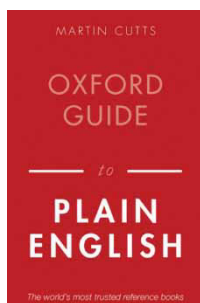# In the Bookstores

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Top-notch reference at a giveaway price

The latest edition of *the Oxford Guide to Plain English* is not the kind of book you would necessarily read from cover to cover: the chapters are stand-alone components and there is no benefit in reading them in order. Rather it is a trusty reference to dip into and come back to.

The book's author, Martin Cutts, places the book in context with an extended preface, explaining what plain English is and illustrating what it isn't with examples of barely digestible writing. He also describes the origins of plain language campaigns and policies in the UK, the USA, Australia, and Sweden, and highlights areas where progress has been made. Happily, he makes clear that his book is intended to guide, rather than to prescribe rules.

The main part of the book is divided into 25 chapters, which range in length from 2 to 42 pages. The longest chapter, *Preferring plain words*, includes a plain English word list that is as good as any I've seen. Other chapters cover much-discussed topics such as favouring the active voice, replacing weak verb plus noun constructions with strong verbs (e.g. rewriting *We must perform analysis of the data* as *We must analyse the data*), and shortening overlong sentences. Still others advise on writing in a gender-neutral, non-sexist way and explain why half a dozen myths of writing are wrong. Particularly useful to me was a chapter devoted to creating and punctuating bullet points, the cause of so many problems.

In addition to providing guidance in specific areas such as these, Cutts also looks at the bigger picture. Importantly, he explains how good visual presentation of information can facilitate comprehension. He further discusses formulas for assessing readability, rightly describing them as 'blunt tools' and cautioning against overreliance on them.

Elsewhere, in a short but welcome chapter on proofreading, Cutts provides a list of 14 proofreading musts, the first being the most important: follow house rules.

Cutts advocates careful planning and reminds us to have the reader at the forefront of our mind when we write. He illustrates his points with pertinent real-life examples from his 'postbag' and other sources, and backs up his advice with feedback from focus groups.

There is much to praise and little to criticise. Perhaps the grammar and punctuation basics are superfluous or could be buried in an appendix. And while the occasional use of idiomatic phrases (against the author's own advice) and non-plain words such as *fusty* may improve the reading experience for some, it could be a barrier to readers whose first language is not English.

Later chapters such as *Clarity for the Web*, *Lucid legal language*, and *Writing low-literacy plain English* head into more specialised territory and might not be essential reading for all, but *the Oxford Guide to Plain English* certainly has something to offer everyone.

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Writing Science in Plain English
by Anne E. Greene;
University of Chicago Press, 2013.
ISBN-13: 978-0-226-02637-4.
9.00 GBP. 124 pages.

Bargain must-have guide to writing more clearly

The sceptic in me was always going to question the publisher's assertion that this book 'can help writers at all levels of their […] careers' and that it is 'an essential resource'. Sure, I thought. But those bold claims are in fact not unwarranted. In *Writing Science in Plain English*, Anne Greene delivers what at the very least serves as revision on good writing practices and a crystallisation of the key aspects of plain English. For me, the utility of her book was underlined when I subsequently read the proof of a manuscript I had written and became aware of some of the deficiencies in my writing.

In a convincing introductory discourse on the necessity of plain English, Greene argues that poor writing limits communication between different research fields and with the public. She correctly points out that opaque, reader-unfriendly writing can be self-propagating. This is because young scientists partly learn to write by reading published manuscripts, whose quality of writing is quite variable. It's like learning how to drive by watching and imitating others.

Writing Science in Plain English ignores *what* to write and 'focuses entirely on how to write clearly and comprehensibly', promising to 'improve everything you write', irrespective of your scientific field or seniority. Another bold claim – and a justifiable one.

Some of the advice in the early chapters may be obvious: 'If you are unsure of your audience, err on the conservative'; don't write in an abstract way; don't be tentative (avoid timid phrases such as *could possibly*). But it does no harm to be reminded of it. Some things you might not have thought about. For me, the advice to consider mixing formal and informal registers was revelatory.

Chapter 3 (of 11) is concerned with our writing telling a story. To improve readability and reduce the word count, the author urges us to avoid using abstract nouns (e.g. *identification*) as subjects and to replace weak verbs such as *be* and *have* with strong verbs. The central concern is always the reader. Greene advocates placing the verb near to the subject on the basis that readers will tend to skim over intervening text looking for the verb.

