

In the Bookstores...

Nice book, useful guide



Silvia M. Rogers. *Mastering Scientific and Medical Writing. A Self-help Guide*. Heidelberg: Springer, 2007. ISBN 978-3-540-34507-7 (Paperback). Euro 26.70 GBP approx. 21.06. 147 pages.

The weight of experience in an objective work. This was the shortest (and most faithful) definition I could find for this book from Silvia M. Rogers. The author

brought her knowledge in the field and her teaching skills together, and fused them into an easy-reading, straightforward piece. She had the obvious advantage of lecturing on scientific writing, thus having the opportunity to identify the issues students feel more difficulty on, but this does not diminish her accomplishment.

The book is composed of eight chapters followed by six appendices and 12 exercises. The first chapter gives us orientation about good versus poor scientific writing, setting some goals to be addressed further on. The part on “The Plain Language Movement” is a good reminder of the efforts towards high quality, less bureaucratic scientific writing. “The BASO Pyramid of Scientific Writing” part is an example of the didactical armamentarium the author uses in her classes. A section about myths and misconceptions pays attention to the errors that remain due to tradition and confusions between different languages.

The next two chapters focus on orthography, punctuation and grammar, with regard to the characteristics of scientific texts. The simplicity with which the text runs and the objectiveness of what is conveyed made me enjoy this usually dull part of any book or manual. Perhaps, as a non-English speaker I tend to value this part more than others do (as they have grown “inside”). A saying in the back cover states: “Although the book addresses certain issues more troublesome to scientific communicators of a non-English language origin, the guide will be of equal benefit to those whose first language is English.” I cannot tell as an outsider, but I believe this will be proven true. Anyway, it is useful piece of information, and the book can be used as a guide as well, so when in doubt, one can take a peek.

The following chapter addresses style. It is incredible how sometimes one knows exactly what to do, and yet one gets tempted by bad habits to go in the opposite direction, as if making infinite sentences, full of prepositions and modifiers, and overusing of the passive voice would provide the text with the nobleness worthy of the related scientific work. Silvia Rogers gives us (I include myself in the tempted souls) a polite, wake-up “punch in the stomach” by remembering that the readers are the main goal, and what annoys them hampers the dissemination of information, just what the text author does not want. We Brazilians (I am not French, despite the name) use the passive voice extensively in any formal document; avoiding it in Portuguese feels almost disrespectful. Some habits are harder to brake than others.

The concern about discrimination in scientific writing is the scope of one chapter. The author shows “usual” phrases and citations that carry sex, race or age derogation and may offend the reader, and how to avoid them. Another chapter focuses on quoting published material—an everlasting matter. A glance at the pros and cons of reference manager tools is given.

The appendices and the exercises are to be considered more than complementary. The former make the book a guide to look up when in need, ranging from punctuation and general rules to awkward phrases to avoid, and lists of academic degrees and honors. The appendix 10.5, “A Light-hearted View of Scientific Jargon”, gives the book a touch of humor. The exercises are of extreme help to reinforce the ideas of their respective chapters and strengthen knowledge.

My advice to the readers would be: read it all once, including the appendices; do not skip the exercises; keep the book with you when you are writing to clarify any doubt; when you finish the manuscript, run a checklist on it with the book’s rules and tips and make sure you followed them. It is a thin book you can take everywhere. It is a complete guide you should read always.

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Spot the difference

- 1) All pivotal toxicological studies were designed and conducted in full compliance with current GLP regulations.
- 2) All pivotal toxicology studies were GLP-compliant.

There isn’t one. 40% of the original sentence says exactly the same!

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Keywords for *Mastering Scientific and Medical Writing. A Self-help Guide*

- Medical writing
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- Non-English students
- Scientific publications
- Scientific writing