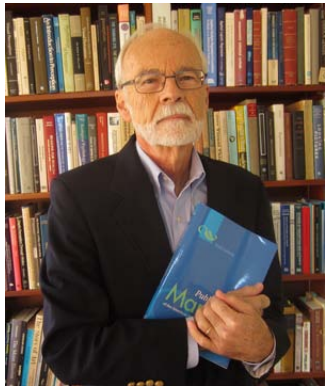# ACCDON

Publishing Research in English-Language Journals: Contexts, Contents, and Corrections

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JCEM
THE JOURNAL OF CLINICAL ENDOCRINOLOGY & METABOLISM
97: 1371-1374 (2012)

JOURNAL OF HEPATOLOGY
Official Journal of the European Association for the Study of the Liver
57: 794-802 (2012)

BIOTECHNOLOGY
A D V A N C E S
31: 838–850 (2013)

AMERICAN SOCIETY FOR MICROBIOLOGY | Journal of Virology
86: 13841-13842 (2012)

AJHG
91: 849–862 (2012)

nature
COMMUNICATIONS
4: 1424 (2013)

MDC
MAX-DELBRÜCK-CENTRUM FÜR MOLEKULARE MEDIZIN BERLIN-BUCH
IN DER HELMHOLTZ-GEMEINSCHAFT e.V.
47: 946-956 (2013)

J|A|C|S
JOURNAL OF THE AMERICAN CHEMICAL SOCIETY
134: 10803-10806 (2012)

Autophagy
9: 175-195 (2013)

DRUG DISCOVERY
TODAY
18: 290–297 (2013)

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My objectives for today:

To help you understand …

- ***Contexts* within which publication occurs**
- ***Contents* of publishable research papers**
- ***Corrections* of common mistakes in manuscripts**

My suggestions come from my experience as a researcher, reviewer, editor, and teacher.

"熟读唐诗三百首，
不会吟诗也会吟"

(Don't be surprised to hear about some of the same topics from both of us today, and more than once from each of us!)

Main contexts:

- **Researcher/Manuscript *authors***

- **Journal *publishers***

- **Journal *editors***

- **Journal *reviewers***

BOTTOM LINE:
Understanding these contexts should encourage you to publish

The "why bother" question

Publication begins with your writing; nothing happens unless you write!

YOUR WRITING → **PUBLICATIONS** → **$$$$$$** → **Prestige**

Institutional Grants, Contracts, Hiring, Enrollment

Institutional

Personal Salary, Students, Collaborators, Grants, Contracts

Personal

Publishing your research gains many rewards

Contexts: *Journal publishers*

The publisher's perspective (*$$$ It's big business! $$$*)

- Around 25,000 peer-reviewed journals, publishing 1 - 2 million articles a year
- Major publishers aim for profits (up to 30 – 40% for big publishers)
  - ➢ Revenues are high
  - ✓ Biggest publishers each issue 500 - 2000 separate journals
  - ✓ Income from subscriptions, page charges, reprint charges, advertising
  - ➢ Expenses are minimized
  - ✓ Manuscripts are free raw materials
  - ✓ Much labor is donated (editors, reviewers)
  - ✓ Institutions may subsidize editor efforts
  - ➢ Lots of pages to fill
  - ➢ Publishers want journals to be read and cited (have high impact factors)

BOTTOM LINE:

Publishers MUST HAVE a stream of submitted manuscripts Publishers MUST accept papers, not reject them

The journal editor's perspective:

●**Pressure from publisher to fill journal pages**

●**Rewards are minimal…**

➢**Possibly, a small stipend from the publisher**

➢**Minor prestige for self, department, home institution**

●**Many other demands on time:**

  ➢ **Teaching, research, other responsibilities**

  ➢ **Managing manuscript flow**

  ➢ **Managing relations with reviewers (recruiting, assigning, follow-up)**

  ➢ **Dealing with authors**

  ➢ **Liaison with publisher**

BOTTOM LINE:

Editors WANT a stream of GOOD manuscripts
Editors WANT TO accept papers, not reject them

The journal reviewer's perspective:

● **Same general aims as the editor**

● **Donated labor, little professional credit**

● **Some sense of sharing service to the discipline**

● **Other time pressures: research, teaching, administrative duties**

BOTTOM LINE:

Reviewers WANT reviews to go as fast and easy
Reviewers WANT TO <u>accept</u> papers, <u>not</u> reject them

What makes a good paper?

● **Importance of the research**

● **Originality**

● suRpRiSiNgNess

What defines research question importance?

- **Historical importance – viewed as important over many years, but still not completely settled**

- **Theoretical importance – tests some proposition derived from theory, especially if the test can falsify the theory**

- **Practical importance – helps solve/resolve some problem that has practical significance**

Unimportant research problems…

- **…take just as much time, effort, and resources as good problems**

- **…are harder to get published, especially in high visibility journals**

What defines research question originality?

- **Advances theory (tests a theory, possibly falsifies it)**

- **Fills an empirical gap**

- **Introduces new methodology**

- **COMMENT: Avoid "me, too" research (i.e., working on problems that many others are also studying)**

BOTTOM LINE:

Connect your research questions to relevant theory
Document originality with your literature survey
Operationalize your IVs and DVs carefully

What defines <u>surprisingness</u>**?**

- **Counter-intuitiveness of results**

- **Application in an unexpected area**

- **Use of unusual methodology**

- **New evidence on a question presumed to be settled**

- **Contradicts common wisdom**

- **Falsifies a widely-held theory**

- **Demonstrates an unexpected constraint on existing results**

Source: Abelson, R. P. (1995). *Statistics as principled argument*. **Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum. See especially Ch. 8, "Interestingness of argument."**

What editors want to see in manuscripts

- **Content appropriate for the journal**

- **Reasonable scope**

- **Conformity to journal style guidelines**

- **Readability**

- **Interestingness**

BOTTOM LINE
Control the things you can control
Construct your manuscript to meet editor expectations

Questions reviewers want to see answered

- Is there a clear research question?
- Is the logic of the research adequate to answer the research question?
- Does the methodology fit the research question?
- Do results adequately address hypotheses?
- Are interpretations, designs, data, and literature consistent?
- Is the research explained clearly (language, readability)?
- Does the work fill a gap in the existing literature?
- Are the results novel, surprising?
- Does the paper conform to journal style guidelines?

