

# In the Bookstores



## How to Write and Publish a Scientific Paper, Eighth Edition

By Barbara Gastel and Robert A. Day;

March 02, 2017.

ISBN: 978-1316640432 (paperback).

24.99 GBP. 344 pages.

A research paper is often the culmination of years' worth of data and experiments, successes and failures, doubts and triumphs, as well as a balancing act between many different opinions from different authors. Writing one can be a daunting task, especially for beginners. Even though most manuscripts are structured in the introduction, methods, results, and discussion format (IMRAD format), jargon and genre norms can confuse first-time writers. And in a world where a single journal (*PLOS ONE*) publishes 80 scientific papers daily, the inexperienced researcher – perhaps writing in their second or third language – may have trouble sorting out the good examples from the bad. Unfortunately, there is a sea of bad examples so immense that it may unmoor even the experienced writer, sending them adrift in the waters of nonsense. The eighth edition of *How to Write and Publish a Scientific Paper* by Barbara Gastel and Robert A. Day is the life raft meant to save the scientific writer from these unsavoury waters and deliver them safely to the shores of clarity.

*How to Write and Publish a Scientific Paper* begins with a preface, after which Gastel and Day offer a warning: This book contains jokes and humour. These, write Gastel and Day, may confuse some non-native readers. Indeed, the first joke appears in the first sentence of the preface: “Good scientific writing is not a matter of life and death; it is much more serious than that.” And the first cartoon appears only 13 pages into the main body. English being my first language, I welcomed the humour and found most of it to be clear and understandable. The quips and witticisms were easy to distinguish and enlivened what would have otherwise been a dry read. But

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I also understand the warning. For instance, there is a small section on scientific style in this book that includes *The Ten Commandments of Good Writing*. While filled with clear jokes about grammatical mistakes, this passage also contains outdated style advice, which made it unclear whether it was written earnestly or sarcastically.

The main body of *How to Write and Publish a Scientific Paper* is 296 pages long and comprises eight parts, divided into 42 chapters, and four appendices. In Part I, Gastel and Day begin with the basics: what a scientific paper is, the history of scientific writing, the development of the IMRAD format, a discussion of ethics, and factors to consider when choosing where to submit a manuscript. Parts II and III are instruction on how to write a scientific paper. In only 72 pages, Gastel and Day teach how to write the title, the abstract, the acknowledgments, the references, and all the IMRAD sections in between. Because this book is intended to be a guide to writing research papers of all scientific disciplines, no specifics are provided for any disciplines, leaving these parts a bit general. Part IV contains useful information often missed by those giving advice on scientific writing. That is, information about submission, peer reviews, reviewer responses, proofs, and publication.

This ends the first half of the book (and the guide to writing a scientific paper); the remaining half (other than the aforementioned section on scientific style) contains useful information beyond the scope of the title. This left me to wonder (about three-quarters of the way through) if future editions should include the subtitle *A Basic Guide to Anything You'll Need to Write in Academia*.

Writing publications other than research papers is covered in Parts V and VI. Brief chapters (about 5 pages each) provide guidance for presenting research orally,

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making posters, and writing reviews, editorials, books, book reviews, and conference reports. Part VII focuses on scientific style and gives advice on aspects of proper English such as avoiding jargon, using abbreviations, and writing science for a community of non-native English speakers. The main body concludes with odds and ends of scientific writing (Part VIII). These include writing theses, grant proposals, cover letters, letters of recommendation, and peer reviews, as well as a section about editing your own work that gives the great advice, “Read your draft aloud. In doing so, you may notice more easily where words are missing or wording is awkward.” Finally, the four appendices cover journal abbreviations, words and expressions to avoid, SI prefix abbreviations, and helpful websites.

Overall, *How to Write and Publish a Scientific Paper* is a very good guide for novice writers. Advanced writers may find the cursory chapters on topics other than scientific papers helpful. I would recommend this book to students, beginners, regulatory writers transitioning into medical communications, and anyone else new to writing academic science.

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