



SCHOOL OF
PUBLIC HEALTH
UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA

Successful Professional and Academic Writing: Organized, clear, concise, correct

A workshop and presentation for
Public Health Sciences Graduate
Students

Dr. Roger Graves
Professor and
Director, Writing Across the
Curriculum
University of Alberta

Who am I?



Roger Graves

Director, Writing Across the Curriculum

Professor, EFS

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April 17, 2009

wac

c4w

writing initiatives

webmail

efs

I'm new to the University of Alberta, having come from the University of Western Ontario where I was Director of the Program in Writing, Rhetoric, and Professional Communication in the Faculty of Arts and Humanities. In my new position here I'll be working with faculty and students across the university as part of the Writing Across the Curriculum initiative. I will also be working with students and faculty in the Department of English and Film Studies.

I am the author, co-author, or editor of five books and 29 articles, including Writing Instruction in Canadian Universities. My current research interests include the development of doctoral student writing, writing assignments across disciplinary fields, and rhetorical approaches to text encoding. Currently I serve as co-Vice-President of the Canadian Association for the Study of Discourse and Writing (CASDW) and a member of the Executive Board of the Canadian Association for the Study of Language and Literacy (CASLL/Inkshed).

Recent presentations

This page contains links to pdfs of slides displayed at presentations I've given.

Books

This page displays the covers and descriptions of books I've authored, co-authored, or co-edited

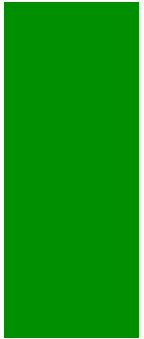


Blog: Thinking About Writing

A new blog on writing-related issues at the U of A and beyond.

<http://www.ualberta.ca/~graves1/index.html>

Writing Across the Curriculum



UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA
Writing Initiatives
University of Alberta

Writing Across the Curriculum

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Today:
9/2/2009 10:31:23 AM

Home > Home

Would you like to improve the writing of your students? Improve their learning of your lecture material? Are you looking for new ways to engage your students in your course materials? If this interests you, contact [Roger Graves](#): or 492.2169

What can we do for individual instructors:

- meet to talk about ways to incorporate informal (short, impromptu) writing assignments into any class, small or large
- review via email any assignment you give students that has a writing component to help make it clearer for students and to help develop grading rubrics to improve the speed and accuracy of grading
- visit your class to help students get started on your writing assignments

What can we do for departments:

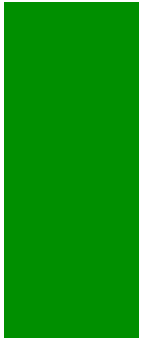
- hold workshops on creating good writing assignments
- host discussions of how to improve the writing of students in your programs
- conduct reviews of writing assignments in your departments courses to identify exactly what your students are being asked to write—and to ensure that they have access to resources on how to write (online and on-campus)

Upcoming Presentations and Workshops:

C4W
WRS Courses
Roger Graves
Blog
Academic Honesty

<http://www.humanities.ualberta.ca/WAC/>

You need both



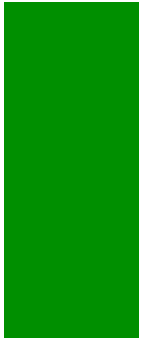
Quantitative

- Statistics
- Numbers
- Tables
- Objectivity
- Science

Qualitative

- Sophistry
- Words
- Paragraphs
- Subjectivity
- Social science/humanities

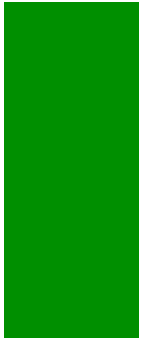
How to succeed as a graduate student writer



Recognize and act on the idea that **writing is social**:

- Form writing groups (on your own or through the Centre for Writers)
- Seek out feedback from trusted readers
- Talk/email profs to seek clarification re. assignments
- Talk with senior students
- Attend job talks, research presentations

Theories of research writing

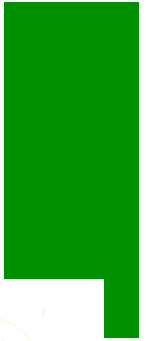


- Research **is** writing
- Texts are not reality but versions of reality that **re-present** some aspects of reality
- A thesis is one of **a set of related genres** that govern graduate student social activity as professionals
- Writing is a **social activity**—it takes place among groups of people, not individuals each working alone

