

CREATE workshop 2015: Writing science for journals, funders, and other audiences

Silja-Riin Voolma University of Cambridge
Jorinde E. Spook Wageningen University and Research Centre

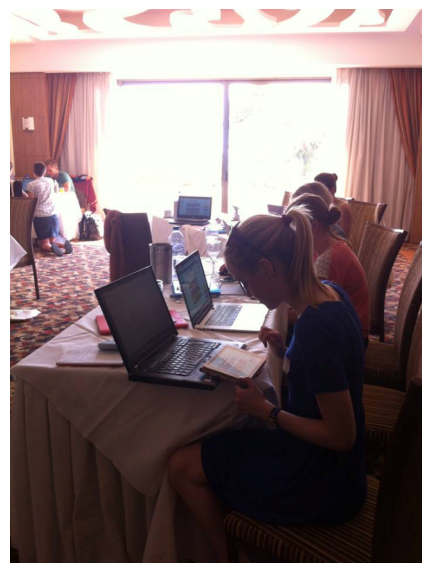
Writing science is much more than writing for scientific journals. Researchers share their work via blogs, twitter and Facebook to disseminate their work to the public. Publishing our work in so many forums and formats allows us to reach a wider audience than has been possible in the past. However, our messages to a range of people are likely to get lost, if we are not sensitive to effective communication styles for different audiences. This years'CREATE workshop focused on "Writing Science for Journals, Funders, and other Audiences". The facilitators were Dr. Jean Adams (University of Cambridge), Dr. Stephan Dombrowski (University of Stirling), and Prof. Martin White (University of Cambridge).

A clear emphasis of the workshop was the importance of collaboration among authors and the value of peer review. We were divided into smaller working groups to practice this. The groups imitated the working process of a research group. We agreed from the outset on some ground rules of collaboration, such as showing respect for each other and each other's work, listening, noticing when help is needed and offering help to others.

This small-group setup allowed us to explore the "do's and don'ts" of collaboration in a safe environment. Within these surroundings we learned the different nuances of scientific writing

for multiple audiences and text formats.

The facilitators suggested that the first step of any type of writing should be making a structured plan. A structured plan makes all the difference to the process and outcome of writing. We learned to write plans with the use of headings and subheadings to clarify what we wanted to say in each part of the text. The "rule of five" was a favourite amongst our workshop group in simplifying the writing process and producing a clear and clean line of argument. The "rule of five" asks for a piece of writing to focus on five main points in five paragraphs and each paragraph to consist of five sentences - simple enough! Moreover, Stephan Dombrowski stressed that there is an important difference between idea generation and editing, which really helped some of us to overcome fearing a blank page. Stephan emphasized that we should not be too critical



of the first draft. Everything can be edited and it is necessary to get all the ideas out before starting to choose words very carefully. So according to our interpretation we would say: start getting the ideas out, structured writing will follow!

A clear strength of this workshop was its focus on all of the building blocks of structured writing (i.e., words, sentences, paragraphs and sections). For instance on the word-level, we learned about 'Zombie' words. 'Zombie' words are commonly used words in academic writing, which do not add anything to the meaning or emphasis of the sentence they are in. The image of zombies haunted us for the rest of the workshop but it is a learning objective that we are still talking and joking about four weeks after the workshop (we hope we haven't included any in this report)!

Another highlight of the workshop was learning about active versus passive writing styles. We are mainly trained to write in the passive voice, but now learned that another option is to use the active voice. Writing in the active voice is quickly becoming the industry standard, which favours its clarity and conciseness. The active voice places the actor as the subject of the sentence and the receiver as the object. In the passive voice these roles reverse which means that our message is more likely to get lost for the audience. The beauty and joy of any kind of writing is its role in story-telling. This was a key message of the workshop. We are story-tellers and our writing should reflect that, whether we are writing in an academic journal or on Facebook. Active writing style allows our message to ring loud and clear to any kind of audience.

There are also two main types of writers, the structured and the binge writers. Structured writing means that you have planned writing into your day so there is no way that you forget to do



it, but it also means you have to keep going back to ideas and narratives that you might no longer remember. Binge writing means you get it all out of the way in one go but it is near impossible to find enough hours to isolate yourself from the world in order to do it. We decided in the workshop that it is all down to personal

preference and neither style is superior to the other. On a personal note, we would consider ourselves "structured binge writers". Before we started writing we had a Skype meeting, discussed ideas about topics for the report and came up with some self-imposed deadlines to

structure our writing process. In practice, we both started binge writing a few hours prior to the self-imposed deadlines. Nevertheless, with these structured time slots of binge writing, in the end, we finished the report one week before the submission deadline of the EHP.

Finally, regardless of the type of writer you consider yourself to be, it is important to ask for peer review. Depending on your audience, this could be a fellow (PhD) researcher in the case of a scientific report, but also friends and family in case you are writing for a lay audience. This will help to adjust your writing to your readers.





Besides asking for peer-review, we also had some practice in handling peer-reviewed feedback. We practiced not taking critique too personally and delivering constructive criticism whilst being sensitive to the receivers' reactions. "Instead of bridging the gap, this paper falls right into it", was a rather harsh comment one of the authors here once received from peer-reviewers. So instead of despairing and losing motivation, we wondered how we could improve the paper and how this bridge could be rebuilt. Peer-review should be seen as an opportunity to learn. The reviewer is surely part of your audience. Therefore, try to understand what was unclear or still missing to get your message across. Our peer review partnerships generated so much interest in future collaborations that Johanna Nurmi, one of this year's workshop participants, set up a Facebook page for both participants and facilitators to keep sharing their work and to ask for advice on all kinds of scientific writings.

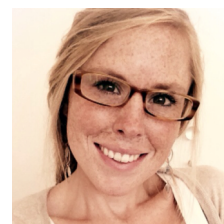
As far as writing workshops go, the amount of time we had to work on our own articles uninterrupted, was invaluable. This year's workshop group was especially respectful of each other's time and space. Even our facilitators were surprised at the extent of silent writing time the whole group stuck to. We credit our facilitators in

motivating us to use the extended time we were given to progress in our own writing and all of our fellow participants for respecting each other's writing and concentration time! Many of us felt we had surpassed our expectations of progressing the writing that we had come into the workshop with.

In addition to learning about and practicing scientific writing, the workshop on "Writing Science for journals, funders, and other audiences" also led to a multitude of new friendships and plans for future collaboration on peer reviewing each other's work, writing together and doing research together. Therefore we would like to thank Dr. Jean Adams, Dr. Stephan Dombrowski, and Prof. Martin White for their enthusiasm and shared knowledge on behalf of all of the participants!



Silja-Riin Voolma
Behavioural Science Group,
Department of Public Health and
Primary Care, University of
Cambridge, UK
srv22@medschl.cam.ac.uk



Jorinde E. Spook
Chair Group Strategic
Communication, Wageningen
University and Research Centre,
The Netherlands
jorinde.spook@wur.nl