

# Winners of the Geoff Hall Scholarship Essay Competition

## Dear All,

The Geoff Hall Scholarships (GHSs) are given in honour of a former President of EMWA. Geoff was a very special person, an extremely valued member of EMWA, and a very good friend to many EMWA members. He firmly believed that the future of EMWA lies in our new and potential members, and so it's a very fitting legacy that we have the Scholarship Awards in his memory. The Scholarships are awarded annually on the basis of an essay competition, and the title of this year's essay was "How to Keep Your Reader Interested From Start to Finish". The committee has the ability to award up to two scholarships each year. This year those scholarships were awarded to Hanna Kurlanda-Witek and Sara Mostafa.

## FOR CORRESPONDENCE



**Lisa Chamberlain James**  
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Hanna graduated from the University of Warsaw with a Master's in Environmental Science in 2008. She then completed her PhD in Geosciences at the University of Edinburgh in 2013. After working in an engineering consultancy in Warsaw for a few years, Hanna became a freelance science writer, writing about a wide range of topics, from radioactivity to viruses. Writing (as well as proofreading and translating from Polish to English) has always been a part of her professional life, but making it a full-time career became a life-changing experience.

Sara obtained her Bachelor's of Medicine and Surgery (MBBS) from the University of Khartoum, Sudan. She moved to the UK in 2018, and after a break in her clinical career, has recently embarked on her journey as a freelance medical writer.

Their winning essays are presented below, and we wish them the very best at the start of their very promising medical writing careers. For those of you inspired to pick up your laptop, this year's essay title is "Can Scientific Documents Be Easy to Read?".

I hope to read your essays soon, and stay safe all, until we see each other at the next EMWA conference.

Bestest,  
**Lisa**

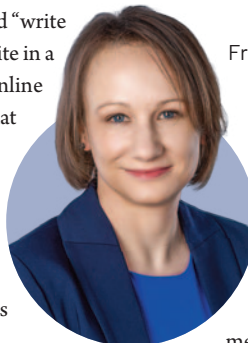
## How to keep your reader interested from start to finish

It is getting more and more difficult to catch a reader's attention and it is harder still to keep the reader engaged until the end of the text. Reading literacy rates are declining as screens replace print newspapers, magazines, and books, and this has an effect on *how* we read. As one study pointed out, "digital media stimulate superficial reading strategies, including scanning, skimming, and browsing, at the expense of more time-consuming strategies that allow for deeper comprehension."<sup>1</sup>

A quick web search brings forth a vast quantity of tips on how to get the skim-reading, multitasking reader to become "hooked" by your text in all of three seconds (the amount of seconds seems to decrease every few years). The tips that are featured the most could be

condensed to "write precious little" and "write the way you speak." But what if you write in a profession where the rules of online publishing don't necessarily apply? What if you can't "add spice", "explain the science so your grandmother can understand", or make it personal? Are medical writers (or writers of other highly-skilled professions) doomed to write reports and articles that no one wants to read?

In this essay, I will emphasise several points that I think are applicable to any writer who wants to keep their readers interested, whatever the topic.



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### Empathy at the core

When writing, it's easy to forget that we're not writing for ourselves. Writing is an art, even when it's meant to be purely informative, and like

artists, writers are often absorbed by what they are creating. But writing is also a form of communication; we write in order to help others understand this information. Empathy for the reader should be the underlying motive for writing in the first place. How will this



information help my reader? Could this sentence be broken into two shorter ones to make it clearer for the reader? In fact, most advice for writers stems from one key point: keep the reader in mind as you write.

### Know your topic

As most science and medical writers know, carrying out research on the chosen topic takes up more time than actually writing about it. This is not a waste of time. An incomplete report or poorly-researched article is obvious and is sure to discourage a reader, even a non-expert in the field. Stating the facts doesn't have to be dull – including background information, eye-catching statistics, and a few intriguing facts will keep the narrative moving.

