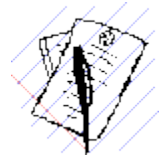


Sternberg's 21 Writing Tips



Sternberg, R. J. (1993). *How to win acceptances by psychology journals: 21 tips for better writing*. *APS Observer*, Washington, DC: APS.

The price you pay for an ill-conceived or ineptly written article submitted to a psychological journal is one of the following: (a) express-mail receipt of a one-way ticket to the Bermuda Triangle (b) an invitation to Hannibal (the Cannibal) Lechter's dinner table (c) eternal damnation in the fires of hell (d) rejection, or worse, benign neglect of the article if it is published. The keyed answer to this problem is (d), although options (a) - (c) may come to pass in individual cases. You can have million-dollar ideas (although, as a psychologist, you'll probably never see the money), but if you do not express those ideas well, the impact of your work will be severely reduced or even nullified. The scientific process does not end with the completion of research. It continues through writing, publication, and the reactions of your peers and the public. What can you do to write successfully? I will not repeat here the basic suggestions of the APA Publication Manual (3rd ed.) or of the various exegeses of it (e.g., Sternberg, 1988). Rather, I will discuss techniques that go beyond the basics. I will divide my discussion into four parts: what you say, how you say it, what to do with what you say, and what to do with what others say.

What You Say

1. Start strong. Smith and Jones (1986) found that 83% of readers never got beyond the first paragraph of the majority of articles they began to read. This opening is an example of how to be boring, as are these: Past research shows..., or It is interesting to note that...(says who?). A strong start asks a question or states a problem pertinent to the theme of your article: Why are so many psychology articles safe and cheap substitutes for sleeping pills?, for example, or Dullness blunts the impact of many potentially interesting articles. Tell readers what the article is about in a provocative way that catches their attention.
2. Tell readers why they should be interested. These findings are interesting and important. Therefore, you should support my promotion to tenure. Don't expect readers to know why you find a topic interesting or why they should find it interesting. Show them! Keep your audience in mind: The more you can relate your topic to concerns of your reader, the more interest you will generate. If you are writing for perceptual psychologists, make contact with the theoretical issues that concern people in this field. If you are writing for teachers, show how your findings can be used to improve teaching.
3. Make sure the article does what it says it will do. In this article, I will characterize the meaning of life, solve the problem of world hunger, and reveal at long last Richard Nixon's secret plan to end the Vietnam War. Many articles are declined by journals because they do not deliver what they promise. They claim much, but deliver little. For example, experiments should follow from the theory you present. Make sure you frame your article in terms of what you have really accomplished, not in terms of what you wished you had accomplished.

4. Make sure the literature review is focused, reasonably complete, and balanced. Thus, both studies showed that high levels of reasoning performance require people to wear propeller beanies on their heads. Other studies, showing that high levels of reasoning performance require pocket protectors, are irrelevant. Reviewers are infuriated by literature reviews that are biased in favor of a single point of view, especially if it's not their own (and chances are good that at least some of the reviewers will have different views from your own). Reviewers are even more upset when their own work is clearly relevant but not cited (can you say, Sayonara to acceptance?). And reviewers do not want to read about every marginally relevant study ever done. Make your review complete and current, but also keep it focused and concise, so that it encompasses but does not overwhelm what you are studying.

5. Always explain what your results mean don't leave it to the reader to decipher. ... Finally, we obtained a 7-way interaction among the independent variables, clearly showing that the variables need to be considered in terms of their interactive as well as their additive effects. Interpret your results. With enough time, readers could figure out the meaning for themselves, but who has time? Don't leave the interpretation for the Discussion section. Speculation and ideas that relate your work to that of others should go in the Discussion. Basic interpretations should be included in the Results section, while people still remember what they are.

6. Be sure to consider alternative interpretations of the data. Thus, the data overwhelmingly support the XYZ theory, and if you can't see it, you need to have your head examined. No data set is unequivocal. Sooner or later, someone will see one or more alternative interpretations. You are much better off if you recognize and try to discount the alternatives yourself than if you leave it to the reviewers or your potential readers. Even if you cannot discount every alternative, people will appreciate your honesty in recognizing that other explanations could exist. If the results are too inconclusive, your article may be turned down. But even published articles are not fully definitive, and readers expect you to admit as much.

