

Lesson 3. Writing in plain English

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Table of contents

What is plain English?

Rule 1: Use shorter sentences.

Rule 2: Use active sentences where possible

Restructuring sentences

Rule 3: Using 'We' and 'I'

Rule 4: Jargon

Clearing up jargon

Two more examples

Rule 5: Giving instructions

Rule 6: Avoid turning verbs into nouns

Rule 7: Use lists, numbers and headings where possible

Check your understanding

What is plain English?



Activity

The UK's [Plain English Campaign](#) say that writing in plain English is about crafting a message that is:

written with the reader in mind and with the right tone of voice, that is clear and concise.

Click the key words or phrases in the above sentence and see if they get highlighted. You should be able to see 3 phrases highlighted. A comment will appear in the box below when you choose an appropriate phrase above.

Writing in plain English is not about 'dumbing down' your research, it's about making your argument clearer.

You can apply plain English language writing techniques to many types of documents, including journal articles. The main principle of writing in plain English is to use active language instead of passive language.

Active language is particularly useful as it can:

- shorten sentences and therefore decrease your word count
- make your abstract clear and concise, which will encourage people to read your full paper
- make passages of your paper clear and concise
- help take out the clutter, redundant words and jargon
- overall, make your article more coherent (and not rambling!)

Here is a handout that outlines [the 7 principles of plain English and how best to use them](#).

Let's go through each rule and see how you can apply it to writing your paper.

You can go through this resource in any of these languages: English, French, Spanish or Vietnamese. Use the language drop-down setting near the top left corner (next to 'INASP Moodle') to change the language. Translation from English to the other languages is automatically done by Google Cloud Translation. INASP is not responsible for the quality of the translated content.

Rule 1: Use shorter sentences.

Often, long sentences can be split into 2 sentences to make a point clearer. You can use a combination of long and short sentences in any section of your journal article: abstract, introduction, methodology, discussion and conclusion.

Take a look at this example of a long sentence:

We hypothesized that an ontogenetic switch to large prey items becomes a limiting factor at some point during early life growth in juvenile habitats, ultimately reducing growth (and thus also maturation) rates in nearshore habitats, thereby incentivizing a potential habitat switch to reefs. ([Source](#)).

This can be split into 2 sentences:

We hypothesized that an ontogenetic switch to large prey items becomes a limiting factor at some point during early life growth in juvenile habitats. This ultimately reduces growth (and thus also maturation) rates in nearshore habitats, thereby incentivizing a potential habitat switch to reefs.

The highlighted text shows how splitting a long sentence helps the reader understand the logic and helps move argument move along. Be careful about using pronouns like **'this'** or **'it'**, as sometimes when you split a sentence into two and start the second sentence with such a pronoun, it can be unclear what you are referring to.

Does shortening a sentence change the meaning?

No. We can, in fact, convey complex things using everyday language. Take a look at how [Cancer Research UK](#) use everyday language to explain the technical information commonly used in clinical trials:

How well treatment works (response)

Many researchers use something called the Response Evaluation Criteria in Solid Tumours (RECIST) to analyse how well trial treatments work. They measure the area of cancer on a scan before and after treatment, to see how much it's changed.

Complete response	There are no signs of cancer on scans or tests
Partial response	The cancer has shrunk by at least one third (30%) and there are no signs the cancer has grown anywhere else in the body
Stable disease	The cancer has stayed the same size, it hasn't got better or worse
Disease progression	The cancer has grown by at least a fifth (20%) or there are new areas of cancer
Overall response rate (ORR)	The total number of people whose cancer has either gone away (a complete response) or shrunk (a partial response)

Source: Cancer Research UK, 2019

Rule 2: Use active sentences where possible

There are 3 parts to almost every sentence in English. These are the:

1. **SUBJECT** (the person, or thing doing the action)
2. **VERB** (the action, or the 'doing' word)
3. **OBJECT** (the person, or thing that the action is done to)



Activity

Passive sentences are ordered like this: **OBJECT >> VERB >> SUBJECT**.

