

Editing for writers who have English as an additional language

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Abstract

Editors of English are typically met with expectations to make a quick fix of documents that need more radical changes than authors think. As editors, we should convey how we work to improve readability, and either adjust or gain acceptance for our approach. Next steps are to identify and discuss illogical, ambiguous content, check grammatical issues in the writer's first language that are different in English, and anything that deviates from clear, concise, consistent, well-formed prose, focused on the research question. A good way of communicating effectively with authors is to give reasons for suggested changes, and ideally, to name the problems.

In the past 6 years I have taught manuscript writing, to academic researchers with various language backgrounds,¹ with the intention to reduce the need for editing. My ideal job is to work with authors who have been through some of my training, so I can communicate more effectively with them about the radical changes that are often needed to create a good paper; i.e. clear, concise, and consistent (3 Cs), well-formed prose, focused on the research question (hereafter termed *purpose statement* because purpose is more often expressed through aims and hypotheses than research questions). *Language laundry* is a typical description of what Norwegian researchers want from editors of English. One job description I got was “*just check my use of definite articles*”.

The articles *a/an/the* and subject/verb agreement

Use of these articles is often highlighted by journal editors and referees as needing attention in submitted manuscripts.² Many languages do not have equivalent constructions, and, in those that do, the articles are not necessarily used in the same way as in English.³ I delete a lot of definite articles,

usually because they're just superfluous, but sometimes because they're used wrongly. Consider the following sentence:

Our aim was to establish the association between X and Y.

From the context, it was clear that the intended meaning was to clarify whether X and Y were associated. The way it was written gave the impression that these variables were known to be associated, and that this particular study was designed to *establish* or perhaps *confirm* that knowledge.

As in Danish,⁴ Norwegian has only one form of the verb for *is/are* (*er*) and *was/were* (*var*), so the singular and plural are the same. Subject/verb agreement is not an issue in these languages. For some Scandinavian authors this causes a lot of problems in English; one manuscript I worked on had subject/verb disagreement in almost every sentence (rare).

Critical reading to identify irrelevant, illogical, ambiguous content

Many supervisors tell their PhD candidates to look

English as an additional language

Science writers for whom English is an additional language are often termed non-native speakers, a negative term that describes them by something they are not. The more positive term *writers who have English as an additional language* is longer, but brevity is not always most important.



at how papers in their field are written, and to learn writing by studying them. To prepare for my workshop on critical reading of scientific papers, participants are asked to find papers that are relevant for their own research, published by acknowledged authors in journals that are considered to be good in their field. They bring these *good* papers to the workshop, where we read them with the intention to misunderstand anything that can be misunderstood; the same way that I would read a paper that I am asked to edit, and the opposite way of how young researchers are often told to read. To get a snapshot of paper content, terminology and target readers, we start the session by looking at the journal title, article title,⁵ keywords,⁵ purpose statement and conclusion. Then we analyse abstracts sentence by sentence.

Backgrounds in abstracts have to be painfully short, so the main challenge for that subsection is to select interesting, relevant content. This real-life example “*There is much talk surrounding food fraud policy...*” is the opposite. The language could have been better, but since the content is too general to occupy that scarce space, I would suggest to either delete it or replace it with something substantial rather than try to revise it.

Objective, goal, aim, purpose

Some journals require that the abstract has subheadings such as Objective, Goal, Aim, and Purpose. If they do, and you’re required to write complete sentences, use the journal’s term to start your sentence because people have different ideas about what these words mean and whether they differ.⁶ For example, if the journal uses the subheading *objective*, do not write *Our aim was ...* or worse *The study’s aim was*. The study itself should not be the subject of the sentence.

Every research project involves studying, assessing, evaluating or investigating, so avoid writing that the study purpose is to do one of these things. The purpose of research is not actually to do experiments or evaluate patients, but to find out something by doing those activities. In the purpose statement, describe the knowledge to be produced, not the actions involved.

