



**In the Bookstores . . .
Practical advice about getting
the words to flow**

by Karen Shashok

Tim Albert. A-Z of Medical Writing. London: BMJ Books, 2000. ISBN 0 7279 1487 1.

Suffering from post spelling bee traumatic disorder? Can't resist that overwhelming temptation to drop quotations everywhere? Find yourself reaching for that posh (but gratuitous) overcoat time and time again? Then this book is for you. Not only will it diagnose your writing problems; it will also recommend sensible, straightforward measures you and the authors you work with can take to overcome them.

Not a treatise on writing theory and process, but a glossary of terms arranged alphabetically over 145 pages (at about four entries to a page), this book is meant for medical and other health professionals with no formal training in writing, but who sometimes face writing and editing responsibilities that can cause stress and frustration because of lack of experience. Tim Albert, who has worked in both the lay and medical press and is also a management consultant, trainer and visiting fellow in medical writing at a UK university, is very well qualified to advise struggling (as well as more experienced) writers on how to collect, organise, and communicate their thoughts.

Albert's functional, goal-oriented approach to writing is based on three practical targets, which are reiterated in different entries throughout the book. For writing to be successful, authors must define and understand their intended audience, think long and hard about their messages and the purpose of the piece of writing before they start to write, and develop a way to judge whether their writing has been effective. In the entry for **effective writing**, the author summarises these key precepts: "If you define in advance what you want your writing to do, you can also define in advance how to measure it. Failure to do this can lead to confusion and depression as you start to believe those who tell you, for all kinds of reasons and with no real evidence, that your writing is poor".

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The book is meant to be dipped into sporadically for advice about real-life issues of (for example) authorship and co-authorship, copyright, impact factors, peer review, and rejection. The writing is incisive, the information is clearly grounded on first-hand experience, and there are carefully measured doses of irony and acid-tinged humour that will keep the after-hours, background reader hooked for page after page. For example, the entry for **semicolons** declares: "If you are having to look this up, don't use them (see full stops)". **Quotation dropping**, the author denounces, "adds little to the argument and is usually less a sign of erudition than that the author has access to a dictionary of quotations". "Putting on the posh overcoat" is Albert's

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metaphor for using a needlessly florid, pretentious style that some scientific authors still believe to be the mark of elegant prose.

Post spelling bee traumatic disorder is Albert's term for the urge to use a long (and difficult-to-spell) word when a shorter one would actually communicate the author's meaning just as well or better. But listen to how the author defines it: "The surprisingly common fear that, unless we can trot out long and obscure words—and spell them correctly—we will be judged as dunces. This has demotivated several otherwise good writers". This entry reflects the author's plain-talking style and illustrates his sensitivity to the difficulties colleagues who do not often wield the pen or keyboard can have when they are called upon to produce a piece of writing.

The author has worked with, and listened carefully to, many frustrated writers who wanted to do an excellent job but were aware that their lack of experience made this task difficult. It is this understanding of how it feels to stare for eons at a blank page or screen, waiting for inspiration to come, that makes Albert's advice so useful. In my favourite entry, which defines a population group he terms the **worried well**, he gives an excellent and sympathetic explanation of the distress writers sometimes feel: "In writing, as in health care, there are many people going around feeling that they have major problems when it comes to putting out their thoughts. This is rarely so. What they are exhibiting is the pain that comes with doing a difficult job well".

The book is meant as a convenient reference, providing on-the-spot clarification of problems and issues in writing and editing, and most of the entries are pertinent to scientific writing in any discipline. It is not a comprehensive reference work for the professional medical writer and editor, so be advised that weightier works should be consulted for information on topics such as the Declaration of Helsinki, informed consent, the CONSORT and QUORUM guidelines, Medline, and (oops!) EMWA and AMWA.

For writing to be successful, authors must define their intended audience, think about their messages before they start to write, and be prepared to judge whether their writing has been effective.

While some might not agree with all of Albert's recommendations on how to make progress with a piece of writing, this concise, practical and entertaining book is nonetheless a delight for medical writers of any degree of experience. It should help fearful or frustrated authors turn their thoughts into text, and stimulate those who work with authors to reconsider some of our approaches to working with budding or occasional writers.

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