Style

The nuts and bolts of writing papers

Number 3. Style and grammar

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Let's face it, if you're writing about validating a rating scale, not many people are going to be glancing at the last page of the paper to see how it ends. The aim is not for the reader to go away breathlessly saying "I couldn't put the *Journal* down this month". The principal consideration is to convey the information as clearly and concisely as possible. An efficient way of doing this is in the passive tense, but do not feel limited by this classic style. If you enjoy writing, why not let a little personality through? There is probably more room for this in papers that are not tied to methods and results sections, but if you have a chance to throw in a bit of personal style, why not let rip . . . tell 'em good. Which brings me to the next point.

The split infinitive and all that

Me and my colleagues come across some grammar thatd make some folks hare stand on end but whats the bottom line its this – you can still understand it. *However*, it does not necessarily make a good impression. Hopefully (now there's a word!) grammar is not merely a game of one-upmanship, but I sometimes wonder. People who think they know about grammar (generally large-foreheaded types with piercing eyes) will drone on about what is right and what is wrong. People who do really know seem to be of the opinion that grammar is not a set of prescriptive rules, but rather a description of the way people (that is, you and me . . . I mean of course you and I) speak the language.

One point of grammar I often correct is the use of 'that' and 'which'. In the first (1926) edition of *Modern English Usage* Mr Fowler wrote at length about the correct usage of the two words. By the second edition (1965) he had given up, and wrote: "What grammarians say should be has perhaps less influence on what shall be than even the more modest of them realize. . . . The relations between *that, who,* and *which* have come to us from our forefathers as an odd jumble, and plainly show that the language has not been neatly constructed by a master builder. . . ."

He goes on to say, "The two kinds of relative clause, to one of which *that* and to the other of which *which* is appropriate, are the defining and the non-defining; and if writers would agree to regard *that* as the defining relative pronoun, and *which* as the non-defining, there would be much gain. . . . Some there are who follow this principle now; but it would be idle to pretend that it is the practice either of the most or of the best writers."

Of the split infinitive, Mr Fowler says "It does not add to a writer's readableness if readers are pulled up now & again to wonder – Why this distortion? Ah, to be sure, a non-split die hard!" He goes on to give an example: "Both Germany & England have done ill in not combining to forbid flatly hostilities."

Emphasis

Some authors love to underline things, and this comes out in *italic*. Italic is used to indicate stress *or* importance; some *very stressed authors* say *very many important things*, and to make sure that *everybody* knows this bit is *very important*, they *like to emphasise it*. *What* would happen if *they* knew that *they* could **boldly emphasise things** I dread to think.

Colloquialisms

A reader in Japan may not have met the man on the Clapham omnibus.

Practical advice

The principal piece of advice is do not worry too much. If in doubt, keep it simple, and make sure that you avoid possible ambiguity. Also check for any mannerisms in your writing that might irritate some readers; for example, have you over-used certain words or phrases?

Next month: technical matters.