

# Lingua Franca and Beyond

## Helpful hints from a cross-cultural perspective

This issue of *Medical Writing* is devoted to the improvement of our writing skills. Can you think of a better topic for our section? There is always room for improvement; whatever you do, and whatever you write improving your skills is a challenge, but for medical writers for whom English is not the first language, this challenge is often much more difficult to tackle. Language is a reflection of our way of thinking and is shaped by the culture we come from and were brought up in. One thing is to learn the vocabulary and grammatical rules, another is to switch your mentality and express your thoughts properly in a language, which by definition, is foreign to you. Ashley Cooper, an Australian, who lives in Europe and works across different cultures,

shares her experience and explains how different cultural backgrounds impact the way we write. She cites the work of Robert B Kaplan, who is Emeritus Professor of Applied Linguistics in the Department of Linguistics at the University of Southern California; he was the founding editor of the *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics* and took part in the preparation of the *International Encyclopaedia of Linguistics*.<sup>1</sup> As Ashley writes 'Kaplan described native English speakers as having a linear thought pattern, speakers of Semitic languages (e.g. Arabic and Hebrew) as having a parallel style, speakers of Asian languages as having an indirect style, and speakers of Romance and Slavic languages as having a digressive style'. Now I understand why coming

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from the Slavic language background I need so many parentheses when I write in English!

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## Writing under the influence

During a recent discussion with a friend and client, I posed the question: 'what's the most valuable lesson you've learned about improving your writing through us working together?' The answer: 'learning how to structure a paragraph'. My friend completed part of her high schooling, a university degree and a PhD in Australia, and is now a successful young group leader at a large university; however, like many academics her first language was not English. My friend writes very well and although I am sure she was simply paying me a compliment, it was this discussion that prompted me to think about the influence of our culture and native language on the way we structure and develop text in a second language.

My aim in writing this piece is to share my experience; specifically, how having an appreciation of cultural norms in writing has helped me to improve my own writing and edit the work of others. Before I go any further, I should say that I am an Australian whose native language is English, and whose second language abilities extend only as far as high school Japanese and beginner-level German. That said, many of my clients are academics and doctors whose native languages include Chinese, French, German, Hindi, Polish, Portuguese, Spanish, Swedish and Turkish. Needless to say, I greatly admire and respect those who can master more than one language! I would also like to acknowledge that I



am by no means a linguist and the cultural differences discussed herein are not true of every piece of writing, nor every genre. I'd also like to mention that there is a great body of research in this area, so if you're interested, the references cited in this article will point you in the direction of further reading.

### Cultural differences in style and structure

*'[Medical writing] is a technique whose principles and practices are applicable whatever the language used. If the language used happens to be English of course it is best for it to be good English, but above all it should be plain and simple English...'*<sup>1</sup>

Preferred patterns of writing have been said to be genre-dependent,<sup>2</sup> and this is particularly true of medical writing. Much of the text with which we, as medical writers, work follows a defined structure. Within this structure we are allowed some creativity, and it is here that our culture comes into play.

Thirty years of research has resulted in the publication of many pieces of work suggesting a range of reasons for cultural differences in writing. It has been generally agreed that the biggest influence is a result of the four dimensions across which cultures are said to differ: individualism versus collectivism; power distance; uncertainty avoidance; masculinity versus femininity. The discussion was expanded