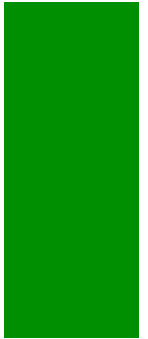
Adopt a process approach

Adopt a **process approach** to writing:

- Gather information
- Draft the document
- Seek feedback; revise for structure and content; gather more information (if necessary)
- Edit for cohesion, style, register



Learn new genres



Identify and learn the nuances of the genres you are asked to write:

- Research posters
- Short papers
- Thesis proposals
- Grant applications
- Scholarship applications
- Opinion/editorial articles



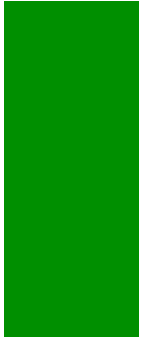
Genres in Public Health Sciences



In groups, come up with answers to these questions:

- What do students write in Public Health Sciences courses?
- Why do they write them? To explore ideas? To be evaluated? To describe? To argue? To reflect?
- Who do they write for?

Keys to Good Writing in PHS



- Transitions/coherence (BPH Ch. 4, 5)
- Logical sequencing/organization/outlines (BPH Ch. 4, 5, 7, 8, 9, 21)
- Audience—non-technical (BPH 1, 3, 5, 8, 9, 14, 31)
- Trusted readers
- Plain language/jargon (clarity/credibility) i.e. KTE
- Structure: headings

Advice for writers

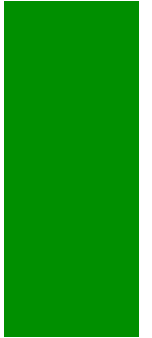
Writing for the *National Post*, Duncan Stewart argues that “without the routine of writing at least a few pages a week, I don’t think one will improve much as a writer.” He offers this advice to writers:

- “1) read more,
- 2) write more, and
- 3) find your voice.”

Source: Duncan Stewart, “Good analysts are good writers,” *National Post*, March 9, 2006, 9-10.

What is style?

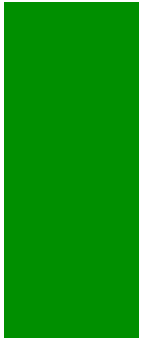
- Clarity
- Cohesion
- Plain language
- Parallelism



CLARITY

- Place the context of familiar information on the left, at the start of a sentence.
- Place main ideas as the subjects of sentences:

“In the past, **various techniques** have been used to deposit a film or coating on a substrate located in a vacuum chamber. **One technique . . .**”



CLARITY

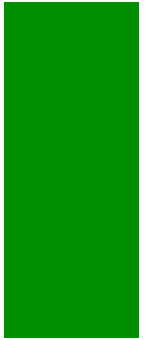
- Locate the subject and the verb close to one another.

Not close:

“A method for the reactive plating of substrates to produce transparent conducting films and photoactive coatings is disclosed.”

Close:

“A method is disclosed for the reactive plating of substrates to produce transparent conducting films and photoactive coatings.”



CLARITY

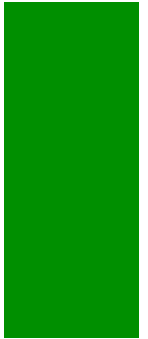
- Place important ideas at the end of sentences to emphasize them:

“Obesity is increasing at unprecedented rates **worldwide.**”

- The sentence above emphasizes the scope of the problem by putting “worldwide” at the end of the sentence.

“Obesity worldwide is increasing at **unprecedented rates.**”

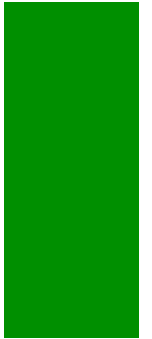
- In this second example, the emphasis is on the rate of increase.



CLARITY

- Place one point in each syntactic structure or unit containing a subject and verb:

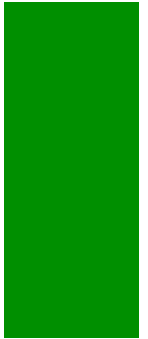
“Highly transparent conducting ZnO films have been deposited using ion-beam-assisted reactive vacuum deposition.”



CLARITY

- Place old information that links back in the subject position, and put new information that you want readers to attend to at the point of emphasis:

“A major strength of this study was the detail with which the variables were collected. This detail allowed for more precise estimates [data] of the effect of alcohol. Using data on consumption . . .”



