

Book review

Writing Readable Research: a guide for students of social science by Beverly A Lewin. Equinox Publishing Ltd, 2010. Circa £12.74. ISBN-13: 978-1-904768-56-2 (Paperback)

There are so many books on research writing that the question is not ‘is this a good book?’ but ‘is it better than the rest?’ Is there something special that makes it stand out from, for example, the 34 titles in my institute’s library? Now, this book is certainly a good one, the author’s 25 years’ experience of teaching scientific writing, and her research, have provided numerous insights useful to her intended audience of novice writers, particularly those in social sciences and particularly those who are not native speakers of English. And I’m comforted to note that these insights are largely the same as those I’ve accumulated in teaching the same subject over a similar period. However, for me, the book doesn’t have that something special that would make it more recommendable than the others. Something special such as being written by a journal editor (as is Lichtfouse, 2009), being specifically for the social sciences, or specifically for writers whose native language is not English. Much of the book is devoted to general writing problems (as the author says in her preface) whereas the title led me to expect a detailed treatment of what social science journals in all their variety require. Likewise, only the special material on grammar (Chapters 2 & 3) is specifically directed to non-native speakers of English. The rest of the chapters are, again, general.

Three other things worried me. One of these was the main title, because research has to be published before it can be read. Researchers must first write to be published before they can write to be readable. These aims can conflict. Appreciating and solving these conflicts is a skill novice writers need to acquire and which needs to be included in any scientific writing guide. Another of my worries was that there was no consideration of who the research should be made readable for. In particular, that it should be made readable for non-native readers of English. These scientists are a very large portion of the audience in any scientific discipline and, from my experience in Europe and Asia, grossly neglected. My third worry was the lack of reference to the ICMJE “Uniform Requirements for Manuscripts” (URM). The URM are the distilled experience of dozens of scientists and publishers and so contain useful pointers to good science writing and manuscript preparation. Yes, it’s true that few social sciences journals are on the ICMJE list. Nevertheless, the URM informs the policies and guidelines of all the major international science publishers and those of other bodies (including EASE itself). All scientists therefore need to be aware of the URM when they write.

In addition to these general concerns, I wonder if the book’s general emphasis on “special words” might encourage unnecessary wordiness. Why, for example, recommend ‘conduct an analysis’ when using the verb ‘analyse’ is clearer and shorter? Of dubious worth, too, I believe is the great emphasis on “toning down” (eg p131ff). This tends to hide the message in verbiage and weakens messages to such an

extent that they evaporate completely. Most manuscripts I see need ‘toning up’, not weakening. If scientists are confident enough to publish then they should be confident enough to do so without such extensive hedging.

Beverly Lewin’s book of course contains many good points. Introducing the varied origins of constraints in the first chapter usefully illustrates the space in which science writing takes place. Stressing that elements are best kept parallel (p57) and events and causes in their natural order (p59) should help prevent these common sins. Also, encouraging writers to construct their text in ‘moves’ (p85) (what I call ‘modules’ in my courses) should help produce well-structured manuscripts, something that is all too uncommon. The list of prepositions appropriate to particular statements (p123) is definitely useful and something that will help my German-speaking students avoid ‘cancer is a consequence from smoking’ and similar errors. Particularly useful in this book are the tasks or exercises. Practical exercises like these help enormously in developing writing skills but few courses include them. Scientists should practise writing, it would help. They practise most other tasks in their profession so why not practise writing? If these exercises prompt even some scientists to practise, they will have done their bit to improve scientific writing.

Andrew J. Davis

*Biochemistry Department, Institute of Chemical Ecology,
Max Planck Society, Jena, Germany
English Experience Language, Services, Jena, Germany
adavis@ice.mpg.de*