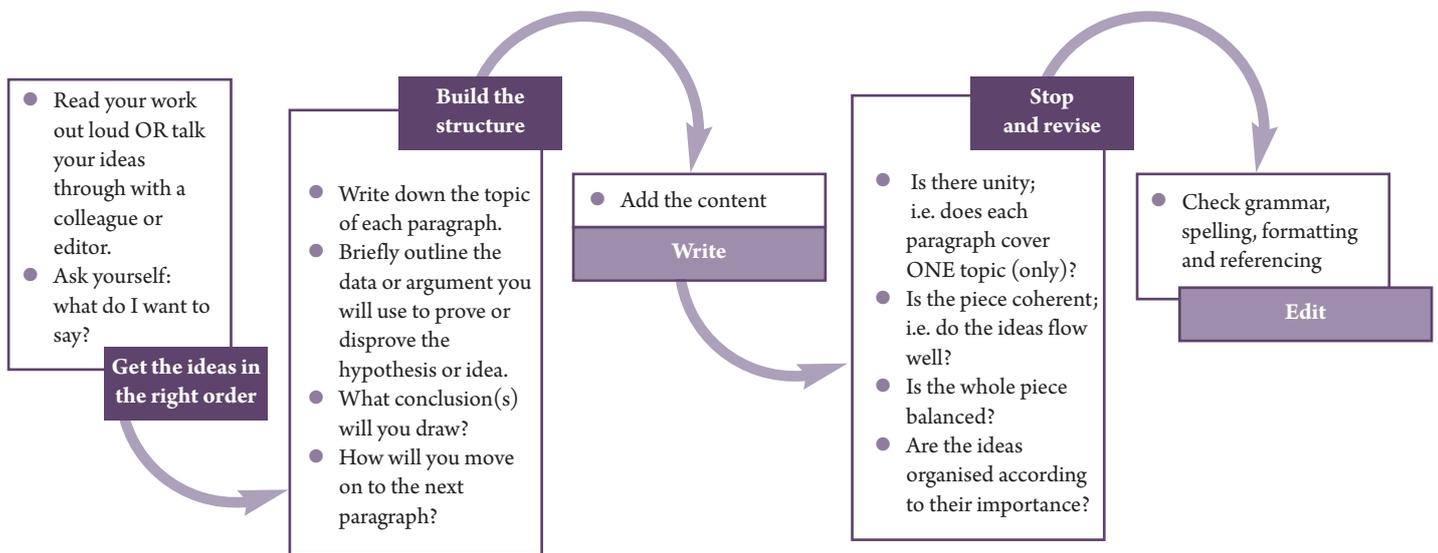


Figure 1: Strategies to improve writing.

further in 1966 when Kaplan characterised and contrasted the writing of native and non-native English speakers.<sup>3</sup> This process, called contrastive rhetoric, compares the interference of the writer's first language on the second (in this case, English) due to the writer's choice of rhetorical strategies and content.<sup>2</sup> In his paper, Kaplan described native English speakers as having a linear thought pattern, speakers of Semitic languages (e.g. Arabic and Hebrew) as having a parallel style, speakers of Asian languages as having an indirect style, and speakers of Romance and Slavic languages as having a digressive style.<sup>3</sup> Although the ideas presented in Kaplan's study have been further developed since its publication,<sup>2,4</sup> the initial study shone a light on the topic, highlighting that culture does influence writing.

In English, the flow of an article – that is, the ease with which the author develops an idea and connects it to the next – shapes whether we perceive it to be a *good* or *bad* piece of writing. For this reason, if native-level English is the goal, then improving the unity and coherence within and between paragraphs can result in a significant improvement in the flow of the final product. This linear style of writing, where the logic between ideas is defined and explicit, is taught from an early age in the Anglosphere.<sup>5</sup> Topical cohesion, or repetition of the topic subject, and sequential progression or development of an idea are thought to be markers of *good* English.<sup>2</sup> This characteristic is not true of good writing in every language (see the cited literature for a detailed discussion). Siepmann presents a nice summary of stylistic differences, including overall coherence, between English, French and German text.<sup>6</sup> In my experience, compared with native English speakers, Spanish speakers tend to be more elaborate in their writing style. This results in

some digression from the main argument and thus less coherence (an anecdotal observation supported by Simpson).<sup>5</sup> This digressive style may be due to the fact that Spanish is said to have far more flexibility in word order than English, and this flexibility allows for more creativity in composition.<sup>5</sup>

#### Shaping our message when writing and our expectations when reading

In a study of the nature of written English by non-native English speakers, Silva highlights the importance of understanding the differences between a native and non-native English speaker to better comprehend and address non-native speakers' needs.<sup>4</sup> I would suggest that understanding these differences is also important for native English-speaking writers and editors, and more generally for editors whose first language is different from the writer's. Interestingly, a reader's expectations have been demonstrated to affect what is perceived to be straightforward writing,<sup>2</sup> and our own cultural expectations can result in our unfair evaluation of a text simply because it is different from the style typical of our native language.<sup>7</sup>