BOTTOM LINE:

Make your paper easy to review

KEY POINT:

Make the editor's and reviewers' jobs

as easy as you can

Editors reject manuscripts <u>solely</u> for deficiencies in…

- **Content**
- ➢ **Inappropriate for the journal**
- ➢ **Too limited in scope**
- **Style**
- ➢ **Not conforming to generic style manuals**
- ➢ **Not conforming to specific journal style**
- **Language**
- ➢ **The usual – mistakes in grammar, spelling, etc.**
- ➢ **Lack of clarity in the writing**

This is a desk rejection -- rejection without review.

BOTTOM LINE:

<u>YOU</u> control all these issues!

An example of a "desk rejection:"

"Although the topic of your paper might be of interest to readers there are a number of issues that need to be addressed in the manuscript before I can even send it out for review so I am unable to consider your manuscript for publication.

"The quality of writing of this paper is well below the standards accepted in <our journal>. At times I found it difficult to understand your logic which makes it especially difficult to evaluate the empirical merit and contribution of your paper .... I also found misspelled words, oddly worded subheadings…, and other formatting issues that do not appear to be language-based errors."

An example of a "**desk rejection**:"

"Although the topic of your paper might be of interest to readers there are a number of issues that need to be addressed in the manuscript before I can even send it out for review so I am unable to consider your manuscript for publication.

"The **quality of writing** of this paper is well below the standards accepted in <our journal>. At times I found it **difficult to understand your logic** which makes it especially difficult to evaluate the empirical merit and contribution of your paper … I also found **misspelled words, oddly worded subheadings**…, and other **formatting issues** that do not appear to be language-based errors."

Lessons from this letter:

- **_ALWAYS_ follow journal style requirements to the letter**

- **_ALWAYS_ aim for logical organization in your manuscript**

- **_ALWAYS_ strive for clear, coherent, standard English**

  - **DON'T RELY ON YOUR SPELLING AND GRAMMAR CHECKER!**

- **Remember -- the eventual publication is ultimately YOUR responsibility**

BOTTOM LINE:

Repeating: Control the things you can control

A brief, but necessary, digression…

Scientific research and publication misconduct

All versions of misconduct…

- **Are unethical**
- **Corrupt the literature: A huge disservice to many stakeholders**
- ➢ **Reduces confidence in your discipline**
- ➢ **Perhaps reduces confidence in science from your country**
- ➢ **Reduces confidence in science as a whole**
- **Waste resources**
- ● *May lead to severe personal penalties*

Categories of misconduct

●**Research misconduct**

➢**Falsifying and fabricating data**

➢**Suppressing data** (**"trimming," "cherry-picking," "the file cabinet problem"**)

●**Publication misconduct**

➢*Duplicate publication:*

✓**Publishing the same data in more than one paper**

✓**Journals may bar authors who are caught**

➢*Piece-meal publication ('salami slicing')*

✓**Publishing parts of a larger research project in several smaller papers**

    ✓ **Combine related studies into a single, more comprehensive report**

    ➢ **Falsifying publication lists (resumè, curriculum vitae)**

    ➢ **Taking authorship credit for research you didn't do**

Plagiarism – a special concern

●Definition: Presenting another author's writing as your own

➢ **Many journals routinely check – the internet makes that easy**

➢ **Plagiarism can destroy a reputation and career**

● **Why do authors plagiarize?**

➢ **Intentional copying – an ethical and moral issue**

➢ **Accidental copying – an educational issue**

✓ **Sloppiness**

✓ **Lack of training**

➢ **Lack of confidence in writing ability – a practice issue**

● **The ONLY solution: Appropriate direct quotation or paraphrasing**

BOTTOM LINE:

Always practice ethical behavior

Consequences can be disastrous for your career

Do you know this man?

"**Montana Democrat John Walsh dropped his bid to retain his U.S. Senate seat …, saying recent plagiarism allegations had proved too much of a distraction.**

"**Walsh…is under investigation for copying much of a paper he submitted for a master's degree at the U.S. Army War College. The college and the Defense Department are investigating the matter.**"

Los Angeles Times, 7 August 2014

Do you know this man?

"The website BuzzFeed **dismissed** one of its writers [Benny Johnson]…after finding 41 instances of '**sentences or phrases copied word for word from other sites**' among the 500 stories he had written, said the site's editor in chief, Ben Smith."
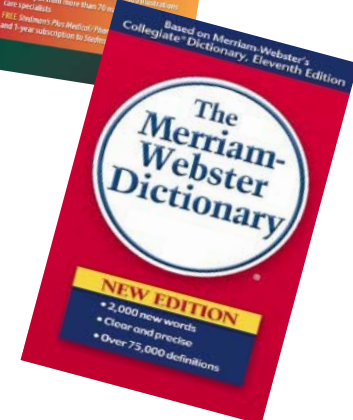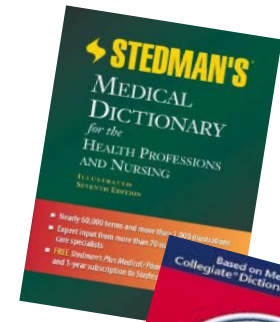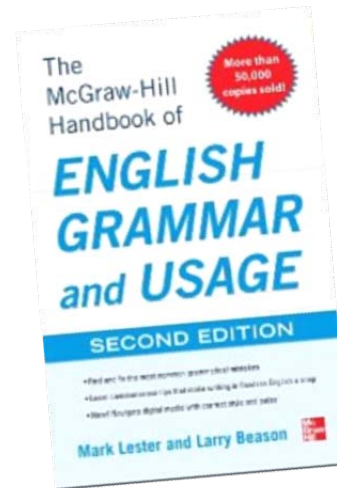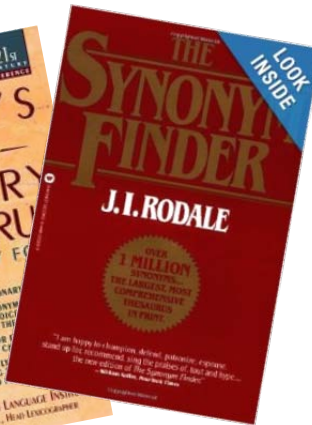
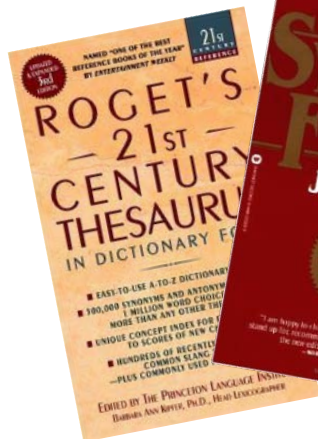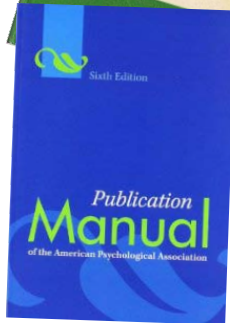Ravi Somaiya, New York Times, JULY 26, 2014

