EASE-Forum Digest: December 2008 to March 2009

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Discussions on the forum this quarter have focussed on change. Could the structure of abstracts be changed? What happens if a corresponding author changes address? How can the name of the author, and the time and date of changes to a document be removed in Word? Should the obligation to state the location of publishers in reference lists be changed? Have times changed to permit use of personal pronouns in scientific manuscripts?

Could there ever be an IMRAD revolution?

Abstracts of biomedical manuscripts are set out with the background first, followed by the methods, the results, and then the conclusion to mirror the structure of manuscripts, which are traditionally written under the headings introduction, methods, results, and discussion (IMRAD). This tradition started to emerge in the late 1940s. Before 1945, articles covered several topics and were organized under subject headings like a book.[1] The IMRAD structure, which facilitates browsing sections of the article for specific information, became the norm when the Vancouver Group adopted it in the first edition of the Uniform Requirements for Manuscripts Submitted to Biomedical Journals, published in 1979. It was therefore not authors or readers but editors who cast the IMRAD structure in stone.

Karen Shashok is an authors' editor currently working with AuthorAID in Iran. She had been working on a manuscript for a journal that required the abstract to be written with the conclusions first, followed by the background, then methods, and finishing up with the results. She wondered whether this structure might have advantages for readers but was concerned that departure from the norm would interfere with electronic information seeking and transfer. Mary Ellen Kerans, an applied linguist, could not envisage any problem with interference for searches made by the journal's community of authors and readers because once a structure had been established it would be the genre of discourse, accepted and expected by that community. "Proof of concept" type papers in the fields of engineering, mathematics, and physics, for example, start with the ultimate concept, continue with the device, and end with the heuristic, which is the theoretical argument and more like the conclusion/findings than like objectives. Rather than the past tense used in biomedical papers, these papers are usually written in the present and present perfect tense: authors seem to unfold their thoughts for the reader as they come to mind. The fun starts when engineers and doctors cooperate to write a paper across their disciplines.

Diana Epstein, who manages a number of ophthalmology journals, pointed out that some journals have a précis, which is a short sentence summarising the whole paper. Editors have been known to reject a paper on this single sentence without ever reading the abstract. She thought that journals like the one Karen mentioned might find it quicker to assess their interest in the paper on submission by reading the conclusions first. Busy readers might also appreciate the time-saving structure.

However, Elisabeth Heseltine thought the conclusion-first structure countered Bradford-Hill's logical formula for constructing a scientific manuscript, namely to answer four questions in the order: What was the question? What did you do? What answer did you get? What does it mean? Elisabeth considered that readers would be unable to understand the remainder of the paper if they did not know what question was being asked.

Carol Norris compared abstracts with posters. She found that conference posters with the conclusions in a box immediately after the title appealed greatly to her physician students. Meanwhile Jim Hartley had been looking at journals and found one abstract in Acta Oncologica (2009;48 (2):192) with the conclusions first. He was surprised to find it read rather well and thought examples should be viewed before embarking on further discussion.

Ed Hull raised a new point about abstracts that caused a brisk exchange of ideas. He referred to a common rule against repeating lines in the abstract that also appear in the manuscript's text and asked what the objection was to repeating lines. For Will Hughes the objection was clear: stringing together sentences from the manuscript was not summarizing, which is what an abstract should be doing. But rephrasing is difficult for people who are not native speakers of English, for whom Sylwia saw no harm in including sentences in the abstract from the main text. John Taylor was more concerned that an abstract should be a stimulating invitation to read the manuscript and saw no objection to including a sentence from the article if this was a captivating focal sentence from the text. Indeed all discussants felt that if, as Will put it, the abstract is well-written, cogent, and pithy, then there could be no objection if the same sentence or part-sentence also appeared in the paper.

