

[Day & Castel 2011](#), [Hofmann 2009](#), [Schimel 2011](#)

Brown et al. (1993) RIGHTING SCIENTIFIC WRITING: FOCUS ON YOUR MAIN MESSAGE!
Rangel. J. 15(2), 183-89.

STEPS

0. **Mind map** and 'group plan' with collaborators.

As first author, make notes, collate discussion. YOU are the one primarily responsible for deciding what goes into the paper and what doesn't.

Don't worry about self-censoring during this 'mind mapping' step.

1. Write down your **main message** in 25 words or less. You may have multiple lines of evidence in your paper, but you should have one main message. If you can't think of just one, you are either not focussing enough, or you have more than one paper to write.

2. Write a **working abstract**. It should answer the following, explicitly:

- Why are you doing this? [context and aim]
- What did you do? [methods]
- What did you find? [core results – say something useful]
- What does this mean? [interpretation in context]
- What is it good for? [application]

3. Based on your main message and working abstract, **write down your title**. Or perhaps 3 alternatives if you can't decide. In most cases, especially for primary data papers, give your main result in your title.

4. **Send** your main message, working abstract and proposed title(s) to your co-authors. After their feedback, revise them and send back. Iterate until everyone is happy (this is, of course, a relative emotion).

5. Decide on **display items**. Impose a strict **upper limit of 6** (any mix of figures and/or tables, multi-panel figures are acceptable if they relate to the same theme). If you have more than 6 items, rank in order of importance and move the lowest ranked ones to the online supplementary information. You may have fewer than 6.

6. **Create the figures and tables**, and write the legends for each. Ensure that each legend is **stand-alone** from the main text.

7. **Circulate** your choice of (up to) 6 display items with legends to your co-authors. Revise accordingly, iterate until everyone is happy with selection and presentation.

8. Plan the **paper's skeleton** (this requires careful thinking, and might take you up to a day to do properly – but believe us, it is time well spent!):

- Decide on length of main text. That is, 20 double-spaced manuscript pages, or 6 printed pages (as it would appear in the journal). How long is this? Approximately 3000 words of main text. If you need to write more (e.g., detailed methods), it must go in the supplementary information.
- Work out the relative size of each section (Introduction, Methods, Results, Discussion, Conclusion). A rule of thumb split is 600, 900, 500, 800, 200, but it varies depending on how much context setting is required, how many lines of evidence you are using, etc. Yet, despite this, it surprisingly often works out at roughly this ratio.
- For each section, plan the paragraphs: write out each paragraph's main message in 15 words or less (similar to the concept of the paper's main message – remembering that each paragraph

should be about only one thing). Then, play around with the arrangement of the paragraphs until you are satisfied with the logical flow.

- If you wish, add to each paragraph some additional notes, key words, indications of reference to cite, display items to refer to, etc. Helps elaborate on the 15-word main message.
- Circulate the skeleton to co-authors and invite critical feedback. Emphasise that this is the appropriate time to fix problems with flow, ideas/content, thrust towards main message, etc.

9. Write the paragraphs! Add the references (via Endnote or similar) as you go.

10. Revise the working abstract into a final draft form, based on the final structure and content of the paper. This now becomes your paper's abstract.

11. Circulate the finished draft ms to your co-authors and give them sufficient time (say 2 weeks) for feedback.

Some other points

- It takes discipline to follow these 11 steps.
- Strategic repetition of your main message in the Intro, Results, Discussion and Conclusion is very important.
- Lead with your main points. This is especially important for the Results and Discussion. Your most important result should come first, your least important last. Your Discussion should start, in the first paragraph, with a strategic repetition of your main message.
- You can be working on later steps whilst you await feedback from co-authors, but try to limit this to stuff you will do anyway (e.g., reference collation, reading, etc.).
- Never *demand* feedback from your co-authors. Request it, and make the point that it's optional for any stage except comments on the final draft. If they give none at a particular stage, it might just be that they're entirely happy with what you've done.
- [Avoid superfluous/tortured language and 'verbiage'.](#)
- Stick strictly to your overall main text word limit (3500 words for a primary research paper), try to limit to 50 references; NEVER more than 6 display items.
- Feel free to ask questions – be sure to reply to all.

