

# Supporting international graduates writing in English as Another Language

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## Professional setting

- This presentation draws on the author's experience in conducting workshops on academic writing for graduate schools and research centers in Germany.
- Her workshops address the interests of multi-disciplinary groups of international graduates, either from the fields of Natural Sciences and Engineering (STEM) or from the fields of Humanities, Social and Political Sciences (HSPS).

## Didactic principles derived from the writing process

In all workshops provided, international graduates are encouraged to

- **collaborate with academic readers** to revise content;
- **collaborate with language professionals** (teachers and copy editors) to improve language and style;
- **and to create a text corpus** containing the publications of the authors whose communication strategies they appreciate most.

## Presentation focus

A *workshop designed for international STEM graduates and postdocs* which explores the language and style of research articles selected as '*benchmark publications*' by the workshop participants themselves.

**Rationale:** In terms of academic writing, graduates call 'learning by osmosis' observing and emulating the language and style of the scientific authors they read. This strategy can be strengthened methodically through text analysis.

## Incentive and inspiration

The workshop presented here was inspired by the work of

- 1) Glasman-Deal, H. (2009). *Science Research Writing for Non-Native Speakers of English*. London: Imperial College Press.
- 2) Bacon, N. (2013). 'Style in Academic Writing'. in *The Centrality of Style* (10).[online] available from <http://wac.colostate.edu/books/centrality/> [6 January 2017].
- 3) Elbow, P. (2012). *Vernacular Eloquence: What Speech Can Bring to Writing*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

# Workshop for STEM graduates and postdocs

## “Academic Voices: Designing Your Scientific Writing Style”

(A two-day workshop for six participants with C1 English skills)

*Prior to the workshop, each participant is requested to submit a ‘benchmark publication’.*

The call for texts defines a **benchmark publication** as

**„ (...) a research article published in a journal covering your discipline which for you as a reader communicates well.“**

## Further indications on creating a text corpus

*„Find and download two or three journal articles from your field that you think are well written. **The articles do not necessarily have to be written by native speakers of English; however they should be typical of research articles in your field (...).** Bring your articles to class so that you can reference them and gain an understanding of the writing conventions in your fields.“*

Feak, Chr. , Swales, J. (2012). *Academic Writing for Graduate Students*. 3rd ed. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press. (p. 15)

# The workshop highlights text features

- organizational structure
- title and subtitles
- paragraph and sentence structure
- patterns of information display (e.g., New/Given/New)
- signaling language
- frequency of keywords and other key expressions
- use of tense, active and passive voice
- populating texts (personal pronouns and 'live' scientists)
- addressing the reader (explicitly or implicitly)



# What is the context of graduate writing in Germany?

- Graduates schools and research centers recruit worldwide.
- The graduates are multilingual.
- The graduates increasingly read, write and publish in English.
- STEM graduates publish during their doctoral research.
- STEM research supervisors are increasingly international.

# Which challenges do graduates and postdocs face?

Writing in English as Another Language in an international academic environment is certainly demanding.

- Yet it seems there is a widespread assumption that graduates will somehow “*Just get on with it*”.
- It equally appears that international research supervisors are to provide not only scientific input but also instructions on language and style.

***Eventually, myths about academic English start spreading ...***

# Designing the workshop as a discovery tour (1)

The workshop proposes reading tasks which enable graduates to discover the options they have in communicating with their readers.

**Goal:** Within existing disciplinary conventions, graduates learn to make choices which are appropriate for the message they wish to convey and the tone in which they wish to do so.

# Designing the workshop as a discovery tour (2)

## Example of reading task:

*Do titles or subtitles include verbal forms?*

*Do titles or subtitles include conjugated verbs?*

**Procedure:** While each participant focuses on her/his own benchmark publication, enlightening discoveries are shared with the group.

# Designing the workshop as a discovery tour (3)

## Example of reading task outcome:

In a ‘*benchmark publication*’ from the field of Cell Biology, subtitles including conjugated verbs function as key messages:

**“Stress Fiber Strain Events Do Not Generate New Focal Adhesions”**

**“Stress Fiber Strain Events Are Preceded by Elevated Contractility and Reduce Traction Force”**

Smith, M. A., Blankman, E., Gardel, M.L., Luetjohann, L., Waterman, C. M. & Beckerle M. C. (2010). “A Zyxin-Mediated Mechanism for Actin Stress Fiber Maintenance and Repair”. *Developmental Cell* 19, 365 -376. (pp. 367 and 371, respectively)

## Responding to false perceptions (1)

Graduates are sometimes misled into believing the following:

- “In scientific English, we should write **short sentences**.”
- “We should **avoid repetition**.”
- “We need to write in an **artificial language**.”
- “The **grammar rules** we learned **may not apply**.”

