
Viewpoints

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Agriculture is one of the most important sectors of the economy because it provides people with food.

Is it? Does it? Yes, it is. And yes, it does. But should we say it in all scientific articles in the field of agriculture? No, we should not. Everyone knows it, irrespective of their background and knowledge. There is no need to inform the scientific community about it even once more.

The agriculture example is of course one of numerous examples that we could point out here. Authors love to start their papers with such clichés, let it be in agriculture, mathematics, health sciences, and the like. Why? I do not know, but I suppose they think that a paper has to start with general information. If one is productive in a particular field, after some time the opening paragraphs of one's papers may seem to have been written by using the copy and paste technique. (Is this not, by the way, what we would call plagiarism?) The point is simply that such openings are unnecessary because the fact that "agriculture is one of the most important sectors of the economy because it provides people with food" is well known by all of us. Do such authors assume that we don't know this?

How the paper opens is very important, and this is a cliché as well, but a very accurate one. The readers do not read the whole paper to find out whether it interests them or not; if reading the opening paragraph or two bores them rigid, there is a good chance they will choose one of the many other articles on the same topic. Nowadays they should have no problems with that. Kane writes, "You may play upon curiosity by opening with a short factual statement that raises more questions than it answers."¹ And though this does not have to be the best way of opening all papers, it says what is really important: first, that making the readers interested may help them to muddle through more

than just one paragraph; and second, reading between the lines, that not doing that may result in being neglected by all of those, or most of them, to whom the paper is directed.

MacPherson says, "Needless to say, the first paragraph is one of the most important of all ... It must lead on to what is to follow and be clearly related to it."² It must lead on to and be clearly related to what is to follow: neither tricky nor difficult, is it?

Kane adds, "You don't want to repel readers ... labouring the obvious also implies a low opinion of readers: don't tell them what a wheel is; they know."¹ This is what each author should remember, and each editor too, because it is the editor who accepts (and sometimes prepares) the final version of the paper. It is the editor's task not to accept the author's attempts to repel readers, attempts that are still so popular among science authors.

And finally, Knuth et al say, "The opening paragraph should be your best paragraph, and its first sentence should be your best sentence."³ And to this, there is nothing more to add.

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Non-native English writing: an underestimated problem?

Recently my husband, who works at a senior level in engineering science, grumbled about the amount of time he was having to put into reviewing research articles. "Doing the job of the supervisors" was how he put it. Articles are submitted that are nowhere near a "final" form. He implied that some supervisors, although clearly native speakers themselves, may not have taken the trouble to even look at the papers before allowing them to be sent in, let alone to check them through. And it is hard work for reviewers to understand the actual message and to evaluate and suggest effective improvements on the basis of a badly written text, particularly when the research may not even be directly

in their own field. My husband admitted to being very tempted, on occasions, to resort to sarcasm to relieve the frustration.

Shortly after this I was asked to read through a research paper by a colleague. The paper had been rejected following a pretty devastating report from one of the reviewers, in which the latter made reference to his subjective experience in trying to review the article ("nearly lost the will to live"). I knew enough about the research and the authors to be fairly certain of the quality of the scientific content of the paper, so it seemed unfortunate that it was rejected because the reviewer was unable to appreciate the quality of the

research presented because of what was, in his view, “bad” writing.

A few months ago I had also been asked to help with the revised version of an article by a different colleague; in this case the paper had been provisionally accepted on condition that fairly major revisions be carried out, including having the article checked by a native speaker “to improve the flow of the text” . There seems to be a problem in producing adequate English text, and these examples are not unique in my experience.

In some cases, as my husband implied, simply not enough effort is put into training English academic writing skills and ensuring that submitted texts are of sufficient quality. This is a serious problem in itself, but cultural differences may play a role. A literal translation is rarely enough to transform a non-English text into an effective English text, but not every author, or reviewer for that matter, appreciates that what constitutes “good” writing within one culture may be seen as “bad” writing in another.

Clyne describes a range of “national styles” of discourse, intricately bound to culture.¹ For example, English argumentation is basically linear in structure, whereas oriental languages tend to prefer more circular structures, with “the topic looked at from different angles”. German is another example of non-linear discourse: digressions are quite common in German texts, and even digressions from digressions, as the author seeks to exhibit knowledge and expertise. Clyne cites one extreme case in which in his (Anglo-Celtic) view “the structure may best be represented by cooked spaghetti”. Whereas the German reader would appreciate the depth and breadth of argumentation presented in this style, according to English standards it does not improve the readability of the text. On the other hand, a text written in the Anglo-Celtic style may be considered superficial by a German reader. Clyne casts “some doubt on the effectiveness of translations of academic publications which do not reorganize the discourse”.

