



Skern, Tim.

Writing Scientific English.

A Workbook.

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The author of this book is a native speaker of English who has been teaching scientific writing in English at the University of Vienna since 1992. He obviously draws heavily on this experience for his book when he uses exercises and student writing samples from those classes. One unique aspect of this book is its fusion of both practical scientific writing concepts with a political message about HIV and AIDS in Africa. Inspiration for the content he uses to practice his guidelines on scientific writing came from his visits to Cape Town and an interest in local HIV education there. By forwarding the full proceeds from this book to a local South African HIV teacher and counselor, he puts his political message into action. Supporting this teacher is, as he says in his

introduction, «a more efficient way of fighting AIDS than any research I might ever do» (p. 6).

Although the author's personal stance obviously stresses the importance of education over research, this book would have benefited from a stronger background on process-writing research in both first [L1] and second/foreign [L2] languages. While he randomly underscores the importance of drafting and revision in several cases throughout the chapters, Skern doesn't explain their specific functions within the writing process. Therefore, he also fails to reveal the pitfalls of drafting and revision, which seems key to any workbook on writing.

An even more dramatic omission is the explicit introduction to the special characteristics of the L2

writing process. This dangerous exclusion goes against the author's own goal to help both native and L2 writers and could be very frustrating for many of these writers wanting to use Skern's book. An example of this can be found when Skern is discussing the nature of the first draft of a scientific article. He asks the reader to refer to the formal guidelines of the publication medium in mind before beginning to write: «... use the [target] journal's <guidelines for authors> to prepare a style sheet for a new manuscript and to have it with you when writing» (p.86). Academic writing practitioners know that for many writers, not only for L2 writers, this means a heavy burden of meeting the expectations of readers with whom they are, for different reasons,

more or less unfamiliar. Throughout the past two decades, writing research has shown in many facets that focusing on an audience right from the beginning of the writing process often leads to writer's block or at least to a slowdown during text production.

Along the same lines, Skern suggests that L2 writers equip themselves with a wide array of reference books from the start of the writing process: «A dictionary, a thesaurus ... should always be close at hand» (p.163). This suggestion ignores the findings of L2 writing research that in the face of drafting, writers seem more successful when focusing on putting down their own ideas in whatever language skills they already have at hand. Only in a later step, after having revised the macro-structure (also sometimes called «higher-order concerns») of a draft, should they turn to the micro-structure of the text («lower-order concerns»). Alternatively, both L1 and L2 writers seem to be able to better maintain their writing flow in a first draft by using strategies such as marking instances where they can't immediately think of the appropriate word (e.g. *The XXX of ...* or *The incubation [look up!] period ...*) and correcting them at a later stage. Another option would be to first use alternative terminology in either the target language or the

native language, often originating from the realm of spoken language. The powerful transition from the writer's own personal language for constructing ideas to the language of the target audience offers the strongest potential opportunities for writers to grow.

Despite all this criticism, Skern's book is a useful source for writing courses or for self-instruction/ independent learning regarding the specific linguistic and stylistic challenges of scientific writing. Chapter 1 begins with a brief summary of some key aspects of grammar and style in Scientific English including the use of «the» and «a», punctuation, and linking words. The author also muses on the up- and downsides of English as the language of science allowing room to vent about some of the more complex, frustrating aspects of the language. At the end of Chapter 1, a short list of useful scientific terms introduces the reader to his scientific lexicon. Throughout the book, these terms are used and set in italics so the reader can begin to understand them within a larger context of practicing scientific writing in English.

Chapter 2 includes eight guidelines to help writers take their English writing to the level necessary in scientific discourse. Using shorter, active sentence structures and

omitting unnecessary words are some of the aspects Skern mentions. The recommendation to «omit unnecessary words» is credited to a classic source, *The Elements of Style* by W. Strunk, Jr. and E.B. White, first published in 1918 and «still the best book available on writing good English» (p.33). Both chapters one and two incorporate improvement exercises that ask readers to apply the guidelines mentioned.

Readers can then practice making use of these guidelines in Chapter 3 while working on two key genres of scientific writing: summaries and abstracts. Skern first asks readers to write their own short texts then offers texts from his students to be improved. All the exercises include revised versions for comparison as part of peer feedback or self-evaluation.

Chapter 4 goes a step further to focus on the making of scientific manuscript as a whole. Focusing on qualitative aspects of a manuscript that increase its chances of being published, Skern goes through the different sections of a model manuscript after which he introduces ways to improve and edit manuscripts based on a sample text.

Using various simplified topics, Chapter 5 asks readers to write a sample manuscript while providing other samples and their improved

versions for comparison. Skern's sense of humor is seen in topics like «Improving the quality of bread» with a suggested research focus «especially if you are British» to «generate a bread with the consistency of a damp towel without having to use any organic materials whatsoever» (p.128).

Chapter 6 offers a short list of well-established English reference works as well as a longer list of recommended texts on different aspects of the English language and on both writing and speaking English. His short descriptions of these sources provide further orientation for the independent reader/language learner/academic writer. An additional prioritized list of recommended readings incorporates 70 sources on different areas of scientific interest such as «On becoming a scientist» or more specific fields of science like «virology». His goal is that readers expand their understanding of scientific texts and scientific terminology by reading different kinds of sources. An additional goal is a better understanding of both strong and rather weak scientific argumentation, both of which can be found in his recommendations. The book ends with an expanded version of the scientific lexicon started in Chapter 1 with reference numbers showing the pages on which

these terms are used. Several blank pages are included for the reader to add words and phrases found in other readings. Skern's engaging language makes this workbook not only informative but also fun to read. His examples are authentic, interesting, and humorous at times, demonstrating that scientific writing need not be a boring topic. Readers wishing to improve their own writing can do so in a way that doesn't feel like pulling teeth. An additional source of reference with a clear focus on process writing and on its unique aspects in L2 writing would be an important complement to this workbook in later editions.

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