

# Bugged by bad writing? Help break the cycle

KENNETH D. MAHRER, *University of Denver, U.S.*

**Reviewer:** I read your abstract and, frankly, it really didn't tell me anything about your manuscript. It has some real problems. When I removed the fluff but kept your original words, it distilled down to three simple sentences: A study was done. Results were found. Conclusions were drawn. It gave me nothing specific about the content of your manuscript.

**Author:** So? Do you have a problem with that?

R: (speechless with quizzical look)

A: That's the way abstracts read. Isn't that correct? Isn't that the way to write—mimic what's worked for others; use published works as examples? That's what my thesis advisor told me.

I wish I had a dime for every time I had that conversation. My pockets would jingle loudly.

Have you ever wondered why so many technical articles talk a lot but say little? Why so many are simply chronologies, or de facto diaries, of what the authors did and seem to ignore what you, the reader, need? Why so many lack purpose (beyond fulfilling the author's professional requirement or personal need to publish)? Or, why so many are solutions looking for problems, i.e., they describe (often prodigious) effort but fail to espouse value or utility. Ever wondered why people write like this? Well, I have, and here are some possibilities. It might be genetic. Maybe there's a poor-writing gene? An interesting idea, but not too likely. Maybe it's a poor-writing bug or, in the cant, a viral or bacteriological agent. That's a cute idea. It certainly could explain a lot: Why it's so pervasive (pandemic?) and why it continues to propagate through the literature (contagious?). Yes, I rather like the concept of the poor-writing bug. Unfortunately, to the best of my knowledge, no such beastie has yet been found.

So what's the cause? Truthfully, I don't know, but I have some ideas. Some books on technical writing call it "writer's ego"—writers becoming so enamored with their own work, they lose the ability to present it to readers. Personally, I think it's less ego and more writer's "innocence" or "ignorance." I think we are victims of a system that talks about good writing but does little to instill the skills. Most writers are products of a system that seems to have lost selectivity and now rewards nearly all writing, good or bad, with publication.

Because poor writing is not part of the human genetic heritage, it's probably safe to say good writing is also not built into humans. Good writing is a taught skill. Ironically, as a subspecies, we scientoids fall short in teaching our offspring (i.e., protégés) correct writing ... possibly because we never correctly learned. Although technical professionals typically spend 20-50% of their time writing, our formal academic training or working environments do not

**Blockettes.** Recent email from Scott Phillips, a geoscientist at Los Alamos National Laboratory in New Mexico, contained some keen insights about editing manuscripts from authors whose mother tongues are not English. Some excerpts as written by Scott:

The point I'd like to make, and perhaps interest you enough to follow up, is that 'poor' writing from nonnative English speakers has a large cultural component.

I spent six months as a researcher in Japan and edited papers for English on almost a daily basis. I got very frustrated with, to my eyes, the convoluted logic and organization in addition to the poor English that I faced in nearly every case.

After one particularly tough bout, I suggested that the author write the paper in Japanese and translate it directly to English. (I can handle bad English, but not bad organization). He replied, "That's what I did."

In another case, I tried to distill a paper's main conclusion into a succinct, final statement. The conclusions had been scattered throughout the body of the paper. The author (a well-respected scientist) replied, "I am embarrassed to make such a strong statement."

Advancing one's opinion is a cultural faux pas in that part of the world. Scientists must be deft to get their work and ideas published without offending others. Western culture requires simple, concise, and strongly worded presentations. The conflict could not be greater.

I try to keep these experiences in mind when I review manuscripts by nonnative English speakers and perhaps I'm more lenient than most. But leniency is not the answer. The question is: If the problem is cultural, how do outsiders learn to present findings in Western media? Can we help the learning process? Consider the difficulty we would have publishing in the East!

allot enough time to teach or develop technical writing skills. We teach the technical and presume the writing. We presume that, by giving a writing assignment in a class or at work, the assignee will write a successful document. If not, so what, we give the student another assignment and maybe he or she will do better. Or, we simply whisper this person cannot write but continue to give assignments anyway. We don't seem able to take the initiative to break the cycle. Hence, we continue to turn out students untrained in basic technical writing skills, and we continue to accept output from colleagues who write poorly. We need to break this trend!

