

## **Non-fiction: Writing in a second language for the global village reader ©**

*These notes have been written by Ilse Evertse who, after 25 years of writing novels, has discovered that proof reading, editing and teaching are more satisfying. The following reflects her experiences working with English texts by academic, non-English authors. She can be contacted at: [stpubus@gmail.com](mailto:stpubus@gmail.com)*

“The Wonder Boys” is an entertaining movie in which the main characters are all writers. At one point the professor who teaches creative writing says: “No-one can teach anyone to write. But it does help if you [the writer] know where you are going.” This is very interesting, but only partially true for writers of non-fiction who know where they are going - this is determined by the topic - but have very specific problems of their own. This article is an attempt to highlight and offer solutions to some of these problems.

The academic world is inhabited by two kinds of people: those with a desire to share the knowledge locked in their minds and those who are forced to publish or perish. Either way, very few academics have a knack for writing. Not that a lack of writing skills has ever deterred anyone from writing, since proof readers and editors will see to it that the text is presented in an acceptable form. Yes?

No! The sad truth is that proof readers and editors far too often have to wade through erudite, but unreadable text. Correcting spelling and grammar errors, shortening sentences, deleting or juggling paragraphs, requesting rewrites etc. may improve text, but this most certainly does not make text readable. Texts do improve with every round of editing, pleasing both the author and the editor to such an extent that both may later feel that a very ugly duckling has been turned into a swan. Only much later do they realise that much altered text most certainly does not equal text that can be read with any degree of pleasure. The swan, it turns out, was just a large and rather lame duck!

How does one set about writing to be read? Here are a few tips that I try to drill into the authors with whom I work.

### **1) Who is your potential reader?**

While writers of fiction have many different kinds of readers, some of whom will read just about anything in print, the writer of non-fiction has a very specific “audience”.

Always, always keep the potential reader in mind. Before you write a single word, it is a good idea to “create” this potential reader. An academic text meant for academic institutions usually means that the potential reader is a person with a higher education. This does not mean authors have leeway to write as they please, since someone aspiring to a higher education, for example a keen undergraduate, should find the text accessible and need not necessarily read through a whole book in order to understand a particular chapter. And do remember: not even academics like reading dense, boring text.

If this academic text is also earmarked for distribution outside academic institutions, the potential reader becomes even more important. This reader has a demanding job and a rowdy family (we are creating a worst-case reader), and is generally interested in and wishes to learn more about the main topic or theme of the book. He or she knows nothing, or very little, about your particular topic. The publication is kept on the reader’s bedside table and a single chapter or section will be read just before he or she goes to sleep.

It is at this very point that your skill as a writer faces the acid test. You have no more than 10 minutes in which to capture this reader's attention. If you do not succeed in doing so, the tired reader may decide to skip your chapter, may even refuse to read the rest of the book on the strength of this one bad experience, or fall asleep while reading your chapter or section.

By **constantly** keeping this yawning, tired person in mind, your text will automatically become simpler, more interesting and understandable. Writing to be read requires mental discipline. Once attained it is a knack that will stand you in good stead.

## **2) Do you really know what you are doing?**

Most inexperienced authors make the mistake of thinking that if they dump all their knowledge of a topic on to paper this means they have done well. No! We now know what the author knows, but this does not make for a meaningful reading experience.

If you are enthusiastic about your topic, that enthusiasm is reflected in the text that, in turn, affects the reader. While only a select few authors can make non-fiction text 'sparkle', you should strive to keep your topic interesting by trying to recapture some of the passion that you experienced when first encountering an interesting topic. And yes, some topics are more interesting than others. If your topic happens to be less interesting, then perhaps you should spend quite some time thinking very hard of an interesting way of presenting it.

Repetitive, difficult to explain and understand data often become accessible when presented in tables. Paradoxically, the extensive use of tables may be the very thing that "kills" an interesting topic and the text may require "action" to bring it to life. Non-fiction "action"? Yes! One of the most interesting non-fiction texts I have ever seen was for the most part presented as a dialogue between three people. It is up to YOU to keep your reader interested.

Good writing is an art that can be imitated by the inexperienced after some hard work: Most people find writing a good abstract difficult, but there are plenty to imitate: go to your library and try to discern the structure of a good abstract. If your papers are boring or middling to poor, take some time off to study the "tricks" that others employ to make their papers interesting. This is not necessarily going to make you a good writer, but you could become a competent one.

If you are writing a dissertation: Have you read a few good dissertations to make notes on the author's style? Do you know how the dissertation should be structured? Don't guess! Do you know how your institution wants you to reference? Do you know what the rules regarding quotations and paraphrasing are? Do you know how to write and format footnotes? Do you know in what tense or tenses and what person you should be writing? If not, ask your editor or proof reader – this will save you a great deal of trouble and money!

And, lastly, practise what your proof reader or editor preaches: there is nothing more frustrating than writers who never learn from their mistakes and nothing more gratifying than those who improve with every text that they produce.