CLARITY

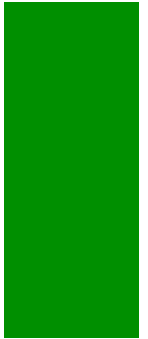
- Use verbs rather than nominalizations to express action in your sentences:

Nominalizations

“This trial will involve the process of construct validation, with the ultimate goal of contributing knowledge to the validity of the interpretations that are made on the basis of the exam mark.”

Revised

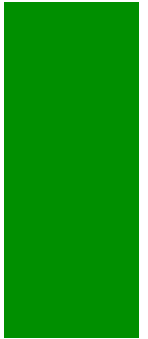
“This trial examines the process of construct validation. The process aims to contribute knowledge that will help instructors interpret grades validly based on the exam mark.”



COHESION

- Link sentences from start to start:

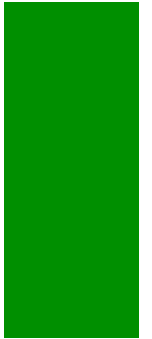
“Various **techniques** have been used to deposit a film or coating on a substrate located in a vacuum chamber. **One technique** simply is to vaporize a metal thermally. **Another technique** is referred to as chemical vapour deposition . . .”



COHESION

- Link sentences from end to start:

“There are no universal guidelines for the level at which glucose intolerance should be labeled as gestational diabetes, making the **diagnosis of gestational diabetes** controversial. Currently, for a **diagnosis of gestational diabetes**, the criteria . . .”



PARALLELISM

- Use matching grammatical structures when you write lists of items.

Not parallel

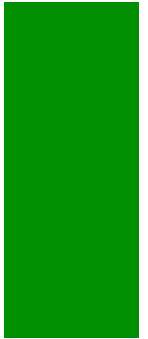
Arenadeck® is:

- non-absorbent
- Provides sound and thermal insulation

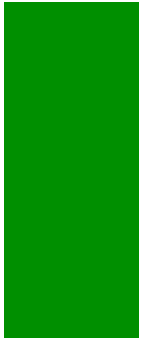
Parallel

Arenadeck®

- Provides sound and thermal insulation
- Resists contamination



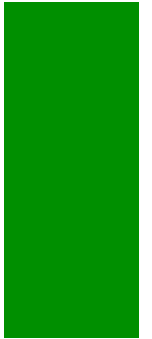
What is plain language?



- A worldwide effort to improve the clarity and accessibility of how legal contracts, government documents, and other important information is written
- Write short sentences, using specific, uncomplicated terms that most readers can understand
- A good basis for writing lay summaries

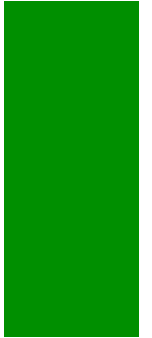
Plain language guidelines

- Plain language involves an ethical relationship between reader and writer
- Writers want to communicate clearly with readers
- Take your readers' point of view
- Organize ideas around what your reader needs to know

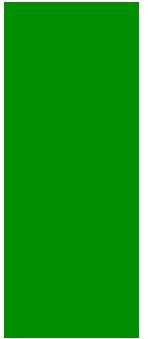


Know your readers

- What level of knowledge do they have?
- What is their cultural background?
- What is their income level?
- What do they want to know?
- What information will they use most frequently?
- What questions are they asking about the topic you are writing about?

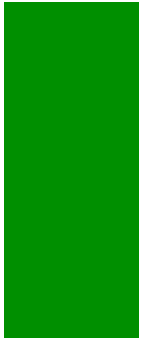


Ways to organize information



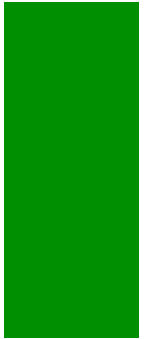
- A series of questions and answers
- Put the most important information first
- Include everything readers need to know to understand and/or to act
- Use bullet points to emphasize main ideas or points

Word-level plain language



- Use words that are accurate, appropriate, and familiar.
- Use technical jargon sparingly; do not use business jargon at all.
- Use active verbs most of the time.
- Use strong verbs (not nouns) to carry the weight of your sentences.

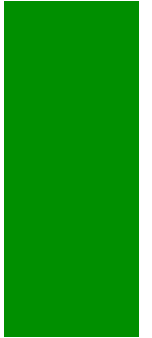
Sentence-level plain language



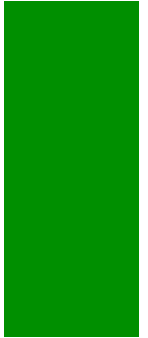
- Be concise
- Vary sentence length and sentence structure
- Use parallel structure (especially in lists)
- Put your readers in your sentences
- Begin most paragraphs with topic sentences
- Use transitions to link ideas

Keep sentences short

- Working memory can only process about 25 words in a chunk.
- Use 25 words as your limit for sentences.
- Aim for 15 to 22 words (or 2 ½ to 3 lines of type in a document).
- Keep paragraphs short.
 - What is short? 6 to 8 lines of text.



