

Teaching Medical Writing

Are you interested in helping non-native English speakers to write academic texts?

Do you teach written English to non-native academics? Or are you a language editor or translator who would like to get involved in this sort of teaching? If so, we would very much like to hear from you. There are not many of us teaching in this area, and it would be great to exchange experiences and ideas.

As noted by Christine Møller and Monika Schoell in a 2008 piece in *The Write Stuff*¹, there are many PhD students and researchers in non-native English-speaking countries who need help with writing manuscripts for publication. An alternative to editing their manuscripts year after year is to help them develop their own language skills to make them better writers. This should help to reduce the need for heavy editing input due to poor sentence construction and incorrect grammar. There is also a joy in being able to express oneself and share one's research and discoveries, even if the text is ultimately submitted to a text editor for a final polish.

Developing the skills of non-native English-speaking researchers can seem like a daunting task, however, given the wide spectrum of language difficulties many of these writers face. Our main challenges when designing an English language workshop for PhD students at the University of Southern Denmark were deciding which aspects of written English grammar to cover and finding a relevant but easy starting point. Our goal was to provide these students with some useful writing tips and strategies to use in their scientific writing. We also felt it was important that students came out of the workshop feeling more confident about writing

in English and inspired to write.

Rather than presenting a pre-determined set of grammar rules, we decided to focus on the problems that were common to most of our course participants. We researched websites from other university writing labs, such as those of Purdue² and Stanford³ universities and found a range of useful explanations and exercises covering different aspects of English grammar and style. However, the drawback of consulting websites is that the language difficulties can differ from person to person and from one group of non-native language speakers to another. The challenges a native Danish speaker might face when writing in English may thus differ from those of a native Mandarin speaker. Therefore, we required the students to submit a one-page sample of their writing two weeks prior to the course.

As the writing samples came in, we reviewed them and began listing out the language use problems that emerged. The most common issues were:

- subject-verb agreement (Danish does not distinguish between singular and plural verbs)
- adjective/adverb confusions
- lengthy, complex sentences often including run-on sentences (subordinate clauses are more common in Danish than in English)
- faulty word order (small but important differences between Danish and English word order)
- misuse of “that” and “which” (different rules in Danish)
- unnecessary words or wordiness

SECTION EDITORS



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This list may look different for academic students in different countries, but a common problem is likely to be texts that are disjointed or difficult to read. For our course, we decided that an understanding of the English sentence structure was essential to creating a clear text and that discussion of the main sentence types would also allow a review of the main parts of an English sentence, such as nouns, verbs, adjectives and adverbs. We then continued with specific grammar points, such as subject-verb agreement, and wordiness. The focus throughout the course was on using the students' own examples to highlight the relevance of the various aspects of grammar and style. We believe that this increased the student's understanding and thus also the likelihood that they would be able to remember the strategies and use them in future writing.

Our PhD course has been well received, and we believe we are making a difference. However, we are very open to new collaborations and ideas on how to teach academic writing skills and would like to hear about others' experiences.

If you are interested in teaching medical writing to non-native English speakers and would like to make new contacts, feel free to get in touch. Christine and Claire will also be holding an *“Open café” meeting at the EMWA meeting in Birmingham in May 2017*, where all interested are welcome to join us to hear more about teaching and to share experiences.

References

1. Møller C, Schoell M. Language revisers/translators/editors: is there anyone out there? *The Write Stuff* 2008;17(2):85.
2. The Purdue Online Writing Lab (OWL). Purdue University, West Lafayette, Illinois, US. <https://owl.english.purdue.edu>
3. Online course on Writing in the Sciences. Stanford University, Stanford, California, US. <http://online.stanford.edu/course/writing-sciences-self-paced-spring-2016>

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