2015 Athletic Training Educators’ Conference

Academic Writing: Tips for Developing a Well-Written Manuscript

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Quotes

• “There is nothing to writing. All you do is sit down at a typewriter and bleed.”
  • Ernest Hemingway [http://www.goodreads.com/quotes/tag/writing]

• “Substitute ‘damn’ every time you’re inclined to write ‘very;’ your editor will delete it and the writing will be just as it should be.”
  • Mark Twain [http://www.goodreads.com/quotes/tag/writing]

• “Writing is not what the writer does after the thinking is done; writing is thinking.”
  • Donald M. Murray

Another Quote

• Quote from the Foreword
  • “I never cease to be amazed by the general inability of physicians, other health professionals, and scientists to communicate through the written word.”

• This does not mean the writer is:
  • Unintelligent
  • Incompetent
  • Or they have poor ideas

• This does mean writing is a skill that requires:
  • Ongoing practice
  • Critical feedback
  • Dedicated work

Presentation Objectives

• Discuss Techniques for Developing Your Writing Skills
• Describe Methods to Develop Your Productivity and Creativity
• Review Aspects of Writing the ATEJ Manuscript
• Highlight AMA Style and Other Grammar Issues

Let’s Warm Up

• Work with 1 or 2 other people
  • You will need a sheet of paper, or ability to write on a tablet
  • Divide the page in 2 halves
  • On the first half, 1 person will draw symbols, objects, pictures, graphs, etc. (but not words) that express/identify/question an idea, fact, or theory.
  • On the second half, the other person(s) will write words, phrases, or sentences that state the point of the pictures.
  • You will have 4 minutes for this exercise.

Developing Your Writing Skills

• Finding Your Voice
• Tightening Your Writing
• General Writing Tips
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- Take-away for this activity
  - Challenge word choices and provide a new direction into writing

Example

- Compare this ...
  - The participants for this study were 400 randomly-selected certified athletic trainers who graduated during the 2004-2005 academic year and became certified in 2005 because this allowed young professionals to have at least 5 years to potentially become involved as professionals.

Example

- With this...
  - We randomly selected 400 athletic trainers who graduated and earned their Board of Certification credential in 2005. We surveyed these young professionals because they had at least 5 years of experience as an athletic trainer.

- How would you describe the differences?

Finding Your Voice

- Writing is speaking; a conversation between you and the “listener”
  - Our day-to-day conversations are sloppy, BUT...
  - Our verbal conversations control the meaning and intention of our words and actions
  - “Finding your voice” refers to learning how you want to speak to someone through writing and accurately share your story

- So what is your take-away advice?
  - Hear what is written
    - You or someone else must read your writing aloud
    - Listen for weak repetitions, poor word choices, and grammatical errors

Tightening Your Writing

- Don’t repeat words or ideas unless it strengthens the writing

- Edit/review the following sentence
  - Poor: We interviewed the subjects following completion of the survey. Subjects completed the survey first to provide us direction for the semi-structured interviews.

- Better: Subjects completed the survey first to direct our semi-structured interviews.
Tightening Your Writing

• Certain words can clutter sentences, fail to add meaning, or unnecessarily categorize; be careful when using these words³
  • Which, that
  • All, what, thing,
  • Type, kind, situation, area, phase, aspect, factor, one

• Edit/revise the following sentence
  • Poor: The most important finding that we discovered with this study was that feedback significantly increased learning.

• Try to avoid naming/grouping something when it is not needed⁴
  • In other words, write in the active voice, not passive voice
  • Edit/revise the following sentence
  • Poor: Thomas and John were the two subjects who expressed the greatest interest in peer instruction. They differed in what aspects of peer instruction they desired; however, Thomas preferred the feedback he received from his peers, and John preferred the social nature of peer instruction.

• It is not about sounding smart, it is about using good words and phrases (eg, simple, familiar) to communicate your ideas clearly and concisely⁵
  • Avoid intensifiers as modifiers (eg, very, basically, actually)
  • Avoid trendy jargon, slang, idioms (ie, avoid the business literature)
    • Instead of “thinking outside the box,” just write “thinking”
    • To “give 110 percent” is not possible

• Use the paragraph as a unit of thought
• Write a good sentence to focus the thought
• Skip a couple lines and write a good sentence for the next thought
• Organize thoughts/sentences so your ideas flow
• Go back to each thought/sentence and add notes to expand it
• Develop the notes into more sentences to complete the thought
• Review, reorganize, and edit as needed
Other General Writing Tips

• **Write using standard, edited American English**
  • Used for correct grammar, syntax, punctuation, spelling
  • If you are wondering which form to use, go with American English over British English
  • Example: "Among" and "amongst" have the same meaning (ie, "in the company of") BUT amongst is rarely used in the American form of English

