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Writing in Psychology

Write what matters. If you don’t care about what you’re writing, neither will your readers.

Judy Reeves

I’m not a very good writer, but I’m an excellent rewriter.

James Michener

When you write about psychology or any of the other sciences, you are telling a story about people. Scientists are people, complete with individual personalities, likes and dislikes, and ordinary human qualities. The way they are affects what they do and how they do it. As such, “science writing is not so much about science, but about people—human problems and their solutions, curiosity and discovery” (Holland, 2007). In this book, you will learn how to convey your thoughts on the important problems and solutions in psychology.

It would be hard to overstate how important it is to write effectively. Writing constitutes one of the “3 Rs” of a basic education: reading, writing and ‘rithmetic. In the world of business, success is dependent, in part, on effective writing. For high-level positions, “writing is a ‘threshold skill’ for both employment and promotion” (College Board, 2004, p. 3). In one survey, many companies noted that writing was important in hiring. One respondent asserted that, “in most cases, writing ability could be your ticket
in … or it could be your ticket out” (College Board, 2004, p. 3). Potential employees who do not write well are unlikely to be hired and, if they are, are unlikely to be promoted.

Graduate school admission may also depend on writing effectiveness. Graduate programs routinely request essays as part of the application process. This writing is “often used to make final selections of students with similar GPAs and standardized test scores. If you are on the borderline of being accepted and the admissions committee could go either way, a sterling essay can increase your chances of success considerably” (American Psychological Association, 2007, p. 132).

The type of writing that you learn in psychology provides the same skills that will help advance your career. You develop clarity and logic in your ideas, along with a style that will engage the reader. If you create such prose, you will attract the attention of possible employers and graduate school admissions committees, and you will effectively present your ideas in psychology.

Writing in Psychology

Most people find psychology interesting and are eager to learn more about it. But they do not want to fight through dull and meaningless writing. As writers, our biggest hurdle involves turning complex, technical concepts into prose that others can appreciate.

Writing successfully is not easy. It requires knowledge of the topic we are addressing; judicious selection of the best words, phrases, and sentences; and editing and revising what we have composed. If there were a magical formula that we could use to generate good prose, everybody would succeed in communicating even complex and hard-to-understand ideas. If you have read the work of scientists, though, you will have discovered that, much of the time, scientific writing is dense and impenetrable. Many writers hide interesting concepts inside packages of dull prose.

On the other hand, people sometimes produce lively prose that may not convey the message accurately. Engaging, but deceptive, prose is no better than accurate, incomprehensible writing.

Fortunately, there is the desirable middle ground that Sigmund Freud and Williams James occupied, where prose was stimulating, not sleep inducing. Those of us who do not initially fall into this category can learn to communicate effectively. The purpose of this book is to help you find the
path to better communication. If you are motivated, you can work on the skills you need to get your point across meaningfully and accurately.

How Does Psychological Writing Differ from Other Kinds of Writing?

If you are trying to write like a psychologist, your style will be unlike much of the writing that you have done in the past. When psychologists write professionally, they usually attempt to convey specific information with a great deal of precision, minimizing ambiguity and the possibility of misunderstanding. The adage to say what you mean and mean what you say is highly appropriate for technical writing. You want your reader to understand the points you believe are important, and you want the reader to know exactly what you intend to say.

In other forms of writing, the emphasis may be on crafting artistic prose. The writer attempts to impress the reader with both content and style. The words that Shakespeare wrote for Macbeth illustrate the point. Macbeth lamented that life “is a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.” These poetic words convey Macbeth’s despair. However, Shakespeare’s style would not be appropriate for a scientist because the style of science is to be straightforward and unambiguous so the reader does not have to puzzle through the words to find meaning in them.

Psychologists often receive training in how to write objective, scientific papers. Unfortunately, the writing style is often “bloodless” (Josselson & Lieblich, 1996, p. 651), meaning that it is not particularly engaging. Sommer (2006) has encouraged psychologists to learn to write with color and style for lay audiences without sacrificing accuracy. But he also implied that the writing style in academic journals need not be dreary.

In scientific writing, we focus on the content of the message. The point is not to impress the reader with the prose, but to render the prose invisible while making the content foremost. This type of writing can be as difficult to do well as literary writing because you need to be concise without omitting important information; you need to choose your words carefully so they engage the reader without obscuring your point; you need to say enough to let your reader understand your message without being repetitive.

Another difference among the various types of writing is that, when we write scientifically or technically, we generally rely on a vocabulary specific
to the topic at hand. Professionals understand this wording, but others are not likely to be as conversant with the terminology. This is one of the reasons that scientific writing has the reputation of being incomprehensible—you need to know the jargon. (The concepts are also complex and may be hard to understand, which does not help.) Actually, technical terms are helpful because they let us communicate complex ideas clearly in a few words, although if you do not know the meanings of the words, the prose is meaningless or, at best, difficult.

