Advice on Writing Advice

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Abstract

Writing rarely comes naturally. It typically requires lots of practice to learn to write well. Unsurprisingly then, there is a lot of writing advice. Here we offer some advice to students writing research articles on how to make use of these resources. We highlight two common barriers to reading advice and, once past those, how to implement the advice you've read. To get you started, we close with a list of our top pieces of writing advice.

1 Main text

Lots of things that seem like they should be easy and are actually hard. This includes playing music, many sports (basketball, snooker, cross country skiing) and other things we may have tried as kids (sewing, woodworking) that appear easy and may be easy to start doing, but are hard to do very well. Writing is one of these things, and perhaps a particularly painful one as we often think that writing should be easy.

It is easy enough to write a text or email and convey what you're trying to say, but formal writing is much more difficult. Formal writing can feel especially challenging because: (1) it's non-algorithmic—there's no repeatable recipe to follow the way there is for lab assays and casseroles, (2) we generally don't know what we want to say ahead of time, and (3) without the natural flow of a back-and-forth conversation it's hard for writers tell what the reader needs. All of this can make writing feel especially frustrating. The result is that many academics—whose profession is about the development and transmission of new knowledge—write poorly.

We argue that most academic writing is bad for the same reason that most writing in general is bad: because writing is hard. It's difficult to write clearly, it takes effort and practice, and, on top of all that, many people don't see any continuous path of effort that would take any particular piece of writing from bad to good. In that way, writing is like drawing or making a good soup: we can know what we're trying to convey, recognize that our current output is terrible, but have no idea what direction to go in to improve it.

The combination of the central importance of writing to conveying our brilliant new knowledge and the complexity of making bad writing better means the market for advice on how to write better is vast. We know because we have read a chunk of it. We're not writing teachers, but we write for our professions. As academics ourselves who want to write better, we've each read a lot of writing advice, from books to articles to blogs and in between. We know the amount of

advice, and its sometimes contradictory nature, can feel frustrating—adding more frustration to an already frustrating task. To reduce some of that frustration, here we provide short advice on how to benefit from writing advice.

Our advice on advice

If you want to write well you generally need some faith in the reality that it is hard and thus some dedication to the effort it will take to get better at something that is hard. Reading writing advice and trying to implement useful advice is one major path to better writing, alongside two often mentioned pieces of writing advice: write regularly, and read.

Once you start reading writing advice though you may stumble across the following problems, which we suggest—with some additional explanation—you muster your way through:

1. **You dislike the advice.** This happens a lot. For example, we compared writing books we like and found we often hated the ones the other liked. The advice was not always very different but the tone or format annoyed one of us, while the other was enthralled, or at least saw its utility.

   The reality is that you don't have to like writing advice to gain from reading about it. If you read enough about writing, you'll find pieces that stay with you and help you write better. And, as you wade through the parts you don't like, you may slowly realize some of it is advice you desperately need. If not, you might at least learn where old rules you have heard and disagree with come from (for example, why your postdoc advisor told you to never start a sentence with 'however').

   Writing advice is usually fairly well written. So, even if you feel horribly at odds with the advice, you're reading some decent writing. This generally makes you write better.

2. **You believe the advice does not apply to you.** Some of it likely doesn't, but much of it does. Good writing is non-algorithmic, but sentences, paragraphs and papers that make sense to people often follow certain rules. You likely appreciate writing that follows many of these rules, such as giving readers information in an order they can digest or putting groups of ideas together.

   Some writers enjoyably break these rules. However, much like Picasso, they are often experts at following the rules before they try breaking them. We suggest you follow this approach as well. Be uniquely gifted at excellent rule-following writing before you break out of the box. If you do start breaking out of the box, solicit and take feedback on whether it's working.

Now that we're past two common problems, you may find that you need advice on implementing all the advice you're reading.

1. **If you see advice repeatedly in recent books on how to write, try it.** This follows from our previous advice, but is a little more nuanced.

   Writing books comes in all sorts of shapes and sizes, from various historical decades, cultural norms and distinct viewpoints. You might not like all the advice. You might

disagree with it vehemently. But if you see the same point made across many different sources of writing advice, you should try to follow it. Remember you're writing for your career so you can always try advice for a month, a year—or two—then decide if it is working. But if you don't try it, then you may be tacitly committing to stick with your poor writing.

2. **Remember, getting better at writing takes more than just reading advice about writing.** Read writing advice! Read, 'my beautiful intellectuals,' read (adapted from Tim Minchin UWA address). But don't forget that to get better at writing you have to write.

Next steps

If reading this has gotten you excited by the idea of reading some writing advice, here's a short list to consider.

1. *On Writing Well: The Classic Guide to Writing Non-fiction* by William Zinsser is a beautiful book, with all sorts of fantastic and depressingly simple advice, written so well that you can re-read it many times.

2. Strunk & White's *The Elements of Style* was written separately in time by Will Strunk and his student E. B. White (of *Charlotte's Web* fame). Strunk wrote the original commands, which White wrote up later, with some adjusting, and added a section, 'An Approach to Style,' at the end. The book then is a mixture of types of advice: grammatical advice interwoven with ideas about organization and style. While parts definitely feel anachronistic, it is filled with good advice and wonderfully short. The writing by White, in particular, shows a man in possession of great writing skill, admitting all the traumas and tribulations of writing alongside advice of how to succeed.

3. Williams and Bizup's *Style: Lessons in Clarity & Grace*—and the much smaller 'Basics' edition—lays out how to write clearly and directly with examples of common problems and how they are fixed. It's dull, but it covers the rules of good writing well.

