Editorial

Writing Clearly

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Writing clearly is integral to a good scientific paper, just as much as the science is. Oftentimes the message is lost in unnecessary verbiage, which is akin to “being unable to see the forest for the trees.” Adrian Flatt, MD, wrote a wonderful editorial entitled “Words”(Flatt, 2000)¹ that exemplifies the need for clear writing and provides humorous examples of overly long and unnecessarily complicated sentences gleaned from his almost ten years as the editor of *The Journal of Hand Surgery*. *The Journal of Wrist Surgery* has been in existence for two years, and we have collected some of our own examples of overly long and nonsensical sentences; *apropos*, “Proportionate loading of specific extrinsic and intrinsic tendons used to perform key pinch enabled force produced against a transducer to be measured.” It is not at all certain what the message behind this sentence is without considerable thought. Basic grammar dictates that verbs should follow nouns, adverbs should follow verbs, and the tense should remain consistent throughout the text. Junior authors tend to drop the articles of speech (the, a) in an attempt to increase the importance of a sentence, but this makes the sentence unnecessarily terse and tiresome to read. Placing the verb before the noun may be appropriate in French and Spanish but not in English. Surprisingly, the native English speakers are more often guilty of this than the authors who use English as a second language. I think of this as “Yoda” speak (i.e., *Star Wars* series). Instead of saying, “I am going to the water,” in Yoda speak this becomes, “to the water, going am I!” By applying these basic tenets, the above sentence becomes, “We measured the key pinch force with a transducer after applying a physiological load to the thumb tendons.” Similarly, “Subsidence was measured radiographically during key pinch in

each of these states. All eight adult cadaveric specimens were evaluated using the four testing schemas completed sequentially,” becomes, “X-ray measurements of subsidence was performed during key pinch following each type of reconstruction.” The goal for the author should be to make it easier to read the manuscript since human nature is such that one will skip over sentences that are difficult to understand.

Lord Chesterfield wrote, “My dear son, pray excuse this long letter, but today I have no time to write a short one.” This eloquent phrase introduces the notion that a well-written manuscript is shorter rather than longer. Do not use three sentences where one would suffice. One useful habit is to write the manuscript, then place it in a drawer for three days before revisiting it. Asking a colleague or friend to read the manuscript can highlight areas where the message is confused or incompletely stated. Drafting an outline first will allow you to organize the flow of ideas. Enabling the grammar check along with the spell check in Word is an easy way to identify the most egregious errors. A medical dictionary and thesaurus are a writer’s best friends and are available for free online. Though an individual writing style may be unnecessarily repressed by the review editors, their main intent is to hone and clarify the message for the reader. Remember that writing is a learned skill that improves with repetition, and the JWS welcomes your submissions.

Reference

- 1 Flatt AE. 25th Anniversary Presentation. Words. J Hand Surg Am 2000;25(2):201-210