download at: www.niche.org.uk/

Title: Niche Editorial Review Markup (Hard copy)
Document Number NST-GUI-017 v03
Date: 15 January 2009
Author: Germanicus Hansa-Wilkinson
Role: In-house Editor

When reviewing, editing and/or proofreading documents:

1. Use consistent proof reading symbols to indicate changes or corrections to the text.
2. Use marginal marks to indicate corrections made within lines.
3. Use different ink colours for different reviews of the same hard copy.
4. Keep a list of decisions to ensure consistency.

Mark as it appears in the text	Meaning	Mark appearing in the margin
--------------------------------	---------	------------------------------

Insertions

	Insert	
...chronic HCV infection The safety...	Insert period	
In 1978 in a small seaside town a baby...	Insert comma	(x2)
The cats pajamas	Insert apostrophe mark	
Cor blimey gov said Cuthbert	Insert quotation mark	
2000; 952936–2939	Insert colon	
2000 95:2936–2939	Insert semicolon	
2000; 95:2936 2939	Insert en dash	
An em dash a long dash can be used	Insert em dash	
An em dash a long dash can be used	Insert parenthesis/brackets	
When all the words run on it is annoying	Insert space	(x3)
...was increased 10 fold	Insert hyphen	

Appendix 1: Proof Correction Marks

Deletions

The cat sat on the the mat	Delete text	
An na was spectacular	Close up	
Ammar was not spectxacular	Delete and close up	
This is not ^{STET} an exit	Leave as is	STET

Style

AT THE start of the sentence	Put in lower case	
...mother then left. immediately he...	Put in upper case	
Caenorhabditis elegans is a worm...	Put into italics	
<i>Caenorhabditis elegans</i> is a worm...	Remove italics	
..was at a concentration of 200 mg/mL	Use non-breaking space	
2000; 95:2936-2939	Put into bold	
2000; 95:2936-2939	Remove bold	

Positioning

[Text to be centred]	Centre text	
3 X 10 ⁸ m/s	Superscript	
HbA _{1c}	Subscript	
Was finished. ^{NP} The start of the next...	New paragraph	NP
...giant bananas, which were larger than...	Run on	
	Start new line	
← Put it here.	Justify left	
Put it here. →	Justify right	
Heamophilic manHard	Reorder words/letters	

Appendix 2: Writing convention – example

SUBMISSION WRITING CONVENTIONS FOR Niche’s Sparkling Lemonade

General

Always refer to product as ‘The Lemonade’.

All clinical documents (e.g., clinical study reports [CSRs], clinical trial register summaries [CTRS], clinical CTD summaries, and Investigators Brochures [IB]) must be created in Microsoft Word using the correct Niche Science & Technology Ltd. template.

The Niche Science & Technology Ltd. Style Guide (v2.0 2019) should be used as a resource for questions regarding writing style that are not addressed in this document.

The term ‘subject’ is to be used rather than ‘patient’.

Style:

- The term ‘adverse event’ is used rather than ‘adverse experience’;
- Capitalize all treatment groups;
- Upper case first letters will be used when referring to specific study days/visits, e.g., ‘Day 1’, ‘Day 3–5’ or ‘Visit 1’; an en dash will be used between numbers of days, e.g., 3–5. When quoting extended visit windows hyphens may be replaced to avoid confusion e.g., Day -2 to Day 1;
- Gender – use capitals (e.g., Male, Female);
- Race – use capitals (e.g., White, Black, Hispanic);
- Use UK spelling for reports used in the UK and US English spelling for reports prepared in the US. Words using US spelling within the template boiler plate text do not need to be changed to UK spelling for reports written within the UK and vice versa.

Numbers

The European convention for dates is used (e.g., 01 January 2019 or 31-Jan-2019).

For whole numbers from one to nine, words rather than numerals are used, except when used in conjunction with units (e.g., 9 mg/L) or percentages (e.g., 9%) or when referring to a specific time point (e.g., 3 hours, Day 2).

For numbers greater than or equal to 10, numerals are used, except at the beginning of a sentence (e.g., Fifty subjects participated...).

A comma is not used for numbers greater than 1000 and less than 10,000 (e.g., 1500 not 1,500). A comma is used for numbers greater than 10,000.

Probability values are expressed as lower case ‘p’ without a space (e.g., $p=0.001$ or $p<0.005$).

Abbreviations

The following are examples of abbreviations that are suitable for use in the text and tables without being defined:

- Units - kg, mg, μg , mL and so on for all SI units, U for arbitrary units, IU for international units;
- Other standard abbreviations - IV, SC, PO, OD, MD, PRN, AM, PM, ITT, PP, bid, i.e., e.g., Mr, Dr, etc.

In addition, the following are suitable for use in in-text tables (but not the text without explanation)

- Year(s), month(s), week(s), day(s), hour(s), minute(s) and second(s) should be abbreviated to y, mo, w, d, h, min, sec, respectively;
- Use M for male and F for female;
- N=sample size; n=subset of sample size;
- Standard deviation and confidence interval can be abbreviated to SD and CI, respectively.

Other standard abbreviations to be used include:

- Adverse event: AE;
- Serious adverse event: SAE.

Appendix 2: Writing convention – example (continued)

Spacing

Do not use spaces when citing percentages e.g., 43%.

When citing ranges use a dash without spaces on either side (e.g., 55–65 ng), do not use the word 'to'.

Hyphens, em and en dash

Use a hyphen (dash without spaces on either side) in compound words that are used attributively to clarify the unification of the sense. For example:

- child-bearing; drug-related adverse event; Fifty-one subjects; on-therapy; placebo-controlled, double-blind, parallel-group study; Gram-negative; intent-to-treat; pre-dose, pre-therapy, post-dose, post-therapy;
- Hyphens should not be used for: per protocol; post menopausal; HIV positive;
- The en dash (longer than the hyphen) is used to denote span in page ranges, unit values, and dates. It is also used as a link between two nouns;
- The em dash (longer than the en dash) is used in place of parentheses or to introduce an afterthought or a statement to summarize what has gone before.

Bullet Points/Numbered Lists

End a series of bullets with semi-colons, with the exception of the last bullet, which should be ended with a period. Example follows:

- one;
- two;
- three;
- four.