• **Write in the active voice & 1st person**
  • The passive voice introduces ambiguity and clutters the sentence; active verbs communicate the specific action
  • Poor: The authors were supportive of...
  • Better: We supported...
  • Quick test:
  • Circle all the "being" verbs (is, are, was, were, am, be, been)
  • If equal or greater number of passive verbs than active verbs, then the writing is passive

• **Limit or avoid using abbreviations**
  • Use only recognized abbreviations; avoid self-made abbreviations just because it is repeated in the manuscript
  • Emphasize the facts/evidence, not who produced it
  • Read examples of how you want to write
    • Reading, in general, is always helpful
    • Reading material similar to how you want to write is even better
    • "Mimic the template"

• **Develop a Writing Routine & Stick to it**
  • An extension of the preparatory ritual
  • If you know what to write, write it
  • If not, use a technique best for you & set concrete goals (eg, 1000 words):
    • Free write; brainstorm; mind mapping; re-read a key article/chapter

Getting Started

• **Use a Ritual to Prepare Yourself to Write**
  • Inspiration is a powerful source, BUT the demands of academia can stifle it
  • A preparatory ritual can lead to a creative start even when you don’t feel it
  • Be consistent with the mental warm-up:
    • Start the day with a morning a swim; get your coffee/latte/other; sharpen your pencils/clean your computer screen...

Developing Your Productivity and Creativity

• Getting Started
• Removing Distractions
• Maintaining Motivation
• Writing is a Group Activity
Removing Distractions

- When writing, start on whatever is in your head at that time. 
  - In other words, starting at the beginning of the paper is not always the best choice.
- How can you introduce a paper that does not yet exist?

Maintaining Motivation

- Set Priorities
- Riddle: “How do you eat an elephant?”
  - One bite at a time.
- A thought on ranking projects:
  1. Finish projects with deadlines; external motivation can help (but sometimes hurt) creativity.
  2. Complete manuscripts with requested revisions; they are one step closer to being published.
  3. Develop presentations into manuscripts; a level of inspiration is already there.

Let’s Test Your Puzzle Abilities

- Working alone: solve as many as you can in 2 minutes.
  - 26 l. of the A. (Example)
  - 7 W. of the A. W.
  - 1001 A. N.
  - 12 S. of the 2.
  - 54 C. in a D. with the J.
  - 8 P. in the S. S.
  - 13 S. on the A. F.
  - 18 H. on a G. C.
  - 90 D. in a R. A.
- ANSWERS
  - 26 letters of the alphabet
  - 7 wonders of the ancient world
  - 1001 Arabian nights
  - 12 signs of the zodiac
  - 54 cards in a deck with the jokers
  - 8 planets in the solar system
  - 13 stripes on the American flag
  - 18 holes on a golf course
  - 90 degrees in a right angle

Removing Distractions

- Going back to the quotes, what does Murray mean?
  - “Writing is not what the writer does after the thinking is done; writing is thinking.”
- Write first, revise/edit later
  - In general, writing a perfect initial draft is not possible.
  - Get what is in your mind onto paper ASAP.

Maintaining Motivation

- Monitor Progress and Reward Accomplishments
  - Develop a table of writing projects with steps/goals through the completion process.
  - When you achieve a goal, give yourself a reward
    - Never reward writing by not writing.
    - If “blocked,” go back to the start.

Let’s Test Your Puzzle Abilities

- Working with a partner: solve as many as you can in 2 minutes.
  - 36 l. in a Y.
  - 8 W. of H. the E.
  - 20 Y that R. V. W. S.
  - 60 S. in a M.
  - 40 T. with A. B.
  - 1 D. at a T.
  - 16 O. in a P.
  - 4 H. of the A.
- ANSWERS
  - 36 inches in a yard
  - 8 wives of Henry the Eighth
  - 20 years that Rip Van Winkle slept
  - 60 seconds in a minute
  - 40 thieves with Ali Baba
  - 1 day at a time
  - 16 ounces in a pound
  - 4 Horseman of the Apocalypse

What is the take-away with this activity?
Writing is a Group Activity

• Writing and learning are closely connected
  • Both communicate information that adds/changes what we know1,2
• Writing with a group:3,7
  • Transfers knowledge
  • Encourages growth from sharing experiences
  • Helps to find your writing voice
  • Provides and enhances motivation
  • Challenges each member to meet individual and group goals
  • Highlights and celebrates successes
• Take-away:
  • Find or develop a support group that will challenge you to write more often, faster, and better

AMA Style (10th edition)2

• What is it?
  • A tool to help write organized, clear, readable, and respected manuscripts.
• How to use it?
  • Start by reading your manuscript
  • Use the manual to correctly present your information when it is not described in the ATEJ Author’s Guide
  • If something does not “sound right,” research how to correct it
  • It also has a section on grammar, but you will probably need other resources

