The Writing Process

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Overview

- The importance of writing well
- General writing skills
- Writing for academia – especially qualitative research
- What to watch out for / how to review your own work
- How to instruct an editor and get the best out of process
- Resources and tips

The importance of writing/communicating well

- How you communicate says a lot about you and your work
- More likely to convey your ideas
- More likely to transfer knowledge to others
- More likely to lead to research impact
- More likely to get published
- More likely to lead to … promotion???

Tip: The key to good writing is to keep *reading* and keep *writing*

Understanding the impact of poor writing

"if it's not really really good, and you come across **errors or faults in the documentation**, you just **lose confidence in the whole proposal**. … Can kill a really good idea really quickly."

Dr Jason Brown, RMIT
On the Reg (podcast)

Oppenheimer, D (2005), Consequences of erudite vernacular utilized irrespective of necessity: Problems with using long words needlessly, *Applied Cognitive Pscyhology,* 20, 2, 139-156

Tip: Know your weaknesses

General writing skills – *On Writing Well (Zinsser)*

- Simplicity over clutter (language and content)
- **Clear thinking leads to clear writing**
- Be mindful of style and audience
- Suggests imitating "good writing"
- Understand the words you are using
- Unity (consistency) in pronouns, tense, and tone
- Importance of the opening sentence to engage the reader, and the exit
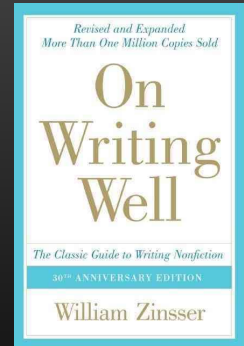
Tip: Keep examples of good writing and re-read them

General writing skills – before you start

- Know your audience (expert/non-expert)
- Understand the style requirements
- Think about the key messages, and how much someone is willing to read, level of detail required
- Think about the capacity of the reader, knowledge and language
  - Students, society, academics, business
- Formatting can be critical
- Not conforming is a risky game (Thesis Whisperer)

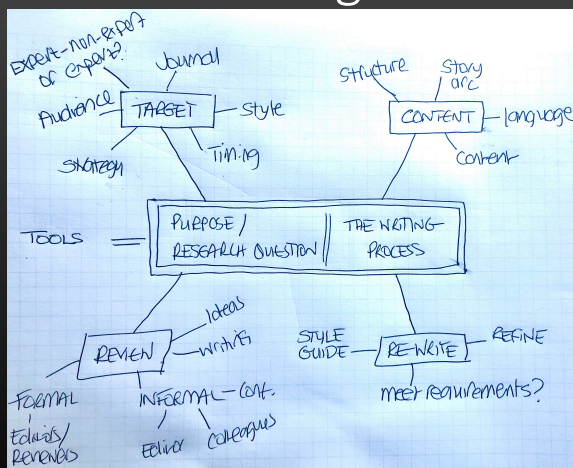Tip: Read a couple of RECENT publications so you know what to aim for

General writing skills – structure

- So you have a blank page…
- Different techniques at different points
  (brain storming, v structuring content)
- Common theme is they help organize thoughts and content
- Templates
- Structure within a structure
- Start, middle, ending – think of the story arc

Tip: Good to go back over structure (e.g. contents page) to ensure flow logical
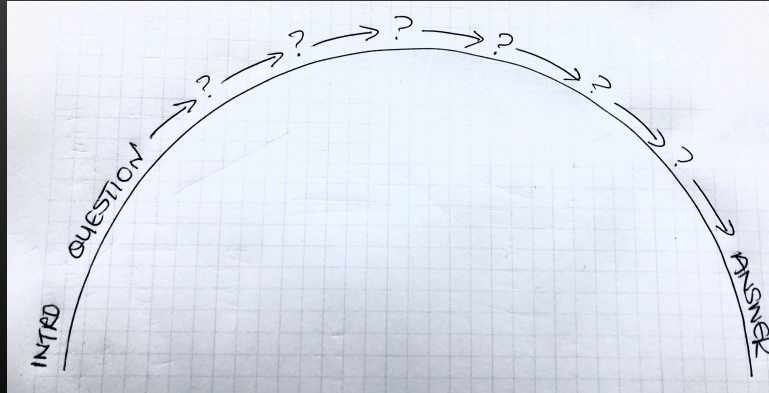
Gather and organise ideas