As a postscript I would like to add a view expressed by Nobel Prize winner Peter Medawar. He explained that the IMRAD format is based on the assumption that discovery is an inductive process arising from unbiased observations. In reality, however, observation is inevitably biased and scientific work starts with an expectation in the light of which choices are made as to the methods used and which results are relevant. Accordingly, he argued that the discussion should come first, followed by the scientific facts and acts.[2]

Corresponding authors on the move

The affiliation given for an author in the manuscript should be that at the time the study was conducted. Mary Ellen Kerans asked forum participants what they did if the corresponding author had another address at the time of submitting the manuscript. The consensus was that the affiliation information should be that at the time of the study, and the current address should be used for the correspondence information.

When you don't want Word to tell all

Elisabeth Heseltine asked if anyone who edited on screen using Word with track changes knew how to remove the name, date, and time from the changes and comments that appear on screen when you hold the cursor over the side-balloon. She learnt from the answers that the name of the author can be changed easily by clicking on Tools - Options - Security and checking the box beside "Remove personal properties on save". Changing the time and date, however, is not so easy. You can change the clock and date or time zone on the computer temporarily by using the Adjust Date/Time at the right-hand bottom corner of the screen or, as Timothy DeVinney suggested, you can use a metadata removal tool to get rid of personal information in a Word file. He provided a URL from which the software could be downloaded (http://www.esqinc.com/products_iscrub.asp) and a reference to an article (http://www.theregister.co.uk/2004/02/02/microsoft_releases_metadata_removal_tool/) with a link to a Microsoft add-on for Office 2003.

Elisabeth thought changing the clock and date back and forth every time you work on a document over a number of days would be laborious, and metadata removal tools might not be the thing for the technologically challenged. She has resolved in future to make a copy of the document, edit it without track changes and then, just before sending the document, click "Compare documents" and compare it with the original. Then, all the changes will have the same date and time.

Are book publisher locations valuable or a waste of time in reference lists?

Standard styles for citing books in a scientific journal's reference list require that the publisher's location (city) be included in the citation. Lorna O'Brien asked the forum whether the publisher's location was really relevant in these days of global companies and online ordering. But Aleksandra Golebiowska from Poland pointed out that not all publishers are global and not everybody has access to the internet to order online.

John Taylor thought there were occasions when the location would be important. For instance, versions of a book published in different locations are not always identical, and a handbook on English might not have the same appeal published in New Delhi as the same one published in the UK. John suggested it would be useful to include the ISBN as alternative or supplementary information.

Jim Hartley liked to see where a book was published as an indication of the relative cost and problems in obtaining a copy, whereas for Will Hughes it as an indication of where the author was coming from, geographically. He thought that within countries there was often quite a bit of autonomy so, for example, it made little difference where a book was published within the UK. He just puts London for all UK books, unless it is clear which city it comes from. But in other parts of the world, he did think it was useful to know the "home" of the book.

The point that Lorna was trying to make, however, was that you could spend a lot of time looking for an elusive location because the big publishers do not state the location in their "blurb", and large retailers like Amazon also keep it a mystery. Mary Ellen Kerans took up this point with alacrity, calling the practice of stating the location quaint but useless, especially as often the location that is given in a reference list is wrong because it is difficult to find this information. Yateen Joshi had found that the branch offices of some publishers had different lists. Nancy Boston agreed, adding that raising location queries with the author could dilute the effort that authors put into answering more important queries.

Use of personal pronouns in academic writing

John Taylor had always understood that personal pronouns are to be avoided in academic articles and felt that repetitive use of "I" and "we" gives the impression of an account of events rather than a presentation of research findings. He referred to one client who he felt, by his insistence on using "I" in his paper, gave the impression that it was God's gift to the field.

Nancy Boston agreed that once upon a time the use of personal pronouns had been frowned upon, but in her experience most journals allow and even preferred their use, except in the methods section. Here she saw some sense in avoiding their use because it was not important to know who performed each part of an experiment. She also tended to cut down use of the pronouns in the introduction, especially where the future tense was used – for example she would change "in the next section I will describe" to "The next section describes".

