

Abstract: Written discourse is the main mode that scholars use to convey the quality of their work. Even so, scholarly writing is frequently flawed by errors in grammar and syntax. Through satire and example, the author provides practical tips to scholars and would-be scholars who wish to improve their prose.

Key Words: Academic nursing, prose, scholarship, scientific discourse

A Scholar Is What A Scholar Writes: Practical Tips On Scholarly Writing

(subtitle: *Wild Manuscripts I Have Known*)

The common stereotype of a scholar is someone who sits atop an ivory tower inhaling the heady vapors of meta physics. In reality, scholars participate in the everyday world. Although they may be expert in particular areas of content, scholars relish diverse sources of broad and general knowledge. What most distinguishes scholars from content experts is their ability to write effectively. This article focuses on specific suggestions to improve scholarly writing.

After some years of reading and editing material in academic nursing, I have noticed a number of problems, which occur with sufficient frequency to warrant mention and painstaking correction. In the belief that nurses learn by precept and example as well as by trial and error, I will share a few comments and illustrations relating to these problems. Most of these examples are taken with slight modification from drafts of articles, dissertations, research proposals, theses, and written assignments that I have read and edited.

All-Not all

These words regularly betray the careless writer, who tosses into her sentence all the words she intends to use without regard for where they fall. "All nurses did not learn the protocol." This statement means that no nurses learned the protocol. "Not all nurses learned the care protocol." This statement means that some nurses did not learn the protocol. (In strict logic, this statement could apply even if no nurses learned the protocol. In common usage, however, the phrase "not all" is used to connote "some, but not all.")

As

As far as *as* is concerned, *as* is as good a word as *because*; indeed, *as* is poetic and elegant, while *because* is uninspired and pedestrian. *As* has as many meanings, however, as *since*, as you can discover with a little reflection. As the purpose of scholarly writing, as you know quite as well as I, is neither poetry nor elegance, but to create as clear and readable a presentation as is possible with complex material, I usually recommend, as I read along as editor, that *as*, as a substitute for *because*, be used as sparingly as possible, as *as* is susceptible to misreading when *as* is used as often as *as* is by an asophile.

As I make the same recommendation for *since*, I cannot be charged with bias against *as*. On the contrary, I regard *as* as a fine and delicately tinted word with qualities that should not be

wasted and dulled in ordinary tasks that can be done equally well by the perfectly serviceable word *because*. *As* should be reserved for those occasions when its particular nuances are needed, as, for example, in the first clause of a sentence. (Note: when a word is used to refer to itself, as in discussing the word *as*, the word should be underlined, or italicized in print. See above.)

Commas

An adverbial clause at the beginning of a sentence normally should be set off by a comma. For example: "After all the patients underwent cardiac rehabilitation, the home treatment was instituted." The comma serves to mark the end of the clause and to indicate a shift in thought. A comma is also needed to prevent misreading of an introductory prepositional phrase when the end of the phrase is not clearly indicated by syntax at the point of transition: "In the treatment groups of patients received stress testing every four weeks." Note how the arrangement invites the reader to misread the end of the prepositional phrase as "the treatment groups." Better style would be: "In the treatment, groups of patients...."

Without a coordinate conjunction (e.g., *and*), a comma should not be used to connect two independent clauses. Comma splicing is the term for this error. Consider this example: "The client awakened hungry after a speedy recovery from anesthesia, he requested beer and pizza." Remedy a comma splice by (a) separating the clauses to create two, stand-alone sentences, (b) adding an *and* after the comma, or (c) substituting a semicolon for the comma.

Complex structure

Keep sentence structure as simple as possible, consistent with the thought to be expressed. Do not make clauses when phrases will do as well. Complex ideas which often require subordinate clauses to state their meaning adequately, ideas which by their very nature twist round themselves and come back to the start so they have no starting (and scarcely a stopping) place, these, the products of a kind of thinking and a kind of nature that transcends the neatly sequenced step-by-step of sentence structure, these ideas require, perhaps demand, the verbal maze of clauses, parenthetical phrases, appositives, infinitives, and all the other residual sentences that sum up two paragraph's worth of thoughts between one capital and the next period; ideas which follow upon one another so tightly that readability must yield to cohesiveness

of thought, such ideas do rightfully deserve compound sentences; if, however, the ideas are not quite so tightly bound, then a conjunction may be inserted, but let the writer do his job too; and, if, with justice, he may upon occasion demand the reader's diligent application to complex thoughts in necessarily complex prose, let him, the writer, with even greater diligence strive to make the syntax match the thought, for no one should suppose the proposition works the other way around; unless the writer wants to display pretentiousness or inability to bring his thoughts to order (or, as in the present case, to demonstrate a point), the reader should not be compelled to pick his way through comma-studded paths of ponderous prose except to find an idea worthy of his labor.

