

Science writing
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Outline

Last time

Non-linear, multi-layer, feedforward networks and error back-propagation.

Today

Science writing

Mid-term exam

Science writing

General points

■ Where your teacher is at

I have spent a lot of time critiquing my own writing and that of others. But I'm still learning. It is one thing to know what to do and another to actually do it. It is also one thing to do something well, and quite a different thing to explain how you do it well. I don't claim to always write well or to know how to write the best. But I do write better than I used to. I've learned from my advisors, journal reviewers, and from my own students. I continue to learn from self-evaluation. So here I'll summarize my ideas and advice.

Two favorite sources:

Gopen & Swan: Provides an excellent discussion of general principles. Not a cookbook.

A Pocket Style Manual 2nd Edition. Diana Hacker: A good cookbook.

And even though this lecture is about science writing, you can learn a lot from reading "how to" books by fiction writers. A couple of my favorites are Stephen King's "On Writing" and Sol Stein's "Stein on Writing". Both also provide relevant advice for non-fiction writers.

It helps to find writers that you like, read their work, and then ask yourself what makes their writing work for you. One of my favorite technology writers is David Pogue of the New York Times. Goofy at times, but he does catch my interest. But more importantly, he always seems to anticipate "my next question". I'll talk about this below in the context of creating and fulfilling expectancies.

And pay attention to your computer's grammar checker! Jerry Pournelle, a well-known science fiction writer suggests the use of a grammar checker in his advice to beginning writers (<http://www.jerrypournelle.com/slowchange/myjob.html>). Also, see: <http://papyr.com/hypertextbooks/grammar/gramchek.htm>

I will talk about science writing, rather than other kinds of writing because: 1) This is a science course and you'll get practice doing it; 2) I'm your teacher, and it is the only kind of writing that I know; 3) At a general level, the kind of writing doesn't matter too much, because the main principles generalize to any effective communication of information. So even if after this course you never write about scientific results again, hopefully you will have learned something about clear communication that will pay off later.

Why bother?

Why bother learning to write well? After all, you might argue, a good scientific result should stand on its own. There are a few cases where just a hint of a major discovery is so motivating that exactly how the information is conveyed is relatively unimportant compared to the result. (The structure of DNA, Einstein's theory of special relativity, the proof of Fermat's last theorem.) But for most of us who write up scientific results, good writing is essential to success. Here are a few reasons.

The vast majority of scientific papers contribute only incrementally to knowledge. Knowledge production is so voluminous that a published paper may get read by only 2 or 3 people. On the one hand, this figure is depressingly low. On the other hand, this is an opportunity to gain 2 or 3 advocates who will use and pass this information on to others. An incremental contribution can be amplified or minimized by the quality of the writing.

While it is certainly true, at least in general, that good writing is altruistic and polite in that it respects the reader, good writing is also selfish--someone else who writes better can get the credit. I know of papers in my field whose (important) ideas or results never gained widespread recognition, and were superseded by a paper in which the writer did a better job of articulating the ideas. The author of the second paper is the one that gets remembered in citations and textbooks. Granted it isn't just the clarity of exposition, but often the depth and breadth of the second paper. However, this depth and breadth can emerge in part from an effort to clearly communicate thoughts and intuitions that are otherwise too vague to be useful. Thus...

probably the best reason to practice writing well is that it will help you think more clearly. And if as a scientist you think more clearly, you may end up discovering more. As Gopen and Swan put it:

"Improving the quality of writing actually improves the quality of thought".

There are many times that I've thought that I've thoroughly understood something, only to be stumped when having to explain it.

As an aside, the same goes for programming. It is one thing to think you have a good idea, and quite another to design a computer program that implements it. There are many apparently "good" theories in cognitive science that stumble at the implementational stage. That is why I teach this course using computers and programming. Producing clear writing is like good programming--they force you to make your assumptions and theories sufficiently explicit to be communicated and tested.

■ Determine your audience

Where does your audience fit on the speciality gradient?

General public, kids, undergraduates, graduate students, scientific layperson, scientific professional, scientific colleague in your field, scientific colleague in your speciality.

It isn't always easy to figure this out, and it may take some research and discipline.