Marcin Kozak quoted Richard Webster's sentiments[3] that assumptions, decisions, and choices should be in the active voice: "the research scientist is not a passive observer of Nature; he or she is an active instigator with all the subjectivity that that entails. Other assumptions, other decisions and other choices would have led to other results and perhaps different understanding…we scientists are human, and we are fallible therefore...". This in my opinion is an important point. It should be clear that the author accepts responsibility for the work, which is why I added to the discussion that when I receive a biomedical manuscript without personal pronouns in it (which is rare) I ask the author whether the Holy Ghost performed the experiments.

Although Angela Turner encouraged the use of personal pronouns in her animal behaviour journal, she thought they could be used too liberally and a sentence could be more precise without them. She would write "This paper describes a case study", instead of John's example "In the following I describe a case study", but she would change "The data analysis was performed with SPSS" to "We analysed the data with SPSS". Angela also thought the situation might vary with the scientific area, because she had been told that chemistry journals discourage the use of personal pronouns.

Carol Norris gave examples of the *BMJ* and *Nature*, which ask authors to write in the active. *Nature Medicine*'s methods section has been devoid of the passive for years. Carol's view was that clever writers could avoid a plethora of "we's" through use of the innate agent. *Nature* claims that readers are able to grasp concepts more easily if they are conveyed directly. Carol also thought that another advantage for journals would be that active structures usually require fewer words than passive structures, resulting in the shorter texts so beloved by journal publishers.

An entirely different approach was taken by Mary Ellen Kerans. For a functional linguist, she said, the issue was flow of information rather than philosophical considerations of active versus passive voice. A linguist sees flow through "theme" (information which comes at the beginning of the sentence) and rheme (all the words that follow). Good writers instinctively think about what they should put at the start of a sentence so that it flows naturally from the preceding rheme. They "thematicize" information by starting the sentence with it and then use either active or passive voice, as grammatically necessary. Passive forms aren't intrinsically a problem if the sentences start with logically flowing information. Passive forms only become a problem if they're used repeatedly, with inappropriately "thematicized" information. Likewise, inappropriately thematicizing "we", merely to make an active-voice sentence for philosophical reasons, would call attention to itself if it didn't help flow of information. Editors (or revisers or translators) should focus less on whether one voice is "better" than another and more on what information should naturally flow from the end of the last sentence.

The question arose as to whether "we" was appropriate when co-authors did not exist. Sylwia Ufnalska said that some of her clients in Poland claimed that this use of "we" was common practice. She did not like the practice but thought "I" could be awkward in a sentence and would prefer structures like "In my opinion". Marcin Kozak viewed "we" as appropriate when the readers were included: "We will discuss the results". Marge Berer discouraged use of "we" for anything except "we the authors" because of the difficulty of otherwise knowing whether the authors meant "we in the community" or, "we who agree such and such" or, "we right-thinking people", etc.

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3. Webster R. Let's re-write the scientific paper. *European Journal of Soil Science* 2003;54(2):215–218.

Technical Tips: Spelling out abbreviations in Word documents

You can use Autotext to easily spell out abbreviations – or add long chunks of text.

Say the abbreviation UTI has been abbreviated throughout your document. On first encountering it, highlight the spelt out form – if the author hasn't spelt it out, type in the full version, and then highlight it.

Then press Alt+F3 – a box pops up, into which you type UTI, and then choose OK.

The next time you come to UTI in the text, put your cursor within or immediately after the "word" (you don't even have to highlight the whole word), press F3 – and the abbreviation is spelt out for you.

This little manoeuvre is also useful for inserting bits of text you commonly use, for example certain queries to authors. You just need to think of, and remember, an abbreviation or short phrase to type in, after which you immediately press F3.

If you do forget what abbreviations you've used for those chunks of text, check in the Autotext file (it's one of the Autocorrect Options under Tools).

But it's probably easier to keep a list of your abbreviations somewhere (maybe on yet another post-it note, which will join those already clustered around your computer screen). Over time, you can build up quite a list – and save a lot of time, trouble, and typing.

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