AMA Style

• Some Common Issues
  • Use the correct abbreviation2
    • et al., NOT et al.
    • Means “and associates/colleagues”
    • eg., NOT e.g.
    • Means “for example”
    • Do not use et al. at the end of examples
    • i.e., NOT i.e.
    • Means “that is” or “in other words”
  • Report numbers to the level of precision you measured2
    • Round up or down depending on what number is to the right of the last significant digit
    • Calculations (eg, mean, SD) can be expressed to 1 digit beyond the accuracy of the instrument

AMA Style and Other Grammar Issues

• Some Common Issues Seen in the Manuscript

AMA Style

• Some Common Issues
  • Citations are Arabic numerals (eg, 3, 11, 42), superscript, and in order they are presented in the manuscript; citations are placed2,11
    • After identifying the author
    • End of the phrase that is cited, or
    • End of sentence if entire sentence is cited material
  • Manuscripts under review are NOT listed in the references but identified in text as “unpublished data”2
  • Refer to the AMA manual on how to write all references correctly
  • Remember, bibliographic software (eg, EndNote) will create a reference list based on how the information is typed into the fields

AMA Style

• Some Common Issues
  • Comma tends to be overused2
    • May want to use more sparingly (see manual for rules)
  • Semi-colon and colon provide a more definitive break in thoughts, such as with independent clauses (see manual for rules)2
  • DO NOT begin sentences with Arabic numerals2
    • Either restructure the sentence or write the number as a word
AMA Style

• Some Common Issues
  • Hyphenate compound adjectives, adjective-noun compound, or other similar compounds that precede
    the noun they describe:
    • eg, decision-making methods but not clinical decision making
  • Quotations:
    • Use double quotes for material you quote
    • Block quotes for material 4 or more lines in length
    • Use single quotes only with quotations in quotations

Knowledge Check

• How many AMA style errors are in the following sentence?
  35 subjects (n = 35) with healthcare education experience
  (e.g., they completed at least 1 full semester of coursework)
  and who were between the ages of 18 and 30 years (mean
  age = 24.128 years) comprised the entire sample for our
  study.

6

Knowledge Check

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  35 subjects (n = 35) with healthcare education experience
  (e.g., they completed at least 1 full semester of coursework)
  and who were between the ages of 18 and 30 years (mean
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  study.

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Knowledge Check

• How many AMA style errors are in the following sentence?
  Thirty-five subjects (N = 35) with health care education
  experience (ie, they completed at least 1 full semester of
  coursework) and who were between the ages of 18 and 30 years
  (mean age = 24.1 years) comprised the entire sample for our
  study.

Some Other Grammar Myths

• Myth: Do not “strand” a preposition at the end of a sentence
  • Let the context of the sentence drive what reads best
  • Example: “He is a person with whom I disagree.” OR “He is a person I
    disagree with.”

• Myth: Do not split an infinitive
  • Again, let the context of the sentence determine how it should be
    written
  • Example: “To boldly go where no man has gone before” is perfectly
    acceptable.

• Myth: Use the indefinite article “a” before the word if it begins
  with a vowel. Use “an” if it begins with a consonant.
  • Use “a/an” depending on how the succeeding word is pronounced.
  • If pronounced with a vowel sound, then use “an” to aid the
    pronunciation
  • Example: an honor; an herb
Writing the ATEJ Manuscript

- Overview of the Review Process
- Authors’ Guide: Key Issues
- Advice for Resubmissions/Revisions

ATEJ Authors’ Guide

- Currently being revised
- Some possible key revisions:
  - Human subject projects must identify IRB approval, but how much to describe may change
  - Follow AMA Manual of Style for all writing issues NOT specifically identified in the Authors’ Guide (the guide trumps the AMA Manual)
  - The ATEJ may review manuscripts other than those types identified in the Authors’ Guide (this includes qualitative research)

Advice for Resubmissions/Revisions

- Plan on being asked to revise and resubmit:
  - Don’t get discouraged; rejection part of the process
  - Remember, any well-written manuscript needs critical feedback
  - Still a step closer to being published

- Consider the amount of work required for the resubmission:
  - If work is minor, resubmit
  - If work is major, weigh the effort to the payoff. Do you have the time?

Advice for Resubmissions/Revisions

- If resubmitting, read editor’s and reviewers’ comments:
  - Be receptive to the feedback
  - Identify the deadline
  - Identify what you can change and assess its work
  - Adhere to the directions on how to revise
  - Bold new writing
  - Precisely describe the changes made and how it resolves the issue
  - If you do not make a requested change, explain why
  - Be appreciative and professional in your resubmission letter

A Final Quote

“Writing’s still the most difficult job I’ve ever had, but it’s worth it.” - John Grisham

Questions

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  - Donald Hudson
  - Retired English teacher and National Writing Project consultant
References


