

## EDITORIAL

# Why are Scientists so Susceptible to Myth?

Most scientific writing—as you may have noticed—is fairly hard reading. Even if the material is interesting—and, of course, it should be, if you are a specialist reader reading a specialist journal—you very often have to fight with a style which is not at all like ordinary English. And why? Because that is how it is done! That is what the scientific community expect—and if you don't write in this way, not only will your articles not be accepted by journals, but you will not be respected by your peers.

Two myths, I am afraid.

Journal editors are not usually worried about style: they are grateful for mere coherence. In fact, very few journals stipulate *anything* about style (notes on 'style' are generally about layout). The British Psychological Society journals require a 'clear, concise style appropriate to an international readership'; the *British Journal of Guidance and Counselling* requires 'clear, straightforward' style with 'minimum jargon'; *Clinical Child Psychology and Psychiatry* requires 'clear, readable' texts. And it does make a difference: as one of the technical editors at the BMJ [*British Medical Journal*] Publishing Group put it:

Articles pour into journal offices. A few are of great scientific value, some are poor, most are middling fair. Articles in the first two categories are generally easy to spot, but editors spend a great deal of time deciding which of the 'middling' articles merit publication ... Editors are human enough to be favourably impressed by a clear, easy to read paper ... (103).

Self-interest, then, should encourage writers to try for clarity and readability—but what about esteem? Just as there is hard evidence that certain writing strategies transmit information more efficiently (which is, one assumes, the object of scientific writing), so there is evidence *that the resultant styles do not undermine the writers' credibility and esteem* (Turk and Kirkman: 20). It is not necessary to speak in dialect to impress your peers. Extensive surveys have shown that, by a large majority, senior members of professions prefer writing which is not traditionally formal (Kirkman: 220–245).

And what, anyway, are 'clarity' and 'readability'? We have to use specialist terminology, but the language in between must be kept as simple and straightforward as possible, especially for second-language users. We don't have to be noun-centred all the time (*Data analysis was conducted in four steps*). We can use verb structures (*Data was analysed in four steps*), or personal forms (*We analysed the data in four steps*) which all the *scientific* evidence supports as being perfectly acceptable, and more efficient.

But surely we are forbidden to use personal forms! If we use—I, me, my, we, us, our—our papers will be rejected as unscientific, subjective and casual! To write 'we think' is not as respectable, not as *scientific*, as writing 'it is thought'. The self, the ego, must be rigorously excluded!

More myth. In a simple experiment, I went into the Periodicals Library of Cardiff University (UK), and looked at the first hundred current journals on the social and human sciences—from *Acta Psychologica*, through the *British Journal of Psychiatry*, *Journal of Counselling Psychology*, and *Journal of Neurology, Neurosurgery and Psychiatry*, to the *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*. These were not the comics: they were all serious, respected, international journals, from all the major publishers and professional societies. It was not a rigorous search: I simply opened each journal at random, and glanced through, looking for those pernicious, unprofessional words. And how many of those 100 journals allowed them?

Answer, 100.

Expressions such as *I would suggest that these findings show*, *We contacted as many children as possible*, and *Nevertheless, our findings were consistent ...* were common. Do they seem unscientific or inaccurate? Not only are they demonstrably more natural and readable than the continual use of phrases such as *the present study suggests* or *thanks are due to*, or *an impression was gained*, but they are *more scientifically accurate*. After all *it may be concluded that* does not mean that the authors themselves concluded it; and *it was thought that* certainly does not mean *we think*. As the editor of the *American Medical Association Manual of Style* observed, 'The description of an experiment, the report of a case, an editorial expression of opinion will all differ in presentation, and uniformity would be absurd' (King, 1989: vi).

Away with the myths, then! As readers, we want the maximum information in the minimum time. As human readers, we need language that we can process comfortably, not a dialect fossilised a generation or two ago. Writing, *communication*, should be as stimulating a part of science as the science itself, and should require just as much care, logic and inspiration. Reading should be exciting, and it is the scientist's responsibility to make it so!