Because of specialization, there are big differences among members of the category of professions that know and use science:

Social scientists, physical scientists, biological scientists, scientific professionals, engineers, grant reviewers, scientists in industry, business users of science.

You may want to write to reach more than one audience at the same time. There are good and bad ways of doing this too.

Tip: Write as if to someone you personally know who represents your audience. If you have a chance, have that person read a draft. Encourage the person to be frank about what is not understood.

As Gopen and Swan put it:

"If the reader is to grasp what the writer means, the writer must understand what the reader needs"

I will tell you who your audience is for this course. In your final paper, your audience is not me! The audience is your peers!

■ Good writing is hard work for most of us

Good writing is hard because it is the result of clear thinking, and clear thinking takes work. Good writing is also hard because it requires thinking about expectancies and logical flow at multiple levels of abstraction. Below, I'll flesh out what is meant by expectancy, logical flow, and levels of abstraction.

If there is one "take home" message, it is that you do learn best by doing, but only if you get and respond to feedback. In this course, you'll get feedback from me and your peers. But ultimately, the most important feedback is that which you generate yourself by reading and revising what you've written, often many times.

Expectancy; Familiar structure, but with small, slightly surprising, instructive deviations

The 18th century English historian, Edward Gibbon wrote:

"The powers of instruction are seldom of much efficacy except in those happy dispositions for which they are almost superfluous"

There is a general principle here that applies beyond teaching to wide range of human activity: to humor, creativity in art, music, and fiction, non-fiction, and science writing. Effective communication means that the recipient needs sufficient context to understand what is being said, and in fact needs to have an expectation for the kind of phrase, sentence, paragraph or section that will come next.

A joke is a caricature of what you want to accomplish when communicating.

(Even predictive coding by the nervous system...)

To use Gopen and Swan's terminology, the *opening* (of a sentence, paragraph, section, or paper) sets context & motivation and general expectation. The *closing* (stress position) brings fulfillment to expectation.

When you write up your final projects, you will follow a particular section form, not because "that's just the way it is", but rather because the form makes explicit the role of expectation. Expectation is why there is often a standard form in science papers: Abstract, Intro, Methods, Results, Discussion.

Violating the order can disregard the tacit structural knowledge of our audience.

Many scientific journals have changed their format to put the detailed Methods at the end. Why?

"Logical flow" & expectancy

■ "Logical flow" and the importance of "transitions"

Any piece of writing should carry the reader along without extraneous mental intrusions into the flow of the description. This is true of both non-fiction and fiction writing. The maxim in fiction is to avoid intrusions that interrupt the "suspension of disbelief".

For science writing, the way to do this is to follow principles of logical flow.

What is "logical flow"? Logical flow refers to transitions in which an expectation is set up followed by fulfillment. As described below, good transitions occur at multiple levels.

From Gopen & Swan: "Put in the topic position the old information that links backward; put in the stress position the new information you want the reader to emphasize".

The topic position is typically at the beginning to set context. The stress position is usually at the end to provide the new information. Old to new.

Avoid spurious information. Spurious information produces misdirection, violating expectancy and the flow of an account--imagine a joke with an explanatory side-comment just before the punch line. But "spurious" can be a function of

the audience. If details obstruct understanding for most of the audience, but are important to a minority, put the details elsewhere (e.g. in an appendix). Determining your audience helps determine what goes where.

Tip: Avoid unnecessary adverbs, and adjectives. After you've written your draft, use your computer to Find all the "very"s and "quites", and delete them.

Tip: Watch for ambiguous referents!! Especially at the beginning of a new paragraph. Here's an example of ambiguous referents

"Put the old information in the topic position. The topic position is typically at the beginning. This will help you write better."

What did "this" refer to? Don't assume the referent is as obvious to your reader as it is to you.

■ Logical flow at multiple levels

Work towards logical flow within units and between units (a unit can be a sentence, paragraph, or section). Use the lead subject word to link with previous sentence or paragraph. Or you could set up a list of expectations at the beginning of a unit, and then follow through with the new information in the same sequence. At a coarser scale of abstraction, a paragraph or section plays the role of a unit. You use the opening concept or paragraph to link backwards to presumed earlier knowledge of the reader, or the previous section of the paper. Use the closing paragraph to emphasize/summarize the new information.

