

COLUMN: GUEST DIRECTOR'S LINE

Several Books to Read and Thereby Delay Writing Your Thesis



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Before "The Simpsons" appeared on television, Matt Groening produced some offbeat cartoons that I followed in the *Chicago Reader*. In one cartoon, an anthropomorphic rabbit, who was struggling to complete graduate school, arrived at a clever delay tactic: "Read another book!"

At the risk of sounding like Groening's rabbit, I can recommend about a dozen books and several websites on the topic of scientific communication and academic writing, and, yes, reading them will delay the next draft of your thesis. However, reading them should help you to eventually write a better thesis and improve your overall ability to communicate professionally. So, go ahead, set aside your thesis for a moment, and read on.

An obvious book to recommend is the American Fisheries Society (AFS) publication *Writing for Fishery Journals* (Hunter 1990). Although no longer in print, it is likely to be available from someone down the hall, and it is worth finding a copy

of your own. One chapter promotes the proper usage of the English—and fishery—language using examples of (all too) common writing problems, and another chapter offers advice to assuage the trauma of negative critiques or editorial rejection. The chapter on graphic display of data illustrates 21 different figure types, and 2 chapters introduce the topic of applied statistics and the interpretation of common fishery analyses.

Soon, AFS is planning to release a successor book to Hunter (1990), tentatively titled *Scientific Communication for Natural Resource Professionals*. Various chapters will introduce principles of writing structure, style, grammar, graphics, and statistics. Other topics include authorship, literature searches, presenting at a conference, converting your thesis into a publishable manuscript, and—a sign of the times—deciding on a traditional print or electronic journal.

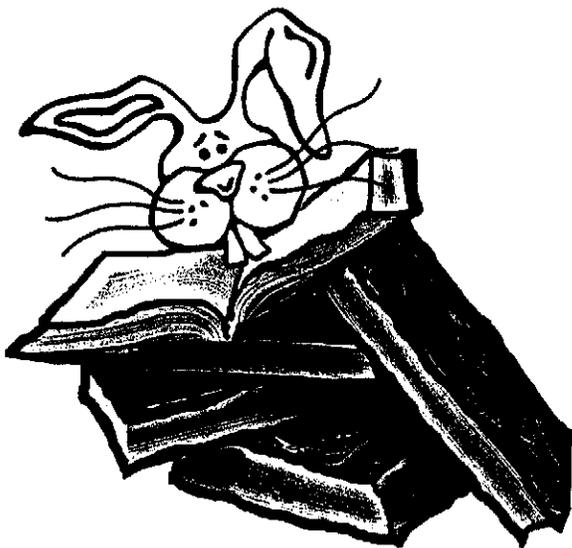
Groening's rabbit could keep very busy on the subject of scientific writing. *How to Write and Publish a Scientific Paper* (Day and Gastel 2006) is an easy-to-read "cook-book" on the subject. It offers step-by-step advice on how to write an Introduction-Methods-Results-Discussion (IMRD) manuscript. It also outlines how to write a grant proposal, a peer review, and your curriculum vitae, and how to write—and ask for—a letter of recommendation. Many stylistic recommendations are covered, such as the dynamics of verb tense throughout a manuscript and common symbols used for editing proofs. It is filled with humorous cartoons, and there

is an excellent index that is indispensable when you refer back to the book later.

A Short Guide to Writing about Biology (Pechenik 2006) covers the basics of preparing an IMRD manuscript, a conference poster, or even a scientific essay for a general audience. There is a chapter on the process of drafting and revising your writing, including specific examples of revised writing in an appendix. Pechenik also offers advice on note-taking, effective reading strategies, and how to develop a thesis statement and write a term paper.

The Craft of Scientific Writing (Alley 1998) demonstrates the value of working from an outline and designing your illustrations to improve the process and outcome of your writing. Alley also discusses language from six discerning perspectives: precision, clarity, forthrightness, familiarity, conciseness, and fluidity. Writing examples are deconstructed to show how to hone this "craft" and to reveal the benefits of revising your own writing (see www.writing.engr.psu.edu/csw.html for a preview.) Although Alley insists that writing about science is not easy, by following this book it should be easier.