BOTTOM LINE:

There are dozens of similar cases, where plagiarism led to severe consequences for the writer.

Gather your writing tools

- **Target journal(s) guidelines, recent articles**
- **Disciplinary style manual (e.g., APA, AMA, ICMJE)**
- **Dictionaries (standard, specialized)**
- **Thesaurus, synonym finder**
- **General grammar and usage guides**
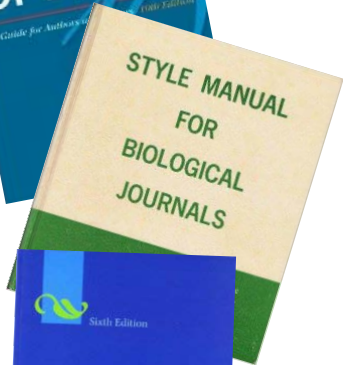
Title

- **Aim for**
  - ➢ **Clarity**
  - ➢ **Informativeness**
  - ➢ **Brevity (typically, 12 – 15 words)**

●**A generic title (re-order parts as needed):**

The effect of variable X on variable Y, under conditions $C_1 \ldots C_n$, for population P

BOTTOM LINE:

Write a strong title. The title is the first filter readers use to decide whether your work is worth reading

Abstract

- **Objective: To amplify title**

- **Use the same flow as the paper itself**

- **Aim to inform without overwhelming readers with detail**

BOTTOM LINE:

Write a strong abstract.

The abstract is the second filter readers use to decide whether your work is worth reading

Introduction

- Use the funnel plan – broad to specific issues
  - ➢ Emphasize connections to <u>theory</u>
  - ➢ Show connections to existing <u>literature</u>
  - ➢ Define the <u>empirical gap</u> you aim to fill
  - ➢ State a clear <u>research question</u>
- Clearly state your hypothesis(-es)
  - ➢ In terms of <u>constructs</u>
  - ➢ In terms of specific <u>operationalizations</u>
  - ➢ Use "<u>if…then</u>" statements (show premises and conclusion)
- Emphasize <u>novelty</u> and <u>surprisingness</u> of results

BOTTOM LINE:

Lead the reader step by step to your hypothesis

Introduction: A generic example

- **PROBLEM affects many people, so discovering the mechanisms of PROBLEM therefore is an important issue. [IMPORTANCE]**

- **Construct N often occurs in individuals affected by PROBLEM.**

- **THEORY predicts that Construct M leads to Construct N.**

- **THEORY has generated much research on PROBLEM, but…**

- **We have not found tests of the effects of Construct M on Construct N in the literature. [EMPIRICAL GAP]**

- **We can operationalize Construct M as Variable X and operationalize Construct N as Variable Y. [OPERATIONALIZE CONSTRUCTS]**

[HYPOTHESIS DEVELOPMENT]

- **If Construct M leads to Construct N, and…**

- **If Variable X is an effective measure of Construct M, and…**

- **If Variable Y is an effective measure of Construct N, then…**

- **We predict that changes in Variable X will yield changes in Variable Y.**

- **If Variable X does affect Variable Y, then THEORY is supported.**

- **If Variable X does not affect Variable Y, then THEORY may be revised or falsified.**

Methods

- **Participants**

  ➢ **Identify participant <u>population</u> and describe <u>samples</u> clearly**

  ➢ **Always acknowledge compliance with ethical standards**

- **Apparatus and Materials: Provide adequate detail**

- **Procedure: Provide adequate detail**

BOTTOM LINE:

Could readers replicate the experiment, given the Methods section and reasonable common knowledge?

Results

- **General flow**

  ➢ **Global statistical tests first (example: ANOVA)**

  ➢ **More specific tests second (example: post hoc t-tests)**

- **State the <u>directions</u> of differences**

- **Tell how statistics address hypotheses; draw conclusions**

- **Follow journal format for reporting statistical tests**

  Example: $t(27) = 3.16$, $p < .05$, Cohen's d = .28

- **Figures and tables stand alone -- don't repeat text material**

BOTTOM LINE:

Statistics are work-horses, not show-horses

Discussion

- **Use the <u>inverted</u> funnel plan – more specific to broader issues**
  - ➢ **Summarize the findings -- how results fill the empirical gap**
  - ➢ **Re-emphasize novelty, surprisingness**
  - ➢ **Connect results to theory**
  - ➢ **Consider cultural similarities and differences**
- **Anticipate reviewer objections**
- **Suggest possible practical applications**
- **Suggest future research directions, next steps: Some possibilities…**
  - ➢ **Change the IV (including parametric changes)**
  - ➢ **Change the DV**
  - ➢ **Change conditions**
  - ➢ **Change the population (cross-cultural studies?)**

Choosing a target journal: Elements to consider

- **How important your results are**
- **Which journals publish results similar to yours**
  - ➢ **Journals you cite**
  - ➢ **Journal selection sites (publishers, others)**
- **Fit between manuscript and journal requirements**
- ➢**Content specificity, journal scope**
- ➢**Length limits**
  - • **Acceptance and rejection rates**
  - • **Impact factors (high impact factor = high rejection rate)**
  - • **Review and publication lags**
  - • **Electronic availability**
  - • **Publication costs**
  - • **[COMMENT: A professional editing service CAN help!]**