The workshop was facilitated by Andy.

Click the key words or phrases in the above sentence and see if they get highlighted. You should be able to see three highlights. A comment will appear in the box below when you choose an appropriate word/phrase above.

Note that there are 6 words in the sentence.

Turning passive sentences into active sentences means changing the structure so that the **SUBJECT** (the person or thing doing the action) comes first.

If we changed the passive sentence above to be an active sentence, it would look like this:

Andy facilitated the workshop.

Note that by making the sentences more active, we have reduced the word count from 6 to 4! 😊

A useful, easy rule to help you change passive sentences into active sentences is to use: **WHO DID WHAT?**

Andy (WHO) facilitated the workshop (DID WHAT)



Activity

Sometimes when you turn a passive sentence into an active sentence, there may be several options available to you that will allow you to get rid of redundant words and add new information for clarity. For example:

The quality of care of these patients is to be improved by use of evidence-based guides and tools.

This sentence is passive and it does not state where the patients are, so we have to add this information to make this clearer for the reader. Let's say that the patients are in Vietnam.

It also does not state the topic of the evidence-based guides. Let's say that the guides are about diabetes control.

The restructured, active sentence could then be rewritten in the following way:

Evidence-based guides and tools on diabetes control will improve the quality of care of Vietnamese patients.

Click on the 2 phrases in the above sentence that contain new information. A comment will appear in the box below when you choose each appropriate phrase above.



Now take a closer look at the above sentence and see if there are any redundant words.

Reveal

Once we have removed the redundant words, we can rewrite the sentence in any of these ways:

Evidence-based guides on diabetes control will improve care for Vietnamese patients.

Evidence-based guides on diabetes control will improve patient care in Vietnam.

Notice how clear these sentences are. This is therefore a useful writing technique to use if you are making recommendations in the conclusion section your paper.

You'll also notice that we've reduced the word count again! 😊

Restructuring sentences



Activity

Restructure each of the below sentences as per the instructions. Write your response in the box below each original sentence.

1. Restructure this sentence to make it more active. Do not change any other aspect of the sentence.

Monitoring and supervision visits were made by the researchers.

Click Reveal to see our suggested answer.

Reveal

2. Restructure this sentence to make it more active. Use the plurals of words if you need to.

Co-ordination meetings had been held by the district and cluster supervisors with the respective District Development Committee (DDC).

Click Reveal to see our suggested answer.

Reveal

3. Restructure this sentence to make it more active and edit out the redundant words.

It was decided by the governor that the assistance to the project was to be suspended.

Click Reveal to see our suggested answer.

Reveal

4. Restructure this sentence to make it more active and edit out the redundant words.

Research was conducted by the China team, between July and November 2012, in coordination with the provisional Centres for Disease Control.

Click Reveal to see our suggested answer.

Reveal

Rule 3: Using 'We' and 'I'

This rule is an extension of using active sentences. You'll notice from the previous exercise that when we write in an active voice, it becomes clearer as to WHO did what action.

WHO did the action is very important to acknowledge, as it makes the decisions made throughout the research process more transparent. There is an ethical argument for this; as researchers we are responsible for the decisions we make throughout the research cycle and we are accountable for these actions. This is why the words '**we**' and '**I**' are useful in the methodology section of your paper, as it's clearer to the reader **WHO did what**.



Activity

The excerpt below is adapted from the methods section of the following article: Ravi Murugesan, Andy Nobes, and Joanna Wild. "A MOOC approach for training researchers in developing countries." *Open Praxis* 9.1 (2017): 45-57.

Click the option that conveys the meaning more clearly. If you click the correct option, you will see it highlighted in green.

Option A: It was important to design the course to not take more than three to four hours of study time per week, as most learners who take our courses have full-time responsibilities.

