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Writing Style

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Writing Style

One of the more rewarding aspects of serving as an editor is being able to provide constructive feedback to authors. I have appreciated and enjoyed the good humor with which most authors take my suggestions and edits because one's writing is by its very nature quite personal. Surprisingly, the most common response I receive from authors is genuine thanks for improving the writing style of their manuscript. Words of appreciation always bring a smile to my face at the same time as evoking an "aw, shucks!" feeling.

I had the great fortune during my graduate studies to be mentored by several excellent writers who worked diligently to curb my sometimes convoluted and unnecessarily complex sentence structure. These mentors had in mind a similar goal as the American Psychological Association (APA), which characterizes "the prime objective of scientific reporting" as "clear communication" (2010, p. 65). During my career, I have interacted with some very fine composition colleagues who clarify overlooked elements of good and clear writing. When I provide edits on papers (a process that one of my daughters has attributed to my "editing gene!"), I try to incorporate what I have learned from so many writers over the years.

One of my insights about clear writing is the importance of using the first person and active voice verbs whenever possible. I find it fascinating that in an effort to sound more "objective" and perhaps more scholarly, many scientific writers historically have resorted to using the third person and passive voice verbs. For example, in the Method section (by the way, note that this heading is singular, not plural), I frequently find an author describing her study participants using the passive voice (e.g., subjects in the study were recruited from local swim programs). The active voice alternative, of course, is to write "I recruited study participants from local swim programs," which is more direct, concise, and clear.

I have had several recent interactions with authors about writing style. One of these authors took great exception to suggestions to use active rather than passive voice verbs. This particular author was adamant that using first person and active voice in fact amounted to "unprofessional" writing. They also claimed that no other articles in *IJARE* used active voice verbs, which, of course, is not accurate. Over the past several years, I gradually have encouraged all authors to consider using active voice verbs as much as possible. My response to this particular author's concern was to reference the APA's support for active voice verbs as being clearer and more direct, but ultimately to give the author the choice of writing style because it is their "voice" being communicated.

I will continue to encourage authors to use the first person and active voice verbs because I believe it is a more straightforward and clear way to communicate our ideas. For the edification of interested readers, I encourage you to read pages 65-71 in the 6th edition of the APA *Publication Manual* (2010). I find those few pages to be continually useful in my own writing. I also recommend Paul Silvia's short paperback book, *How to Write a Lot: A Practical Guide to Productive Academic Writing* (Silvia, 2007). *How to Write a Lot* is not primarily a composition

text, but rather it contains a number of important strategies for helping authors be more productive writers. It does provide some solid suggestions for improving the clarity of writing that parallel those of the APA. In the end, clear communication of our ideas is our prime objective.

References

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*Steve Langendorfer, Editor
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