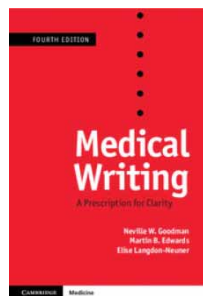


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Section Editors:

Alison McIntosh
alison.mcintosh@iconplc.com

Stephen Gilliver
stephen.gilliver@gmail.com



Medical Writing: A Prescription for Clarity (fourth edition)

By Neville W. Goodman, Martin B. Edwards, Elise Langdon-Neuner (Editor), and Andy Black (Illustrator);

Cambridge University Press, 2014.

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37.50 GBP. 380 pages.

Do you know the difference between compliment and complement? Do you know your breeches from your breaches? Do you know why the word 'Ghoti' should be pronounced 'fish'? Answers to these questions and many other interesting facts regarding the English language can be found in the fourth edition of *Medical Writing: A Prescription for Clarity* by Neville Goodman, Martin Edwards, and Elise Langdon-Neuner. This book caters for writers at all stages of their careers and from different fields of medical writing; whether you are a physician, a professional medical writer, or a student, this book provides an array of practical information to help improve the clarity of your writing. Those writers for whom English is an additional language will find this book particularly useful as a guide to ensuring effective and coherent writing.

The book is divided into three main parts. Part 1 (chapters 1–3) introduces the reader to key problems which have arisen through decades of unchanged medical writing practice, in particular the level of unnecessary complexity, redundant jargon, and phrasing seen in medical journals, and the problems facing writers for whom English is not their first language.

Part 2 (chapters 4–22) attempts to address these problems by highlighting some of the common errors made with spelling and offers useful tips on choosing the appropriate wording. Furthermore, this section questions the choice of vocabulary used in medical literature and offers simpler and clearer alternatives to avoid the key messages being lost in the 'polysyllabic fog' of the writing. In chapter 4, the authors describe how the advent

of computers and the internet has shaped the way we write about, reference, and research topics of interest. Searching databases such as Google Scholar and PubMed has shown an increased prevalence of unnecessarily complex words such as *ameliorate*, *novel*, *myriad*, and *elucidate*, and our dependence on such aids as the Microsoft spell-checker can result in common spelling mistakes if we do not truly consider what we are writing.

The most extensive chapter of Part 2 is chapter 7, which provides simpler, clearer alternatives to over 100 words that are commonly used in medical writing, but that are either often incorrectly used or unnecessarily complex. This chapter is complemented nicely by chapters 8 to 10, which focus on superfluous and imprecise words and phrases that have become ingrained in everyday medical writing.

The authors often refer to the writing of James Watson and Francis Crick, who are complimented on the short and simple statements in their seminal work on the structure of DNA, which get straight to point of what they are proposing. To some extent, I agree with the authors' viewpoint: clarity is paramount in scientific reporting. But clarity is not always achieved by using simple words. A writer must gauge his or her audience when writing a scientific document. Although certain types of scientific communication, such as medical journalism, require the utmost simplicity to communicate a difficult subject matter to a lay audience, intricate medical documents such as clinical study reports will inevitably require a level of complex terminology, especially when describing adverse events. A writer cannot simply say this subject *had the flu*; the writer must document a detailed description of the event (including specific symptoms, diagnostic tests, and possible causality) that often necessitates the use of a complex medical vocabulary.

Chapters 11 to 20 in Part 2 explore further aspects of the English language, including word order, punctuation, prepositions, tenses, and the use of clichés. These chapters cater more for writers with English as an alternative language. However, native English speakers would also benefit, as

these aspects are often overlooked in everyday writing. I disagree, somewhat, with the authors' views on circumlocution (chapter 16), the process by which a writer deliberately uses more words than are necessary to get their point across. I agree that sentences should be succinct; however, removal of too many words, as shown in the examples in this chapter, could perhaps lead to misinterpretation. In chapter 21 the authors apply their philosophy of simplicity and clarity to graphs as well as text and give some fine examples to follow.

In Part 3 of this book (chapter 23), the authors conclude with a selection of 43 exercises to test the reader's knowledge of what he or she has learnt throughout the course of Parts 1 and 2. The exercises consist of excerpts from medical books and journals which the authors have rewritten to reduce the use of redundant phrases. The authors also provide uncorrected versions of the 43 exercises which allow the reader to attempt their own corrections.

Valuable changes to this fourth edition when compared to previous versions include a shorter introduction, an updated suggested reading list, and an updated list of 'abused' words. In addition, exercises from previous editions are now incorporated into the main body of the text and PubMed is used to highlight key wording and phrases in medical literature that need addressing to ensure that the correct message is delivered and to avoid confusing readers.

If English is not your first language then this book is a useful introduction to some of the pitfalls of medical English. If English is your native tongue, then this book will not dramatically change the habits of a lifetime. But I would imagine that if 10 medical writers read it they would each take from it a different piece of information that would improve their writing in some small way, and that can only be a positive thing. My main criticism of this book is that the authors could apply their own techniques more thoroughly in certain chapters, in order to maintain the reader's engagement; however, they should be credited for representing their points with amusing illustrations, which enhance the text in an entertaining way. This is certainly not a book to read cover to cover in one sitting, but instead is to be used as a resource to refer back to every so often. Furthermore, this book is unlikely to provoke a fundamental change in the way that medical documents are written, but it does effectively highlight key issues and solutions that all writers should be conscious of. I would recommend this book as a necessary addition to any medical writer's bookshelf.

Reviewed by [Nicholas Churton](#)
Medical Writer, ICON Clinical Research, Eastleigh, UK
Nicholas.Churton@iconplc.com