## **3) Are you keeping the reader happy?**

Ask yourself what, apart from the topic, keeps you happily reading. The following are a few obvious points that come to mind:

*a) Make use of headings*

If the topic you are dealing with is particularly difficult and multifaceted, headings forming an outline can be of great help to the reader and even more so if you take the trouble to think of "creative" headings that stimulate the reader's curiosity. Do keep in mind that more than three levels of headings are seldom reader-friendly. Editors, unfortunately, know only too well that great headings do not mean that the text that follows is relevant in terms of the heading. Is yours?

Each heading should shortly introduce the contents. The most obvious answer - and the most boring - is often to provide a definition. Academics need definitions, but they do not make an interesting introduction, nor do they capture the reader's imagination. Do not misuse them!

*b) Short sentences*

Academic topics are quite complicated and become even more so if an author uses long, winding sentences, or uses convoluted phrasing because this sounds so "academic". Discipline yourself and be kind to your editor. Rewrite every paragraph as succinctly as possible.

*c) Sentences and paragraph should logically follow one another*

This is easier said than done. A disciplined writer checks that every sentence and every paragraph is linked to the next one. If this is not the case, then very often you have either introduced a new idea or theme and it should be identified as such, or there is gap in the text that requires "bridging" text.

The greatest cause of disjointed sentences is the practice of cutting and pasting sentences from the literature. If you do this often enough you end up with an extremely boring leaflet that only the initiated understand. Be warned: a leaflet is by no means a riveting paper.

*d) Avoid the curse of abbreviations, acronyms and references*

Abbreviations and acronyms are fine - if you have explained them at least once. It is wise to explain a specific abbreviation again if it occurs much later in the text and was perhaps not thoroughly established previously.

Be aware of the fact that culture-specific references have very little meaning outside your own culture. A reference to Bauhaus in a business text, for example, may mean nothing to an average American reader.

*e) Do all the parts form a whole?*

This is by no means as strange a question as it sounds. Academics mostly focus on various parts of the text at different times. Each part is often endlessly revised until the author is satisfied. This author very often forgets or, perhaps closer to the truth, has been too exhausted by the effort to really want to read through the complete section or chapter again. This is a pity, since editors often find that such text does not "work" - the parts do not form a whole.

This is a problem that is easily solved. First of all, start off by ensuring that you are not faced by impossible deadlines. Don't invite punishment; insist on realistic deadlines and discipline yourself to keep to them! Secondly, schedule a "break" of at

least a week, but preferably two, near the completion of your text. When you resume work, you'll have new and valuable insight into your text - insight that only you can really provide, although editors do try their best.

f) *Omit redundancy*

Academics find it very difficult to write without repeating themselves, while readers find redundancy extremely tedious. Don't underestimate the intelligence of the potential reader. And do remember: repetition, even cleverly disguised, is still repetition. There are instances in which a brief recapitulation should be given to save the reader the bother of having to page back. This should be the exception and not the rule.

g) *Are you providing all vital information?*

Familiarity with a topic often leads to authors taking certain **vital** aspect of such a topic for granted. This leads to certain "gaps" in the information provided which, in turn, leads to much confused readers. There is nothing more frustrating than reading of new methods that "bridge a gap" or "surmount" a previous problem without this "problem", "challenge" or "gap" being previously mentioned or explained.

Please note that the operative word is "vital" - this is not an invitation to dump a mass of undigested knowledge on to the reader.

h) *Have you read the text aloud?*

This is another of those acid tests. Overly long sentences, incorrect constructions, omissions, all have a way of making themselves felt when you listen to yourself speaking the words. The spoken English of most non-natives is far better than their written English and this imbalance is often automatically corrected once they start reading their text aloud. And, please, do take care to read what is there and not what your mind wishes were there!

#### 4) **Be kind to proof readers and editors**

If English is a second or third language, you should be using a very good dictionary and thesaurus. Proof readers try their very best, but even with a knowledge of the writer's mother-tongue it is sometimes extremely difficult to know what authors mean if they use many incorrect words in one sentence.

Start off by deciding whether you are going to use United Kingdom or United States English - there is nothing more maddening than a paper that alternates between the two. Remember to use American punctuation if you're using US English!

Do remember that in English the verbs, unlike those in Germanic languages, are usually in the middle of the sentence, not at the end. Get to know the "typical" mistakes that are made when non-natives write English, e.g., Finnish writers mostly omit definite articles because their language has none, while German-speakers are inclined to use "there exists" as the direct translation of "es gibt".

It is important to remember that editors are only human and not writing machines. They cannot magically provide facts that you have omitted, nor are they by any means paid well enough to act as ghost-writers to potential writers who provide them with keywords.

In a perfect world, texts on a particular topic would be proof read and edited by people who themselves are knowledgeable about this topic. At best proof readers and editors have a working knowledge of a great number of topics, but no specialist knowledge. This can lead to very embarrassing mistakes and even incorrect information being sent into the world when authors and their proof readers and/or editors misunderstand one another. However, when they do not even share the same language, the potential for embarrassment is compounded.

A final point to remember: **writing is a learning experience**. If you approach the task with this in mind, you will value it as you value other learning experiences and, more to the point, you won't be angry when asked to explain or rewrite even when you feel that you cannot improve on what has been written.

Good luck and may all your ugly ducklings prove to be beautiful swans.