

Writing as a Tool for Social Science Research and for Marketing Knowledge

Dickson M. Nyariki

*Department of Range Management, University of Nairobi PO Box 29053, Nairobi, Kenya.
Telefax: 254-2-631225; E-mail: <range@bidii.com>*

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ABSTRACT Writing is one of the tools of research that is usually taken for granted. This paper is an attempt at bringing out the importance of effective writing, especially to social science researchers. With examples, it indicates the main aspects of good writing, discusses standards in written work, including theses and dissertations, and points out how writing social science research papers can be improved. Academicians and graduate students in a wide array of disciplines should find this work useful in preparing their theses and dissertations and developing research papers for reputable journals and other publications.

INTRODUCTION

Writing is a tool both in doing research and in presenting research results in various forms, such as reports, books and research papers. It is one of the tools of research that is not always recognised. There are several reasons for writing and publishing, and these must first be identified. One of these may be to achieve tenure or promotion. The aim here may be as long a list as possible of articles in scholarly journals. Books would usually take much longer to write. Further, the academic credit given for books vis-à-vis articles may be such that the time spent writing a number of articles (say, 10) will normally count more heavily toward academic advancement than the same amount of time devoted to writing only one book.

Another reason for writing and publishing may be to achieve professional recognition. This goal is likely to be achieved for lecturers and professors by articles in professional journals which depend on "judges" or peer reviewers who advise the editor on the merits of articles, or by a textbook accepted and published by a recognised publishing company or professional association. There may also be the drive to achieve continued professional growth. For both lecturers and practitioners, the discipline of marshalling one's ideas about a certain issue so that it becomes an

orderly presentation of theory or practice is an invigorating experience that leads to growth.

Lastly, the objective of writing may be to generate income through royalties. As argued by Twedt (1977), if one's motivation is to maximise income, the "First Law of Marketing" is of paramount importance: "Make what people seek to buy; do not try to sell what you happen to make." If your interest is in the Theory of Free Market Economies, and this is no longer popular try to adapt yourself to what is selling, even though this philosophy may be in conflict with the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake. Once the notion is accepted that publications are *products* that must be marketed to *consumers* (i.e., accepted by editors), the author's chances of acceptance are greatly enhanced. Thus, good (*effective*) writing is of paramount importance.

Effective writing in any field of research is a powerful tool. It is a means of marketing knowledge (Colvin and Mighell, 1957; Twedt, 1977). Until they have been organised and put into readable form by the writer or researcher, the ideas or results of his research study are only of value to him. Effective writing, therefore, sets forth the subject clearly so that its readers can follow it with a minimum of difficulty. For example, whatever its topic or length, an effective research paper should meet the following criteria (Lester, 1990; Rozakis, 1999):

- It has a clear thesis – one that addresses a problem for a special audience
- The writer has a strong understanding of the topic and material used
- There is evidence that the writer has read widely on the subject, including the recognised authorities in the field
- The writer acknowledges the opinion opposed to his but shows why his point is more valid
- The points are organised in a clear and logical manner
- Each point is supported by solid, persuasive facts and examples

- All outside sources and supporting materials are carefully documented and can be easily verified
- The paper uses standard written English and follows standard conventions of the genre, including the use of correct documentation

[Further information on preparation of research papers can be found in Stapleton (1987) and West (1980).]

THE NEED FOR SOCIAL SCIENTISTS TO WRITE EFFECTIVELY

Social scientists need to write effectively. Take this example of how *not* to write, as narrated by Colvin and Mighell (1957). There was this scientist. He was an entomologist. He himself used his book in a workshop to show how not to write. A part of the book was a fly that causes myiasis – a skin disease in human beings as well as animals. Little had been known of its habits before that time. He had made an exhaustive study of the insect. He was an authority on the subject. But the book could not sell.

Why was this? Because, as he had come to discover, he wrote the book for himself, not for his readers. He used scientific terms without bothering to explain them in words that a layman could understand. He chose words consisting of many syllables rather than the short, direct words. He neglected to break up his paragraphs. His sentences were long and winding. So the book gathered dust on library shelves; it was not read or could not sell.

If effective writing is important to physical scientists, it is many times so to social scientists. Social science is less exact than the physical/natural sciences. Social scientists must often reason from inadequate data; must depend to a considerable extent on logic. The very nature of social science places an ethical obligation on social scientists to use the resources of communication more efficiently than others.

