

In the Bookstores

Successful Scientific Writing, fourth edition

James R. Matthews and Robert W. Matthews
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They say, “Never judge a book by its cover”. But I do. I pick it up, weigh it in my hands, examine it front and back; sometimes, I even smell it, searching for any hints that will help me divine its worth. From the exterior, *Successful Scientific Writing* by Janice R. Matthews and Robert W. Matthews exudes utility; it screams, “research”. The cover is green, unadorned, and clean-lined. The high-quality spiral binding allows it to lay comfortably open on a desk, a lab bench, anywhere. This is a book that wants to be written in, to have its text highlighted, to have its pages dog-eared, to be used as any other common tool like a screwdriver or a pipette. Even the coffee stains on the upper right corner of my copy look perfectly at home.

Successful Scientific Writing begins with a preface outlining the changes since the last edition (this is, after all, the fourth edition). Since publication of the last edition (2008), the authors have doubled the amount of chapters, adding content about topics such as publication ethics and presentations. In the main part, *Successful Scientific Writing* mostly covers the *plat principal* of scientific writing, the peer-reviewed manuscript. The chapters start with planning and end with publication. Quotations from philosophers (Hippocrates and Kant), absurdists (Carroll), romantics (Tennyson), humourists (Vonnegut and Twain), and others intersperse the sections. Similar to other books of its kind, this book features cartoons and graphics to break up blocks of text and add flavour to what could



otherwise be a plain read. There are also 30 writing exercises, along with an answer key, gathered in an appendix at the end.

The first four chapters of *Successful Scientific Writing* are devoted to pre-writing; that is, planning, literature searches, organising your thoughts, and journal selection. A short section on writer's block offers several different suggestions, citing other publications for further reading, instead of offering a simple one-size-

fits-all solution. The next four chapters are on the general organisation of a peer-reviewed manuscript – IMRAD (Introduction, Methods, Results and Discussion). The authors also highlight parts on the periphery of a manuscript such as the title, keywords, abstract, tables, and figures.

About one-third of the way through, *Successful Scientific Writing* transitions from general information about writing manuscripts to the actual writing in the manuscript. The



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authors focus five chapters (about 80 pages) on the written communication of science. There is a chapter on reporting numbers and statistics followed by a chapter on revision, which offers practical advice such as removing multiple hedges, breaking up long sentences, and removing empty fillers. A chapter on style and syntax tackles proper tense, active/passive voice, modifiers, participles, and more. Matthews and Matthews also dedicate a chapter to word choice, discussing jargon and nominalisation, appealing for bias-free language, and providing a list of commonly confused words. A fifth chapter on writing covers capitalisation and punctuation specifically for scientific writing.

In the final third of the book, the authors address publication ethics (such as plagiarism, copyright, and fair use). A chapter on oral presentations offers advice about using visual aids from chalkboards to modern slideshows.

The next chapter is about the oral presentation of slideshows and posters. *Successful Scientific Writing* ends with the final step in any author's journey: publication.

Overall, *Successful Scientific Writing* is a well-written guide for writing manuscripts that is an easy read thanks to the authors' clear style, many cartoons and timely quotations. Beginners will find the initial third of the book on arranging a manuscript useful, whereas both beginners and intermediate writers may find themselves returning to the sections on writing, revision, grammar, and syntax.

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