

Scientific writing is telling *and selling* a story

As a researcher you may not also consider yourself a salesperson, but you need to sell your ideas to funding agencies, your results to an audience of peers – other scientists – and your conclusions or recommendations to diverse consumers, users and policy-makers.

When you write a proposal or scientific manuscript the objective is to convince someone that your excellent research must be funded or that your exciting paper must be published. And your sales weapons are your words and graphics. Someone who knows well the importance of words and structure of text is Dr John Blackwell, who has been writing, re-writing and editing scientific texts for 20 years. News and Views met him to catch some advice.

– We must admit that the vast majority of scientists are better researchers than writers, but still they all have potential to improve their writing skills, he says.

English is the second language for many researchers, but grammar mistakes are only minor concerns, and can be easily corrected. The structure, flow and logic of the text are far more important.

His major advice is to convey the essence as quickly as possible. Why is the focal problem important, what is unique about the research, and why are the results worth attention?

– The first sentences of the abstract, the main text and the cover letter also give the first impression. You have to catch the editor's or readers' attention immediately by highlighting the importance of the project.

Focus on what's novel

A common mistake is to focus too much on limitations of the study

instead of what is novel.

John Blackwell has helped researchers to publish in prestigious journals such as Nature, simply by restructuring the text.

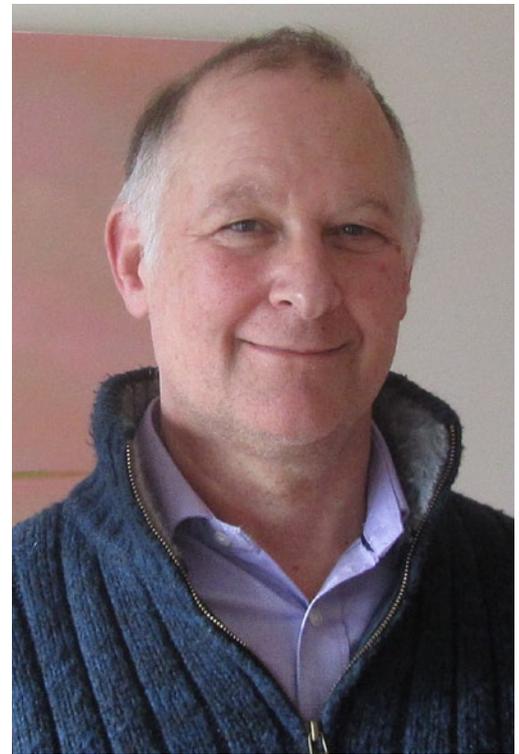
– Some authors of scientific texts seem to have an irresistible urge to minimise chances of publication by highlighting, at length, limitations of their work, he says.

One example is a paper intended for Nature where the authors had repeatedly written that the study confirmed previous observations, without stating that other results had been obtained in settings that were far from natural. Nature only publishes novel findings, so the chances for acceptance were low. John changed the text and highlighted that this was the first study to detect evidence of the focal process in field conditions, and the paper was accepted.

Fill the gaps

The first sentences are of course important but the whole text also needs strong “narrative flow”, i.e. a clear storyline or thread must be maintained from the start to the concluding remarks. The theoretical and practical implications must be clearly described so the reader is not left wondering why the study was done, and the text should keep the reader actively engaged.

A common mistake John Blackwell describes is to leave *non sequiturs* – a statement that does not follow logically from preceding statements. For instance: “Since over-fertilisation can cause environmental problems, we assessed the possibility that surface waters in the area are eutrophic.” This sentence does not provide a key link: that one of the



About John Blackwell

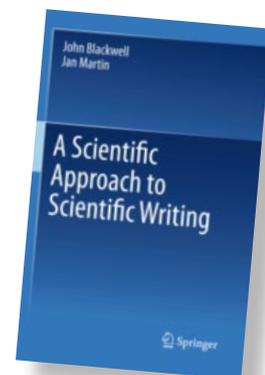
John Blackwell received a PhD on algae stress plant physiology from Sheffield University and continued as a post-doc in Aberystwyth (Wales) and Umeå in Sweden, where he worked in SLU's Forestry Faculty.

He started editing papers, proposals and theses for his colleagues in Sweden, and soon realised that this was his calling.

He founded Scientific English Editing Services, now Sees-editing, in 1996, and since then he has personally edited more than 5000 papers on behalf of scientists from more than 30 countries.

John Blackwell is also co-author of “A scientific approach to scientific writing”, a book published by Springer.

Photo: Mats Hannerz



problems over-fertilisation can cause is eutrophication.

– *Non sequiturs* often arise simply because the missing links seem obvious to authors, and they assume that readers will have the knowledge required to fill the gaps. But this is wrong, he says. Some readers may lack the knowledge and thus fail to understand the passage (and potentially the whole purpose of the study), while others may understand it but still be irritated by the break in the logic. Furthermore, if there are several *non sequiturs* in a passage it may become nearly incomprehensible to all readers.

Get help

It is very easy to omit important linking information. Authors are highly familiar with their studies, read between the lines and forget that the readers do not know all the details of their study. Therefore, it is important to get help and second opinions on papers.

– A common mistake is to let only close colleagues in your group check a manuscript. They too will be highly familiar with the study, and thus potentially ‘blind’ to some flaws. Therefore, a check by someone who has general knowledge of the subject, but is less intimately involved, can be highly valuable.

John Blackwell doesn’t say it, since he doesn’t want to exploit the interview by advertising his own business, but further good advice is to get help from a professional scientific editor. Getting someone to merely check the grammar is not enough, tightening the structure and phrasing is also often critical. And that needs someone with at least some scientific experience as well as linguistic expertise, who can close gaps in the logic and improve the narrative. The small cost of editing a text may determine if an article will be accepted or a proposal granted.



Photo: Alexandru Giurca

A great step forward for Forest Policy Science in Northern Europe

The SNS/EFINORD funded network Forest Policy Science held its 2nd Nordic Conference on Forest Policy Science in November 2014. The location was Ängavallen in southern Sweden.

Altogether 37 participants from Nordic and Baltic countries took part in the 3-day conference. The first day was devoted to “Deliberative Governance” and “Ideas, Frames

and Discourses”. Days two and three continued with sessions on “Local participation in global politics”, a discussion on “European East, still in transition?” and “Conflicts, coordinations, coalitions” and “Creative futures”.

Daniela Kleinschmit, coordinator of the network, concluded: “When talking about Forest Policy Science there are fragmented initiatives in

Northern Europe. We need to co-operate in order to strengthen our network and make a difference on a bigger scale.”

The programme and some of the presentations can be downloaded from the SNS website

www.nordicforestresearch.org.

Contact News & Views

Write to the scientific editor:

Mats Hannerz,

Silvinformation AB

mats.hannerz@silvinformation.se

More info about SNS:

www.nordicforestresearch.org

News & Views is a newsletter from SNS containing short, popularized articles covering Nordic forest research and forestry. Articles presenting SNS-supported activities are prioritized. The newsletter is published eight times per year, and is available for download from the SNS and Scandinavian Journal of Forest Research websites.



News & Views is edited by Mats Hannerz, Silvinformation AB mats.hannerz@silvinformation.se and produced by Carl Henrik Palmér. chp@areca.se