Coordinate terms

Words, phrases, and clauses may be made grammatically parallel by coordinate conjunctions (e.g., *and*, *or*, *but*), semicolons or commas, or combinations of these. Headings which are parallel in outline and are under the same super-heading are also coordinate terms. The familiarity of this construction encourages slovenly disregard for its cardinal rule: Coordinate terms should be grammatically and logically parallel. It is relatively easy to avoid sloppy construction. For example, "The HMO data were analyzed by two methods, analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) and by using residual scores." Coordinate terms in the preceding sentence are not grammatically parallel. The first is a noun in apposition to methods. The second is a prepositional phrase modifying analyzed. The terms also fail logical parallelism. If the analysis was accomplished by using residual scores, then it was also accomplished by using ANCOVA. When coordinate terms are widely separated, it is usually preferable to repeat the relevant words, such as the preposition "by" in the first sentence of this paragraph: Words, phrases, and clauses may be made grammatically parallel by coordinate conjunctions (e.g., *and*, *or*, *but*), by semi-colons or commas, or by combinations of these. Careful choice of the best construction makes for more effective communication (Strunk & White, 1979).

Compound conjunctions

These (e.g., both...and; if...then; neither...nor; not only...but also) are often helpful in improving readability; the first word serves as a signal to indicate both the presence of coordinate terms and the nature of the forthcoming conjunction. Not only does the first word provide a signal, but it also indicates the first coordinate term in the same way that the main conjunction marks the second coordinate term. Be sure that the terms thus paired are grammatically and logically coordinate. Consider this example: "Remission was both a function of T-cell potency and level of chemotherapy." Function and level are not logical coordinates; a better construction would be: "Remission was a function of both T-cell potency and chemotherapy level."

Dangling participles

A participle is a verb form normally used with an auxiliary verb (e.g., seeing, seen). Participles are often used in adjectival form as modifiers of nouns: "Seeing the seizure, the nurse recorded the event." Such participles may be regarded as condensed forms of clauses. Participles are much shorter than clauses: "Seen briefly, the patient's mother was aloof and detached." Connectives and redundant words are omitted. As usual, such omissions exact a price in the form of strict adherence to grammatical structure. A participle modifier must be as close as possible to the noun it modifies. A participle modifier is said to dangle if its noun is not close enough, particularly when another noun is closer: "Seen briefly, a nurse judged the patient's mother to be aloof and detached." Grammatically, this sentence means: "When a nurse was seen briefly, she judged the patient's mother to be aloof and detached."

Effect-affect

The noun effect is closely related to the verb affect. If an experimental therapy has an effect, then it affects the dependent

variable. Effect, as a verb, means "to bring about," as in the sentence: "Through holistic healing methods, they effected their own cure."

Imply-infer

These words are complementary. This statement does not imply, nor should you infer, that they are synonyms. A proposition, or its originator, implies. The recipient of the communication infers. A nursing theory or theorist implies; the researcher or practitioner infers.

However

Do not use however as a coordinate conjunction; however, it may be used to introduce a coordinate clause, as in this sentence. Note that a semicolon, not a comma, precedes however in this usage. Avoid the tendency to use however at the beginning of a sentence. The word is weak and uninformative. Most sentences which are introduced with however have another place a few words from the start where however can be euphoniously inserted.

Irregardless

This word is used colloquially in place of regardless. The practice is not generally regarded as good usage. The prefix *ir-* is a negating prefix, as in: "Advance directive guidelines frequently specify examples of 'an irreversible condition'." In the same way that irreversible means "not reversible," irregardless should mean the opposite of regardless. Some authorities suggest that this problem arises from fusing the words regardless and irrespective, which are nearly synonymous (Leavitt & Sohn, 1979).