It is important for an editor to have a general awareness and understanding of cultural differences in rhetorical structure as this provides a framework within which to work. It allows the editor to interpret the author's intended meaning and then to help the author build the story for their intended audience. Much of my early experience as an editor involved correcting the English of researchers whose native language was Chinese. At the time, I did not fully appreciate the almost poetic way in which many of these authors wrote and did not recognise that this was typical of good writing in Chinese culture. Fortunately, my awareness has grown and

although I willingly admit to needing clarification from time to time, rather than assuming the author's message is unclear, I understand the message 'is simply not clear to me', which isn't to say it is unclear to others. This failure to appreciate cultural conventions is apparently not only true of English speakers. In a study published in the mid-'90s, Chinese speakers, who evaluated an English text written by a native speaker, found the work to be 'insufferably redundant, cyclical, excessively detailed, forced and unnecessary.'<sup>8</sup>

As a writer and/or editor, whether a native or non-native English speaker, being aware of your own perspectives in relation to writing structure can be extremely helpful in improving your own work. When revising a text, this self-awareness may also allow for easier identification of potential points of confusion. If your intent is to present a piece of writing as though it has been written by a native English speaker, I would recommend the following strategies as I have found them to be particularly helpful (a summary is presented in Figure 1, above):

- **Read your work aloud (and record yourself) or talk through your ideas with your colleagues or editor.** Stop and think. What do you want to say? In my experience, many of the non-native English speakers I work with are more confident with their spoken English than their written English. One of the most effective strategies I have found is to go through the planning process (see the next point) aloud. Getting the ideas in the right order is the first step – changing the register from spoken English to a more formal written style can come later! Even if you think your written English is better than your spoken English, I've found this process helps writers to more easily identify the main point(s) of their work.

- **Build the bones of your paper before you write.** If you're trying to achieve native-sounding English, give yourself a linear structure to work with. Make note of the topic of each paragraph, the data or arguments that prove or disprove your hypothesis or idea, the conclusion(s) you will draw, and the way in which you intend to move to the next paragraph. Once you have this skeleton, you can add the meat!
- **Consider the unity, coherence and balance of your piece.** Once you've added the meat to the bones of your skeleton and you've created a piece that's reasonably fleshed out, stop and revise your text. Ignore the sentence-level stuff at this point – you can come back to that later. Look at the ideas within each paragraph. Does your paragraph cover just one topic? Are the ideas coherent? Now look at the whole piece: is it balanced? Have you organised the ideas according to their importance?

### Concluding thoughts

As a writer or editor, striving to achieve native-level written English is important to ensure clarity of message. This is particularly important when the register of a piece needs to be more formal or academic. That being said, non-native English speakers often use literary tools that a native English speaker would not. These non-traditional phrasings and word pairings often add richness to a piece of writing, and editors should appreciate and embrace them – as long as they do not impede or confuse the intended message.

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## The Sarajevo Declaration on Integrity and Visibility of Scholarly Publications

Regional scientific journals can face all kinds of problems and threats, including plagiarism and other ethical issues, difficulties finding editors and reviewers to handle submissions, unscrupulous authors, and barriers to getting indexed. To discuss and address these and other challenges, the Academy of Medical Sciences of Bosnia and Herzegovina<sup>1</sup> convened a special congress on science writing, editing, and publishing in Sarajevo in December 2016.<sup>2</sup> Attended by interested parties from Balkan and Mediterranean countries, the congress ultimately yielded an aspirational ten-point declaration aimed at improving the quality of journals published in the represented countries: the Sarajevo Declaration on Integrity and Visibility of Scholarly Publications.<sup>3</sup>

The Declaration reminds editors, reviewers, and authors of their responsibilities in general and specific terms. The benefits of following ICMJE (International Committee of Medical Journal Editors),<sup>4</sup> CSE (Council of Science Editors),<sup>5</sup> and similar guidelines are emphasised. The Declaration also advocates using social media and ORCID (Open Researcher and Contributor ID)<sup>6</sup> to publicise scientific papers and suggests that journals devote space

for students and more senior individuals to publish material in return for continuing professional development (CPD) credits. Publishers are urged to increase the skills of their editorial teams by recruiting experts in statistics and design, although this is perhaps easier said than done. Lastly, journals are encouraged to increase their visibility and credibility by improving their websites and by ensuring that their editorial practices are transparent.

While it will be hard to measure the Declaration's overall impact, journals that start following its guidance will surely be expected to improve their standards.

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