7. End strongly and state a clear take-home message. In sum, there is a need for further research to clarify the issues. What a snooze! There's always room for further research; readers don't have to be told that. Readers want a punch line. They want to go away from a paper with a clear conclusion, preferably a snappy one (which may or may not be in the last sentence). When the reader later tries to remember your article, this conclusion will probably be the mental access route. Leave readers with what you most want them to remember.

How You Say It

8. Write sentences that are readable, clear, and concise. Sure, you already know this, but some people go on and on and on, repeating themselves and pointing out the same thing over and over again, using dangling constructions, getting off the point, and obfuscating their points to the point where the reader loses sight of what the point is anyway, to extent that there is one, or, as the case may be, more than one.

9. Emphasize logical flow and organization. Don't expect readers to understand the logical sequence of your ideas. It is important that the prose flow and that the organization emerge

clearly. Write your ideas in a sensible sequence. Readers should concentrate on what you say, not how you say it. Logical organization can mean the difference between confusion and clarity.

10. Explain what you're going to say, say it, and then restate what you've said. In this way, you provide an advance organization for the reader, explicate the main content, and emphasize to readers what you want them to remember.

11. Be creative, and give concrete examples. Some academic writers harbor the illusion that the more abstract and high-sounding their writing is, the more readers will be impressed. On the contrary, most readers need concrete examples or analogies in order to understand other people's ideas. The more abstract the points, the more readers need examples. Readers are busy: Don't expect them to generate the examples. It's your responsibility. You have all read papers that left you drowning in abstractions. I'll leave it to you to think of specific examples.

12. Don't assume people will know what you mean, or be familiar with abbreviations or jargon. Sometimes when I'm writing an article, I notice a sentence or paragraph that isn't clear. Occasionally, I'm too lazy to change the offending text, and I hope no one will notice. I'm particularly likely to hope that people will know what I mean when I'm not sure what I mean myself, so that perhaps later they can tell me. Almost without fail, however, readers don't understand what I said any better than I do. Reviewers complain about what they don't understand and that includes abbreviations or jargon. QED.

13. Write to be interesting. An article tells a story. Like a story, it should capture readers' interest. You know what it's like to read (or worse, to have to read) someone else's boring articles. Well, guess what? That's what it's like for other people to read your boring writing. Write for your reader, not for yourself. Readers appreciate the effort to keep their interest. Ultimately, what matters is whether people read your articles, and if the reviewers don't enjoy reading your work, they won't recommend it for publication. This in turn will make it difficult for others to read your articles, and it's hard to have an impact on the field if no one reads what you write. And don't tell people how interesting your results or your papers are. If your article is worthwhile, believe me, people will know it. An interesting point, don't you think?

14. Write for a somewhat broader and technically less skilled audience than you expect to read the article. Writers tend to overestimate the knowledge and technical sophistication of their readers, as well as the extent to which readers share their exact interests. You should therefore write for a slightly broader and less knowledgeable audience than you expect will read the article, keeping in mind that you want to avoid insulting your audience. Somewhere between "Visualize Maculation decamp," and "See Spot run," lies both your audience and the Land of Acceptance Letters.

15. Avoid autobiography. In some schools, you are expected to tell the story of your life when you write a paper, especially a dissertation. This story includes all your false starts, blind alleys, and tales of woe. You may even be expected to explain all the reasons your manipulation didn't work out the way it was supposed to. Journal space is precious, however, and there just isn't room for these autobiographical details. Thus, journal articles are usually written in a manner that bears little resemblance to the way the research was actually conducted. This difference is

not dishonesty: Professionals simply know how the system works. I first learned this fact when I was in graduate school. It was a dark and stormy night. I'd just received an editor's letter. (For further details, see my Complete Life and Works, Vol. 21, published by Narcismo Press.)

What to Do With What You Say

16. Proofread. As the editor of Psychological Bulletin, I find that the single most annoying flaw in a submitted article is a slew of typographical errors. Why? Because they are the easiest thing for the author to correct. It's neither the editors nor the reviewers jobs to do your proofreading for you. Always proofread. It's the one thing you can most easily do to improve the impression you make. If you don't proofread, some reviewers and editors will simply tell you to do it. But others won't be so congenial, and you may have problems changing that first impression. No matter what, you loose. [APS OBSERVER EDITOR: SIC!]