The PICOT approach for formulating purpose statements

The PICOT approach recommends that the purpose statement specifies the following items (when relevant): target Population/or problem, the Intervention of interest, the Comparator, key



The author (second left) during a writing course in HELL (close to Trondheim, Norway); not as bad as its reputation.

Outcomes, and the Time frame over which the outcomes are assessed (the T can also refer to Type of study [design]).⁷ Consider the following research question:

Is implantation of a multifocal-intraocular-lens in presbyopia patients with cataract or having refractive lens exchange effective to correct presbyopia?

The P is “*presbyopia patients with cataract*” and the O “*is corrected presbyopia*”; no information is given about the T and we cannot discriminate between the I and the C. This is an example of text that I would ask the writer about, because I assume that one of the interventions is of more interest than the other (and that it should be possible to discriminate between the I and the C). The description of patients is placed in the middle of the sentence (and is written in a non-parallel way),⁸ giving the impression that it just refers to those who had the implant (misplaced modifier).⁹ If the description of patients is placed in the beginning of the sentence, it refers to both procedures in a clearer way. If both interventions are of equal interest, consider:

Alternative 1: *In patients with presbyopia and cataract, can presbyopia be effectively corrected by a multifocal-intraocular-lens implant or by a refractive lens exchange?*

If the implant is more interesting than the lens exchange, consider:

Alternative 2: *In patients with presbyopia and cataract, does a multifocal-intraocular-lens implant correct presbyopia more effectively than a refractive lens exchange?*

Note that the revisions do not include the word *implantation*; a verb transformed into a noun (nominalisation). Nominalisations are highlighted as problematic/overused constructions in four of nine papers in the “Writing better workbook” published in *Medical Writing* in the first issue of 2017.¹⁰

Conflict of Interest between writer and reader?

A researcher recommended her colleagues publish in British journals because they allow more words than the American ones. When asked which ones she preferred to read, she quickly said “The American ones, they’re shorter”.

A well-written purpose statement eases writing of the conclusion. Purpose statements and conclusions in the abstract must reflect those written in the main text. For my writing courses, participants are asked to find and check all of these statements in their chosen paper, and bring the one they like best to use in the course. There we check if that could also be improved.

Wordy, unfocused introductions

A researcher in one of my workshops recommended her colleagues to publish in British journals because they allow

more words than the American ones. When I asked her which ones she preferred to read, she quickly said “*The American ones, they’re shorter*”. I thought it was a great way of expressing the *Conflict of Interest* between writer and reader. Researchers have so much they would like to share about their important project and what they have learned by reading piles of literature. Sadly, most readers of science papers just want to get to the main point/ what’s new as quickly as possible.

A common error in introductions/ background sections, is to begin too broadly or too far off topic. Consider beginning with a startling statistic that illustrates the seriousness of the problem you will address, and get to the point as soon as possible. Do not provide dictionary definitions of terms that readers already know.¹¹ Authors should gradually guide readers’ thoughts to the study aims, which are described in the last paragraph of the introduction. Ideas should be organised so that, immediately before reading the aim, the reader understands the relevance of the topic and anticipates which gap in knowledge has to be filled.¹² When I ask researchers what they find most challenging about writing, many say “*writing concisely*”. If you, as an editor of English or co-author of an article, think that a text should be 25% shorter, convey that carefully to the author – the risk of offending is overwhelming. A good strategy for an editor is to give reasons for why they suggest changes, and ideally to name the problem – e.g. non-parallelism⁸ or misplaced –ing forms.¹³

Dangling modifiers and -ing forms

A verb ending with *-ing* can be a present participle or a gerund; the gerund is a verb functioning as a noun.¹³ For Norwegians, the *-ing* form seems to be perceived as a hallmark of English. Problems associated with the construction are usually about ambiguous subject referral (due to their location in sentences). If placed in the beginning of a sentence they may not refer to a subject at all (dangling modifier¹⁴ [*dangling* because the clause *hangs loose*, not firmly attached to an appropriate subject]); if written/misplaced after a noun they are not supposed to refer to, they create uncertainty about what the subject is.

