

Written Communications Skills Workshop

Sponsored by the Office of Intramural Training
and Education

Friday, October 17, 2008

Instructor: Maggie Meitzler

**Writing Skills Workshop
Syllabus
October 17, 2008**

1:00-2:30 p.m.

- Overview of the Workshop
- **How To Use a Grammar Book:** Focusing on the most frequently made errors: subject/verb agreement, wordiness, parallelism, active versus passive voice, and more
- **Punctuation:** Commas, semicolons, colons, and more
- **Word Usage:** Use and misuse of the language

2:30-2:40 p.m.

Break

2:40-4:00 p.m.

- **E-mail (A solitary sport):** Writing the perfect e-mail:
 - Spelling: Is it important?
 - Tone: Who is your audience?
 - Organization: Logical flow of ideas
 - Rereading: Reread incoming e-mails for additional details
 - Editing and re-editing: The “cooling off period.”
- **Short document:** Organizing and writing an abstract

Exercise 1.

Subject/Verb Agreement

Rule: The number of the subject determines the number of the verb (singular subject = singular verb, plural subject = plural verb). Words that intervene between the subject and verb do not affect the number of the verb. In the following sentences, indicate the subject and correct verb(s). (See pages 72–75 of *Writing: Grammar, Usage, and Style*.)

1. Important questions concerning tumor biology, treatment timing, dose intensity, consequences on quality of life, and the cost or benefit of therapies **is/are** posed.
2. In both treatment arms, either doxorubicin or dactinomycin **was/were** given every 6 weeks.
3. Data from our latest study **indicate/indicates** that neither the length of storage nor multiple freeze-thaw cycles **alter/alters** the ability to detect antibody.
4. Characterization of enzyme activity **indicate/indicates** that hyaluronidase may be produced by the tumor itself.
5. In summary, our analysis of treatment regimens for osteogenic sarcoma and Ewing's sarcoma patients **suggest/suggests** that increase of doxorubicin dose intensity **is/are** associated with favorable clinical response.
6. Ten micrograms of DNA **was/were** digested with the restriction enzyme.
7. A number of patients **was/were** at the Center after treatment.
8. The number of patients **was/were** 360 at the Center after treatment.

Exercise 2.

Parallel Construction

Rule: When coordinating two or more elements in a sentence, be sure to use parallel construction of items, i.e., that all the components have the same grammatical form. They should match. (See pages 78–83 of *Writing: Grammar, Usage, and Style*.) Correct the parallelism in the following examples.

1. Cells were dissolved in solution, stirred until blended, and filtering was done last.
2. The students learned writing, editing, and to read.
3. Individual slices were transferred to an upright microscope, visualizing with infrared differential interference contrast microscopy, and perfused (2 ml/min) with extracellular solution.

Exercise 3. Parallelism (cont.)

Correct the first words (those underlined) in the following list to be parallel throughout. (The errors in this list were introduced by the instructor.)

The OITE encourages all trainees to

1. Take part in orientation sessions when you arrive at the NIH.
2. Subscribing to one or more electronic mailing lists so that you are aware of ongoing activities and job opportunities.
3. Visited the OITE web site regularly to check for new opportunities.
4. Participating in career and professional development workshops.
5. Made use of the OITE Virtual Career Center and Career Library.
6. Registered for free courses, such as Writing about Science, Speaking about Science, Interviewing, and Improving Spoken English.
7. Attend the many scientific seminars, lectures, and lecture series offered at the NIH.

Exercise 4.

Wordiness and Redundancies

Rule: Wordiness is using more words than necessary to say something, and redundancies are stating the same thing twice. Wordiness and redundancies happen in first drafts of most written works. This problem can be resolved during rewriting and editing. (See Chapter 12 and the list on pages 128–132, *Writing: Grammar, Usage, and Style*.)

Reduce the following wordy or redundant phrases to one word.

1. in order to _____
2. due to the fact that _____
3. consensus of opinion _____
4. during that time _____
5. small in size _____
6. have an effect/impact on _____
7. a small number of _____
8. considerable amount of _____
9. has the ability to _____
10. in the event that _____

Exercise 5.

Passive versus Active Voice

Rule: The active voice is more direct. Most journals request that you use the active voice when possible, but it is a good practice in most documents. (See page 12 of *Writing: Grammar, Usage, and Style*.) Edit the following sentences to reflect the active voice.

1. **Passive:** It was discovered that a sustained coordinated effort will be required to . . .

Active:

2. **Passive:** Data were collected from 5000 patients by physicians.

Active:

3. **Passive:** The definition of *mapping* used in the survey was taken from previous studies.

Active:

4. **Passive:** Infection was caused by *Staphylococcus aureus*.

Active:

5. **Passive:** The lab tech was bitten by the rat.

Active:

Exercise 6.