17. Check for fit to journal guidelines and subject matter. One of the single most common causes of outright rejection is the submission of articles that even a casual review would reveal to be inappropriate for that journal. For example, people send me, as editor, empirical studies of substantive psychological phenomena, despite the fact that the Psychological Bulletin never accepts articles of this type. They waste their own time and mine. We also return articles that depart substantially from APA writing guidelines (e.g., are single-spaced, or use notes in place of references). You can save yourself and others a major headache by checking that your article fits the intended journal. (You've probably guessed by now that this very article was rejected from Physical Sciences.)

18. Read your paper at least once while imagining yourself to be a critical reviewer, or even better, ask a colleague to do the same. We tend to be enamored of our own work. We often don't see the flaws that would be obvious if the same paper had someone else's name on it. So try reading your paper with the same devastating analytical acuity you would use if you wished to demolish the work of your most loathsome enemy. Ask a colleague to do the same. In this way, you will be able to anticipate and perhaps eliminate some reviewer criticisms use of faulty logic, for example. If your logic is faulty, your paper suffers; of course, this also means that if your logic is perfect, so is your paper.

What to Do With What Others Say

19. Take journal reviews seriously, but remember that reviewers are not gods (a fact that has escaped some reviewers). Many, but not all, criticisms by reviewers are credible. Sometimes, individual comments are downright asinine. But points gain force when they are repeated across reviews, or by the editor in his or her letter. You don't have to make every change suggested in every review. But should you be given the opportunity to revise, you are expected to write a letter accompanying your revision. This letter should explain to the editor how you dealt with each point of criticism, or why you did not respond to selected points. You should realize that although you usually don't have to address every point in every review, the comments made by the editor should not be ignored. Reviewers and editors do not expect perfection; they do expect, however, to be taken seriously. They put the time and effort into reviewing the article, and want to see something for it. One final note about reviewers. People often whine and moan about how

nasty reviewers are. Some of them are. But remember: We have met the enemy, and we are it. Reviewers are drawn roughly from the same pool of people as those who write articles. If we all do our part, there will be fewer nasty reviews. And if you don't agree with me, you must be stupid and utterly worthless.

20. Don't take reviewers comments personally. Reviewers criticize work, not people (unless they do their job incorrectly). I have written fairly strong critiques of the work of some of my closest friends in the field, and they have done the same of my work. We know better than to take professional differences personally. If you do so, you will find yourself holding grudges against an awful lot of people. Send me a self-addressed stamped envelope (with \$10 worth of postage), if you'd like a copy of my own 300-page list of personal enemies.

21. Perseverance pays, to a point. During my editorship, no article submitted to the *Psychological Bulletin* has been accepted outright with no changes. In other journals, the rate of outright acceptance may be slightly higher, but not by much. It can easily take two, three, or even more revisions before an article receives final acceptance. Journal editors differ in terms of how many rounds are typical. Moreover, even if one journal flatly rejects your article, another may love it. I'm not alone in having been brutally rejected by one journal, only to be welcomed with open arms by another. But if your article is being rejected across the board, you need at least to consider the possibility that you don't need to go to the supermarket for your next turkey. Finally, remember that the journal reviewing process, and science as a whole, are basically conservative. Articles are often rejected because they are just not very good, but I do believe that some of the best work in psychology and in other sciences is rejected because people are not yet ready to hear the message (see Sternberg & Lubart, 1992).

I'm not personally impressed by people who tell me they've never had an article turned down. To do creative work, you must take risks, and to take risks, you must occasionally fail. Much more important than whether you fail (and everyone does sometimes) is how you handle the failure and learn from your mistakes. Should you ever reach the point where you never fail to get your articles accepted, and where no one ever disagrees with you, beware: You are probably not doing your best and most creative work. And if you really want to avoid rejections, then don't take chances. Never submit. You'll be completely safe from criticism, and from making a scientific contribution as well. References American Psychological Association. (1983). *Publication manual of the American Psychological Association* (3rd ed.). Washington, DC: Author.

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