

Crafting Stories: Workshop on innovative strategies for writing scientific papers

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This year at EHPS, I registered for the pre-conference workshop titled "To Provide Innovative Strategies for Writing Scientific Papers, Including Creative Use of New Internet Resources, and Responding to Reviews, Including Rejection". The day long workshop took place on Tuesday 1st September between 9am-5pm at the Grand Resort (the conference venue) and was facilitated by Prof. James Coyne of the University Medical Center, Groningen in the Netherlands. With 350 publications, it is clear that Prof. Coyne is a talented academic. He has also been designated by ISI Web of Science as one of the most impactful psychologists and psychiatrists in the world. In the workshop, the entire publication process was addressed from submitting a manuscript, to responding to reviews and deciding whether to appeal rejections.

Prof. Coyne began the day by telling us that scientific writing has changed. Reporting good science is now not sufficient to ensure publication. We were told that our mentors didn't always know best, as social media and fast-paced communications replace traditional methods. We are now forced to make personal choices about adopting new practices in a rapidly changing environment. The group were told that writing is about crafting stories: a good paper is a good story. Writers are challenged to market their manuscripts. We must convince a journal that they should want to publish our paper. Starting

with the cover letter, title, and abstract, we must strive to inspire interest and create a persuasive narrative.

With the challenge set and status quo placed to one side, we began to discuss the writing process. The advice was pretty simple in many ways: write. Just write. Every day. Academics should practice writing at least 200 words a day. Make it an automatic routine practice. Remove the shackles and inhibitions. Embed this into your day and refine your art. Binge writing is less productive than slowly crafting a piece over time. Think about the piece before you write. Get to know the literature. Sign up for Google alerts and

follow researchers on Twitter. Find blogs that discuss work you are interested in. Structure procrastination so that when you're not doing what you should be doing, you're still doing something useful. This creative background process allows you to get your ideas together. Then

write a "shitty first draft" - get the ideas on the page. Come back and polish the piece over time.

How do we get people to want to read our paper? Maximise immediate attention by being innovative. Produce an eye-catching title or abstract- not misleading or inaccurate, just eye-catching. Promote your paper and tell people why what you're doing is important. Identify the likely problems with the paper and address them. Turn these problems into selling points, by acknowledging limitations. Have an abstract that draws people in. Don't write your abstract last; use it as a tool to get ideas in order. Don't spend



too long on your abstract. In the words of Prof. Coyne: "Date your abstract but never marry it- like it, spend time with it... but don't get attached because you might have to cut it."

Traditional journal impact factors and citations are often misleading and in many ways are quite a silly way to measure "prestige" of a paper or an author. Often, high-impact "vanity journals" want to publish newsworthy or paradigm-busting stories. However, replication studies or null findings are frequently ignored, despite their valid and reliable findings. Therefore we are faced with a difficult task. How do we draw in our reader?

Prof. Coyne told us "don't write like a girl" (citing his sometimes co-author feminist Robin Lakoff). Appropriate the dominant, direct style of writing currently associated with being an older male. I don't know if Prof. Coyne has much experience of Irish women, but I certainly wouldn't describe their style as traditionally non-committal or submissive. However, this controversial comment drew us in- the art of grabbing the listeners' attention. With an element of drama, our presenter had a captive audience. Prof. Coyne's message was clear: Be effective.

Open access papers enable dissemination. Creating a knowledge economy enhances our science. Our research should be available to everyone. We were encouraged to appeal rejections where necessary. Reviewers are fallible human beings like the rest of us. Sometimes they are wrong to reject our paper. The group was told to manage publicity for newly published papers. Taking the lead on our own press communication is important so that our work is not misinterpreted. Compose short summaries or press releases about the paper so that the message is clear. If you don't control your

publicity it can control you. Say what you mean and mean what you say... otherwise you might get caught out.

Prof. Coyne's workshop was engaging and informative. In just one day of anecdotes and demonstrations, this highly interactive session helped us to craft storylines for cover letters and responses to reviewers, picking titles and writing abstracts. Prof. Coyne gave personalised feedback to participants engaged in the writing process, helping them to pitch their study in an appealing and enticing way.

It seems that when writing, the main aim is to be pragmatic. Think strategically about your writing and write for your intended reader. Reflect and think about the writing process. Draft, re-draft and refine. Don't exaggerate findings. Resist the temptation of using hype or spin. After all, it will be evaluated and some people (in their own words) have made pretty good careers out of "shooting down crap."



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