The findings of social scientists are intended to be applied, to be used by the academicians, policy makers and practitioners – those who work directly or indirectly with the people. How and to what extent they will be applied will depend on how effectively they are presented. If the results of a study made by a social scientist are not presented clearly and effectively, the value of the study is largely lost. This is particularly important in a discipline such as economics. If you are not clear you are likely to be misun-

derstood, and if the misunderstood idea is taken up by policy makers and implemented it can be costly to a group of people or to the whole citizenry of a country. Social scientists in this particular discipline can make a real contribution to the general public understanding of the issues involved by adopting more specific and understandable language, especially to the elements of society concerned with making decisions on the basis of such studies.

So, social scientists are more dependent on effective writing than physical/natural scientists. For example, geneticists may have new crops or new breeds of livestock to show for their labour. Agricultural engineers may invent new farm implements or machines or improved types of farm buildings. It is only infrequently that social scientists have tangible evidence other than written work to show for their services. What the house is to the builder, the painting to the artist, the model machine to the engineer, the written work is to the social scientist.

WHAT MAKES GOOD WRITING?

Writing of some kind begins with the first project or research statement and continues until the report, thesis, research paper or some kind of written work, e.g., a book that grows out of the project or research, is completed or published. Writing is a part of all phases of the research study. Good writing, then, is writing that communicates most effectively. This definition assumes something to communicate. It also assumes that some action, or lack of action, will be induced in the reader.

Zero Defects

A university professor in the United States who was a reviewer of an international journal for more than 10 years once lamented that he had found fewer than one manuscript in 10 to be *letter-perfect*. It was painfully obvious to him that earning a Ph.D. did not automatically make one a master of English style, but it seemed reasonable to expect distinctions to be made between “data” and “datum,” between “imply” and “infer,” and between “its” and “it’s.” The professor found that at least 90% of the *selected* manuscripts he had reviewed (bearing in mind that the real turkeys are usually not forwarded to reviewers) contained errors of syntax, spelling, or style. A letter-perfect manuscript may still lack substance, but at least the baby will not be thrown

out with the bath water. If your command of the language is uncertain, it would do well to have the manuscript reviewed by someone who has language skills.

Attributes of Good Writing

What are the attributes of good writing? There is *style*, which is highly individual. Essentially style resembles good manners. In many respects style is a matter of choice. But successful communication means that attention must be paid also to the personal preferences of the readers, or rather, the potential readers. For example, there are expressions and forms of speech that are likely to antagonise readers. A manuscript that is larded with such phrases as "In other words," "On the other hand," "It is interesting to note," makes readers see red, and can annoy the examiners and editors. Let us take the expression, "It is interesting to note." It may be interesting to an author to note a certain fact, it is true, but how can he be certain that his readers will find it so? He would do better to let the readers be the judge. The phrase "In general" is much favoured by certain social scientists. Another commonly used expression that adds little value to a manuscript is "In the final analysis." There are many others. "On the other hand" is seldom needed. As for the phrase "In other words," if the issue has been explained once in clear, direct language, why use other and probably not as effective words to repeat the explanation? If it is additional explanation, the phrase is incorrect. Phrases such as these can remove the *sparkle* from a manuscript or thesis. Sparkle is found in all kinds of writing, not only in *literary* writing. Without it, readers will begin to yawn before they have finished a page; they will toss the offending communication aside, and any *message* it may have contained will be worthless.

Sparkle in writing means variety in vocabulary, phraseology, figures of speech, paragraphing, length of sentence, and in anything else that goes into writing. Variety in vocabulary does not mean using all the words the writer can find in the dictionary. The shortest, simplest words that will express the meaning intended are best. This does not mean that the longer words cannot be used. Often they must be used. But they should be sprinkled throughout the manuscript.

Remember too that normally the third person passive is preferred in certain written works such as theses and dissertations. But its usage can be abused. In some cases the direct statement is

better – we did so and so rather than so and so was done. But beware of "we" when only one writer is expressing himself. Note, however, that when "we" is used in its generic context, it does not mean that reference is being made to many people. Sometimes usage of such words is the prerogative of the editor, the examiner in the case of theses and dissertations, or the university examining.

Writers would do well to remember that use of the active voice also helps to avoid verbal effusion. The precise word is better than the abstract word. Such general words as condition, situation, and position are usually unnecessary. Instead of saying weather condition, why not say weather? The meaning is the same.

