

Checklist to Make Your (Medical) Writing Shine



10 STEPS TO MAKE YOUR WRITING SHINE



You wouldn't call yourself a writer or editor, but sometimes you need to make a piece of writing your best work, and of course, you always have to write emails, sometimes to very important people! Here are a few quick tips to make your writing your best when it needs to be.

By Emma Hitt Nichols, PhD

STEP 1 – CHECK YOUR WRITING WITH AI

- Paste your writing into ChatGPT (or equivalent) using the following prompt:

Prompt: The following few paragraphs are intended for a _____ [eg, clinician, business, general?] audience. Please check for any grammatical errors. Do not rewrite the paragraphs, just point out any wording that could be improved or corrected and provide suggestions in list form.

Then, from the results, implement any of the changes that you think will improve the writing. At the time of this writing, ChatGPT may not catch all the errors or may make unhelpful or inaccurate suggestions, but this is a useful first step.

STEP 2 – CHECK SENTENCES FOR LENGTH

- The best writing uses a mix of shorter and longer sentences. Go through your writing to make sure you have varied the sentence length appropriately. If you tend to write long sentences, try breaking them up for better readability.

STEP 3 – GET RID OF THE ADVERBS

- When you have a verb and a modifier of that verb next to each other, they can often be combined into a single word. So for example, for “walked slowly,” you can use “ambled.” She was “very happy” could be “ecstatic.” At the same time, go through and try to tighten up any overly wordy phrases or redundancies. Although this is veering into the area of more advanced writing practices, simpler and shorter is usually best, and a more specific word is better than a general word.

STEP 4 – USE ACTIVE RATHER THAN PASSIVE VOICE

- You can often spot the passive voice when you find forms of the verb “to be” being used (ha—did you catch that?). So for example, “it was given to me by Janet,” should be “Janet

gave it to me.” In science and medical writing the passive voice is often more forgivable because you don’t care that it was the lab assistant who plated the cells, but often the passive voice is used when it doesn’t need to be.

STEP 5 – CHECK PARAGRAPHS FOR FLOW

- Each paragraph should cover only one idea, and ideally, should build on the idea in the previous paragraph (typically from less specific to more specific). Using signpost words and phrases, such as 'however,' 'by contrast,' and 'on the other hand' within paragraphs, can provide direction to help the reader navigate through the piece. And even though it seems elementary, a topic sentence at the beginning of each paragraph really does help with flow and clarity.

STEP 6 – READ THE PIECE ALOUD

- Reading your work aloud can help you catch errors or awkward phrasing that you might miss when reading silently.

STEP 7 – REREAD IN A DIFFERENT COLOR OR FONT SIZE

- Try rereading your text in a different font and font size. It may surprise you what you’ll find. If you are working in PowerPoint, always view your slides on slide show before finalizing.

STEP 8 – REREAD UNTIL NO ERRORS

- Reread your work slowly all the way through until you find no errors. If you find one, reread it slowly again.

STEP 9 – GIVE IT TIME

- If you have time, put your writing away for 24 hours or more and then reread it. You may see something that you initially didn’t catch.

STEP 10 – SPELLCHECK

- Always perform a spellcheck as the final step. If you make any changes, either make absolutely sure you have done it correctly or do another spellcheck.



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