

Book reviews

Health-related Scientific Articles in the 21st Century

Ed Hull, 2016, ISBN 9789463230063, www.professionallenglish.nl

Give readers nuggets

I am not going to make the classical, systematic – and to be frank, boring – book review, but I will rather give the points that I found original and exciting. At first sight the book cover shows the central message with the subtitle “Give readers nuggets”, illustrated by a drawing of four gold nuggets entitled Introduction, Methods, Results and Discussion. This nugget concept is sound because it tells us that authors should insert several items of information that are really useful to the reader. Here you might think communicating useful content is obvious, but, after having reviewed several thousands of scholarly articles, I can tell that most authors write primarily for themselves. This issue is clearly highlighted by Ed Hull in the Problem section of the book, stating that articles usually contain complex, abstruse and pompous prose that does not improve readability but aims primarily to demonstrate the scholarly prowess of the author. In other words, bad scientists use complex words on purpose to hide the absence of discovery; I have seen this many times in submitted articles. Ed Hull further mentions an astounding statement by a scientist for whom he was providing writing advice: “But this is science, it does not have to be readable!” Providing four nuggets per article, one per section, is also very interesting in the digital age, because we know that authors read manuscripts neither fully, nor linearly from title to conclusion. Instead, authors jump fast from section to section to read only the section, paragraph, or figure of interest. Therefore all elements, eg sections and illustrations, of an article should indeed contain carry-home nuggets and almost be readable without any other elements being read.

English is not a problem

I like the short size of the book with only 76 pages written in large characters, which contrasts sharply with the usual “bibles” of 200-300 pages – who reads that? – on, ironically, “how to write short papers”. Ed Hull’s book is concise, which fits perfectly with the straight-to-the-point objective of a scientific article. As a French native, I had a good laugh when reading the Preface, where he explains that, despite being an English-speaking native, his biomedical submissions got rejected. Here he makes the excellent point that English is not the main issue in scientific writing. Communication is. And, unfortunately, the average scientist communicates with the real world like a mole. The Preface contains other very inspiring quotes on the evolution of scientific writing.

A new structuring method

The new method proposed by the author to structure an article is based upon 10 core concepts that you should use

to build the article sections. Concepts 1-3, Problem, Strategy and Questions, should be used to build the Introduction section. Concept 4, Study Design, refers to the Methods section. Concept 5, Relationships Between Variables, refers to the Results section. Concepts 6-10, Answers, Support, Uncertainties, Step Taken and Next Step, refer to the Discussion section. The book explains in detail, with examples, how to use such a method to structure. I find it very practical for an author because the author is usually facing too many challenges at the same time when writing an article. Here Ed Hull’s method can be compared to a knife that cuts the cake of challenges to make small pieces that contain only one challenge each. In other words, the strategy is one issue at a time, no more.

Blah blah sentences

Good advice is also provided on how to improve sentences. The reader will discover many empty, unneeded, ambiguous words, verbs and “blah-blah” constructions that I observe on a regular basis in submissions and even published articles. I like very much the example “The treatment altered the size of the tumor”, because the reader has no idea whether the patient will eventually die or not. Ed Hull also provides guidelines to structure a paragraph, using the simple and efficient idea that, just like a chain, every sentence should be linked to its previous sentences.

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