Here’s an example of a dangling modifier (present participle in this case):

Using the survey data, the effects of education on job satisfaction were determined.

Who is using the data? Implied subject = we/researchers, grammatical subject = the effects. Corrected: Keeping the passive voice *The survey data were used to determine the effects of education on job satisfaction* or changing to the active voice *We used the survey data to...*

Consider this example: *This study suggests that it is possible to influence the self-efficacy of 12–13-year-old, socially withdrawn children with a school-based intervention using a solution-focused approach (SFA).*

It’s not clear who was using a solution-focused approach, but it certainly wasn’t the intervention (placement of *using* immediately after *intervention* implies referral to that word). The last example sentence has other problems as well, see Exercise 1.

Conflicts of interest

In addition to writing this article because of a personal need to formulate her own editing strategy, the author is interested in selling her writing courses.

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Every research project involves studying, assessing, evaluating or investigating, so avoid writing that the study purpose is to do one of these things.

Exercises

Be creative and use all your knowledge about English to improve the sentences below. Some tips are given under each sentence.

Exercise 1

Conclusion: This study suggests that it is possible to influence the self-efficacy of 12–13-year-old, socially withdrawn children with a school-based intervention using a solution-focused approach (SFA).

Problems: *The study itself as the sentence subject, misplaced present participle, illogical flow of information, weak verbs, multiple hedging⁴ and wordiness.*

Exercise 2

Functioning as the exterior interface of the human body with the environment, skin acts as a physical barrier to prevent the invasion of foreign pathogens while providing a home to the commensal microbiota.

Problems: *Unclear subject, non-parallel, wordiness, superfluous definite article.*

Exercise 3

Objective: To explore Somalian new mothers' experiences with the Norwegian healthcare system and their experienced needs during the

hospital stay and the postpartum period.

The journal did not require complete sentences in the abstract, so starting with *To* is fine.

Problems: *Repetitive, inappropriate verb choice, non-parallel.*

Answers to exercises

1. "Conclusion: Our results indicate that the school-based intervention, SFA (solution-focused approach), can improve the self-efficacy of 12–13-year-old socially withdrawn children."

The study itself is not the sentence subject and does not "suggest" anything; alternative beginnings are *The authors suggest* or *Our results indicate*. I prefer the latter because it emphasises that the conclusion builds directly on the results. The word *indicate* is stronger than *suggest*, but is modified sufficiently by *can improve* later in the sentence to keep the meaning. *Influence* is an unspecific word; we understand that it does not mean *aggravate*, but then we may as well write *improve*. An abbreviation would not normally be explained in a conclusion; it is included here just to make a point. Note that the abbreviation is written before the explanation. There is no formal rule about which to place first, abbreviations or explanations, but you have to adhere to style

guides.¹⁵ Two different signs are used correctly to describe the children's age "12–13-year-old": the en-dash and the hyphen.¹⁶

2. "Skin is the human body's exterior interface with the environment; a physical barrier that prevents invasion of foreign particles while providing a home for the commensal microbiota." Notes: *Function* and *act* are synonyms in this context and there's no need to use both.

3. "Objective: To document Somalian new mothers' experiences and needs in Norway, in the hospital and postpartum at home." *Explore* is a big word that is overused in my opinion (don't have a reference for that). I often suggest alternatives such as *clarify*, *describe*, *document*. *Healthcare system* does not add information (course participants agreed). *Experienced needs* are just needs. The term *postpartum period* is used in a confusing way (and there's no need for the word *period*); it seems to start after the mother has come home from the hospital (women who have given birth in Norway are discharged quickly, but not immediately). By adding *at home*, the sentence becomes parallel and clearer; the study documents the women's experiences in two locations.