Some general points:

- **Journals cannot survive without manuscripts to publish**
- **Journals cannot accept manuscripts authors don't submit**
- **Journals want to ACCEPT papers, <u>not</u> reject them**

Key points to remember:

- **Follow journal guidelines for submission EXACTLY**
- **Practice good language skills – correct, clear, precise**
- **Aim for a perfect paper (but expect to make revisions)**

BOTTOM LINE:

Make it easy for the reviewers and editors to like your paper

Submission cover letters

- Some guidelines (electronic submission portals may differ)

➤Use the <u>editor's name</u> and the <u>journal title</u>

➤Include manuscript details (title, word count, numbers of figures and tables)

➤BRIEFLY, tell why the paper is worth publishing (novelty, surprisingness)

➤Possibly, request masked review

➤Make reviewer recommendations: Tap your network

➤Affirm the paper is not under consideration elsewhere

➤Affirm conformity with ethical requirements

➤Acknowledge potential conflicts of interest

➤Include contact information for corresponding author

BOTTOM LINE:

Make it easy for editors do their jobs

A Perspective On "Halo Effect"

●Good first impressions (a "halo") carry over to later judgments

●The "halo" on a submitted manuscript is its initial appearance

➢Formatted as editors and reviewers expect

➢Organized as editors and reviewers expect

➢Written as editors and reviewers expect

BOTTOM LINE:

Use "halo effect:" What looks good is good
Control manuscript elements that you can control

Submission cover letters

- **Problem areas to avoid**
  - ➢ **Using a form letter**
    - ✓ **"Dear editor" (editors have names!)**
    - ✓ **"Your honored journal" (it has a title!)**
  - ➢ **Including too much information about paper content (don't copy-and-paste the abstract!)**
  - ➢ **Omitting administrative and mechanical details that the editor needs to know**
  - ➢ **Using a submissive, pleading tone (respect yourself and your work!)**

BOTTOM LINE:
Write a professional, peer-to-peer, business-like letter

Dealing with the review process

- **Initial contacts**

  - ➢ **DO recommend reviewers in your cover letter**

    - ✓ **People likely to be sympathetic toward your work**

    - ✓ **Mention people who you would prefer _not_ to be reviewers**

  - ➢ **It's okay to contact editors**

- **Waiting…the hard part!**

  - ➢ **Give the reviewers and editor time to do their work**

  - ➢ **If the time seems excessive, inquire politely**

Eventually, you get…

THE DECISION LETTER!

Manuscript Decision

Accept as submitted

- Celebrate wildly!
- Call your Supervisor!
- Call the Nobel Foundation!

Revise and resubmit

- Take a deep breath!
- Read all comments carefully
- Revise the paper
- Write response letter
- Resubmit

Reject

- Rant and rave!
- Take a deep breath!
- Read all comments carefully
- Revise the paper
- Submit elsewhere
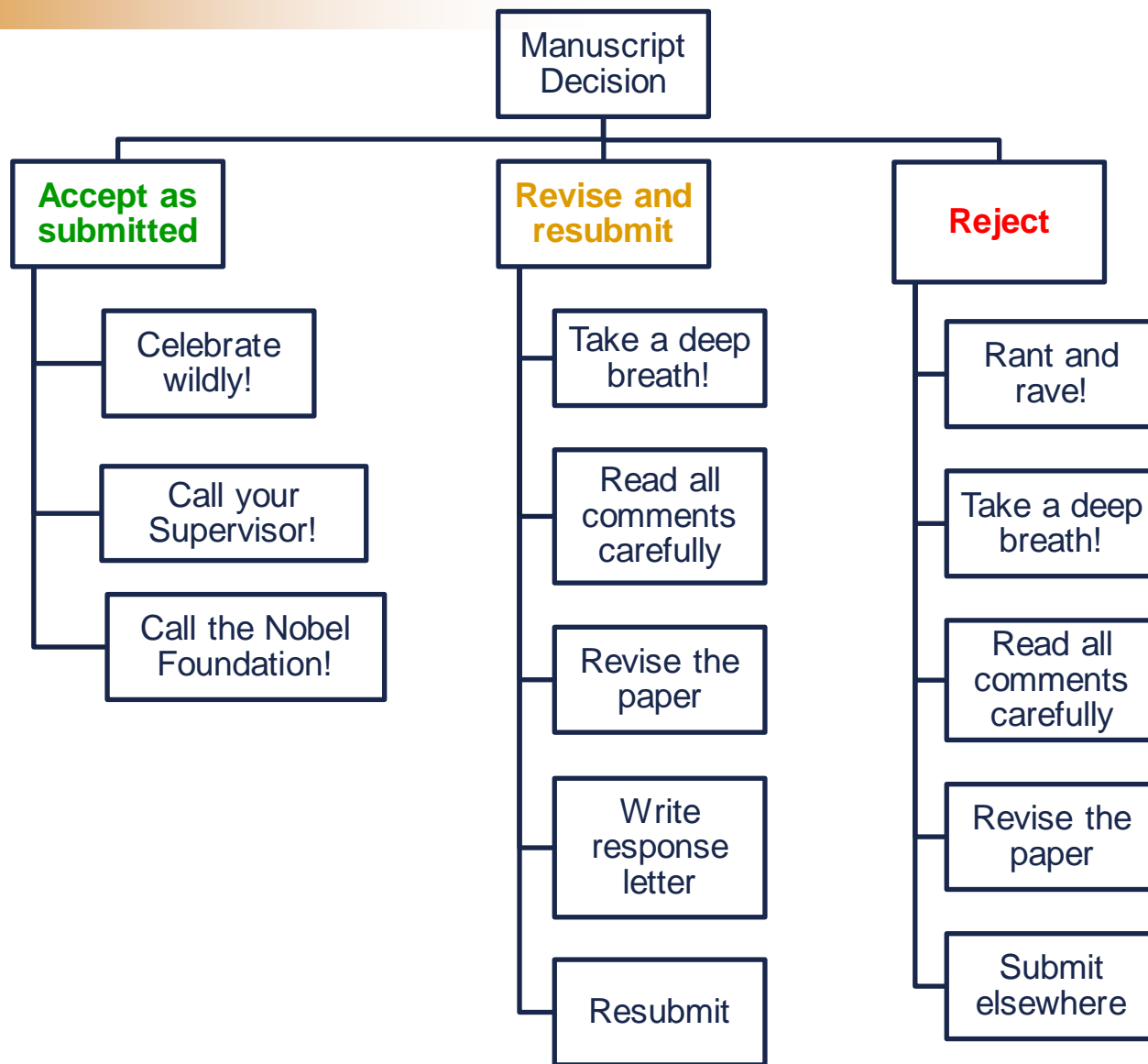
Re-submission response letters

