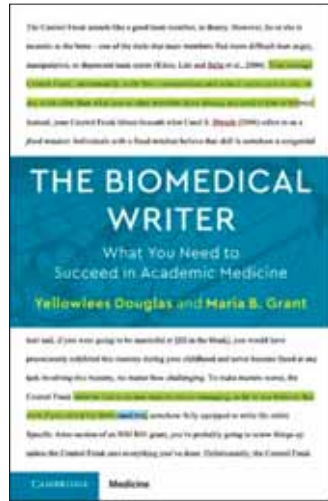


In the Bookstores

The Biomedical Writer
Yellowlees Douglas and
Maria B. Grant
Cambridge University
Press, 2018
ISBN-978-1-108-40139-5
Paperback
£22.99 206 pages



Yellowlees Douglas is a consultant on writing and organisations and an associate professor in the Center for Management Communication at the University of Florida, USA. Maria B Grant is a professor of ophthalmology at the University of Alabama, USA who has authored more than 200 peer-reviewed publications. The book is targeted at academic researchers rather than professional medical writers.

This small paperback consists of seven chapters each of which begins with a bullet point list of learning points and is interspersed with ‘Between the lines’ and ‘Snares to avoid’ information boxes – opportunities for a deep dive into some of the topics covered in the chapter. The first chapter (Writing: The most vital – and neglected – skill) serves as an introduction to the book and its authors.

Chapter 2 (Writing for your reader’s brain) is very different in style to anything I’ve read in other textbooks on medical writing. It takes an academic approach to how we read – from basic word recognition to recalling content – and provides tips on how to organise sentences and paragraphs to have the greatest impact. For me, this chapter underlined two important principles. The first is that papers must be readable to have impact – good research can be obscured by “clunky” writing. The second is that writers should always ask a copy editor to look at their work before submitting.

One of the learning points for Chapter 3 (Before you begin: getting to *So what?* and *Who cares?*) is to anticipate potential objections or rejections as you are writing. I think that this is good advice. To this end, the book’s authors remind writers to use appropriate guidelines (CONSORT, PRISMA, STROBE, STARD, and STREGA) to avoid compromising the reporting

of the study. They also suggest that researchers classify their study by its outcomes – i.e., as “incremental”, “first ever”, “incidental/dramatic”, or “a paradigm shift” (accepting that outcomes often straddle more than one category) before even writing an outline. They point out that this will also be useful in promoting the paper (e.g, through social media) post-publication. I found the “Progressing Your Career” section at the

end of Chapter 3 troubling, as it could be interpreted as encouraging writers to flout ICMJE and GPP3 recommendations. This section is ostensibly about mentorship, but in my opinion, readers could replace “mentor” with “sponsor”. In respect of review papers it says: “Usually, rather than write the manuscript themselves they enlist... someone they mentor to collaborate with them on the review.” For the word *collaborate* substitute *write*. And “Your mentor’s name may well get the paper published at a good journal.” This is the type of behaviour that the pharmaceutical industry has rightly been criticised for and which prompted the development of ICMJE and GPP3 guidelines. These authors acknowledge the perniciousness of these arrangements – in the process making a very valid observation about the way in which they affect women’s career progression – yet, disappointingly, encourage their readers to play the game rather than change the game.

Chapter 4 (Getting published: manuscripts, journals and submissions) is by far the longest chapter in the book (at 47 pages) and for me was the most important. The chapter has 10 sections. It starts with some great practical advice on targeting journals and familiarising yourself with their style and author guidelines. The authors make some important suggestions for ensuring that writers understand and properly convey the context of

The authors make some important suggestions for ensuring that writers understand and properly convey the context of their work through a thorough literature search.

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their work through a thorough literature search. They recommend the use of search algorithms in Google Scholar and PubMed to ensure that all of the background on the topic is captured and to highlight gaps in current knowledge and/or practice. The authors then take each section of the manuscript in turn and provide very detailed descriptions and advice on how they should (and should not) be constructed. The section on writing the introduction takes 15 pages, reflecting the importance the authors place on getting this right. The authors’ suggestions to create a basic outline that you can gradually expand, to use the introduction to highlight where the gaps in research are, to ensure that the methods section covers the Who, What, When, Where and How of the study, to stick to reporting data in the results section and keep commentary on those findings for the discussion all reinforced my beliefs about the most efficient way to write a manuscript. The authors make the very good point that this is what journal editors and reviewers are looking for – and deviating from that pattern is likely to result in manuscript revisions and publication delays.