Option B: We designed the course to not take more than three to four hours of study time per week, as most learners who take our courses have full-time responsibilities.

The excerpt below is adapted from the methods section of the following article: Kimirei, I. A., et al. "What drives ontogenetic niche shifts of fishes in coral reef ecosystems?". *Ecosystems* 16.5 (2013): 783-796.

Click the option that conveys the meaning more clearly.

Option A: We used hook and line angling, and a fyke net to supplement fish catch in the mangrove habitat and guard against gear selectivity in fish size.

Option B: Hook and line angling, and a fyke net were used to supplement fish catch in the mangrove habitat and guard against gear selectivity in fish size.

Using phrases that explicitly state what you did will also help you explain your reasoning in any subsequent sentences. For example, the highlighted text below shows one important research decision per sentence:

We examined differences in diet, growth, maturity, and survival from predation among habitats through ontogeny, coupled to differences in food abundances. This enabled us to critically evaluate the degree to which these ecological factors differ among habitats and life stages, and why and when ontogenetic niche shifts may occur more generally in tropical coastal environments. (Source: Kimirei I. A., et al., 2013)

And remember, if you use words like '**we**' and '**I**' then it keeps your word count low. 😊

Rule 4: Jargon

What is jargon? Let's take a closer look. The Oxford Dictionary defines jargon as:

'Special words or expressions used by a profession or group that are difficult for others to understand.'

We see jargon everywhere. It's used in law (eg, legal jargon), medicine and healthcare (eg, instructions by and for healthcare workers), government departments (eg, legal or policy documents) and in development work (eg, use of acronyms by organisations).

A common feature of jargon is that it is a specially crafted language that is understood by a profession or sector. Also, it often contains abbreviations and acronyms that only a professional group would easily understand.

Although technical accuracy is important, this is not the same as jargon. And it's fine to use technical language where your audience understands it, for example in a specialist journal or a document for a specialist audience.



Activity

Take a look at this extract from an FAO technical paper aimed at researchers and policymakers. Click on all the words/phrases that you think are jargon. We think there are at least 6 instances, but you may think there are more, depending on your knowledge of the agriculture sector.

One institutional innovation that has been promoted to increase agricultural productivity, particularly on smallholder farms, is contract farming (CF). By linking farmers to the value chain, CF offers a path from subsistence to commercial agriculture for some smallholders, and can provide access to credit, technology and markets. Agribusinesses, whether parastatal or private, have the capital and resources needed. For the agribusiness, CF also obviates the need to acquire land. Policymakers therefore view CF as a potential "win-win" solution for farmers, processors and society.

(Source: Menezes, A., N. Ridler, and P. Murekezi. *Contract farming and public-private partnerships in aquaculture. Lessons learned from East African countries*. Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, 2018.)

Click reveal below to check if you spotted the jargon in the above paragraph.

Reveal

Clearing up jargon

Most jargon can be cleared up by shortening long sentences, explaining technical terms and by using a more active voice where possible.



Activity

Take a look at a revised version of the extract shown on the previous page. Jargon that has been edited has been highlighted in blue, while jargon that has been retained is in pink. When you click on a highlighted phrase, a comment will appear in the box below.

Contract farming (CF) – agricultural production based on an agreement between the farmer and the buyer – has been promoted to increase agricultural productivity, particularly on smallholder farms. By linking farmers and farming processors to the value chain, CF offers a path from subsistence to commercial agriculture for some smallholders, and can provide access to credit, technology and markets. Agribusinesses, whether parastatal or private, have the capital and resources needed. For the agribusiness, CF also removes the need to acquire land. Policymakers therefore view CF as a potential “win-win” solution for farmers, processors and society.

Two more examples

Can you spot the jargon in the examples below? How can these sentences be made clearer?

Obesity is a significant factor contributing to the incidence of coronary disease

Reveal

IPTp is part of ANC in Ghana.