- **Common elements**
  - ➢ **Express appreciation for the reviewers' time and effort (beginning and end of the letter)**
  - ➢ **Answer <u>every point</u> that the <u>editor</u> makes and <u>every point</u> that <u>every reviewer</u> makes**
  - ➢ **Indicate where revisions have been made and their nature**
- **Categories of response to reviewer comments**
  - ➢ **"I agree and have revised the paper in the following way…"**
  - ➢ **"I do not agree, because…, and have not revised the paper…."**
  - ➢ **"I don't understand the comment and don't know what changes to make…"**

BOTTOM LINE:
The response letter is as important as the revised manuscript!

Corrections focal points

- **Structural problems**

- **Language problems**

- **Style problems**

- **Logical problems**

General problem areas

- **Not following journal style guidelines**

- **Unclear organization of material**

- **Inadequate detail**

Corrections: Structural problems

Title problems

- **Lack of clarity**

"Haptic 'anchorage' provides behavioral stability to biological systems"

"Haptic anchoring and human postural control"

- **Lack of informativeness**

"On the generality of the laws of learning"

"Preparedness: Evolutionary biases on stimuli, rewards, and conditions for learning"

- **Length: Too brief, too long (12 – 15 words is typical)**

"P' "

"Structure of the Earth's inner core from seismic P' wave reflections

Abstract problems

- **Excessive length**

- ➢ **Journals set limits (typically, 150 – 250 words)**

- ➢ **Don't waste words; write economically**

- **Subheads: Sometimes yes, sometimes no**

- **References: Generally omit them**

- **Too much detail (e.g., statistical information)**

- **Undefined abbreviations or acronyms**

- **Editorializing**

Introduction problems

- **Limited literature coverage**

  - ➤ **Topical scope too narrow (include related topics, methods)**

  - ➤ **Historical scope too shallow or restricted**

- **Unclear logical development**

  - ➤ **Not documenting problem importance**

  - ➤ **Not relating theory to problem, research questions**

  - ➤ **Not relating existing literature to research questions**

  - ➤ **Not demonstrating an empirical gap to be filled**

  - ➤ **Not acknowledging operationalizations of constructs**

- **Omitting a clear statement of the research questions**

- **Not clearly stating hypotheses to be tested**

Methods problems

MAJOR PRINCIPLE: Methods should allow readers to replicate the research

- **Inadequate description of participants**
  - ➢ **Participants (vs. subjects) preferred**
  - ➢ **Population not defined adequately**
  - ➢ **Recruitment methods not described**
  - ➢ **Assignment to comparison groups not described**
  - ➢ **Sample characteristics not described or described inaccurately**
  - ➢ **Sample sizes not given**
  - ➢ **Exclusions: Tell how many and why**

Methods problems (continued)

- **Inadequate description of apparatus, materials**

Special focus: Rating scales

- ✓ **Language, translation issues**
- ✓ **Response procedures not described**
- ✓ **Scoring procedures not described**
- ✓ **Psychometric data (e.g., reliability) not described**
- **Inadequate description of control procedures**
- ➢ **Experimenter blinding**
- ➢ **Matching participants across conditions**
- ➢ **Misuse of "random" (random selection, random assignment)**
- **Inadequate description of procedures**
- ➢ **Sequence of events**
- ➢ **Testing environment**
- ➢ **Test session length**

Results problems

- **Improper choice of statistical procedures – three questions to answer**
  - ➢ **What is the level of measurement in the data?**
    - ✓ **Nominal – counting events into categories (numbers as mere labels)**
    - ✓ **Ordinal – rank ordering measures (numbers as sequence labels)**
    - ✓ **Continuous (interval, ratio; numbers as meaningful measures)**
      - + **Equal scale units**
      - + **Fractions of units are meaningful**
  - ➢ **How is the data distributed?**
    - ✓ **Normal**
    - ✓ **Non-normal**
  - ➢ **What question do you want to answer?**
    - ✓ **Description of the data**
    - ✓ **Difference(s) among groups**
    - ✓ **Associations between measures**

Corrections: Structural problems

Results problems (continued)

- **Ignoring assumptions of statistical tests (→ inappropriate statistics)**
- ➢ **Parametric test assumptions**
- ✓ **Continuous levels of measurement**
- ✓ **Sample size, usually > 20 - 30 observations**
- ✓ **Data distributions: Normal, equal variance among groups**
- ✓ **Benefit: High power when assumptions are met**

- ✓ **Examples: t-test, ANOVA**

- ➢ **Non-parametric test assumptions**
- ✓ **Nominal, ordinal, or continuous levels of measurement**
- ✓ **Sample sizes can be small**
- ✓ **Benefit: High power-efficiency with less restrictive assumptions**

- ✓ **Examples: Wilcoxon rank sum, chi-squared, Kruskal-Wallis ANOVA by ranks**

Results problems (continued)

●Inadequate detail in reporting results

- ➢ **Not pairing variability with central tendency measures**
  - ✓ **Nominal data – category proportions (mode, range)**
  - ✓ **Ordinal data – median, range (or interquartile range)**
  - ✓ **Continuous data – mean, standard deviation**
- ➢ **Not following standard formats for reporting statistical results, typically…**
  - ✓ **Test used, with degrees of freedom**
  - ✓ **Calculated statistical value**
  - ✓ **Probability value**
  - ✓ **Effect size**

Example: t(27) = 3.16, p < .05, Cohen's d = .28

Results problems (continued)

- **Not stating direction of differences**

  ➢ **"Scores for Group A were <u>significantly different</u> from Group B scores."**

  ➢ **"Group A scores were <u>significantly higher</u> than Group B scores."**

- **Not pairing statistical outcomes and interpretations with hypotheses**

  "The significant difference was consistent with our hypothesis."

