Book reviews

Medical Writing: A Prescription for Clarity: A self-help guide to clearer medical English
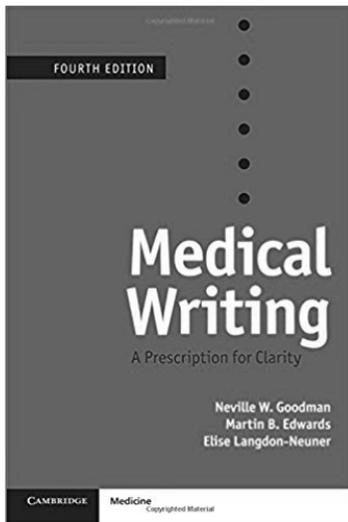
This is an extended revision of a book first published a quarter of a century ago. It takes the advice of the previous edition in a direction more focused on those writers for whom English is not their mother tongue, but who need to write to a standard sufficient to withstand the rigours of a viva or peer review in English.

In an attempt to emulate the processes of clinical medicine the book is divided into three parts: (I) Problem: The Illness; (II) Solution: Symptomatic Relief; and (III) Practice: Recuperation. The approach taken throughout the book is one of examining bad writing in order to encourage good writing, with the underlying message being that good writing is a skill that can be learned.

In an early chapter there is an insightful roundup of what makes English so difficult to learn as an additional language, and how the linear flow of one idea or deduction to the next is the style preferred by native English speakers. The larger part of the book is then taken up by Part II – Solution: Symptomatic Relief in which we find 19 Chapters devoted to the idiosyncrasies of the English language – as non-native speakers (NNSs) may see them. Topics covered are both wide ranging and comprehensive, and it is useful to think of language not as a static fully formed entity, but rather as a flexible work in progress. Even so, there are rules that must be followed if one is to write clearly and meaningfully.

All writing should start with planning. In Chapter 5 there is a useful checklist to assist writers to get their thoughts and writing objectives in order. Indeed, as editors we wish all authors to approach their writing systematically – asking themselves at the outset of any composition 'What is the question?' A section of this chapter 'Getting Started' contains four useful guidelines: use familiar words, use short words in short sentences, get others to read your draft, and read books about the English language/ examples of well written science. There follows a lexicon of commonly misused words, misuse caused by small differences in spelling (eg counsel, council), including many examples of mix-ups that even native English speakers make. Although I felt that some of the definitions could be made clearer, it is a very useful resource. The larger proportion of Part II is devoted to Chapter 7 'Is there a better word?' in which words that can be replaced by more straightforward alternatives are discussed. A few of my personal favourites come under fire here, so while I applaud this lexicon in many ways, I decry it in others – there is a balance to be had between overly flowery prose and a dry list of facts and statements. Also, at the extreme, there is a risk of stripping any medical writing of the 'author's voice'.

The issue of superfluous words or 'padding' ('words for words sake') also comes under scrutiny. In these times of constricting word counts, none of us has the luxury of including a word that it not absolutely necessary for our message, so this is one of the sections of this book that even the most erudite among us could learn from. The authors identify common culprits, and as in the other sections of the book, give examples of sentences from which such words can be cut, and how the remainder of the sentence can be restructured. A good point well made is that there is nothing wrong with judicious repetition of a word, especially in a complex discussion of drug names (which can often be very similar). The often thorny issue of prepositions is tackled in Chapter 11: Trouble with Short Words. That there is no set of rules governing the use of prepositions means that this is another area in which native writers frequently make errors.

Overall, this book is a very comprehensive analysis of the English language as it is used in the reporting of medicine today. It is organized so that it is easy to dip into, with a comprehensive index and an extensive list of further reading. Throughout, the language used to describe the various nuances of grammar, terms and usage, is often (in my opinion) too complex for a NNS to easily comprehend and so I would not recommend this book to writers who are less familiar with this tricky language and who wish to improve their medical writing abilities solo (even though the subtitle could suggest that this is a self-help guide). However, for those of us who teach and/or mentor NNS, this is a useful resource: if you need a textbook to assist with explaining, through worked examples and exercises (which are numerous), good practice in medical writing to writers who use English as an additional or foreign language then you have found a gem. Likewise, if you are a native English speaker with an especially well developed understanding of the nuances of English Grammar you will find it of academic interest.

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