

Editorial

Saying it with Style

Most journals, whether they be learned, relatively formal journals such as this, or the populist journals to be found in newsagents, have some sort of prescribed house-style. Contributors to the journals would normally be expected to conform to the housestyle for two primary reasons — to increase the chances of the contribution being accepted by the editor, and to increase the likelihood of the article being understood, according to the expectations of the reader. Some authors, naturally, are of the opinion that the piece is their own work and they should be allowed to say what they like in any way they please. This is their prerogative, as much as it is the Editor's prerogative not to publish the same piece unless it follows the house style. In such a case the author may feel he is being constrained for the sake of the Editor's whim; however, in an international journal, the need for an easily understood and logical presentation of research work is paramount, and the house style usually is the result of evolution towards, we hope, an optimum style of presentation. Thus the division of a research paper into Introduction, Materials and Methods, Results, Discussion, References is almost universal for those papers dealing with laboratory research. Most authors will accept this format, but may decide the finer details of house style are not worth bothering about; after all, does it really matter whether British or American English is used — or Japanese English for that matter?

Well, no. In the great scheme of things, of course it does not matter if we are only interested in conformity for its own sake. But the conformity in presentation and even in the use of certain words is not just for the sake of it but is to ensure that when a certain word is used in the *Journal of Pharmacy and Pharmacology*, it will mean the same thing as it did last time. Allowing authors complete freedom to use words to mean what they mean them to mean — like Lewis Carroll's Queen — would result in anarchy within the journal, a bad example to others who may use the published article as a model for their own contributions, and confusion in the scientific literature.

Of course, if the presentation of papers of forty or so years ago is compared with the presentation of today, even in the same journal, there would certainly be differences. Somewhere along the way, new conventions become accepted both by the scientific community and by the editors. The role of the editor is to maintain a rein on arbitrary or transient fashions, ensuring all articles are presented in modern English which is neither archaic nor trendy.

Authors must be allowed to express themselves in their own words; it is often a charge levelled against dry scientific writing that it is unimaginative and impersonal and anyone who has used a wordprocessor's style checker, will be well aware what the opinion of this particular device is on the quality of scientific writing! The journal's editorial staff needs to guard

against submerging an author's own style under an arbitrary set of rules, while ensuring conformation to sound English construction and scientific nomenclature is maintained.

A recent correspondent to *Chemistry in Britain* suggested that the use of the passive voice in descriptions of chemical preparations was unnecessary. Far better, the correspondent argued, to describe the preparations as though they were recipes; set out the ingredients at the beginning, then describe how they are mixed together, heated, cooled and so on. Not only is this clearer, than the often tortuously described passive voice method, but actually often uses fewer words. The piece brought back to me an ancient memory as an undergraduate when a fellow (female) student proclaimed in a broad Lancashire accent that chemistry was just like cookery; all you had to do was follow the recipe and you obtained the product. The rest of the class (mostly male in those days) was most scornful of this view, but may have revised their thoughts when the young lady in question obtained one of the few first-class degrees awarded that year.

So why not set out the Materials and Methods section as a cookery recipe? Perhaps the answer lies in the nature of the work being prepared. If the author is reporting a new analytical method, it may be appropriate to use the recipe approach. In this case the author has presumably refined and evaluated the method he is proposing (at least it is the fond hope of this Editor that an analytical method worthy of publication has been honed to near perfection) and is now suggesting it should be used by others according to his instructions. In theory, others following this recipe exactly will obtain valid analytical results. There is a different situation when the author has carried out an experiment under certain conditions and is reporting his results. There is not necessarily an expectation that others will carry out the same experiment, but may want to compare literature results in experiments under different conditions. Thus in this situation the author is indeed reporting what was done and under what conditions — perhaps just once. The amount of detail that the author is expected to include in the Materials and Methods section is usually expected to be such that an informed worker in the same field would be able to repeat the same experiments. This would be a necessary requirement for any work to be reliably confirmed by follow-up workers.

Thus the conclusion to be drawn is that the Journal has a right to demand that authors should conform to certain guidelines on style for the sake of clear and effective communication, but that the guidelines should not be so rigid as to place inappropriate constraints on the author. As always, the Editor and Author must work together to ensure this effective communication.

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