- **Not examining statistical outcomes logically and critically**

  ➢ **Given the original data, do statistical outcomes make sense?**

  ➢ **"Marginally significant" outcomes are NOT significant**

  ➢ **Be sensitive to possible Type I errors**

Results problems (continued)

- **Style issues**

➢Leading zeros

✓If decimal value could not exceed 1.00, no leading zero

r = .87 (correlations cannot exceed 1.00)

p < .05 (probabilities cannot exceed 1.00)

✓If decimal value could be greater than 1.00, insert a leading zero

Mean reaction time = 0.73 sec (could exceed 1.00

Error rate standard deviation = 0.25 (could exceed 1.00)

➢Spaces around math operators, symbols: before, after symbol

➢Decimal places: Report calculated values to one decimal place beyond that of the underlying values

✓Mean age = 12.3 years (for integer ages)

✓Standard deviation for age = 1.26 years (for integer ages)

➢Reporting means and standard deviations as $\pm$ **(No!!)**

Discussion problems

- Lack of clear organizational flow (connection to the Introduction)
- Introducing new findings, not described in Results
- Unfounded speculation
- Ignoring alternative explanations
- Overlooking possible cultural differences
- Emphasizing negatives vs. positives
- Too much focus on "limitations"

Avoid pointing out…	Instead, talk about…
Limitations on results	Boundary conditions of effects
Limitations due to confounds, artifacts	Alternative explanations
Limitations of methods	Constraints of methodology
Limitations on generalizability	Parameters of generalizability

References problems

- *ALWAYS* follow journal guidelines
- Unclear reference citation placement in main text
  - Better to introduce a point rather than follow the point
  - Examples:

"Past work showed that….(Jones, 1984; Smith, 1934)."

"Past work (Jones, 1984; Smith, 1934) showed that….."

- Inconsistent reference formats
  - In the text
  - In the reference list
  - No initials in text citations (except…)
- Mismatched text citations and reference lists
- Alphabetizing: In order by family name
- Improper use of "et al."

Figures and tables problems

● **General points**

  ➢ **Text overlaps tables, graphs**

    ✓ **Don't repeat table, graph data in text**

    ✓ **Don't repeat text data descriptions in tables, graphs**

  ➢ **Not citing every table, figure in the main text**

  ➢ **Not putting each table, figure on a separate page (often in a separate file)**

BOTTOM LINE:

ALWAYS follow journal style guidelines
(Haven't we seen this someplace before??)

Corrections: Structural problems

Figures and tables problems (continued)

- **Graphs**
  - ➢ **Wrong graph type for data**
    - ✓ **Bar graphs for categorical data**
    - ✓ **Line graphs for scaled data**
  - ➢ **Mislabelled, unlabelled graph axes**
  - ➢ **Omitting error bars on plotted points**

- **Tables**
  - ➢ **Not identifying tabled content in the caption**
  - ➢ **Improper style – rulings, notes, significance indicators**

- **Inadequate captions for both tables and graphs**
  - ➢ **Not enough information to understand the table, graph**
  - ➢ **Undefined abbreviations (in captions, tables, graphs)**

Corrections: Language problems

Passive voice sentence construction

- **Passive voice form**: Object – passive verb form – agent
- **Active voice form**: Agent – active verb form – object
- Problems with passive voice sentences:
  - The agent is often omitted and therefore ambiguous
  - Passive voice sentences are often longer
- Examples

Passive form: "It has been shown **[by whom?]** that…"

Active form: "Smith (2014) showed that…"

Passive form: "Participants were recruited **[by whom?]** from…"

Active form: "We recruited participants from…"

- **Comment**: Journals generally allow personal pronouns (I, we)

Long sentences

- **Difficult to read, difficult to understand**
- **Example 1:**

Original wording – one sentence:

Therefore, we believed that, apart from paying special attention to Variable ABC, other variables, and their response to Variable XYZ in particular, also need to be taken into consideration in order to decide whether an individual was affected.

[Grammatical, but long and hard to follow]

Alternative wording – two sentences:

(1) Therefore, apart from paying special attention to Variable ABC, other dependent variables also need to be taken into consideration. (2) In particular, one must consider their response to Variable XYZ in order to decide whether an individual was affected.

Long sentences (continued)

● **Example 2:**

Original wording – one sentence:

Sichuanhua is the dialect in Sichuan which is referred to as Southwestern Mandarin because Sichuan is in the southwestern part of a region spanning all of Northern China where dialects of Mandarin are most commonly found.

[Ungrammatical – missing punctuation -- and long]

Alternative wording – three sentences:

(1) Sichuanhua is the dialect in Sichuan. **(2)** Sichuanhua is referred to as Southwestern Mandarin, because Sichuan is in the southwestern part of a region spanning all of Northern China. **(3)** In that region, dialects of Mandarin are most commonly found.

Corrections: Language problems

Paragraph length: Too long, too short

- **Example (yes, this is a single paragraph!):**

    Based on the Chinese genome-SNPs genetic information provided by the 2009 Hapmap database (http://www.hapmap.org) and gold standard which was internationally recognized: r^2 = 0.8, MAF > 15%, two tag-SNPs (rs2242446, rs4783899) in the SLC6A2 gene and two (rs6277, rs2242592) in the DRD2 gene with high biological plausibility in the development and progression of the syndrome were selected using the Haploview software.

