

## ◆ *Writing Workshops: Three Practical Designs Improve the Publishability of Trainee Writing*

*Moderator:*

**Walter J Pagel**

University of Texas M D Anderson  
Cancer Center  
Houston, Texas

*Speakers:*

**Iain E P Taylor**

Davidsonia  
Vancouver, British Columbia

**Walter J Pagel**

University of Texas M D Anderson  
Cancer Center  
Houston, Texas

**Pamela Derish**

University of California, San  
Francisco  
San Francisco, California

*Reporter:*

**Leslie Neistadt**

Journal of Athletic Training  
Columbus, Georgia

Write clearly—a seemingly simple directive that constitutes the impossible dream for many authors. Workshops can help by teaching authors the principles of scientific writing and providing a systematic approach and opportunities for practice. This session highlighted three such programs.

For 15 years at the University of British Columbia, Iain Taylor has offered 8-week scientific-writing workshops for eight to 40 students. The workshop is open to anyone who is interested, has a paper to write, and can commit to “Kick Butt 101”. Authors peer review each other’s papers but only in subjects outside their specialties; this allows them to remain undistracted by “technobabble” and other jargon. The course begins with abstract planning (week 1), moving on to the results or core message (weeks 1–3), methods (week 4),

discussion (week 5), introduction (week 6), final abstract (week 7), and submission and peer review (week 8). Throughout, Taylor stresses that editors are seeking original articles demonstrating best practices, timely reporting, and a clear story. Authors are encouraged to write the first draft with minimal input from colleagues and none from the principal investigator, seeking input from coauthors only after the paper is written. Taylor advises authors to be assertive in dealing with editors and to call, rather than e-mail, when asking for status reports.

Pamela Derish, of the University of California, San Francisco (UCSF), began teaching writing workshops with the encouragement of Department of Surgery chief Hobart Harris, a former student of UCSF faculty member Mimi Zeiger, author of *Essentials of Writing Biomedical Research Papers*. A health-sciences institution, the university lacks a publications division to support and train faculty in writing scientific manuscripts and grant proposals. In the current publish-or-perish climate, faculty members immediately recognize the value of scientific writing as the basic currency of academic medicine, but such skills are neither intuitive nor given much attention in their curricula. Authors who attend the workshop recommend it to colleagues and students, reinforcing its value. Another benefit is that authors get to know Derish, who also works as an author’s editor, and become comfortable in seeking her assistance with future projects.

Derish’s objective is to improve participants’ abilities to report on basic and clinical science. She emphasizes the structure and content of each section of a manuscript, focusing on how the parts work together to tell a clear, comprehensible story. In addition, she teaches a “clarity clinic”, in which she addresses how precise word choice can eliminate jargon and ambiguity, simple sentences can describe

complex science, and organizing ideas into paragraph form makes scientific writing logical and persuasive.

At M D Anderson, which supports a 27-person editorial department, Walter J Pagel was inspired to create a writing curriculum after being asked to speak at the Council of Biology Editors (now CSE) annual meeting about editing for non-native-English speakers and convening a focus group of young physicians and scientists in preparation. Pagel and his staff emphasize the IMRAD (introduction, methods, results, and discussion) structure, de-emphasize the details of English grammar and syntax, and demystify the publication process. Basing their work on the models of Edward Huth and Zeiger, they teach by leading critiques of published papers. Even students who are not completely fluent in English can benefit, and each attendee receives a handbook. To date, 350 postdoctoral fellows and 150 faculty members have completed the program.

The consensus is that faculty members will attend workshops and allow postdoctoral fellows to attend because they recognize the importance and value of clear scientific writing. Mixing native and non-native English speakers, professionals with different expertise, and researchers with clinicians causes few problems and often enriches the learning environment.

Graduates of all these programs describe themselves as more confident about writing, better at starting the writing process, and more successful in being published. Writing clearly may no longer be the impossible dream. 📖