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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sentences</th>
<th>Short</th>
<th>Long</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Simple</td>
<td></td>
<td>Complex</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ordinary</td>
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<td>Grandiose</td>
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<tr>
<td>Familiar</td>
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<td>Non-technical</td>
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<td>Technical</td>
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<td>Concrete</td>
<td></td>
<td>Abstract</td>
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<tr>
<td>Vocabulary</td>
<td>Short</td>
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<td>Abstract</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
## Choices for a writer

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Comfortable idioms</th>
<th>Special scientific idioms</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Phrasing</td>
<td>Direct, incisive</td>
<td>Roundabout, verbose</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Verb forms</td>
<td>Active</td>
<td>Passive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Personal</td>
<td>Impersonal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paragraphing</td>
<td>Use</td>
<td>Non use</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Punctuation</td>
<td>Careful</td>
<td>Casual, random</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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)
Peccavi

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