- **Too long**
  - **Hard to read: Mixes many themes, ideas**
  - **Other issues:**
    - **Probably contains a comma splice**
    - **"Gold standard" is an idiom**
    - **Passive voice structure (find the verb here!)**
- **Too short**
  - **Single sentence = paragraph**
  - **Avoid single sentence paragraphs**

Paragraph length: Too long, too short (continued)

●**Possible revision**:

(1) We selected two tag-SNPs (rs2242446, rs4783899) in the SLC6A2 gene and two (rs6277, rs2242592) in the DRD2 gene. (2) Those SNPs have high biological plausibility in the development and progression of the syndrome. (3) We made our selections using the Haploview software. (4) That software is based on the Chinese genome-SNPs genetic information provided by the 2009 Hapmap database (http://www.hapmap.org), an internationally recognized with relatively high reliability (r^2 = 0.8, MAF > 15%).

●**Still complicated, but probably more easily understood**

➢**Four sentences instead of one**

➢**Active voice sentence structure**

➢**Perhaps a more reasonable logical flow**

Unclear pronoun antecedents

- **General rule: Reader looks back to most recent reasonable noun**
  - ➢ **Matching in number**
  - ➢ **Matching in gender**
- **Problem: Some pronouns have unclear antecedents (references)**
- **Common mistake: Make the pronoun match the <u>closest</u> noun**
- **Consequence: Ambiguity for the reader**

Unclear pronoun antecedents (continued)

● **Example 1:**

Original wording:

Agreeable people are characterized as straightforward, trustworthy, altruistic, modest, and tender. **It implies** that agreeable individuals value harmony in interpersonal relationships.

(No clear antecedent at all for "it!")

Alternative wording:

Agreeable people are characterized as straightforward, trustworthy, altruistic, modest, and tender. **Those characteristics imply** that agreeable individuals value harmony in interpersonal relationships.

Unclear pronoun antecedents (continued)

● Example 2:

Original wording:

Our results showed the opposite relation compared to the literature from Western societies, and thus **they are important** in the sense of highlighting cultural differences.

(Antecedent for "they" could be "societies" – a reasonable guess – or "results" – the likely intended antecedent.)

Alternative wording:

Our results showed the opposite relation compared to the literature from Western societies. Thus, **the present studies are important** in the sense of highlighting cultural differences.

Comma splices

●Definition:

➢Two independent clauses joined only by a comma

➢Each independent clause could be a complete sentence

●To correct comma splices …

➢Start a new sentence (often best)

➢Replace the comma with a semi-colon

➢Insert a conjunction following the comma

Comma splices (continued)

●**Example 1:**

Original wording:

We analyzed communication in a closed group**, whether** communication in an open group would show the same characteristics is an interesting question.

Alternate wording (start a new sentence):

We analyzed communication in a closed group**. Whether** communication in an open group would show the same….

Alternate wording (insert a semi-colon):

We analyzed communication in a closed group**; whether** communication in an open group would show the same….

Alternate wording (insert a conjunction):

We analyzed communication in a closed community**, but whether** the individual's communication in an open group would show the same….

Comma splices (continued)

● **Example 2:**

Original wording:

Some researchers attempted to integrate the withdrawal concept with its structure**, the** concept can distinguish between various causes of withdrawal.

Alternate wording (start a new sentence):

Some researchers attempted to integrate the withdrawal concept with its structure**. The** concept can distinguish….

Alternate wording (insert a semi-colon):

Some researchers attempted to integrate the withdrawal concept with its structure**; the** concept can distinguish….

Alternate wording (insert a conjunction):

Some researchers attempted to integrate the withdrawal concept with its structure**, because the** concept can distinguish….

Incomplete sentences – lack subject, lack verb

The Sino-Tibetan language, including native Mandarin and Sichuanhua and so forth. **[no verb]**

A science which is transparent and the process plays out in public. **[no verb]**

Verb tenses – emphasize time of action took (present, past)

The current study takes **[took]** into account two issues. It aims **[aimed]** to study the appropriateness of emotional crisis communication in various crisis types.

Number disagreement (subject-verb, noun-pronoun)

Formally <u>publishing</u> **[singular subject]** an article in a scientific journal <u>**cost**</u> **[plural verb – should be "costs"]** money.

Each [singular subject] of these papers **have [plural verb – should be "has"]** different levels of review.

Corrections: Language problems

Confusable words: English has many examples

- Affect – effect
- To – too – two
- there - their - they're
- verses – versus
- wonder – wander
- accept - except
- …lots of others

Abbreviations, acronyms

- Define any abbreviation on its first use AND…
- ➢ In title
- ➢ In abstract
- ➢ In table, figure captions
- Avoid too many abbreviations (can the reader remember them all??)

Some special issues

● Articles (a, an, the)

➢ Asian language speakers often omit articles in English writing

➢ "a" and "an" refer to <u>any example or instance</u> of the noun

✓ Use "a" before words beginning with a consonant ("a dog")

✓ Use "an" before words beginning with a vowel ("an elephant")

➢ "the" refers to a <u>specific or particular instance</u> of the noun

● Collective nouns (research, evidence) have no plural forms

● Inclusive, non-sexist language

➢ Avoid masculine pronouns as generic

➢ Use "he or she," "him or her," "his or hers"

➢ Easiest fix – restructure to use plurals

● Repetitious words, phrases – if feasible, use reasonable synonyms, rewording

Some special issues (continued)

● **"Like" – Many functions (adjective, adverb, noun, verb, conjunction)**

➢ **"Like" is often used to mean "such as"**

➢ **"Like" is often used to mean "resembles"**

➢ **"Like" is often used to mean "as if"**

➢ **…and many other meanings!**

➢ **Choose other wording to clarify your intended meaning**

● **"Because" and "since" do not mean the same thing**

➢ **"Because" means "as a result of" or "for the reason that"**

➢ **"Since" means "following in time"**

Some special issues (continued)

- **Slang, idioms, allusions**
  - ➢ **Ambiguous, because of ties to historical and cultural contexts**
  - ➢ **Aim of scientific writing is clarity and precision**

- **Slang (colloquial language) – non-standard words or phrases used in a particular cultural context**
  - ➢ **Slang can change meaning rapidly (talk to any teenager!!!)**
  - ➢ **Examples (probably poor and out of date):**
    - ✓ **Nitty-gritty – the fine details**
    - ✓ **Nerd, geek – person focused on some narrow topic**
  - ➢ **Note that professions, trades have their own slang (argot)**

Some special issues (continued)

●**Idioms – conventional phrases that have a generally understood, but not literal, meaning within a culture**