4. *How to Write a Lot: A Practical Guide to Productive Academic Writing* by Paul Silvia is a short book about how to write well, with a focus less on style and more on the scheduling and perseverance part. It can be ideal for folks procrastinating about writing by reading about writing because it lays out all the rules about writing in short order (which are: to write a lot, you need to sit down and write, regularly).

This an extremely short list. It's missing a number of excellent books, as well as entire types of writing books you should consider reading. For example, books and articles on creativity or engaging your audience, books specific to your subject that cover the intricacies of the full process (in ecology, this would include *Stephen Heard's The Scientist's Guide to Writing*, which says a bunch of the stuff you're supposed to pick up from the ether: how to make a figure, write in the tense expected in different sections of a research article, pick a journal), or books dedicated to the love of punctuation—to mention just a few. Ideally you'll be reading a lot and cover these genres as you go. We also provide a longer list of books in our appendix.

If you want to get started right now on reading writing advice, here's our short list of what we

think is some of the best advice. If you read more advice, you'll see this advice again.

1. Write for your reader and be kind to them. Or, from Strunk & White: have "... deep sympathy for the reader. Will [Strunk] felt that the reader in serious trouble most of the time, floundering in a swamp, and that it was the duty of anyone attempting to write English to drain this swamp quickly and get the reader up on dry ground." Orwell put it more simply with: Totalitarians write poorly because they want to obfuscate.
2. Focus on immediate and long-term goals and skip the intermediate goals (like getting your article accepted, published etc.).
3. Make sure you have the much-needed gap.
4. Live to write another day (you don't have to get everything you know or found in this one article/book/paper).
5. Accept that you'll revise.
6. Learn the basic rules before you break them. If you're not sure what they are, read advice books that lay them out.
7. Murder your darlings. This advice is often given (and attributed). It generally means – if you're in love with some turn of phrase or such that you have written, take it out. We all fall in love with things we write and hold tight to them; when you get feedback to delete something you love, remember this advice. But it also relates, for me, to learning the rules before you break them, which includes....
8. Outline, or otherwise find a way to"work from a suitable design."
9. Think of the paragraph as the unit of writing.
10. Omit needless words

How did you do? Did you manage to get past feelings that you dislike the advice or it doesn't apply to you? We hope so. And if you keep reading and especially writing—practicing writing by writing—your efforts should make you a better writer. The only way to find out is to try it.

2 Appendix: A longer list of books/articles

1. Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art by Scott McCloud
2. Stuff by Robert Boice is also good, such as the writing section of *Advice for New Faculty Members*, it shows some graphs in case you still want to believe spontaneous writers write better.
3. Made to Stick: Why Some Ideas Survive and Others Die (Heath & Heath) is not written as well as I would like, but all the points are valid and not put together so well anywhere else (that I am aware of).
4. The article that slams Strunk and White (??)
5. Loehle's (article) classic on creativity in science compares your ideas to a zoo of animals, in a very good way. *A guide to increased creativity in research—inspiration or perspiration?*
6. Pinker
7. Orwell
8. Fowler Becker
9. Higgins
10. Virginia Tufte
11. Josh Schimel's Writing Science: How to Write Papers That Get Cited and Proposals That Get Funded
12. Stephen Heard's The Scientist's Guide to Writing (`https://press.princeton.edu/books/paperback/9780691170220/the-scientists-guide-to-writing`), which I like as it says a bunch of the stuff you're supposed to pick up from the ether: how to make a figure, write in the tense expected in different sections of a research article, pick a journal, how to get your paper rejected and move on and upward with the arts ... on and on. *Chicago Manual of Style* for arguments about whether you can capitalize a word after a semi-colon, plus they have a *Manual for Writers of Research Papers, Theses and Dissertations* that is handy.
13. My own advice for writing research articles: `https://statmodeling.stat.columbia.edu/2014/01/14/advice-writing-research-articles/`
14. Basbøll
15. Beverly Cleary
16. If, but, therefore book.

3 Appendix: Incomplete longer version of writing advice

1. "Keep it simple while telling a coherent, compelling story" (McCarthy)

2. Read writing advice! People who write it are often good writers so it's good reading and thinking/reading/working on writing better likely will improve your writing.

3. Read more. To be a good writer you need to read good writing and develop an ear for what sounds good, and maybe eventually you'll notice why it works (if you read a lot of writing advice especially).

4. Take advice. Even if you love how to write, try advice you're given, especially advice you have a feeling may apply to you (and/or if you see it often). Getting too attached to your style can prevent this, so remember to let go a little. Try it for a while, see how it feels, see how readers respond—you can always go back to your old style, but you cannot make your writing better if you never change it.

5. Remember your reader when receiving advice. Writing is less about you and more about your reader, so when people read your writing and give you advice, you're getting info from a most valuable source—a reader: appreciate this and take it under real consideration, especially when your readers may have very different perspectives from you. For example, non-native English speakers often tell me things about English words that are not true for native English or American speakers, (for example, 'alter' has a negative connotation) but I often find they are true for second-language English speakers and for some of my research the main audience is second- language speakers so I try to make the changes.

6. Write the talk first, then write the paper from the talk (from my colleague Ben Cook): often it becomes clear in a talk what's missing or mis-organized, so sorting this out first can help you write a better paper later.

4 Miscellaneous

Berger 1990

> According to Nordic myth, the modem world begins when Odin slays Ymir, the Ice Giant. Ymir's offspring drown in his blood, but two survive and start a new race of frost giants. Lodged in Utgard, they pose a constant threat. Only Odin's son Thor, brandishing Mjollnir, the magic hammer, keeps them in check. The pronounced and abrupt changes in climate during the Glacial-Holocene transition suggest that the luck of battle switched sides frequently before Odin and Thor won over Ymir and his kin.