



How to write consistently boring scientific literature

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Although scientists typically insist that their research is very exciting and adventurous when they talk to laymen and prospective students, the allure of this enthusiasm is too often lost in the predictable, stilted structure and language of their scientific publications. I present here, a top-10 list of recommendations for how to write consistently boring scientific publications. I then discuss why we should and how we could make these contributions more accessible and exciting.

“Hell – is sitting on a hot stone reading your own scientific publications”

Erik Ursin, fish biologist

Turn a gifted writer into a dull scientist

A Scandinavian professor has told me an interesting story. The first English manuscript prepared by one of his PhD students had been written in a personal style, slightly verbose but with a humoristic tone and thoughtful side-tracks. There was absolutely no chance, however, that it would meet the strict demands of brevity, clarity and impersonality of a standard article. With great difficulty, this student eventually learned the standard style of producing technical, boring and impersonal scientific writing, thus enabling him to write and defend his thesis successfully (Fig. 1).

Why are scientific publications boring?

I recalled the irony in this story from many discussions with colleges, who have been forced to restrict their humor, satire and wisdom to the tyranny of jargon and impersonal style that dominates scientific writing.

Personally, I have felt it increasingly difficult to consume the steeply growing number of hardly diges-

tible original articles. It has been a great relief from time to time to read and write essays and books instead.

Because science ought to be fun and attractive, particularly when many months of hard work with grant applications, data collections and calculations are over and everything is ready for publishing the wonderful results, it is most unfortunate that the final reading and writing phases are so tiresome.

I have therefore tried to identify what characteristics make so much of our scientific writing unbearably boring, and I have come up with a top-10 list of recommendations for producing consistently boring scientific writing (Table 1).

Ten recommendations for boring scientific writing

1. Avoid focus

“There are many exceptions in ecology. The author has summarized them in four books”

Jens Borum, ecologist

Introducing a multitude of questions, ideas and possible relationships and avoiding the formulation of clear hypotheses is a really clever and evasive trick. This tactic insures that the reader will have no clue about the aims and the direction of the author's thoughts and it can successfully hide his lack of original ideas.