➢**"gold standard" – an ideal comparison**

➢**"tie one on" – get drunk"**

➢**"tie the knot" – get married**

➢**"fit to be tied" – extremely angry**

●**Allusions – phrases that are meaningful as references to literary contexts (e.g., Shakespeare, mythology)**

➢**Achille's heel – a special area of vulnerability**

➢**Sour grapes – unjustified, jealous complaint**

➢**Sisyphean task – difficult and never-ending**

Corrections: Style problems

Formatting

- **Margins: 1 inch all sides, show white space at page breaks**
- **Font, font size, font color**
  - ➢ **Single, standard font throughout (Times New Roman font – widely preferred)**
  - ➢ **12-point size widely preferred**
  - ➢ **All black font color best**
  - ➢ **SimSun font presents editing difficulties**
- **Line spacing – double space throughout**
- **Paragraph indentation -- half-inch (1 cm)**
- **Text justification – prefer flush-left**
- **Running head, page numbers – insert these**
- **Section heading style – follow journal guidelines exactly**
- **Hyperlinks (tables, figures, references) – omit in manuscripts for review**
- **Revisions – show only the text as you want it to be read**

Other style issues

- **Hedged words (single words, short phrases in quotation marks)**
  - ➢ **Here is a statement**

    His girl friend is beautiful.
  - ➢ **Hedge quotes suggest non-standard interpretation**

    His girl friend is "beautiful." – …but maybe not really?
  - ➢ **To show emphasis, use italics or underscoring**

    His girl friend is <u>beautiful</u>. – …REALLY beautiful!
- **Numbers**
  - ➢ **Numerals vs. as number words in text**

    Single digits, use number words (one, two, three, …, nine))

    More than single digits, use numerals
  - ➢ **Numbers to start sentences (use number words)**

    "25 of the 50 participants were left-handed." – No!

    "Twenty-five of the 50 participants were left-handed." – Yes

    "Of the 50 participants, 25 were left handed." – Yes

Other style issues

●**Parenthesis use**

➢**Nested parentheses – one set of parentheses inside another**

"…the main effect was significant (F(2, 35) = 6.27, p < .05)…."

"…the main effect was significant, F(2, 35) = 6.27, p < .05,…."

➢**Back-to-back parentheses – one set of against another**

"…used the Wilcoxon signed-ranks test (WSRT)(Siegel, 1956)…."

"…used the Wilcoxon signed-ranks test (WSRT; Siegel, 1956)…."

●**Common Latin abbreviations (etc., e.g., i.e., et al.)**

➢**"i.e." and "e.g."**

✓**Use these inside parentheses**

✓**Otherwise, use "that is" and "for example"**

➢**"etc." – means "and so forth;" thus, "and etc." is redundant**

➢**"et al." – typically used only with respect to references**

Corrections: Style problems

Other style issues (continued)

- **Punctuation**

➢ **Comma placement can completely change sentence meaning**

Example 1:

"The panda eats, shoots, and leaves."

(Now, remove the commas!)

"The panda eats shoots and leaves"

✓ **Removing the commas turned VERBS ("shoots," "leaves") into NOUNS**

✓ **(Many English words can be both nouns and verbs!)**

Other style issues (continued)

• **Punctuation**

➤ **Comma placement can completely change sentence meaning**

Example 2 (my favorite!):

"Woman, without her man is nothing."

(Put in a second comma!)

"Woman, without her man, is nothing."

OR…

"Woman, without her, man is nothing."

Other style issues (continued)

•Punctuation

➢Apostrophes

✓Used to show verb contractions

+"The car will not (won't) start."

+"The crops were not (weren't) harvested."

✓Used to show possessives

+"That is the director's chair."

+"That is the dog's bone."

+Problem: Where to show the possessive of a word ending in –s?

(Usually, following the –s, but there are exceptions)

✓Apostrophes used with "it" – an odd case

+Insert an apostrophe ONLY in the contraction of "it is" (it's)

+DO NOT use an apostrophe the possessive of "it" (its)

Corrections: Style problems

Other style issues (continued)

Sometimes, even native speakers can't figure out where to put the apostrophe!

BOTTOM LINE:

A good grammar and usage guide is very useful to help resolve punctuation questions.

Logical problems

●**Problem words**

➢**Cause, prove**

✓**Correlation does not imply causation**

✓**Probabilistic hypothesis tests always leave doubt**

➢**Most: a statistical statement**

●**Anthropomorphizing nouns**

➢**Example: "the results found that…"**

➢**"Finding" is a human action; things don't "find"**

➢**Instead: "the results indicated [or demonstrated, or showed, or revealed, or suggested, or documented]…"**

●**Ambiguous synonyms: If clarity demands repetition, be repetitious**

How to improve your writing

Writers read

Writers read a lot, read widely, read great writing (Give up TV!)

Scientific writers read a lot of science, in their own field <u>and others</u>

If you want to PUBLISH in English, READ English

> People…pick up grammar and syntax through their reading….The language sticks to them like cat hair to black trousers, and they do things correctly without knowing why.
>
> Kitty Burns Florey
> *Sister Bernadette's Barking Dog*, 2006

"熟读唐诗三百首，不会吟诗也会吟"

How to improve your writing

Writers write

Build regular time for your writing projects into your schedule

Getting started is hard for everyone (How did they build the Great Wall? One stone at a time.)

Any writing is better than no writing

Science writers write science

<u>Writing quality</u> prejudices judgments of <u>science quality</u>

If you want to PUBLISH in English, WRITE in English

Good writing depends on good revising

Become your own toughest critic

Become your own best editor

How to improve your writing

Some commentary on quality of writing…

> **People who cannot distinguish between good and bad language, or who regard the distinction as unimportant, are unlikely to think carefully about anything else.**
>
> **B. R. Myers**

> **I rewrote the ending of *Farewell to Arms*, the last page of it, 39 times before I was satisfied.**
>
> **Ernest Hemingway**
> **Nobel Prize for Literature, 1954**

> **As a writer, you'll never be taken seriously if your reader keeps getting sidetracked by your faulty grammar.**
>
> **Mark Goldblatt**

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