**Response:** Deepen knowledge on genre and language registers.

## Responding to false perceptions (2)

Graduates seem haunted by prescriptive statements such as:

- “In scientific English, we should **only use the active voice.**”
- “In scientific English, we should **only use the passive voice.**”
- And, some comments by research supervisors, such as the following, can lead to despair: **“It doesn’t sound English.”**

**Response:** Offer professional language support at institutional level.

## Confusion may equally be prompted by journal guidelines and style guides

Statements containing ambiguity can confuse academic writers who have not been immersed in an Anglophone culture, as in such cases the advice given tends to be taken literally.

**Response:** Consider that many scientists are writing in an environment in which English is not the official language. Offer advice which is descriptive rather than prescriptive.



# Overcoming false perceptions (1)

## **“short sentences only”**

As an example, in a benchmark publication selected from the field of Neuroscience, the workshop looks at a sequence in the Introduction with varying sentence lengths:

23 words / 40 words / 37 words / 12 words

Corbetta, M., Kincade, M., Lewis, Chr., Snyder, A. & Sapiro, A. (2005). “Neural basis and recovery of spatial attention deficits in spatial neglect”. *Nature Neuroscience* (8) 11, 1603–1610. (p. 1603, right column, 2<sup>nd</sup> paragraph)

## Overcoming false perceptions (2) “*avoid repetition*”

We equally find that the **authors use repetition for emphasis**:

*“Here we show that spatial attention deficits in neglect after right frontal damage **correlate** with abnormal functional activation of structurally intact regions of the dorsal and ventral attention networks and that recovery of these deficits **correlates** with the normalization of activity within these regions.” (44 words)*

Corbetta, M., Kincade, M., Lewis, Chr., Snyder, A. & Sapiro, A. (2005). “Neural basis and recovery of spatial attention deficits in spatial neglect”. *Nature Neuroscience* (8) 11, 1603 –1610. (p. 1604)

## Overcoming false perceptions (3) “*avoid repetition*”

The same publication reveals that verbs can become key expressions in a research article.

Throughout their article, the authors repeat the following verbs:

***associate*** (8 times), ***show*** (26 times), ***mediate*** (13 times),  
***correlate with*** (8 times)

Corbetta, M., Kincade, M., Lewis, Chr., Snyder, A. & Sapiro, A. (2005). “Neural basis and recovery of spatial attention deficits in spatial neglect”. *Nature Neuroscience* (8) 11, 1603–1610.

## Overcoming false perceptions (4) “**only active / only passive**”

We also find that **active or passive voice is used as appropriate:**

*“These results show that a neurological deficit (...) **does not reflect** only local dysfunction (...) but **is** also **determined** by the distributed impairment of connected neural systems that **are** structurally intact. This dysfunction **may be reflected** (...).”*

Corbetta, M., Kincade, M., Lewis, Chr., Snyder, A. & Sapiro, A. (2005). “Neural basis and recovery of spatial attention deficits in spatial neglect”. *Nature Neuroscience* (8) 11, 1603–1610. (p.1609)

## Overcoming false perceptions (5)

### ***“It doesn’t sound English.”***

In some cases, apparently much time is lost discussing perfectly correct yet slightly more complex grammatical structures such as:

- the use of the active voice followed by ‘to be’:

***“We considered them to be suitable for ...”***

- or the use of the passive voice followed by an infinitive verb structure:

***“The samples were found to comply with ...”***

# Treasures found when deconstructing benchmark publications

- The language and style graduates wish to be inspired by evolves from *the selected scientific authors' intention to share knowledge* (i.e., from reader-focused communication strategies).
- These scientific authors describe a complex world in *natural English using a more formal language register*.
- They *use all language as appropriate for their purpose*.

# Why refer to benchmark publications selected by graduates?

- This approach allows *graduates* to *apply and further develop their own learning strategies*.
- It encourages *reflection on writing*.
- It strengthens their *self-confidence* and their *sense of aesthetics*.
- As a result, it enhances *a process of critical enculturation*.

# References

Bacon, N. (2013). 'Style in Academic Writing'. in *The Centrality of Style* (10). [online] available from <http://wac.colostate.edu/books/centrality/> [6 January 2017].

Corbetta, M., Kincade, M., Lewis, Chr., Snyder, A. & Sapir, A. (2005). "Neural basis and recovery of spatial attention deficits in spatial neglect". *Nature Neuroscience* (8) 11, 1603 – 1610.

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