Appositives

Rule: An appositive is a word(s) that follows and restates or identifies a noun or pronoun. When appositives are non-restrictive (naming the only possibility), they are enclosed with commas. (See pages 98, 99, and 185 of *Writing: Grammar, Usage, and Style*.)

Ex: My sister Emily was at the center. (I have more than one sister = restrictive.)

Ex: My brother, George, is in Beijing. (I have only one brother = non-restrictive.)

Restrictive = restricts, limits, or defines the subjects (essential)

Nonrestrictive = does not restrict, but adds information (non-essential)

In the following Acknowledgments section, use commas to indicate that the appositive(s) (renaming of the noun) is/are non-restrictive.

Acknowledgments

Thanks are due to my editor Maggie Meitzler at St. Mary's Press for her attentiveness and patience; to my agent Charles Kane for suggesting the idea for this book; to my copyeditor Penny Smyth for her many helpful corrections; and my summer interns Mary and Tom Jones for additional comments on the scientific background.

Exercise 7.

Apostrophes, Commas, Colons, and Semicolons

Include the proper punctuation in the following sentences.

1. Its obvious that the centrifuge was faulty.
2. Therefore our data show that Balb/c mice are happier mice.
3. Within this framework we designed our model.
4. At the horizon of a black hole light freezes.
5. The cells which had been sent to us by a rival lab were infected.
6. If the infection recurs within 2 weeks an additional course of treatment will be administered.
7. In the control group the infection recurred within 2 weeks whereas in the study group the infection recurred within 10 weeks.
8. There were four groups of patients (1) tall, (2) short, (3) red, and (4) green.
9. The compounds were methyl ethyl ketone sodium benzoate and acetic, benzoic, and cinnamic acids.
10. We are grateful to our statistician Ted Smith for help with the illustrations and to our editorial assistant Kate Jones for her secretarial expertise. (Show that the appositives are non-restrictive.)

Exercise 8.

Hyphens

Insert hyphens to indicate modifiers.

1. 20 minute interval
2. thirty five PCR cycles
3. 96 well plates
4. 24 h incubation period
5. 6 cm vials
6. 2 dimensional gel electrophoresis
7. between subject variables
8. pre PCR preparation
9. post operative period
10. mid 1990s

Exercise 9.

Organization

Rearrange the components of the following e-mail announcement. Renumber paragraphs to reflect the order in which they should appear for logical flow and order.

To: NIH campus

Subject: Healthier Lifestyles Event: Free Food!

1. This endeavor also serves to support the Surgeon General's Initiative, the Healthier Feds Program, and the Office of Healthy Foods programs to increase awareness of physical activity in all populations.
2. Individuals with disabilities who need sign language interpreters and/or reasonable accommodation to participate in this event should contact the Office of Communications at 301-496-2500 and/or the Federal Relay at 1-800-877-8000. Requests should be made at least 5 days in advance of the event.
3. Join the Physical Therapy staff in supporting healthier life styles throughout the lifespan by participating in the celebration of National Physical Therapy Month, "Join the Fight Against Fast Foods," Wednesday, November 9, 2008, 11:00–1:00 PM in the CRC Hatfield Building 10, second floor cafeteria.
4. For further information please contact:

Fred Jones, Events Coordinator
Phone: 301-496-4700
E-mail: fred.jones@nih.gov
5. Healthy lifestyle materials on nutrition, physical activity, proper shoe wear, and bike fit will be provided to the NIH community for persons interested in making choices of physical activity during busy work schedules! Many prizes will be raffled off.

Thank you.

Exercise 10.

Abstract

The abstract is the most important part of any scientific paper because it is the first and often the only part of the paper (along with the title) that is read by the journal before a decision whether to review is made. To help avoid initial rejection, the abstract should be well written and reflect the work presented in your paper. Fill in the template below for a rough draft of the abstract for your current work.

Abstract

To determine

we

We found that

These findings demonstrate/suggest that

Suggested Reading for Your Learning Pleasure

Grammar Books

A Writer's Reference, 5th ed., by Diana Hacker. This book is highly praised by copyeditors for its depth of information. Bedford/St. Martin's, Boston, MA.

CliffQuickReview. Writing: Grammar, Usage, and Style. Jean Eggenschwiler and Emily Dotson Biggs. Wiley Publishing, Hoboken, NJ. The textbook chosen for this seminar and for the upcoming "Basic Science Writing" workshops offered monthly in 2009 by OITE.

The Elements of Style, 4th ed. (aka Strunk and White). A well-written and long-respected pocketbook on grammar. A tradition on college campuses since 1959. Longman, New York.

English Grammar for Dummies, by Geraldine Woods. Wiley Publishing, Indianapolis, IN.

Fun Books on Grammar and on Punctuation

Eats Shoots and Leaves: The Zero Tolerance Approach to Punctuation, by Lynn Truss. This is an easy and fun way to learn the correct use of punctuation. Although the author is British, the differences between British and American usage are well defined. Penguin Group, New York.