An outliner can help to make the logical flow at multiple levels explicit. E.g. ideally, this subsection should have its internal logical flow, and if you close the cells, the section should also have a logical flow between subsections. You can use parts of an outliner like a scaffolding that gets removed once the structure of the text has been built. Sometimes I use many more outliner levels while writing than I need for the final draft. It helps me organize my thoughts at multiple levels. But once I've figured out the structure, the text stands on its own without an overdose of subsections, subsections, and sections. Too many of these can disrupt the flow.

Paper structure

■ Title

The title should be inviting, informative and ideally, the conclusion of the paper. E.g.

Good:

Activity in primary visual cortex predicts performance in a visual detection task

Why is snow so bright?

"Shape perception reduces activity in human primary visual cortex" (one of my papers)

Bad:

"Aspects of phase" (sadly, also one of mine)

But sometimes one can get away with "vagueness", e.g. "Pursuing commitments" (Nature Neuroscience, Shadlen, 2002). This sounds like a "must read". Why?

Abstract

Mini-version of the whole paper. Still a unit of discourse with logical order: set context & motivation, raise question, give answer. Minimize details from the methods, unless the method is a primary contribution.

■ Introduction

Motivation, motivation, motivation. Articulate the question for the target audience.

The "Funnel" principle

Start the introduction by motivating with the big picture, and gradually focus in on the scientific question/hypothesis being tested. The metaphor is that your paper should provide a channel into which readers with diverse backgrounds can be brought into an appreciation and understanding of the focused scientific question of the paper. Adjust the "width" of opening of the funnel to the diversity of the audience. Usually the "length" of the funnel--the allotted writing space--is fixed, determined by scientific journal convention.

Here is another way of thinking about the "funnel principle". The average number of readers per scientific journal article is small. Further, the number that actually make it all the way to the end is even smaller. The introduction can serve to motivate and reach an opening audience that might be different than your closing audience.

By the end of the introduction, the funnel is narrow--it is where you, the expert on the material, are at.

Example

"Soon after I started physiological research, I was lucky enough to make an interesting, but as it turned out unoriginal discovery (Barlow, 1950). I was repeating some experiments that Hartline (1938, 1940) had done on the frog's retina, with the idea that the very large receptive fields he had discovered might not be simple spatial integrators of light, as he had suggested, but might have some form of pattern selectivity. The experiment was to measure the threshold for eliciting impulses from a retinal ganglion cell as a function of the area of the stimulus spot. If spatial integration occurred, and the sensitivity over the receptive field was uniform, ..."

From: Barlow, H.B. (1982), "Perception: What quantitative laws govern the acquisition of knowledge from the senses?"

The Punch-line of the introduction

Context at the beginning. The "punch-line" at the end. The "punch-line" is the crucial, exciting scientific question, i.e. end the introduction section with a clear statement of the hypothesis to be tested. By the end of the introduction, your readers should be waiting with bated breath to find out how you've answered the question, and what your answer is. Don't give away the whole story. But no hard and fast rules. Sometimes a titillating preview of the result can be a good idea--the equivalent of a movie trailer. Again, consider the diversity of the audience. And whether you want to allow for the readers that will quit after the Introduction because they just wanted to get the gist anyway.

■ Methods

Explain how you answer the question posed in the introduction. Some brief overview of this explanation may go in the Introduction, but the details go in the Methods.

■ Results

In this section, the context is the data and analysis. The new information is the interpretation in the light of the question(s) posed at the end of the Introduction. Many good results sections have clear figures that carry and summarize most if not all of the results, and the writing centers around explaining the figures.

Tip: Work on making sure that the scientific conclusions can be drawn naturally and clearly from the figures and the figure captions. Then writing the Results section will come naturally. The reader should have an expectation of what to see in the data or figures if the hypothesis is true vs. false.

Tip: It can help in the initial design stages of an experiment to sketch out the figures with the results you anticipate. This can help to clarify the relationship between your hypotheses and your tests even before you start.

One could devote a whole lecture just to the art and science of figures. Instead, I highly recommend the books by Tufte (see References).