Tip: Doing this by hand is good as it slows you down

Story arcs: developing, rather than losing the plot

Tip: More linear story arcs also useful to identify/check path through article

General writing skills – navigation

- Some journals are very traditional: Introduction, literature review, method, sample, data, findings, etc.
- Use headings to:
  - Break up long passages, help reader consume content
  - Communicate/highlight content
  - Help navigate content
 - BUT don't go wild – 3 levels maximum (think of them like NVivo codes)

Tip: Be mindful of heading format and length of headings for contents pages

General writing skills – content

- Story line, make it compelling to read – story arc
- Language – spelling, tense, simple language, no cliches, length
- One point per paragraph, no single sentence paragraphs
- Point first – in sections and paragraphs – explanation, evidence, link (to point and to central argument)
- Transitions (logical but not patronising)
- Appeal to skimmers and detailed readers alike
- Effortless to read

Tip: Language and writing styles evolve, so keep your skills up to date

General writing skills – know the rules
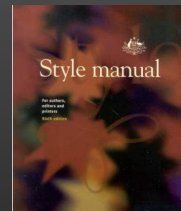
- To capitalise or not, to italicise or not
- Abbreviations and contractions, define on first use
- Tense (literature review v findings) – if unsure, look at a journal article
- Verb conjugation; e.g. Bates finds (singular), Bates et al. find (plural)
- Parallel language – spot the odd one out: going, talking, make
- Conventions – e.g. *Legislation in Title Case and Italics year (Jurisdiction)*
- Language can vary depending on who you are writing for and when – gramma rules and social rules: meet the expectation of the reader

Tip: https://www.stylemanual.gov.au/ 7th and live reference
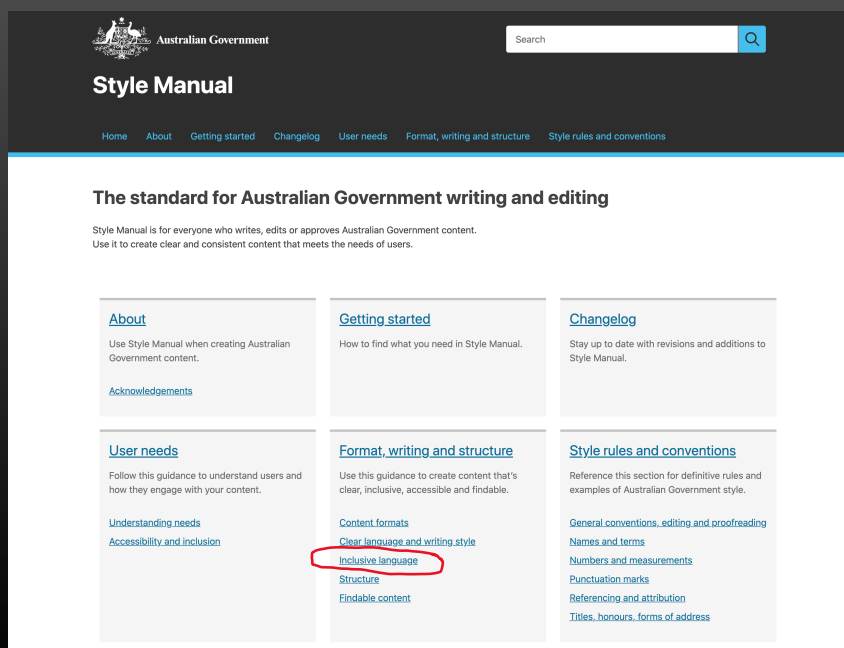
Journal articles – Title and abstract

- Academic writing – formal, logical, impersonal, highly objective

- Importance of title and abstract
- The dark art of title writing
- The difference between a good abstract and a bad abstract
- Clear research question – and make sure you answer it
- Playing the long game

Tip: Title and abstract opens the door to reading your article

Journal articles – Structure and content

- Structure
  - Look at style guide for requirements
  - Look at recent examples – be consistent with journal expectations
- Content
  - Template / check list
  - Headings to help the reader access content
  - Balance content
  - Use language consistent with the literature