Reveal



Reflect and jot down: what types of jargon does your research field like to use?

Rule 5: Giving instructions

Instructions are active sentences by their very nature and you can use this rule in your journal article. For example, if you have a section in your paper that refers to your dataset, you can use this principle to write an instruction to the reader to access the dataset.

For example, a passive sentence for an instruction might read:

The dataset can be accessed by contacting the authors.

But you can change this to an instruction by firstly putting the reader first to make it more active:

If you want to access the dataset, please contact the authors.

Then you can make it shorter by editing out the redundant words:

To access the dataset, contact the authors.

A golden rule of giving instructions, which many find uncomfortable at first, is to leave out the word *'please'*, as you are *instructing* the reader, not *asking* them to do something.

Giving instruction is a useful technique in briefings and websites, for example *'download the summary here'*.

Rule 6: Avoid turning verbs into nouns

One of the skills of a researcher is the ability to write about research in different ways. This can be tricky when all we know is the formal language that we used throughout school, college and university.

One of the quirks (you could call it jargon) of formal language is that we turn verbs (action words) into nouns (concepts, emotions, things or people). This process is called '**nominalisation**', and we do this a lot in our writing, often without realising. This is a habit that can be difficult to unlearn, but if you can master it, then the clarity of your writing will improve dramatically.

Here are examples of verbs that have been turned into nouns (they have been nominalised). How many do you use regularly?

Verb	Noun form of the verb
Complete	Completion
Introduce	Introduction
Provide	Provision
Fail	Failure
Arrange	Arrangement
Investigate	Investigation
Expand	Expansion
Discuss	Discussion
Implement	Implementation
Collect	Collection
Verify	Verification

When we turn verbs into nouns, we make the writing passive, longer and less clear.



Activity

Take a look at the sentences below with the nominalised words highlighted. Rewrite the sentences so that they are more active and they do not use nominalised words, then click reveal for our suggested answers.

An investigation of the adaptation of the new coastal resource management tool in Palawan was conducted by the research team.

Reveal

Our pilot online course in research writing was successfully offered to a group of 28 Rwandan researchers with a 90% completion rate.

Reveal

There was a realisation that high-bandwidth elements such as video lectures are not practical.

Reveal

If you want to learn more about how we can avoid using nominalisations, visit this [webpage at Purdue University](#).

Rule 7: Use lists, numbers and headings where possible

Lists, numbers and headings are your friends! They help tidy up your text, signpost the reader, and present research findings in a clear way.

Here are 2 good examples of how you can use lists in your journal article to separate important information:

To meet this challenge, we formed a team of “guest facilitators” drawn from (1) the AuthorAID network of voluntary mentors from our mentoring scheme; (2) researchers in developing countries who have attended AuthorAID train-the-trainers workshops; and (3) high achievers from previous online courses.

(Source: Murugesan, Ravi, Andy Nobes, and Joanna Wild. “A MOOC approach for training researchers in developing countries.” *Open Praxis* 9.1 (2017): 45-57.)

To aid readability, (1) each lesson page usually had not more than about 100 words, (2) short sentences, normally 10 to 20 words long, were used, and (3) difficult words were avoided. To sustain the learners’ interest, each lesson had a mix of content and thought-provoking questions.

(Source: Murugesan, Ravi. “Promising outcomes of an online course in research writing at a Rwandan university.” *European Science Editing* 38.3: 60-64.)

Remember, it is acceptable to use digits for all numbers and percentages, except at the beginning of sentences.

Check your understanding



Activity

Improve this paragraph using what you have learned so far. Write your revised version in the box below.

Furthermore, this study can explore various factors through higher level statistical analysis such as logistic regression analysis mainly to measure the main predictors of knowledge (at least 3 danger signs) about danger sign during pregnancy, current practice of early marriage and incidents of violence within community.

Click reveal to see our suggested answer.

Reveal
