

# Style and Editing

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# Medical journals are dull

## Reasons

- Literary inability
- Fear of frivolity
- Editorial timidity
- Peer pressure to perpetuate custom and practice

“Every dull dog has his day”

-- *Richard Asher, 1984*

# What is style?

- Communication is an attempt to sell someone else our ideas
- Style in writing is all about choice of how this is done
- Every writer has available resources of a full language
- English has particularly large choice of words and structures
- Style is a choice of these that covers balance, emphasis and tone

# What is style?

- No such thing as a “correct” style
- Each writer selects arrangement of words to best express intended meaning and obtain desired response from readers

# Is there a “correct” style?

## Example

- The MLT door is not to be opened during a session because the delegates may escape
- Do not open the MLT doors during a session; the delegates may escape
- On no account should the MLT doors be opened during a session, or the delegates may escape
- The delegates may escape: do not open the MLT doors during a session

# Choices for a writer

Sentences

Short

Long

Simple

Complex

Vocabulary

Short

Long

Ordinary

Grandiose

Familiar

Unfamiliar

Non-technical

Technical

Concrete

Abstract

# Choices for a writer

Phrasing	Comfortable idioms	Special scientific idioms
	Direct, incisive	Roundabout, verbose
Verb forms	Active	Passive
	Personal	Impersonal
Paragraphing	Use	Non use
Punctuation	Careful	Casual, random

# Good writing

- Good writing is not just about a consistent choice from one side of these oppositions
- The best writing has variety and flexibility
- Medical writers use formal, third-person, passive, impersonal constructions: the “dull dog”

# Do's

- Clarity
- Brevity

Clarity

# Clarity

- Write with a design
- Avoid eccentricities of language
- Use simple, short sentences
- Put message at start of sentence
- Maintain unity of thought in sentences and paragraphs
- Keep paragraphs short

# Effective Sentences

- Variety
- Emphasis
- Logic

# Emphasis in Sentences

## Examples

- ✗ He stole Rs 5000 as a last resort
- ✓ As a last resort, he stole Rs 5000
  
- ✗ Attention is called to our rules
- ✓ May we call attention to our rules?

# Logic in Sentences

## Examples

- ✗ I asked whether his car was tuned, and is it ready to take us
- ✓ I asked whether his car was tuned and whether it was ready to take us
  
- ✗ She told me that he was dead on the phone
- ✓ She told me on the phone that he was dead

# Effective Paragraphs

- Length 100 to 400 words
- Development
  - Unity
  - Coherence
  - Completeness
- Function
  - Introduction
  - Transition
  - Emphasis
  - Conclusion

**Brevity**

# Brevity

## Benefits

- Grace (The gracious silence)
- Force (Philip of Macedonia to the people of Laconia,  
“If I enter Laconia, you shall be exterminated.”  
Reply, “If.”)
- Speed
- Power (To imply and stimulate)



*Napier*

I have sinned (Sind)

# Don'ts

- Grammatical errors
- Gaffes in construction
- Grandiloquence
- Grandstanding
- German structure

# Gaffes in Construction

- Trumps (Capitals)
- Bumps (Parentheses, brackets, footnotes)
- Clumps (Inspite, alright, upto, ofcourse)

# Grandiloquence

- Abstract words (Juxta, sphericity)
- Vague words (Of the order of)
- Foreign words (Circa, vide supra)
- Fancy words (Beauteous)
- Offbeat words (Uptight, hep)
- Non-words (Aspirinize)

# Grandstanding

- Preaching dogma
- Pre-eminence claims
- Precedence claims
- Prejudice
- Superlatives
- Unindicated italics, underline
- Exclamation ('shriek') marks

# German Structure (Pseudo-adjective pile-up)

## Examples

- Tea-containing cup
- Alkalinized (by ammonia) solution of silver

And now, some final thoughts...

One should not aim at being possible to  
understand but at being impossible to  
misunderstand

– *Quintilian*

Originality ... is too often only undetected and  
frequently unconscious plagiarism

– *Dean W R Inge*