Tip: The opening sentence/paragraph should encourage the reader to continue

Journal articles – Style and length

- Style and length
  - Journal style guide – lots of rules (but honestly, never comprehensive)
  - Recent articles

- Language
  - Language – English, Australian English, American, etc.
  - Specialist language, norms (not necessarily grammatically correct)
  - Avoid idioms, expressions and cliches as they often don't translate literally

Tip: Compliance with style guide shows you are not just shopping around

Journal articles – common issues

- Technical language – write so that everyone can understand
- Repetition – sentences, expressions, words
- Overly long sentences – be clear and to the point
- Inconsistent use and presentation of terms
- Inconsistent tense and tails
- Overly complex, indigestible language – need to be able to understand on first read

Tip: Go back to Zinsser's principles of writing well – they apply here too

Journal articles – common issues in qual

- Formatting quotes
  - Length - enough to make sense, but brief as possible
  - General rule is 'to use single marks and then "double" within the quote'
  - General rule is block quote 40+ words (no quote marks unless within, then single). (Source after full stop)
  - BUT if quoting interview data, block quote for less
- Avoid using same quote twice
- Remember ethics – deidentified, anonymised, enough to provide context of quote

Tip: Search for case org name or key identifiers before submitting

Other considerations in qual research

- Include research instrument – questions/guide/vignette
- Identifying case org or participants – yes/no
- Validating transcripts or findings or both
- Providing meaningful report back to participants
  - Research question
  - Who participated (to show representation)
  - What you found
  - Why this matters
 - What next

Editing your own work (or a colleagues)
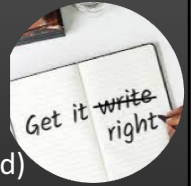
- Review **structure**:
  - Check story arc – is it still there, are you telling the story (start, middle, end)
  - Length and balance – read out loud
  - Check headings, footnotes, appendices, figures and tables
  - Presentation and style
- Review **content:**
  - Develop your own style guide for language and presentation for each document
  - Check language and sense, remove clutter
  - Citations and references (and format)
  - Check accuracy of data

Tip: Allow time – have breaks – but maintain momentum and ownership

Instructing an editor

- Using an editor to address the 'curse of knowledge'.
- Instruct (don't over instruct) them based on your needs and budget
  - Form of editing (written, track, notes) and feedback
  - Level (language, sense)
  - Citations/references
  - Style/format (give them style guide and recent papers)
- How to save time and money (and eyesight of the editor)
  - Format tables properly
  - Use referencing software
  - Plan ahead
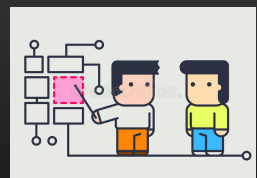
Tip: Don't be surprised at the work involved for both you and the editor

Addressing comments

- Don't freak out – you are the expert
- Style is individual but aim for your work to be accessible
- If you don't agree with suggestions, treat them as a red flag
- Ensure you make changes throughout document (editor may flag once)

Tip: Don't ignore feedback, but there may be many ways to improve your work

Create your own resources / self help

- Develop your own style guide – consistent language and presentation
- Know your weaknesses, write a list of your common errors – remember to address them
- Skill up with Word
  - Headings, Cross references, Formatting, Control F, View
- Skill up with referencing software
  - Citations, Formatting (don't assume imports are correct)
- Keep examples of good writing
- Create your own template

Tip: Invest some time in building your own resources – it will pay off quickly

Resources

- Books: Style Manual (Australian Gov), On Writing Well (Zinsser)
- Dictionary
- Journal style guides and recent articles
- Writing tips
  - ThinkWrite – sign up to email (simple but good tips)
  - Thesis Whisperer
  - Blogs, podcasts
  - Websites: https://www.inklyo.com/category/grammar/ , Grammarly
  - If in doubt, google
- Training: Linked in Learning?

Tip: Have some good resources to hand but never stop growing as a writer

Thank you

The importance of communication

Two Ronnies
"Four Candles"
1976

https://youtu.be/gi_6SaqVQSw

Enjoy!

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