

Writing Accessibly about Science

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Overview

- Why write accessibly about science?
- General pointers
- Pointers: writing for the public
- Pointers: writing for non-native speakers
- Discussion

Why bother writing accessibly about science?



Why write accessibly about science?

- Helps non-specialists understand
- Helps non-native speakers understand
- Aids other readers too
- Establishes rapport
- Minimizes misinterpretation
- Minimizes editorial distortion
- Clarifies one's own thinking
- Other

The pointers—some caveats

- Guidelines, not rules
- Not exhaustive
- Varied amounts of research support
- Speaker . . .

- Yet, well worth considering

General Pointers

- Provide multiple “points of access”—for example:
 - Title
 - Abstract or blurb
 - Introduction or lead
 - Headings
 - Graphics
 - Pull quotes
 - Italics or boldface (sparingly used)
 - Sidebars

General Pointers (cont)

- Make the structure clear at a glance—for example, with
 - Headings
 - Bullets
 - White space
- In general, avoid long paragraphs and long sentences.

General Pointers (cont)

- Minimize use of jargon.
- Remember to define unfamiliar terms.
- Minimize use of abbreviations and acronyms.

General Pointers (cont)

- Write simply and concisely:
 - Use simple, common words.
 - attempt→ fundamental→
 - Delete needless words.
 - red in color→ totally destroyed→
 - Condense wordy phrases.
 - at this point in time→ in the event that→
 - Use verbs, not nouns made from them.
 - produce relief of→ provide an explanation→

General Pointers (cont)

- Offer access to further information—for example, through
 - References
 - Links
 - Resource lists



Other Pointers:

Writing Accessibly for the Public

- Provide human interest—for example, by including
 - Researchers
 - Health professionals
 - Technology users
 - Patients
 - Others
- Use some narrative.

Writing for the Public (cont)

- Provide overviews before details.
- Relate the unfamiliar to the familiar—for example, through analogies.
- Include examples.

Writing for the Public (cont)

- Introduce new terms gently—for instance:
 - “complete loss of kidney function, known as end-stage renal disease”
 - “the involuntary, or ‘autonomic,’ nervous system”
- Make relationships clear:
 - Make reasoning explicit.
 - Use transitions effectively.

Writing for the Public (cont)

- Present numbers and sizes effectively:
 - Use familiar units.
 - Compare sizes with those of familiar items.
- Counter misconceptions respectfully.
 - Acknowledge plausibility of the belief.
 - Show the belief’s inadequacy.
 - Show the merits of the more scientifically founded view.



Other Pointers: Writing Accessibly for Non-Native Speakers

- Use largely subject-verb-object sentence structure.
- Use mainly simple verb forms.
- Try not to use words with multiple meanings—even if doing so means (oops! requires) using a longer word.

Writing for Non-Native Speakers (cont)

- Beware of literary allusions, sports metaphors, etc.
- Beware of irony and humor.
- Write dates in formats interpreted consistently (for example, 5 January 2008, not 1/5/08).

Writing for Non-Native Speakers (cont)

- Retain optional words, such as “that,” if they clarify sentence structure.
- To guide readers, punctuate liberally.
- See *The Elements of International English Style* by Edmond H. Weiss (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2005).



Recap

- Why write accessibly about science?
- General pointers
- Pointers: writing for the public
- Pointers: writing for non-native speakers
- Discussion

Discussion



Thank you!