Lists

Lists are useful for identifying items within a category. For instance, "Common fractures include comminuted, transverse, and spiral. Other fractures are greenstick, impacted, and compound." If the first part of the sentence is completed by a list, then don't place a colon after the introduction to the list. In the examples above, no colon follows the words include or are. Also remember that a comma appears before the "and" in a series. For example, "Check for warmth, redness, restricted movement, swelling, and tenderness." Rather than say, "Check for signs and symptoms of inflammation," the author chose to list the signs and symptoms. Lists are easy to write. Because they provide less information than narrative description, however, lists should be surrounded by sentences containing vivid details. Avoid a series of lists. Serial listing compromises clarity, muddles meaning, and confuses the reader (Flesch, 1994).

Nonsense

If a reader finds your writing difficult to understand, then his first response is to examine your statements more closely. Careless writing may give a reasonable impression when subjected to cursory reading; yet the same sentence may dissolve into meaninglessness or absurdity upon careful scrutiny. Consider this example: "Performance of human subjects fit the pain surcease model." Now what, precisely, is meant? Is an empirical phenomenon, e.g., human performance, supposed to fit (or explain) a theoretical model? Shouldn't the explanation be the other way around? Another common example reads: "This study investigated . . ." The writer, we hope, did the investigating. When seeking IRB approval, one author innocently, though ominously asserted: "The participants will be numerically coded." For a moment we wince at mental images of concentration camps and the Nuremberg Trial. But wait—didn't the author really mean that the participant's verbal data and biopsy samples would be coded?

Order

Present ideas in logical order. Though paragraphs can give the appearance of order to a narrative that is poorly constructed, the absence of paragraphs reveals disorganized, muddled thought. No amount of brilliant and obsessively sequenced ideas can overcome the illogical labyrinth and messy morass of words that

accompany a two or three page paragraph. Careful word placement also improves readability: "...in comparable fashion to other teens, pregnant adolescents...." Because comparable to must be understood as a unit of thought, the sentence is more readable when written: "in a fashion comparable to...."

Personal passives

Unfortunately, the passive voice is encouraged in scientific writing. Verbs differ in the extent to which the active subject is important. Statements such as the data were analyzed are sufficiently impersonal that no emphasis or clarity is needed concerning who performed the analysis. Deciding, believing, and judging are actions with high level of personal involvement, and identity of the subject is important to assess the action. Expressions such as "it was determined..." or "it is believed..." would seem strained and stilted if they were not clichés of scientific writing. When these expressions are read by me, however, it is believed that a sense of being irritated tends to be aroused such that it is felt by me as being inclined to be poked.

Because such passives are conventions, I will not presume to proscribe them. But if you must use these expressions, then do not use them to evade responsibility or intentionally obscure the active subject. Be sure you make clear who did the deciding, believing, etc. Personally, I prefer a forthright acceptance of responsibility, such as "This investigator decided...The writer believes..." If you feel daring, there is abundant precedent for using "I" in book reviews, policy papers, and theoretical articles. Note: Whether a scientific journal will accept "I" depends on the whim of its current editor.

Possessive form

"Possession is nine-tenths of the law." This hackneyed expression raises the question of whether possession can be proved. In written discourse, the most common way to prove possession is by using an apostrophe. For example, "The conceptual framework for this study is Martha Rogers' theory of Unitary Human Beings." Because the proper noun, Rogers, ends in an "s," the apostrophe follows the "s." This rule also holds true for most plural nouns. With singular nouns, however, an "s" follows the apostrophe: "A nursing theorist's chief goals are to explain clinical realities and predict health outcomes." Plural nouns that don't end in "s" (e.g., children) are treated like singular nouns (e.g., children's). Regrettably, knowledge and rigid application of this grammatical convention can lead to another pesky problem for writers and editors, the it's-its confusion.

It's is often misused as the possessive form of it, even though it's is really a contraction of it is. Conversely, its (without an apostrophe) is the correct form for indicating possession by the pronoun, it. Here's a way to remember: "It's a shame that my otherwise excellent exposition of thought is tainted by this pesky flaw, but my usage has its problems." The same rule applies to you're and your. Similarly, use whose to indicate possession, and who's to denote who is. Recognize and correctly use other possessive pronouns, such as theirs and yours.