Other high points of this chapter were the “Making discussions more accessible” section (which included the BMJ’s suggested structure for discussions) and an explanation of the terms *association*, *correlation*, and *causation*. There were some low points in the chapter for me, however. Some of the subsections were just too theoretical (in particular, the use of gambits in constructing the introduction). Some of the subtitles were just too contrived: titles such as “Manage the Scylla and Charybdis of discussions” and “Running the gatekeeper gauntlet when submitting” seemed to run counter to the advice in the chapter. Once again, the lack of encouragement to write collaboratively, with all

authors earning their place on the by-line, is disappointing. On the one hand, the authors are encouraging researchers to check and act on journal requirements, and on the other they say: "... you are writing the paper exclusively because the *invited* [my emphasis] senior author has delegated its writing to you" – behaviour that in most cases would prevent a journal publishing a paper. I also took issue with three of the otherwise excellent takeaways from this chapter: "consider publishing negative data" (many journals actively encourage this now in order to recognise the contribution made by patients taking part in the study); "filter the data you report in your results section to highlight only your most significant findings" and "highlight your most important finding in the opening paragraph of your discussion" (GPP3 encourages authors to be guided by the objectives/endpoints of the study, with the emphasis placed on the primary outcome).

Chapter 5 (Getting funded: applying for grants) will be of interest to EMWA members who work in this area, or who want to work in this area, but is outside my own experience. The authors reiterate their key messages for writing manuscripts: prepare well – ensure that you understand what type of funding is on offer and what it can be used for; anticipate the likely outcomes of your research and don't over- (or under-) sell it; understand the needs of your audience; clearly identify gaps in current knowledge and practice that the research will address; and prepare an initial outline of the application before starting to write. The authors encourage writers to think of their grant application as a business plan that leaves the reviewer with no unanswered questions and clearly demonstrates that you have considered all the problems that you might encounter and have

the tools to deal with them. The authors caution writers to expect to fail at their first attempt and provide strategies for responding constructively to criticism of the manuscript.

Chapter 6 (Collaborative writing: pass the baton) – which covers preparation of both grant applications and research papers – is very nicely done. It suggests the type of expertise that you need to have in your writing team to complete the paper and accurately describes the challenges of ensuring that everybody's views are considered, and a consensus arrived at before submission. I wasn't impressed by the authors' suggestion that all potential authors complete a light-hearted questionnaire to identify strengths and weaknesses as a writer, or their categorisation of different types of writer. The chapter does, however, include some pertinent advice on setting and enforcing deadlines and on different ways of communicating with the team during the writing process. I heartily endorse the authors' recommendation for face-to-face meetings whenever practicable (especially for discussing contentious or difficult matters). I found their comments about email exchanges interesting and enlightening. In this context, emails should be brief, have a clear subject, ideally state the main purpose in the opening sentence and certainly in the first paragraph, and seek to conclude a discussion not to start one. This chapter allays some of my concerns that the authors are sanctioning ghost writing and guest authorship, and I think that it is a shame that it was not placed earlier in the book.

Chapter 7 (Communicating with the public) deals with writing press releases and materials such as consent forms and lay summaries for the public to use. The preamble to the guidance on writing lay materials is very US-focused, but the step-by-step guidance itself is general enough to

be useful in any market. I very much liked the authors' practice exercises for writing press releases – gradually distilling down the key points of a research publication until the most significant and newsworthy findings remain. They list nine criteria by which the newsworthiness of research findings can be assessed: impact, significance, controversy, prominence, the unusual, timeliness, currency, usefulness, and educational value. If your findings encompass one or more of these, it should be possible to write a release that garners interest among the press. The authors remind readers to check with their publisher before issuing a press release and about the necessity to publicise the research and not any product that was used in the research. The 'Snares to avoid' section in this chapter concerns 'pay to play journals': it is clear from their description that the authors are referring to predatory journals here, and I think it is a shame that they didn't stick to this terminology. There are reputable journals that charge a fee for open access publishing and it would be a shame if researchers were discouraged from using them because of a misunderstanding. I also think that this section would have been better included in Chapter 4.

This book is not an easy read – you need to set time aside and study its contents. It is a book that some medcomms agencies may appreciate for its insight into how people take in and understand what they are reading, and how you can organise your writing to optimise the delivery of your messages. Aimed, as it is, primarily at academics, however, this book is not a general reference text for professional medical writers.

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