

WRITING RESOURCE KIT

Medical, educational, and policy research must find its way into users' minds through writing, and so the clarity and effectiveness of this writing is foundational to how we learn and best care for patients. Almost none of us has formal training in effective writing, though our non-clinical professional lives are defined by what we get out of our heads and onto the page.

We want to be good at our jobs! We train for years as physicians and surgeons, we attend conferences and CME, we read journals like *CUAJ*. For those who write as part of their professional lives (that's all of us, whether email updates or hospital memos or research manuscripts), getting better at writing for clarity and brevity makes us better communicators, which makes our emails and memos and papers more enjoyable and much more useful to readers.

A dedicated session of editing for clarity, organization, and brevity (both in sentences/paragraphs but also in what is included *at all*) is a great and important step in any writing project, but you will almost certainly find value in how others approach quality writing. To this end, here are some resources you may find helpful or even revelatory in the **absolutely necessary** process of improving writing. There are many more resources out there, doubtless excellent.

If you are thinking about buying these books, consider an independent bookstore in your area. You may have a favourite already, but [this list](#) links to Canadian booksellers, likely close to you. Give them a call with the name and title.

Better writing in general:

On Writing Well by William Zinsser

A classic – the first 10 chapters are easy and excellent.

The Elements of Style by William Strunk Jr. and E.B. White

The classic – gets ribbed by contemporary authors but is the source of the concepts “omit needless words” and “use the active voice.”

The Sense of Style by Steven Pinker

Ribs Strunk & White as overly prescriptive. Intended as a modern update on writing style.

Better academic writing:

Stylish Academic Writing by Helen Sword

Very good, covers many disciplines with many examples and specific concepts. Stylish here meaning that writing can be interesting and compelling, not just terse and grammatically correct. Specific tools and examples in *The Writer's Diet* (see below).

Writing Science in Plain English by Anne E. Greene

Less than 100 pages in 11 concrete chapters, with ++ examples and exercises. Title says it all and is important.

The HBR Guide to Better Business Writing

For the internet-era addled attention span (me), very digestible. About business writing (!), but brevity and clarity are highlighted, and can help in non-medical writing in our lives as well.

Write it Up by Paul J. Silva

Intended to help you think about writing for impact. Includes paper structuring, but also collaboration, choice of tone, etc. Easy read at <200 pages.

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The Writing Workshop by Barbara W. Sarnecka

A bigger and wide-ranging book, with general advice on making space to write, but specifics on different paper types and accessible style advice.

The Writer's Diet by Helen Sword

Easy read at 75 pages, with specific advice on her style themes of using strong verbs, concrete nouns, limiting descriptive flourishes, and wasted words. Very practical with a nice web resource.

The act of writing and producing work:

On Writing by Stephen King

Some specific advice, but mostly a memoir and treatise on the writer's craft. Still, great reading.

Bird by Bird by Anne Lamott

More about navigating the life of the writer and how to produce work. Not academic but easy and nice. You may come to use the phrase "bird by bird, buddy" when your to-do list feels overwhelming.

How to Write a Lot by Paul J. Silva

Another short and easy read on cultivating the writing habit, with some short notes on style and types of writing project.

Videos and other resources:

Search "better academic writing" and you will see dozens of videos. Your mileage may vary, but below are a few that I've liked. You can use the video settings to try out 1.25x and 1.5x speeds for these if you like.

Helen Sword "[Stylish Academic Writing](#)"

This is a short lecture from the Harvard University Office of Faculty Development & Diversity. Not a seminar on technique, but a nice talk on the value of getting better at writing.

Judy Swan "[Scientific Writing: Beyond Tips and Tricks](#)"

Actually, has some good tips and tricks in this higher-level overview. Audio has some fuzz.

Steven Pinker "[Zombie Nouns and the Passive Voice in Writing](#)"

Try to forget the fact that he reads directly from his slides, there are some good examples and even a defense of passive phrasing.

Larry McEnerney "[The Craft of Writing Effectively](#)" and "[Writing Beyond the Academy](#)"

These are lectures from the University of Chicago Writing Program. Gets conceptual on the purpose of writing, but many pearls.

George Orwell "[Politics and the English Language](#)"

Written in 1946 with a focus on exploitation of vague language for political evil. I'm pretty certain that's not the reason for most of our fuzzy writing in medicine, but there is some good stuff here ;)

[The Writer's Diet test](#)

Allows you to copy/paste your text to search for problematic words and phrasing as defined by Helen Sword. As the book admits, these are not definitive must-change issues, but shining a light can make some helpful changes seem obvious.

You may have some books, videos or resources that you have found helpful in becoming a clearer and more effective writer. If so, we'd love to hear from you at CUAJ! Email us at journal@cua.org.