A related error that too commonly appears is misusing an apostrophe to pluralize an acronym or number. Consider this example: "With advent of prospective payment schemes in the early 1980's, HMO's created a powerful market niche." Best form is achieved by dropping the apostrophes (University of Chicago Press, 2003). Clear meaning is the key determinant for use of apostrophes. Although context suggests otherwise, apostrophes lead the reader to expect possession, such as: "A 1980's style of business acumen among a leading HMO's employees brought charges of bottom-line, health care economics." Here the possessive form conveys an intended meaning.

Precision

Use language which is as precise as possible. "Smughorn and Barnweather (2001) found that ICU nursing performance improved..." What kind of performance? Speed? Accuracy? On what basis was the judgment made? The empirical meaning of

the sentence depends on the answer to these (and perhaps other) questions. Apparent conflicts in scientific reports are produced by such sloppy summarizing. And what is meant by found? Was this finding an inference derived by the reviewer or was it a conclusion of the original author? Somebody is responsible for this generalization, and the reader is entitled to know who.

Pronouns

A pronoun normally refers to the nearest previous noun which agrees with it in person and number. Exceptions are permissible where the context prevents ambiguity (Flesch, 1994). When there is the possibility of ambiguity, however, repeat the noun. "It is necessary to limit the types of medication errors to the most common for the purposes of this research. These can be categorized as giving an inaccurate dose, omitting a dose or giving it late, and failing to document medication." The antecedent of these is types, or possibly errors. A reader will discover this fact for himself, after he realizes that the antecedent is not purposes. For three decades the APA style manual (2001) has carried an exhortation that writers should avoid the indefinite this. The word this, employed as a pronoun, should only be used if the antecedent noun is clear. The most common case of an "indefinite this" is an idea expressed, but not named, in a preceding paragraph. This problem can be fixed by inserting an appropriate noun after the word this, changing the status of this from pronoun to adjective as was done at the beginning of this sentence. Consider this example: "Lanzetterfeld and Sieber (2002) concluded that their post-MI clients did not seek all the clues that were available to them before making a decision. This was true even when there was no substantial exertion or increased oxygen demand." To clarify, change this to this conclusion.

In keeping with contemporary editorial mandates for gender neutral language, authors frequently err by using the plural pronoun "their" instead of "he" or "she." For example, "Each client will administer their own medication at home." Political correctness and gender neutrality are preserved by using a plural antecedent: "Clients will administer their own medication..."

Qualification

Be careful to qualify your statements properly. "Behavior in this situation will be referred to as caring intervention." This statement is about as sweeping an edict as, "Let there be light!" Does the statement apply now, henceforth, and forever, for all time and unto all people? No. The author only means to apply it in the present paper.

Sentence fragments

Do not use phrases as sentences: "Among the 176 patients admitted for day surgery, a small percentage (1.7 %) did not comply with pre-operative instructions; two drinking water and one eating a snack after midnight." An independent clause is required after the semicolon. In this example, a participle phrase was incorrectly substituted. This phrase cannot stand alone as a sentence because it is missing a predicate.

Split infinitives

To carelessly or gratuitously split an infinitive will incur mild distress in some readers and perhaps suggest that you do not know that an intact infinitive is the preferred form. For emphasis, or for clarity, ample precedent supports the judicious splitting of infinitives.

Subject-verb

A verb must agree in number with its subject. The most common source of agreement error is the case in which a plural noun lies between a singular subject and the verb. Some examples follow. "The nature of the results, one might argue, are not surprising at all..." The subject is nature. "The proposed set of research studies are an extension of a study recently completed by the author." The subject is set. "It appears that behavior

conducted in both caring and uncaring environments are characterized by a primacy effect among clients." Behavior are characterized, are it?

Superfluous words

Avoid superfluous words: "All blood specimens tested yielded positive results." Tested is a necessary qualifier of specimens if only some specimens were tested. But if all specimens were tested, then tested is not a qualifier and, as a descriptor, it is absurd. If the blood specimens yielded any results at all, it is because they were tested.

Varied sentences

Avoid monotony. Vary the length and structure of your sentences. Although flagrant misuse of complex sentences was satirized earlier, a string of indistinguishable sentences is boring. Punctuate your writing with short sentences. It's okay to mix subordinate clauses and prepositional phrases with the clause containing your main idea, particularly if the complexity is warranted by the content. But the best way to emphasize a main idea is with a period. Period!