In disciplines such as economics, writers are inclined to endow ordinary words and phrases with special meanings. For instance, the word "income" as used by economists may refer to tangible goods as well as to cash. The word "global" for "total" is more familiar in England than in the United States, and its usage is likely to confuse laymen in the latter.

It is usually well to use the old tried and true words to express meanings. True, members of any specialised profession tend to develop their own terminology, but it would do well if a word whose meaning may not be obvious to laymen is accompanied by an explanation. An example will do here. In 1977, A Missouri Court of Appeals rejected an appeal because it did not "indicate to the court what the facts were in simple concise language, to indicate wherein and why the trial court erred and to give the legal reasons in the argument to sustain the position taken." So even lawyers may find that plain English is desirable. However, avoid being judged guilty of stating self-evident facts – Most Christians go to Church on Sunday; or the sun rises in the east and sets in the west. The "Michaelangelo Principle" may thus be important: "Trifles make perfection, and perfection is no trifle."

Paragraphs that extend over a page or even half a page can take away sparkle from a manuscript. But it is also well to note that one-sentence paragraphs are not desirable. Sentences that run for over three lines are not desirable either. The piling up of nouns as modifiers sometimes reaches a point at which it is impossible to find the subject of the sentence. A look at newspaper headlines will verify this statement. The writer of newspaper headlines, however, has some excuse. He is allowed only so much space and must condense his headline until it fits that

space. The writer of, say, a thesis is not bound this way. Witness a news-paper writer's sentence: "Central Bank Amendment Bill passes, interest rates down, banks backlog borrowers applications." It is difficult to make out whether the rise in interest rates has been sparked by the passing of the Amendment Bill by parliament, and if banks have failed to satisfy new loan applications. It will require the reader to read the story to discover. Brevity is usually all the good, although it can be overdone.

STANDARDS IN WRITING

Universities and journals, for example, usually set up certain standards for their students and contributors to follow. These are the *conventions of uniformity* that facilitate reading and communication. True, many of them are arbitrary; they have no more real basis than has the left-hand rule of the road that we in Kenya and those in many other countries follow. But imagine how much confusion on the highway is avoided because of it. Certain other countries follow the right-hand rule. It is equally effective. The point is that it is uniform throughout the country, not just in certain cities or localities.

In the same way, uniform rules for writing prevent many "mental collisions." Each university or journal has its own preferences and its own rules. These preferences and rules cover a number of items.

Spelling

Social scientists are not expected to use Esperanto, the equivalent of "Sheng" in Kenya, in their writing. However, there are certain accepted spellings that may vary, depending upon the university or the country in which the university is located or the journal is published. At the University of Nairobi we generally prefer British spelling, even though less and less emphasis is being given to this. Some departments may place greater emphasis on this than others. We use "align" instead of "aline," "per cent" instead of "percent," "equalled" instead of "equaled," "labour" instead of "labor," "behaviour" instead of "behavior," "utilise" instead of "utilize," and so on. If your degree is to be issued by a university in the United States, you may be required to use the second rather than the first spelling.

Statistical Tables

There should be uniformity as to table titles, entries, grids, etc. Users of tables are likely to be confused if these will vary from table to table. In one table they might find totals in one place; in the next, the totals would be somewhere else. In poorly prepared manuscripts, a particular table format may be used for some tables, several pages ahead a different format is used. Some words in a row or column may have their initial letters capitalised while some may not. In several years of supervising graduate students, we have found this last problem irritatingly frequent.

Footnotes

Some footnotes may be necessary, but "footnoteitis" – an inflammation of footnotes – is to be avoided. If they must be used, footnotes should be as brief as possible. We have actually read articles in which the space devoted to footnotes exceeded that of the main text. Students often use material in footnotes that should be in text, and vice versa. Bibliographical footnotes should be avoided; but if they must be given, they should contain all pertinent information – author's name, title, publisher and place of publication, number of pages, and date of issuance. For some reason, bibliographical citations are peculiarly liable to error. Not infrequently, the author's name is misspelled; only a part of the title is given; or the date of publication is many years off. This is particularly common with graduate students beginning to prepare their theses.

Punctuation

Proper punctuation is important to the meaning of your sentences, but less rather than more punctuation is preferred. A detailed discussion of this can be found in Turabian (1982).