The Well-Tempered Sentence, by Karen Elizabeth Gordon. "A punctuation handbook for the innocent, and the eager, and the doomed." Houghton Mifflin, Boston, MA.

The Delux Transitive Vampire, by Karen Elizabeth Gordon. A fun way to learn correct use of nouns, pronouns, and verbs, with hilarious examples that are sure to make you laugh. Pantheon Books, New York.

Sister Bernadette's Barking Dog: The Quirky History and Lost Art of Diagramming Sentences, by Kitty Burns Florey. Harcourt, New York.

The Best Books on Scientific Writing

Successful Scientific Writing: A Step-by-Step Guide for the Biological and Medical Sciences, 3rd ed. Janice R. Matthews and Robert W. Matthews. Cambridge University Press,

Essentials of Writing Biomedical Research Papers, 2nd ed. Mimi Zeiger. McGraw-Hill, New York. A long (>400 pages) and expensive workbook (>\$50.00), but it has the best examples of any book on this subject.

E-mail

135 Tips: Email and Instant Messages, by Sheryl Lindsell-Roberts. Houghton Mifflin, Boston, MA, 2008. This recently published book is THE definitive work on everything e-mail; it includes excellent examples and useful information.

Online Writing Help

There are numerous online grammar and writing sites for guidance help. Do a quick search to find the one that is right for you. Search on your specific problem (e.g., problems with prepositions). The best sites are usually sponsored by universities.

The best site is sponsored by Purdue University (<http://owl.english.purdue.edu/writinglab/>). The **Online Writing Lab** (OWL) offers everything from correct use of articles (a, an, the), use of prepositions, writing information (specific to your field, e.g., social sciences, engineering), and other valuable resources, including ESL guidance.

Style Guides

All style guides contain sections on grammar, writing, and usage. They are excellent sources of good examples and up-to-date trends in scientific and medical usage.

AMA Manual of Style: A Guide for Authors and Editors, 10th ed. JAMA & Archives Journals, American Medical Association. Oxford University Press, New York. See pages 315–425 for writing guidance.

Scientific Style and Format: The CSE Manual for Authors, Editors, and Publishers, 7th ed. Council on Science Editors. The Rockefeller University Press, New York. See pages 105–134 for grammar guidance.

The ACS Style Guide. Effective Communication of Scientific Information, 3rd ed. American Chemical Society. Oxford University Press, New York. See pages 47–104 for grammar, punctuation, and style guidance.

APA Style Guide, 5th ed. American Psychological Society, Washington, DC.

The Chicago Manual of Style. The Essential Guide for Writers, Editors, and Publishers, 15th ed. The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, IL. Standard guide used by publishers for general style and usage. See pages 145–275 for grammar, punctuation, and style guidance.

Uniform Requirements for Manuscripts Submitted to Biomedical Journals: Writing and Editing for Biomedical Publication (<http://www.icmje.org/>). This general information for authors, cited in the Instructions to the Authors in many journals, offers concise guidance for writing a scientific/medical manuscript, along with useful information about journal policies.

How to Write Good

1. Always avoid alliteration.
2. Prepositions are not words to end sentences with.
3. Avoid cliches like the plague—they're old hat.
4. Parenthetical words however must be enclosed in commas.
5. It is wrong to ever split an infinitive.
6. Contractions aren't necessary.
7. Do not use a foreign word when there is an adequate English *quid pro quo*.
8. One should never generalize.
9. Eliminate quotations. As Ralph Waldo Emerson once said: "I hate quotations. Tell me what you know."
10. Don't be redundant; don't use more words than necessary; it's highly superfluous.
11. Exaggeration is a billion times worse than understatement.
12. One-word sentences? Eliminate. Always!
13. Analogies in writing are like feathers on a snake.
14. The passive voice should not be used.
15. Don't repeat yourself, or say again what you have said before.
16. Don't use commas, that, are not, necessary.
17. Do not use hyperbole; not one in a million can do it effectively.
18. Never use a big word when a diminutive alternative would suffice.
19. Subject and verb always has to agree.
20. Be more or less specific.
21. Placing a comma between subject and verb, is not correct.
22. Use youre spell chekker to avoid misspelling and to catch typographical errors.
23. Use the apostrophe in its proper place and omit it when its not needed.
24. Don't never use no double negatives.
25. Proofread carefully to see if you any words out.
26. A writer must not shift your point of view.
27. Place pronouns as close as possible, especially in long sentences, as of 10 or more words, to their antecedents.
28. Everyone should be careful to use a singular pronoun with singular nouns in their writing.
29. If you reread your work, you can find on rereading a great deal of repetition can be by rereading and editing.
30. And always be sure to finish what

*The source of this list is unknown, but some of the rules came from William Safire's *Rules for Writers*.