### Trouble ahead for the reader

You've read so much about the topic, it's tempting to write about all that you've found out. The reader has to *know*. This is the trap that many writers fall into – overwriting. Trying to include every little detail inevitably leads to the dreaded “wall of text”. It's likely that we've lost a reader at

this point. There has to be a balance between thorough explanation and brevity. The remedy for long blocks of writing is to use visual cues that will catch the reader's attention, such as breaking up text using white space between paragraphs, using bullet points, or bold print.<sup>2</sup> Varying sentence length adds rhythm to a text, which also improves readability.

Another pitfall often associated with overwriting is the use of complex words (a term my thesaurus hints could be replaced with *sesquipedalian*). Of course, not much can be done about medical

terminology, but inserting a combination of long words in one sentence will make the reader lose focus. As cautioned in Strunk and White's *The Elements of Style*, “Do not be tempted by a twenty-dollar word when there is a ten-center handy, ready and able.”<sup>3</sup>

### Accepting reality

Writers spend many hours at the keyboard, working through draft after draft. There's a part of us that just wants to finish the task and move on to the next, yet I believe every writer wants their work to be read and appreciated. The knowledge

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that someone will read our article or manuscript motivates us to make it as good as possible. However, we have to admit to ourselves that no matter how much we strive to make the content well-researched and readable, many people (even those who are interested!) simply won't read all of it. Most will skim it. Some will just read the first and last paragraphs. It is only rational to accept that this is the case and be grateful for any form of readership. Does this mean we shouldn't work as hard when we're writing? No. Even if only a few people read the whole text, these are your readers, and they deserve the best of your writing. Make sure they find what they are looking for.

### References

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# How to keep your reader interested from start to finish

**T**he year is 2022. Distractions, misconceptions and conspiracies abound. Having been tasked with creating something that, like cream poured into a bitter cup of coffee, rises to the top – I am anxious. I strive to be accurate, but that is not enough; I must also don my armour and prepare to battle for the reader's attention. Three ferocious adversaries hinder my path, each threatening to snatch the reader away. How, then, can I emerge triumphant?

## Stage one

Before I enter the fray, I prepare for the first opponent: irrelevance. I remember the first time I learned that some people wrote for a living within the realm of medicine. After an investigation into what that entailed, I was charmed by one skill these people seemed to possess: the ability to break down complex concepts and reshape them to their liking. The core message would be the same, but the way it was conveyed would be adapted depending on the reader.

As with all things I find fascinating, I sought to learn how this was achieved. It turns out that the magic begins with audience analysis.<sup>1</sup> This close examination of the intended audience is the first step towards vanquishing irrelevance.

To do this effectively, Alley suggests we consider the following three questions:<sup>1</sup>

1. Who are they?
2. Why are they reading?
3. What do they already know?

The first and third questions are particularly important when addressing lay audiences. In this instance, level of health literacy and prior knowledge about the subject must shape the message, or we risk missing the mark.<sup>2</sup>

The second question helps us avoid a common pitfall in scientific writing: presenting a deluge of facts without highlighting (or even addressing, at times) what the reader truly wants

to know.<sup>1</sup> Readers are interested in what they find valuable, and to provide true value, we must try to anticipate the questions that may arise in their mind and answer them.

## Stage two

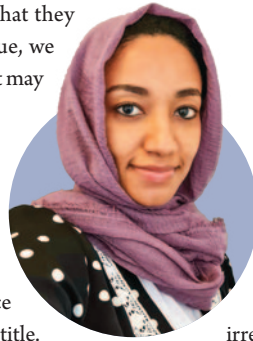
When the reader's journey begins, a second rival, boredom, reveals itself. Now, my words are up against two enemies, and the delicate balance required to defeat them starts with the title.