Using APA Style

A further difference between scientific or technical writing and less formal writing is that, in science, authors typically follow a specific format in preparing reports. In psychology, for instance, authors use guidelines that appear in the Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association (American Psychological Association, 2010), commonly just called APA Style. (Some other disciplines, such as sociology, education, and nursing, may also use APA style.) Research reports usually include seven sections, as described in Table 1.1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section of the report</th>
<th>What the section contains</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Title page</td>
<td>The title of the paper, the names of authors, and the affiliations of the authors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abstract</td>
<td>A brief overview of the entire project of about 150 to 250 words</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>The background and logic of the study, including previous research that led to this project</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Method</td>
<td>Minute details of how the study proceeded, including descriptions of participants, apparatus, and materials, and what researchers and participants actually did during the study</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Results</td>
<td>A detailed statement of the statistics and other results of the study</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discussion</td>
<td>What the results tell us about thought and behavior</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reference</td>
<td>Where to find the work cited in the paper that relates to the present study</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Most of the time, if a writer submits to a journal editor a manuscript that deviates from an expected style, the editor is not likely to reject the manuscript as unsuitable for publication. Instead, editors work with authors so that the final version of the manuscript is consistent with APA style (Brewer, Scherzer, Van Raalte, Petitpas, & Andersen, 2001). However, editors have commented that deviations from APA style often accompany problems with the content of a manuscript. So if you create a manuscript that fails to follow appropriate style, a reader who is familiar with (and used to) APA style may assume that you paid as little attention to your ideas as you did to the way you expressed them. In the workplace, employers have expressed similar sentiments, that poor writing reflects poor thought (College Board, 2004).

According to the research of Brewer et al. (2001) on the use and the importance of APA style, writers are likely to depart from APA style in their presentation of research results and in citing references. So you should pay particular attention to these facets of your writing. If you write a paper in APA style that does not involve empirical research and data analysis, APA style can still apply. The structure of your paper is likely to have elements in common with the Introduction, Discussion, and Reference sections of a research paper, which we discuss in later chapters. Once you learn the basics of APA style, writing an effective paper might be easier than you anticipated because you will have a good sense of what belongs in a paper and where it goes.

As you write for a professional audience, keep in mind that readers are willing to be convinced with persuasive arguments, but you have to convince them. Scientific writing entails presenting a series of logical arguments that follow from one another. At the end, your good logic is going to make a believer out of your reader. If we are going to accept the process of science, it means that when a writer offers a logical argument that is supported by good data, we should be willing to accept that argument.

Making a Credible Argument

The difference between scientific writing and other writing has to do with the nature of how psychologists attempt to persuade readers. In everyday life, if you want to change somebody’s mind about something, there are several ways of doing it. One is to appeal to authority. That is, by quoting an expert (i.e., an authority), you can often convince people to believe you. After all, experts know more than others in their field of expertise. Unfortunately, experts can be wrong.
You can also appeal to what “everybody” knows is true; some things are so obvious, they must be true. Unfortunately (again), there are some things that everybody knows to be true that simply aren’t true.

You can also appeal to others’ emotions. Politicians and advertisers do this all the time. Unfortunately (again), conclusions based on emotional appeals can make a person feel good about a decision that, ultimately, proves to be troublesome. Furthermore, such conclusions are often not very stable (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986).

We should not simply believe the experts (even though they are probably right more than they are wrong in their areas of expertise); they should have to convince us with logical arguments. We should not simply trust our senses (even though a lot of what we feel to be true has some validity). We should not simply believe in what makes us feel good or reject what makes us feel bad; it should have logical validity.

When trying to convince your reader of your arguments, you should engage the reader in critical evaluation of your ideas. Research has revealed that persuasion based on logic and on attention to important details leads to greater and longer-term acceptance of an argument. This is the type of persuasion that you should strive for in your writing.

**Different Types of Communication**

If you want to communicate with your audience, you need to know what your audience expects. Depending on whether you are writing, speaking, or presenting visually, your approach will differ somewhat, even if the underlying message is the same.

**Written Communication**

If you are writing a formal, APA-style research report, as you would for publication in a journal, your reader will expect a structured presentation with considerable detail. The advantage of such a written presentation is that your reader can go back and review the background you cite, review your methodology to make sure it is sound, evaluate your results to judge if they are appropriate, and see if your conclusions are justified from your results and if they relate to the ideas you presented in your introduction. A written document is a permanent document that the reader can go back to at will.
Professionals (including professors) expect the writing to be free from colloquial or informal expressions and to be entirely grammatical. You should choose your words carefully because they are lasting expressions of your ideas.

**Oral Communication**

In contrast, if you are delivering that same research in an oral presentation, you cannot possibly pack in the same level of detail and expect your audience to understand your ideas. Working memory is limited to a relatively small amount of information. So if you are talking to people in an audience, it does not make sense to introduce as many ideas as you would in writing; your audience cannot go back to review what you have already said. They are forced to listen to your ideas in the present and can keep track of only a few ideas.

In an oral presentation, you should limit yourself to three or four main points you want your listeners to remember. You can introduce minor points to help reinforce the major ideas, but your audience will have a hard time keeping the details in memory. Professional speakers suggest that you tell your audience what you are going to say, then say it, and finally tell them what you just told them. There is something to this philosophy, although in a research presentation you should not be quite so simplistic. You should establish the framework of your presentation and repeat critical points when appropriate. Still, in the short period of time allotted to oral presentations, usually 10 to 15 min, you are limited in the amount of information you can convey, just as the audience is limited in its ability to comprehend your ideas.