## References

- King, L., 1989. *American Medical Association Manual of Style*, 8th edn, Baltimore, Williams and Wilkins.
- Kirkman, J., 1992. *Good Style for Scientific and Technical Writing*, London, Spon.
- Pearce, N., 1994. 'Style—What is it and Does it Matter?' In G. M. Hall, (Ed.) *How to Write a Paper*, London, BMJ Publishing Group.
- Turk, C. and Kirkman, J., 1989. *Effective Writing*, 2nd edn, London, Spon.

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## LIST OF JOURNALS CONSULTED

*Acta Psychologica; Acta Sociologica; Adoption and Fostering; Addiction; Ageing and Society; Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science; American Journal of Economics and Sociology; American Journal of Orthopsychiatry; American Journal of Psychology; American Journal of Sociology; American Psychologist; Animal Learning and Behavior; Applied Cognitive Psychology; Archives Européennes de Sociologie.*

*Behavioural and Brain Sciences; Behavioural Medicine; Behavioural Neurology; Behavioural Neuroscience; Brain; Brain and Cognition; Brain and Language; British Journal of Educational Psychology; British Journal of Guidance and Counselling; British Journal of Mathematical and Statistical Psychology; British Journal of Medical Psychology; British Journal of Psychiatry; British Journal of Psychology; British Journal of Social Psychology; British Journal of Social Work; British Journal of Sociology.*

*Child and Family Social Work; Child Development; Child Welfare; Clinical Child Psychology and Psychiatry; Cognitive Neuropsychiatry; Clinical Psychology Review; Cognition and Emotion; Cognition and Instruction; Cognitive Development; Cognitive Neuropsychology; Cognitive Psychology; Cognitive Science; Consciousness and Cognition; Contemporary Psychology; Current Opinion in Psychiatry; Current Psychology; Developmental Psychology.*

*Ergonomics; Educational and Child Psychology; Ethnic and Racial Studies; European Journal of Cognitive Psychology; European Journal of Social Psychology; European Journal of Women's Studies; European Journal of Work and Organisational Psychology; Families in Society; Family Process; Gender and Society; Health Psychology; History of Psychiatry [Royal College of Psychiatrists]; International Journal of Comparative Sociology; International Social Work; International Sociology.*

*Journal for the Psychoanalysis of Culture and Society; Journal for the Theory of Social Behavior; Journal of Abnormal Psychology;*

*Journal of Adolescence; Journal of Ageing and Social Policy; Journal of Applied Behavior Analysis; Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology; Journal of Applied Psychology; Journal of Applied Social Psychology; Journal of Behavioural Medicine; Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry; Journal of Cognitive Neuroscience; Journal of Comparative Psychology; Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology; Journal of Counselling Psychology; Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology; Journal of Experimental Child Psychology.*

*Journal of Experimental Psychology: Animal Behavior Processes; Journal of Experimental Psychology: Applied; Journal of Experimental Psychology: General; Journal of Experimental Psychology: Human Perception and Performance; Journal of Experimental Psychology: Learning, Meaning and Cognition; Journal of Experimental Social Psychology; Journal of Family Psychology; Journal of Family Violence; Journal of Gender Studies; Journal of Gerontology; Journal of Health and Social Behavior; Journal of Management Psychology; Journal of Marriage and the Family; Journal of Neurology, Neurosurgery and Psychiatry; Journal of Occupational and Organisational Psychology; Journal of Organisational Behavior; Journal of Social and Personal Relationships; Journal of Social Behavior and Personality; Journal of Social Psychology; Journal of Experimental Analysis of Behavior; Journal of Women and Ageing; Journal of Youth and Adolescence.*

### Editors' Note

The ANZJFT, too, encourages its authors to write as simply and clearly as the complexities of their subject permit; to avoid all unnecessary jargon; to prefer the active voice to the passive, and the personal to the impersonal ('We asked the family ...' rather than 'The family were asked ...'; and to use references and quotations from other authorities only where they are needed to support the argument, rather than as a gratuitous display of the writer's (apparent) knowledge of the field.