What's wrong with long?



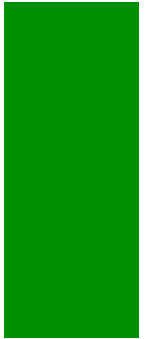
- Readers miss important points due to overextending memory
- They may not reread long sentences
- They may stop reading your document altogether.
- Exceptions?

When an idea makes more sense in one long sentence than in several short sentences, use a longer sentence.

How do I shorten sentences?

- Include only one or two ideas in a sentence.
- Explain qualifiers or modifiers to an idea in separate sentences.
- Explain any conditions attached to the main idea in separate sentences.
- Avoid using “and” to connect ideas that can be rewritten in separate sentences

What to avoid in shortening sentences?

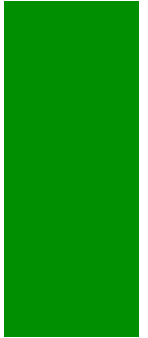


- Don't sacrifice clarity to keep a sentence short.
- Link related ideas by using *that*, *which*, or *who*.
- Don't shorten sentences by leaving transitions out.

Use simple sentence structures

- Simple sentence structures ensure that your writing is direct, positive, and active
- Use simple, declarative sentences (subject + verb + object)
- Example
“Your refund arrived today.”

Three tips



1. Connect modifiers to the words they modify:

Not “Please let me know whether you can meet the newest deadline as soon as possible.”

Instead “As soon as possible, please let me know whether you can meet the newest deadline.”

Tip #2

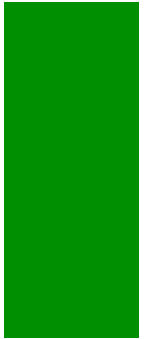
- If the paragraph exceeds 6 to 8 lines of text, change the format or use bullets to list information.

Not “The manual is divided into three section that are tailored to the background knowledge of various users such as the first time user who doesn’ t know how to turn the program on to the novice user who is ready to learn more advanced functions to the expert user who want to adapt the source code of the program.”

Instead “The manual is divided into three sections tailored to the user’ s background knowledge:

- First-time users who can’ t turn on the program

Tip #3



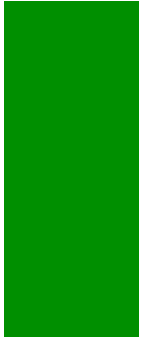
- If you use bullet points, use parallel structure for parallel ideas

Not “To access the font formatting instructions follow these steps: 1) click on the help icon on the main toolbar, 2) next you need to scroll through the options until you find formatting, 3) next users would want to click on the “font” choice.”

Instead “To access the font formatting instructions follow these steps:

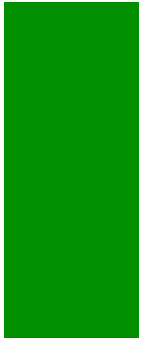
1. Click on the help icon on the main toolbar
2. Find the formatting option
3. Click on the “font” choice”

Readability and document design

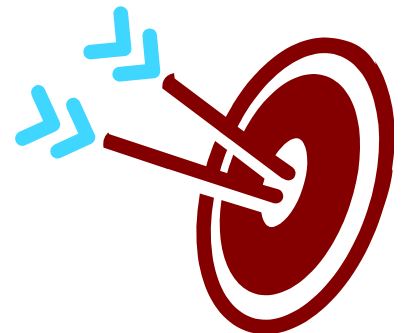


- Add white space: paragraph breaks
- Use bolding to highlight and enable skimming
- Use bulleted lists
- Use headings

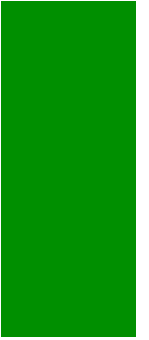
Target: Lay Summaries



- Our first task is to define the genre as clearly and as specifically as possible
- Our goal is to understand what we're aiming for
- Only then can we make good choices about how to revise our own writing



Lay Summaries



In groups, count these items:

- Number of paragraphs:
- Number of sentences in each paragraph:
- Number of words in each sentence:

Divide the work up within your group—each person takes one paragraph, for example.