Ironically, since this trend remains unbroken, we are de facto expecting students, young professionals, and even seasoned professionals will learn or improve technical writing skills by emulating the published works they read. This is completely illogical. How can we expect them to learn if they mimic articles that have a good chance of being poorly written. Even if they do read a well-written article, they probably don't have the tools for understanding why it is well written. It sounds like another vicious circle: untrained student becomes professional, writes weak manuscripts that are published, read, and mimicked by uninformed student who becomes uninformed professional, etc. Again, I say, we need to break the cycle.



Breaking the cycle can only be done only by mandating change. It cannot be done by simply paying lip service to the need for change.

Ironically, I wrote this column while visiting Seoul National University (SNU) in Korea. I was visiting the campus to give a short course (four days, four hours per day) on technical writing for publication to engineering and science graduate students. This is my second time giving this course. In my first Writer's Block (March 1998), I described what I learned when preparing my lecture notes for my first course. Well, I went back again. It is quite a task to lecture in English (I don't know Korean) about publishing in English to students and faculty whose mother tongue is not English. It is also interesting to note that this course is totally optional, and each participant paid about US\$25 to attend. Two years ago I lectured to about 85 students; this time it was about 200. Why the increase? I'd like to believe I was brilliant and was returning for an encore performance. However, I'd probably be inflating the facts. SNU has instituted a requirement that each graduate student must publish in an international journal in order to get a master's or Ph.D. However, like many curricula in the United States, SNU's engineering and science curricula do not require or offer any courses on technical writing. Ergo, this special course and its high enrollment.

The English language proficiency of these students was, in general, wonderful. Although often slow and somewhat deliberate when speaking (I assume because they were translating from Korean to English in their heads), their comprehension was wonderful. I say this because they laughed at my jokes (most of the time), and catching the subtleties of humor in a foreign language is not easy. However, based on samples (I gave them a writing assignment during the course), their writing skills were much weaker than oral language skills. Fortunately, the professors and administration at SNU who invited me recognized this weakness and are trying to break the poor-writing cycle.

So what should we do about the uninformed-student-becomes-weak-writer? Change university curricula? This would certainly help, especially if taught by someone qualified in technical writing (and NOT by English majors professing technical writing skills based on a history of studying Shakespeare, Chaucer, Dickens, Hemingway, etc.—a topic for another day). However, in my opinion this is not going to happen from within academe. Based on my experience at more than one university, changing curricula from within a department mandates an act of Congress but can be done given a few years. Changing curricula to include subjects viewed to be peripheral to the main emphasis of a department requires divine intervention of the first kind! Getting faculty members to agree on the change and finding the available block in which to insert the new courses is not a simple task or one not easily accomplished in a single lifetime.

What then? How do we break the cycle? We need to do a number of things. First, we need to tell academe that it's turning out students poorly prepared for the technical writing demands beyond the ivy-covered walls. Poor writing in school means a poor grade, poor writing in a profession can have greater consequences, including lost revenue. Next we need to apply pressure ... especially by those groups and/or individuals who finance academic programs, projects, etc. The pull of the purse strings is very

persuasive, particularly within universities.

We also need to focus beyond academe. We need to do something about weak writing within the profession. We need to improve our short courses and make—not encourage—students and new, young, and seasoned professionals take them. Short courses can open eyes, blow away dust, and re-polish tarnishing skills. However, one has to be careful not to assume that short courses are the total answer. They are good but not the whole answer. Short courses can teach concepts but do not have enough time to provide practical feedback, evaluation, and rewrites of the students' work. You can lecture people until the Chicago Cubs win the World Series—a feat usually described by "Wait till next year!"—but the real test comes when they write. If not, we would all be Rembrandts after listening to lectures on painting. Short courses are a partial fix.

The full fix will come only when we finally stop accepting substandard work. Within organizations this may require time-consuming rewrites. That's expensive, but in the long run, it should pay dividends. Within the publication world, it means not accepting and pushing through substandard manuscripts. Editors and reviewers have to accept the stewardship of their professions, even if it means controversy or stepping on some toes. In general, it means we must accept that all dispersed material, whether within an organization or within the professional community, is an example of technical writing quality that subsequent writers may follow. We must immerse readers in a sea of top quality not a sea of overwhelming quantity or the cycle of poor writing will continue. **E**