**Poster Presentations**

Yet another medium of expression is visual. Increasingly, research conferences are relying on poster presentations for reporting research findings. In this form of communication, you present all your information in a small display that might be about 4 × 6 feet (i.e., 1.3 × 2 meters) in size. The dimensions vary from one conference to another, but the amount of space always seems to be smaller than you would want.

One of the worst things you can do is to fill the poster with text. Nobody wants to fight through a poster with endless strings of sentences. The viewer is typically interested in your main points. The use of tables, figures,
bulleted points, and other eye-catching features is a good idea in a poster. During such a presentation, the author of the poster is usually present, so if viewers want to know more details than are available on the poster, they can simply ask.

So, for a poster, you should present the main points with as little text as you can get away with. Visual elements are often a more meaningful way to make your points accessible. The result is often more information than in an oral presentation, but less than in a complete APA-style research report. It helps when the researcher is present to clear up any misconceptions that arise because not all the information is available on the poster. Furthermore, if you are presenting a poster, you can create a handout that resembles an APA-style manuscript. In this way, interested people can get the gist of your research and can ask you any questions that come to mind right away. Then they can take your written handout and attend later to the level of detail they desire.

**Internet Publishing**

A relatively new option for communicating your ideas is through the Internet. Web presentations combine various features of traditional manuscripts and of visual displays, but there are some additional elements that foster effective communication. A web-based presentation allows easy use of visual elements that are often too costly to include in printed manuscripts. In addition, you can use hyperlinks with your text to refer the reader to related web material or to references.

A simple web page is fairly easy to create if all you need is to present text, figures, or pictures, and hyperlinked text. It is helpful to know the code for the language of the web, HTML (Hyper Text Markup Language), but with the authoring software on the market, knowing HTML is not absolutely necessary. Fortunately, it is fairly easy to learn. You can even save word-processed documents in HTML format, although generating a well-formatted web page from a word processor can be tricky.

**Effective Communication**

A professor named Denis Dutton held a bad-writing contest for a few years. The sentence that motivated him to begin the contest appears below; it was about an attempt at educational reform. The prose, which was not
intended to be bad, was absolutely incomprehensible. (You should not feel embarrassed if you don’t understand it.)

[It] would delegitimate the decisive, if spontaneous, disclosure of the complicity of liberal American institutions of higher learning with the state’s brutal conduct of the war in Vietnam and the consequent call for opening the university to meet the demands by hitherto marginalized constituencies of American society for enfranchisement. (Dutton, 1999)

This book is an attempt to prevent you from writing such incomprehensible prose.

No matter what you choose as your medium of presentation, there are some characteristics of good communication to remember. First, you should establish your theme and organize your thoughts around it. Developing an outline or an idea map (as illustrated in chapter 2) can be very helpful. To create either requires that you know what you want to say. It is tempting sometimes to start writing without a coherent idea of your message. If you operate this way, your writing may meander toward irrelevant topics.

Second, if you want to communicate effectively, you should make sure that your grammar is flawless and that your selection of words is judicious. When your writing is technically competent, your reader will not be distracted from your message by having to figure out what you mean. You also need to go back to your work to edit and revise it. It helps to reread your work when it is not fresh in your own mind; sometimes you can spot problems that were not initially apparent. In addition, your writing may benefit if you ask somebody to read your work and explain to you what is unclear. Mark Twain recognized the importance of revising one’s work: “The time to begin writing an article is when you have finished it to your satisfaction. By that time you begin to clearly and logically perceive what it is you really want to say.”

Finally, it is important to remember that even lengthy manuscripts begin with a single sentence. In order to maximize the effectiveness of your writing, you should set up a schedule and a process. B. F. Skinner is a good example; he was an early bird, so he arose and did his writing for a few hours in the morning, a practice that he continued right up until his death.

How to Begin

Find a place where you can concentrate free of distraction, at a time when you are clear-headed. If you are a night owl, that may be the best time for you to write; if you are an early-morning lark, that would be a good time. In
either case, you should establish a routine. Writing does not happen until you do it. And when you develop your routine, remember to positively reinforce yourself. Identify a goal for your writing session and reward yourself when you reach it. So you might decide to explore and write about a given topic for 30 min. After 30 min, you should reward yourself with a break.

You may need to shape your behavior first, though, so you might need to start with a shorter work period, gradually extending it until you identify the longest period of time during which you can write effectively. Psychologists have identified a phenomenon called post-reinforcement pause. It refers to a period of time after a reinforcement when the animal (including the human animal) stops working toward another reinforcement (Felton & Lyon, 1966). You should make sure that your post-reinforcement pauses are not too lengthy.

By developing good writing habits, you will have taken the first step toward successful communicating. The task is often not easy, but the results are eminently satisfying.

In the next chapters, we will explore how you can develop your ideas, connect them to what others have already written, and express them in a style that reflects a sophisticated knowledge of psychology. In the end, you will have an impact on your audience when you write and when you speak about psychology.