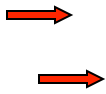
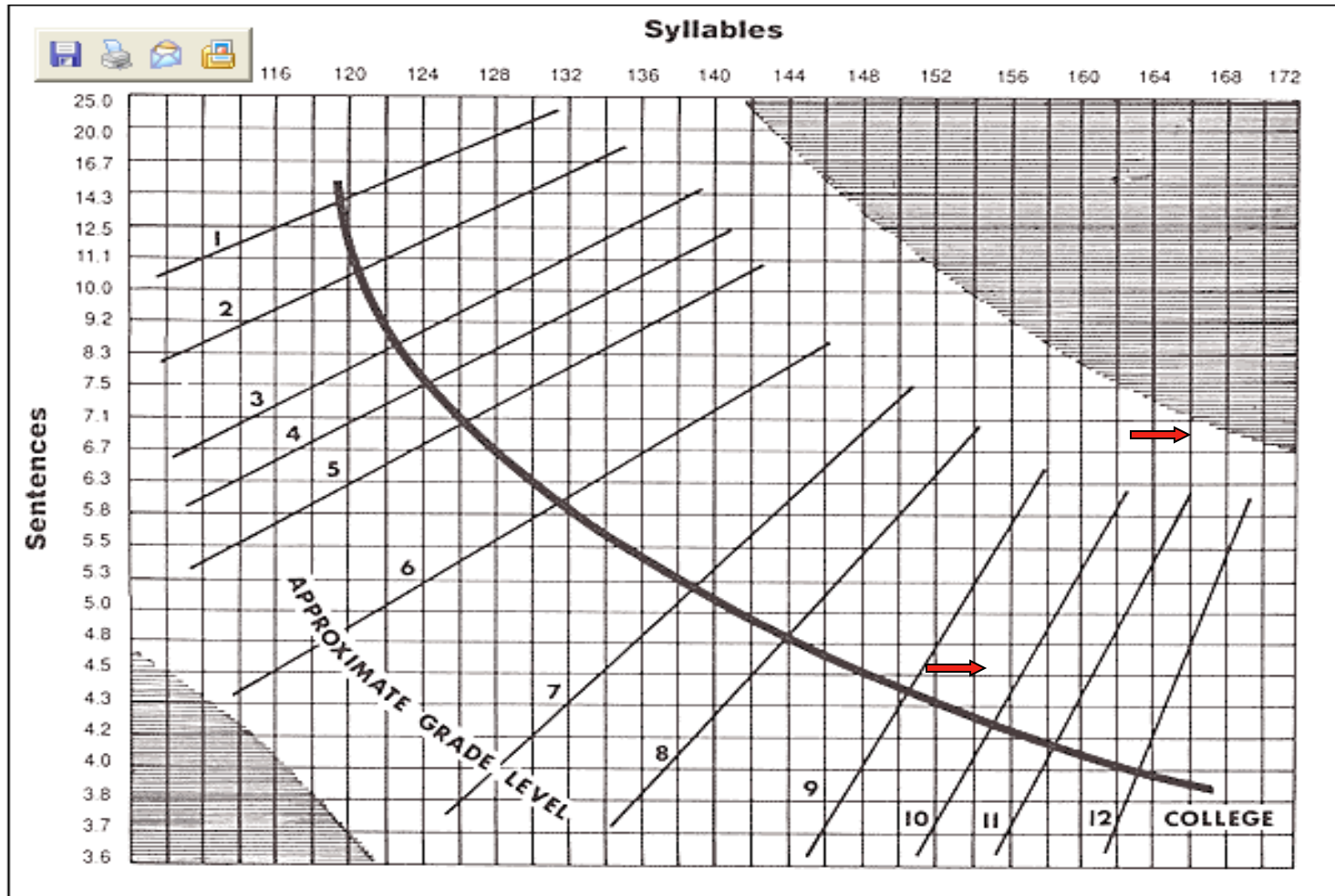
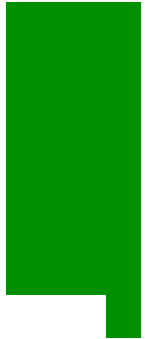
Totals

	Paragraphs	Sentences	Words/sent.