In a later study Clyne compared differences in academic discourse patterns in texts by English- and German-speaking scholars, motivated among other things by the concern that:

“If English- and German-educated scholars do apply

different formal criteria to judge the acceptability of academic writings, and cultural differences make them susceptible to such judgments, international and academic exchange and cooperation may suffer.”²

Communication of scientific knowledge is vital for the development of our understanding, and editors and reviewers (mostly on a voluntary basis) have an important role in ensuring the validity and quality of the knowledge that is passed on. It would be unfortunate if good research were misinterpreted and perhaps even rejected as a result of cultural bias – or if reviewers were no longer willing to do the job because they have to put much time and effort into adapting the style of text (which, incidentally, is not always appreciated by the authors), when their main concern should be with the scientific content of the research presented.

Although this problem is not a new one, it still requires serious consideration. My husband’s view was that the problem is getting worse rather than better, perhaps as a result of recent trends that most research in his field is carried out (and published) by relatively inexperienced PhD students. This does not apply so much in my own field of work, but here too there is increasing pressure on researchers to publish their work internationally. Recognition of what constitutes an effective international academic text (including respect for different cultural viewpoints), and the will and the means to ensure that submitted texts meet a basic standard, could ease the burden on authors and reviewers alike.

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A subtle but profound change in citation practice

Moving away from the traditional practice for citing journal articles (year, volume, page numbers), the BMJ is as of 1 July using e-locators -- unique identifiers for BMJ articles, analogous to DOIs, which are unique identifiers of any electronic object. This is part of the BMJ’s new practice of continuous online publication, in which articles are posted on *bmj.com* as soon as they have been edited and proofed. Later the articles are gathered into print issues.

“The *BMJ* is the first major medical journal to move to

continuous publication,” says an editorial in the issue of 28 June, “but within publishing generally it is not alone. Broadcasters have long been posting news continuously on their websites, and many newspapers now post their articles online as soon as they are written, in advance of the next morning’s paper edition. People’s online behaviour suggests that their interest is primarily in individual articles and not in the print issues, or indeed even the journal in which they appear. The *BMJ* has for

some years been giving authors all the space they need for their research papers and providing shorter versions in print.”

The online “publish ahead of print” model that the BMJ used for research articles assumed that they would eventually be published in a print issue, and the ultimate citation for that article derived from that print issue. But now each article has only one (permanent) citation, not derived from print. When it was first published, an online first article had a year and a DOI (*BMJ* 2008 doi:10.1136/bmj.012334.5678.BM, for example) but when it later appeared in print, the citation became: *BMJ* 2008;336:123-5.

Now, that citation is *BMJ* 2008;337:a145 – from its first online appearance to entries in Medline, PubMed, and other bibliographical indexes. PubMed and ISI have been

informed about this change and are happy with it.

This subtle change marks a profound shift in publication practice. It will be interesting to see if other journals follow this route; what would motivate them to do so?

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Inquiring about impact factors

With great interest I have read Arjan Polderman’s editorial in the November 2007 issue of *ESE*,¹ because the correct use of impact factors is currently of great importance to journals and their authors. I fully endorse the accompanying official statement from EASE and believe that the editorial community may be interested in supplementary materials that shed some additional light on the subject.

In this connection I would recommend familiarization with the related polemics developed last winter in the *Journal of Cell Biology* and in Thomson Scientific’s Citation Impact Forum. The last portion of this discussion appeared in January in the *Journal of Cell Biology*.² Its corresponding webpage (www.jcb.org/cgi/content/full/180/2/254) contains references and links to the previous parts of this debate, as well as some extra comments.

In addition, for those concerned with the possible future of impact measures I would recommend the blog of Iowa

State University’s Science and Technology Librarian, Gerry McKiernan (<http://scholarship20.blogspot.com/2008/05/more-open-metrics-emerging-impact.html>), which holds a collection of related citations, references, and links, and which can be a good starting point for further inquiry into this interesting area.

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