

Advice on Writing Advice

Andrew Gelman & E. M. Wolkovich

Last updated: March 27, 2023

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 out there. Here we offer some advice to students writing research articles on how to make use of these resources.

1 Short version

Lots of things seem like they should be easy and are actually hard. This includes many sports (basketball, snooker, cross country skiing) and other things we may have tried as kids (sewing, woodworking) that appear easy and 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 repeatably recipe to follow the way there is for many lab assays, (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, not just because writing is hard, but also because it feels that it should be easy. The result is that much academics, who are in a 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 is bad: because writing is hard. It's difficult to write clearly, it takes effort and it takes 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. You can immediately tell that a soup tastes bad; that doesn't mean you know what should be added or subtracted from the recipe to turn it into the delicious meal that you would like. In that way, writing is like drawing: we can know what we're trying to convey, recognize that our depiction is terrible, but have no idea what direction to go 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 wide. We know, as 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 itself—adding frustration to an already frustrating task. Thus, 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 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 often was necessarily different—though sometimes it was—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'—Strunk & White).

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 them before they ever 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.

3. **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.

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

Recommendations

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 each common problem and how they are fixed.
4. *How to Write a Lot: A Practical Guide to Productive Academic Writing* by Paul Silvia was ideal for E.M.W. when she was procrastinating about writing her PhD 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. 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. 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.

We cannot resist the urge to give our top list of writing advice...

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/9780691171111/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 Incomplete longer version of writing advice

4 Next steps ...

1. The word doc has a lot of stuff. I suggest leave it all there and start here anew...

2. Come up with a quick outline here.
3. Write a short form of the paper and send to Andrew.

5 Miscellaneous

Berger 1990

According to Nordic myth, the modern 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 kins.