Fry's readability score

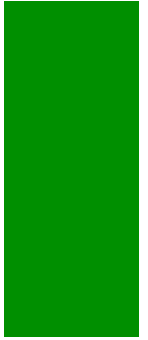
- Randomly select three sample passages and count exactly 100 words beginning with the beginning of a sentence. Don't count numbers. Do count proper nouns.
- Count the number of sentences in the hundred words, estimating length of the fraction of the last sentence to the nearest 1/10th.
- Count the total number of syllables in the 100-word passage. If you don't have a hand counter available, an easy way is to simply put a mark above every syllable over one in each word, then, when you get to the end of the passage, count the number of marks and add 100.
- Enter graph with average sentence length and number of syllables; plot dot where the two lines intersect. Area where dot is plotted will give you the approximate grade level.

Plot your scores



<http://www.on.literacy.ca/pubs/clear/20.htm>

Beyond formulas: sentence types



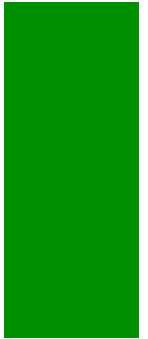
- Identify the sentence styles used:
 - Simple (subject + verb + other)
 - Compound (simple sent. + [and/but/;] simple sent.)
 - Complex (dependent phrase/clause + main clause [simple sentence])
 - Compound-complex [simple + simple + dependent phrase/clause]

Analysing your own draft

	Paragraphs	Sentences	Words/sent.

Linguistic registers

- Levels of formality
- Level of difficulty of vocabulary
- Number of words in English: roughly 1 million
- Number of words in all of Shakespeare: 24,000
- Technical writing varieties of limited English: 1,000



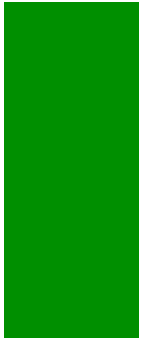
Reability factors

- Readability studies of printed materials about cancer have shown them to be written at a Grade 10 level or higher, which leads to the following problems for seniors:

- information overload
- unclear messages
- difficult vocabulary
- incomprehensible technical language
- uninviting tones
- content that does not specifically target their cohort
- little organization

Friedman, D. B., & Hoffman-Goetz, L. (2003). Cancer coverage in North American publications targeting seniors. *Journal of Cancer Education*, 18(1), 43-47.

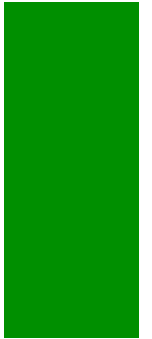
Guidelines for revising your own drafts



- Break the text into paragraphs
- Vary your sentence length
- Vary your sentence types
- Search for simpler words/vocabulary
- Spell out acronyms
- Define technical terms in your sentences

Guidelines for revising your own drafts

- Put actors (you, the reader) into your sentences
- Make your organizational patterns clear (narrative, analysis)
- Use transitional words and phrases



Readability in other genres

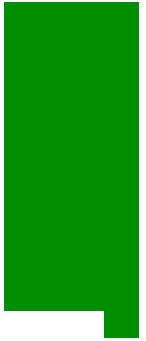


TABLE 1. Brochure Readability, Atrial Fibrillation (n=8)

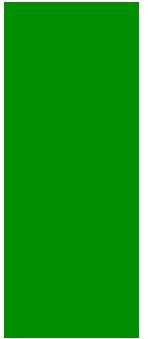
Brochure Name	Source (See Appendix)	SMOG Grade Level	Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level
<i>Atrial Fibrillation*</i>	Mosby, Inc.	8	8.3
<i>What is Arrhythmia?</i>	American Heart Association	9	7.2
<i>Detecting Atrial Fibrillation for Stroke Prevention</i>	National Stroke Association	9	6.5
<i>Atrial Fibrillation?</i>	DuPont Pharma	10	6.9
<i>Atrial Fibrillation, Coumadin® and You</i>	DuPont Pharma	11	7.8
<i>Atrial Fibrillation: Management of This Irregular Heartbeat†</i>	Mayo Clinic	12	10.2
<i>Atrial Fibrillation†</i>	3M Pharmaceuticals	13	10.7
<i>Anticoagulant Information†</i>	American Heart Association	13	11

*Brochure contains <30 sentences.

†Brochure posted on the Internet.

Anticoagulant Patient Information Material Is Written at High Readability Levels. Carlos A. Estrada, MD, MS; Mary Martin Hryniewicz, RN, MSN; Vetta Barnes Higgs, MD; Cathy Collins James C. Byrd, MD, MPH

Discussion



- If writing is social in important ways, how do we create social structures to improve student writing?
- As graduate students move from reporters of knowledge to producers, how do you learn advanced discourse practices in your field?
- As graduate students, how do you advance your careers and improving our own writing ability?