Numerals

A moot question is whether to use figures in text or to write out numerals. However, always write out numerals when starting a sentence. Too, write any numerals under 10 and use figures for 10 or above. Probably the best method to follow is to rely on your editor, supervisor or examiner.

Use of Numbers, Letters or Bullets to Set off Points

Setting off your main points and sub-points with numbers, letters or bullets or a system that includes two or three of them is a good practice, although it can be carried to excess. The common practice these days is to use bullets. The computer provides many versions of these. Setting off the points in this way emphasises them and makes it easier for the reader, especially if you have many points, with sub-points.

Word Usage

A word if properly used should "excite in the reader the same idea that it stands for in the writer." The purpose is to make ideas as clear and distinct as possible by the use of words "as near as may be to such ideas as common usage has annexed them to." Avoid jargon, circumlocution and tautology. We have all heard speakers who take hours to say what they could easily have said – what they did say – in the first few minutes of their talk. The reader's reaction to an overdone manuscript is much the same as the listener's reaction to a speaker of this kind. Tighter editing – simply cutting out verbal effusion – will frequently eliminate tautology and jargon and will increase interest in what is left. The telegraphic style of writing does not lend itself to good writing either. A balance must be struck, therefore.

Writers in social sciences sometimes find it desirable to emphasise certain statements by repeating them. But a writer should be wary of repetition. One difficulty that confronts the writer of a social science manuscript, such as economics, is the seeming necessity of "hedging." A colleague at work always complains that we cannot sustain an argument for five minutes without hedging. Often, an economist does not feel that he can come right out and say that if so and so happens, the result will be thus and so. Instead, he says: "It is likely," "Probably," "It may," "It could," "Apparently." Hedging can be carried to excess and it has the potential of offending readers, editors and examiners. Witness this, for example: "As an agricultural economist discovered, apparently farmers are generally optimistic about their future prospects in grain marketing." This has been diluted to a point of uncertainty. One cannot be sure what it means.

Thus, it is wise not to begin to write a sentence until you are quite certain what you

want to say. Let us suppose that you, an economist, have analysed your material, know what you want to say, and are ready to begin writing your manuscript. The thing to do first is to decide on your audience. Are you writing for professional workers? For business executives? For academicians? Or for whom? In many cases it may be for all or a few of them. But this decision will affect all phases of your writing. If your manuscript is intended for professional workers and academicians, you can include theory, involved tables, footnotes, methods and statistics.

When you start to write, a good way is to make an outline, listing all the main headings and sub-headings. Yes, the outline may be subject to change as you go along, but you will find it of big help. The *organisation* of your manuscript will definitely take some thought.

Certain words function best when they are used in certain ways. The word "amount," for instance, is best when it refers to money; the word "quantity" when it refers to weight (mass). Economists sometimes overwork certain words. One of these is the word "determine." It is said that only God can determine, although this rarely receives attention. Man can ascertain, calculate, estimate, assess, evaluate, find out, or what have you. Make use of synonyms to improve variety in vocabulary. Current computer word processors are installed with thesaurus. Avoid overusing words like "which." It makes smooth writing to replace "which" with "that" when the latter would do as well. Very often neither is needed.

Superlatives should be used sparingly or not at all. This is true too of all adjectives and adverbs. To some economists, all the points they make are "important," "notable" or "remarkable." But the effect of this on the reader or examiner can be unfortunate. He soon tires of seeing the words and wonders whether anything in the manuscript really is important. If you present your points and discuss them in clear direct language, you need not call attention to their importance. The reader will see that for himself. Too often, adverbs like "relatively," "comparatively," "fairly," and "highly" are used when there is no standard of comparison.

CONCLUDING REMARK: HOW TO IMPROVE YOUR WRITING

No matter how good your style of writing, it can be improved. One way to do this is by reading good literature. Most editorial pages and columns

of certain international newspapers or journals, and even some local newspapers, are rewarding to read, though one may disagree with the content. The quality of writing is usually high.

Also remember that it will do good not to submit the first draft of your manuscript or thesis to the editor or supervisor. Let your colleagues review your first draft. In the case of a thesis, your supervisor will try to help you present your subject matter in the most effective way. Your colleagues might suggest corrections to the work. Do not take these suggestions amiss; welcome their comments. You, as a writer, are often too close to your work to see its drawbacks unless a disinterested person points them out to you.

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