■ Discussion

Describe the broader implications of your results. This is the place for bold predictions, and for humble speculation. As an editor I've found that most Discussion sections are too long in papers submitted for review.

■ General principles: Economy, symmetry and elegance

Principle of (translational) symmetry. If points 1,2,3 are raised and highlighted in the intro, those points should be followed up in the same order in the experiment, results, and discussion. This is a special case of creating and fulfilling reader expectations.

*Tip: When introducing a key concept with a set of descriptive words, use the same descriptive words when referencing it later. (oops, ..when referencing the **concept** later)*

If jargon is necessary, pick one word per concept and stick with it. Don't use multiple jargon words that mean the same thing.

Sentence and paragraph structure

Let's go over some specific advice from your reading.

■ Rhetorical principles from Gopen & Swan:

Subjects should be followed as soon as possible by their verbs, otherwise the reader loses the logical flow within the sentence.

Information to be emphasized should be placed at "points of syntactic closure". E.g. stress positions in a sentence are typically at the end.

i.e. "save the best for last"

Place the person or thing whose "story" a sentence is telling at the beginning of the sentence, in the topic position.

Place context or "old information" at the beginning for linkage backward, and contextualization forward. I.e. work towards good transitions.

Unit of discourse (e.g. sentence, but regardless of size) should serve a single function or make a single point (applies to more than sentences).

Tip. You may have several points you want to make in a paper. But it is rare that all points have equal importance. Determine the priorities. There should always be a clear "take home message".

Readers expect the action of a sentence to be articulated by the verb. Use informative verbs (as in information theory. "is, "are presumed to be", "has" are low information words.) But good writing is in a mysterious place between low and high entropy.

Provide context before asking reader to consider anything new ("motivation motivation motivation")

Try to ensure that the relative emphases of the substance coincide with the relative expectations for emphasis raised by the structure.

In other words, avoid the problem **The Foundations** sang about in 1968: "Why do you build me up (build me up) Buttercup, baby. Just to let me down (let me down) and mess me around"

■ Economy, "redundancy reduction "

I often review scientific journal submissions that are too wordy. One of the best ways of avoiding unnecessary verbiage is to follow the principle of logical flow at multiple levels. There are too many sentences (or paragraphs or subsections) that just seem to be elaborating on what went before, or that are tangential. In other words, the article fails to follow the principles of logical flow. One could advocate a kind of minimax rule: "maximize information transfer with the minimum number of units", but I don't think advice is that useful, any more than a cost function is useful without some algorithm to minimize it. But I do think something like a minimax rule is the end result of working towards logical flow.

But, don't over-do-it! I.e. avoid telegraphic writing.

Great quick overview here:

A Pocket Style Manual 2nd Edition. Diana Hacker.

Examples of good writing:

Scientific audience:

Some of my favorite writers in cognitive and neuroscience are: Horace Barlow, Gordon Legge, Geoff Hinton, Anya Hurlbert, John Hopfield, Denis Pelli.

And for the scientific layperson: George Gamow, Freeman Dyson, Steve Pinker, and Matt Ridley. I especially liked Bill Bryson's "A Short History of Nearly Everything", 2004.

Examples of bad writing:

Gopen and Swan provide some examples of bad writing, and it is well worth the read.

Also take a look at:

[http : // www.bulwer – lytton.com/sticks.htm](http://www.bulwer-lytton.com/sticks.htm)

For more on writing, both good and bad:

[http : // kimberlychapman.com/essay/badwriting.html](http://kimberlychapman.com/essay/badwriting.html)

[http : // www.developsense.com/GuidelinesForBetterWriting.html](http://www.developsense.com/GuidelinesForBetterWriting.html)

[http : // www.dcs.qmul.ac.uk/~norman/papers/good_writing/general_.principles.html](http://www.dcs.qmul.ac.uk/~norman/papers/good_writing/general_.principles.html)

And although aimed primarily at fiction writing, my favorite is: "**On writing: A memoir of the craft**" by **Stephen King**

Some class examples

Final Projects

Next week's topics

■ Neural representation & coding

References

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A good cookbook. Short, handy, good examples, with the most important and useful stuff at the beginning.

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