The title is often the deciding factor for whether the reader wishes to continue. The task lies in crafting a title that is attractive enough to spark interest, but still accurately represents what lies below it.<sup>3</sup> The goal should not be to "entice as many people as possible to read [our] work,"<sup>1</sup> for in doing so we attract a flock of fleeting readers, purely driven by fleeting curiosity. Since our desire is to keep readers interested, as well as to provide value, we should aim "to engage those people who want or need to read [our] work."<sup>1</sup>

Hartley<sup>3</sup> discussed the pressure writers sometimes feel to create catchy titles, at times compromising accuracy. He points out that "in the context of information retrieval", titles should also "be informative" in order to be found.

If the reader moves beyond the title, then we know we have made a positive first impression. However, the reader has not yet trusted us with their time; they have merely given us a chance to demonstrate why they should. To quote Zinsser,<sup>4</sup> "Readers want to know – very soon – what's in it for them."

That, then, is the job of the first paragraph or two: to show the reader what to expect. Again, this part must be compelling enough to convince the reader to stay. This can be achieved by using interesting facts, anecdotes or thought-provoking questions.



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## Stage three

By the time the reader arrives at the heart of the document, irrelevance has been knocked down.

Boredom, on the other hand, proves relentless. Since this is usually a place densely packed with information, it is more likely for the reader's attention to wander. The aim at this stage is to maintain the "tension" that "pulls readers along without their noticing the tug."<sup>4</sup>

Say what needs to be said in its simplest form, without oversimplifying.<sup>1</sup> Declutter, not just by removing unnecessary words, but also unnecessary jargon.<sup>5</sup> Avoid falling for the trap of the passive voice, which masquerades as a more "scholarly" technique. Instead, propel the reader forward with action and verbs whilst giving them time to comprehend what they are reading.<sup>5</sup>

Writers can choose to breathe life into their writing here by incorporating elements of storytelling – although there are ethical considerations in science. If a story stirs up emotions in an individual, and those emotions, rather than critical thinking, drive their response, is that a form of manipulation? Katz<sup>6</sup> argues that in the presentation of scientific findings, maybe it is; that "Great storytellers embellish and conceal information to evoke a response in their audience."

However, others argue that storytelling *can* be done with care and honesty.<sup>7</sup> Think of Pollock and Bono, and their vivid description of messages "buried under a desert of barren prose, revealed only to those willing to endure the tedious archaeological dig necessary to excavate them."<sup>5</sup> All too often, writers feel the need to dehumanise their writing, and in doing so, lose the connection to the reader.

By the time the reader arrives at the heart of the document, irrelevance has been knocked down.



#### Stage four

Towards the end of the reader's journey, two enemies lay amid the rubble, defeated. This is not yet time to celebrate, however – for another one lingers nearby. Disappointment soon rears its ugly head.

Having led the reader this far, the ending shouldn't feel like a regurgitation of what has already been told;<sup>4</sup> that can resuscitate boredom and leave the reader feeling deflated. Instead, it is where we leave the reader with questions to ponder and next steps to take; where we leave a

seed that can grow into a meaningful discussion. It is where we hope that if the reader is disappointed, it is not because they regret having gone on this journey – but rather that they have arrived at its end.

If you are reading this sentence, then I have won the battle and coaxed you to complete this journey with me. *Now* is the time to celebrate.

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This is called the hash, pound, or number character. A hashtag is a keyword or set of keywords that is preceded by the # character. It is used in social media to create a thread of conversations around a specific theme or topic conveyed in short texts or microblogs. It is commonly used in Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, Pinterest, etc.

A dictionary of most common hashtags can be found at <https://www.hashtags.org/definition/~h/>.

For your info, EMWA is compiling a list of standardised hashtags for our social media use.



This is called the "at" sign or symbol. The @ sign is part of email addresses and social media user names ("handles"). Our EMWA handles are as follows: @Official\_EMWA (Twitter), @EMWA (LinkedIn), and @europeanmedicalwritersassociation (Facebook)

**The two most important keys on your keyboard**