CONCLUSION

Scholars try to make sense of the world through specialized means, such as scientific research, gentle dialogue, gregarious debate, critical reading, and reflective writing. Scholars should distinguish themselves as effective communicators. They should practice the art of direct, clear, and focused writing free of excess. Scholars should skillfully write for different audiences, without distracting flourishes or contrived rhetoric. (Rhetoric, mind you, isn't a bad word or a loathsome practice, if it is done well.) Sadly, though, scientific writing is frequently obscure and obtuse when compared to everyday discourse. This short article has illustrated common errors in scientific writing, such as misused commas, dangling participles, and superfluous words.

Alert to the practical tips offered in this article, a seasoned researcher or would-be scholar can produce consistently cogent and persuasive prose. Of course, the scholarly writer also must present premises that aren't fallacious, ideas that cohere, and a vivid text that inspires the reader. A scholar's writing provides evidence of disciplined thought. If scholarly achievement is most often conveyed through writing, then scholars must learn to write well. Writing well is a hallmark of good scholarship.

REFERENCES

- American Psychological Association. (2001). *Publication manual of the American Psychological Association, 5th Edition*. Washington, DC: Author.
- Flesch, R. (1994). *The art of readable writing*. New York: John Wiley & Sons.
- Leavitt, H.D.; & Sohn, D.A. (1979). *Stop, look, and write!* New York: Bantam Books.
- Strunk, W.; & White, E.B. (1979). *The elements of style*. New York: Macmillan.
- University of Chicago Press. (2003). *The Chicago manual of style*. Chicago: Author.

EDUCATION

❖NURSING INSTRUCTOR❖

For almost 80 years, Mott Community College, located in southeastern Michigan, has served the educational needs of businesses and the community. We currently have an exceptional opportunity available for a full-time Nursing Instructor in our Health Sciences Division.

This position will provide instruction in nursing theory and clinical practice to a diverse student population within the Practical and Associate Degree Nursing programs. The Instructor will also be responsible for planning and evaluating program curriculum as well as developing syllabi, exams and learning activities. Our faculty and staff members are committed to providing high quality educational opportunities and services that promote individual development and improve the overall quality of life in a multicultural community.

Qualified candidates must possess a Master's Degree in Nursing, three years of relevant clinical experience and current Michigan licensure as a Registered Nurse. Teaching experience at the community college level is desirable.

Please visit our website at www.mcc.edu to view complete posting information. Application deadline is May 30, 2003. To apply, please submit a letter of application, resume, three letters of reference, copies of graduate transcripts and current Michigan RN license. Requested materials should be submitted by using only one of the following methods:

◆ Mott Community College ◆

- ◆ Human Resources, CM 1024
- ◆ 1401 E. Court Street, Flint, MI 48503 ◆
- ◆ Fax (810) 762-0595 ◆
- ◆ Resume@mcc.edu ◆



Mott Community College

Filling of this position is subject to budget availability. Mott is an AA/EEO employer. Selected candidates must submit to a drug test and criminal background check. In accordance with the Americans with Disabilities Act, if applicants have accommodation needs they may call (810) 762-5396.

A Spirit of Nursing Diversity Lights Our Way

SERVICE. QUALITY. STEWARDSHIP. PEOPLE. INNOVATION. COMMUNITY.

An innovative spirit, coupled with a passion for excellence, drives the nurses at Lourdes Health System to continuously improve health care for the diverse communities we serve.

We are currently searching for the following RNs:

OUR LADY OF LOURDES MEDICAL CENTER, CAMDEN

- Renal/Transplant
- Outpatient Dialysis
- Acute Stroke
- Home Health

LOURDES MEDICAL CENTER OF BURLINGTON COUNTY, WILLINGBORO ICU/CCU • Telemetry • ER • Med Surg

Our rewarding environment includes:

- Highly competitive pay
- Leading comprehensive benefits
- Dedication to education
- Focus on your career goals and aspirations

Forward your resume to:

E-mail: lisab@lourdesnet.org, Fax: 856-757-3044



LOURDES
HEALTH SYSTEM

Feel Our Healing Strength.

For more information on all of our current opportunities, please visit our website:

www.lourdesnet.org

Member of Catholic Health East, sponsored by the Franciscan Sisters of Allegany, NY. EOE/M/F/D/V

Copyright of Journal of Theory Construction & Testing is the property of Tucker Publications, Inc. and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.

Copyright of Journal of Theory Construction & Testing is the property of Tucker Publications, Inc. and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.