Like almost all writers nowadays, Greene favours the active voice. Unlike everyone else, she provides a good explanation of when the passive voice can be useful.

Her wisdom seems almost endless: use the same terms for the same thing; don't use technical terms if your audience won't understand them; avoid non-parallelism; vary sentence length to avoid monotony; cut out superfluous words (including *the*); use transition words such as *however* and *therefore* to guide the reader; replace wordy phrases with single words. It really reads like a 'What's What' of good writing.

All chapters contain example sentences which the author analyses and improves. However, some of the reworded sentences have meanings or implications that are subtly different from those of the originals. Similarly, Greene advises us to avoid long words, but some of the shorter words she suggests we replace them with have different meanings. These ambiguities are a potential source of confusion.

Each chapter is complemented by challenging, thought-provoking exercises which make the reader analyse and improve other example sentences and paragraphs. Excellent, but I do have a criticism: the author's own answers (improved sentences/paragraphs) often contain multiple changes – not just the one that illustrates the point of the exercise. This might make things harder for novices.

I have never read a book on writing where I agree with everything, and this book is no exception. Chapter 7 is on how to structure sentences, where to put certain information. It contains some great tips, but things are not as black and white as the author suggests. Likewise her advice to replace negative phrases (e.g. *did not allow*) with positive ones (in this case, *prevented*). As with active and passive and long and short sentences, I feel a mixture can work well.

The last two chapters deal with designing and organising paragraphs. Greene helpfully describes ways to arrange separate paragraphs so that readers can navigate them easily. Disappointingly, there is no summary after the final chapter. I kind of wanted the author to wish us good luck in our attempts to go out and write more clearly!

I have highlighted this book's flaws in the interests of balance, but really they are massively outweighed by its strengths. Costing just £9, *Writing Science in Plain English* is a steal.

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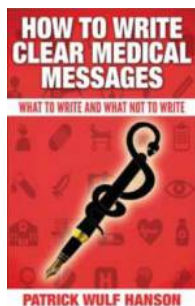
How to Write Clear Medical Messages: What to Write and What Not to Write
by Patrick Wulf Hanson;
CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2014.
ISBN-13: 978-1500163532.
5.84 GBP. 108 pages.

For a while, I have been looking for a book on writing clearly aimed at medical writers or other people writing for the health professions. So I was intrigued when I learned about *How to Write Clear Medical Messages: What to Write and What Not to Write* by Patrick Wulf Hanson. The title sounded perfect for my needs, and as described in the About the Author section at the end of the book, the author seems well-qualified to write on the subject after having worked in scientific research and communications for more than 20 years.

The introduction emphasises the importance of planning your communication. The author explains that the first step in writing a document is to ask the following five questions:

- Why do you want to communicate your message?
- What do you want to communicate?
- What do you want to show?
- What is the purpose of the text?
- To whom do you want to communicate?

Subsequent chapters are on writing as a communication tool. They summarise key points such as using the active voice and basics of English grammar and punctuation; words that can be confused by non-native English speakers, such as *advice* and *advise*; correct usage of numbers and units; and usage of abbreviations and acronyms.

The book then switches modes and discusses a wide range of topics important to medical writers, including ethical considerations, writing for marketing and advertising, communicating research, basics of statistics, and referencing. The final chapters include some overall advice and sources of information and reading.

Unfortunately, this book does not do an adequate job of addressing the author's own five key questions. Who is it for? Is it medical doctors and other health professionals, professional medical and scientific writers, other professional writers, researchers, or non-native English speakers? Several or all of the above? At some point, the author mentions medical writers, but some of the topics would already be known to a professional medical writer. The 'what' and 'why' are also not fully clear, and the purpose of the book and what the author really wants to show are lost between the covers. In addition, the book often has long lists of information or things to consider but usually lacks examples or exercises, so it never really accomplishes its goal of teaching the reader how to write clearly. Finally, the book has a number of glaring errors that should have been caught during a proofread and certainly before the book went to print. This is rather embarrassing for a professional medical writer and highlights the importance of a key missing chapter: quality control!

I think that the author has a good idea: a book teaching people how to write clear medical messages is needed. But he needs to develop the book further, clarify who the target audience is, move long lists to an appendix, and be more careful about quality control. I encourage him to produce a second edition that truly meets its objective and addresses his five main questions.

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