How to Write a Lot: A Practical Guide to Productive Academic Writing (Silvia 2007) presents an approach to overcome those "spe-



cious barriers to writing a lot." Silvia dismisses the notion of writer's block as if it were a mythical creature, and he sets guidelines on how to increase the quantity and quality of your writing. This book inspired one blogger (<http://wickedanomie.blogspot.com/search/label/book%20review>) to create a standard template for all of her future publications! It also discusses the process of writing a book.

If I were to take a broader view of the subject, the quintessential book about writing is *The Elements of Style*. Originally written in 1918, it is now in its fourth edition. There is even a special illustrated edition, and the full text can be accessed via the world wide web (www.bartleby.com/141/). This is a very short book—my copy (Strunk and White 1972) is only 78 pages—and it makes no effort to be comprehensive. Still, it manages to cover many aspects of grammar and composition very well, and it offers lucid tips on how to develop an effective style of writing. In the spirit of this book, which espouses the principle to "omit needless words," I say: "Read it!" This book has the potential to improve your writing within only a few hours.

The Little Red Writing Book (Royal 2004) postulates that there are only "a limited number of the most important related writing principles, which [outstanding writers] use over and over again." This book settles on 20 principles of writing structure, style, and readability; 30 rules of grammar; 8 parts of speech; and 2 problematic punctuation marks: the comma and semicolon. This book cannot quite escape the long shadow of Strunk

and White. In fact, in the short chapter titled "Eliminate Needless Words," the author quotes William Strunk, Jr. as if no one could write more concisely. Nonetheless, the book offers many fresh examples and includes several exercises in each of its short chapters, with the answers worked out and annotated in the back of the book.

If you feel that you need help with punctuation, a popular book on this subject is *Eats, Shoots & Leaves* (Truss 2003). There are whole chapters on the apostrophe, the comma, and the hyphen; a slew of other punctuation marks are covered in due course. As a biologist who understands the importance of rules when naming fishes, I could understand Truss's plea to observe rules when using punctuation marks. Still, Truss's passion for punctuation has led to some extreme acts of "copy editing," such as when she recounted her experience standing on a London street waving a stick (with an apostrophe attached) in front of a billboard to "correct" a missing punctuation mark. Regardless, the book is well-written and worth the read.

Grammar Snobs are Great Big Meanies (Casagrande 2006) bravely takes aim at Truss and a number of other highly regarded but often pedantic aficionados of the English language. I found that Casagrande's book provided a welcome perspective on the dynamic, living, and even imperfect qualities of language. This book dispels the notion that one must completely acquiesce to the recommendations of editors and reviewers, but not without emphasizing that one should learn the rules before attempting to break with them. This is a refreshing mes-



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sage for all of us still working to find our own voice in writing.

I suppose there are some Groening-rabbit types out there that seek a comprehensive treatment of the subject. There are tomes available, often referred to as style guides (www.nationmaster.com/encyclopedia/Style-guide). These serve as excellent references for professional writers. The problem is, however, that different publishers use different style guides. If you want a style guide, then try www.fisheries.org/afs/publications_style.html, which pertains to AFS journals but is also a suitable reference for many other writing assignments. It includes lots of general information, such as punctuation, spelling, fish names (including correct plural forms), proper use of symbols for math and statistics, and tips for presenting data in tables and figures.

Not everyone plans to publish a thesis, but virtually everyone anticipates landing a job after completing their degree. *The AFS Guide to Fisheries Employment* (Hewitt et al. 2006) encompasses a broad spectrum

of career steps, including pursuing secondary education (undergraduate and graduate) and a wide range of employment: academia, government, nongovernmental agencies, and the private sector. It has additional chapters on writing a resume or curriculum vitae, employment in aquaculture, working outside the United States, becoming an administrator, and the value of professional societies. Students should read this book to secure a broad overview of fisheries employment and to be ready to successfully engage with potential employers.

In his book, *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, author Stephen Covey (1989) recommends taking the time to "Sharpen the Saw." He speaks of this as a holistic process of renewal, but part of the specific advice he offers is that "reading good literature on a regular basis is a good way to renew your mind" (www.leaderu.com/cl-institute/habits/habit7.html). I agree, so follow Covey's model of renewal, not the rabbit's model of delay.

If Groening's rabbit was writing this article, he would have two or three times as many books to recommend. Read the one that addresses a particular weakness or an immediate need. Read several that appear to offer complimentary advice. But don't let yourself get carried away. Last I heard, the rabbit is still in graduate school, only about half way through the *Chicago Manual of Style* (2003), and successful only at avoiding his major professor!

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