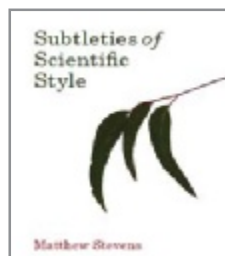


>>> In the Bookstores...

A book to squeeze into the gaps on a medical writer's bookshelf

Matthew Stevens. *Subtleties of Scientific Style, ScienceScape Editing*, 2007. ISBN 0-9578877-2-8 (paperback). USD 12 (approximately EUR 8.84, GBP 6.00), 112 pages. The book can be ordered or downloaded as a pdf (for USD 6) through <http://www.zeta.org.au/~mls/subtleties.html>.

Subtleties of Scientific Style has been written for language editors. It is about subtle recurring writing errors, other books cover the common errors. The author decided to write the book when he realized that the books on his shelves did not deal adequately with faults in writing that he regularly encountered.

Matthew Stevens opens his book by telling us about himself and about his book. He is Australian and he warns that he finds much US usage of English perplexing, if not wrong. Part of the problem of science editing, he suggests, is that usages have become ingrained into the language of science and no one really thinks about what they really mean any more. Readers are invited to send him any favourite subtlety that he has not covered and they would like to see covered in a later—and bigger—edition.

The next introductory section asks: What is science? The main force of this section is that science does not happen but is done by people. Therefore authors should be honest about this and not tortuously avoid the active voice. The body of the book is written under the following headings: Substantive editing, Common errors, Errors of substance and sequence, Errors of reasoning, Improving expression, Improving visual presentation, Tricky or misused terms, and Errors in classical languages. There are five appendices: Editing techniques, Wordy phrases, British or US spelling?, Unicode values and non-displaying characters, and Character charts in logical groupings, which the author describes as two handy character charts for Macintosh- and Windows-based editors who are tired of hunting around for special characters. The book ends with a bibliography of Books, Worldwide Web resources and Software.

When I first started editing I read many books about editing. Nowadays I often lack the enthusiasm to read a new book because I have already read what new books have to say in an old book. This book is different. I learnt some answers to questions which my previous reading had never answered. For example the journal I used to edit required me to change rpm (revolutions per minute) to *g* (gravity) when centrifugation was being described. I have now been enlightened as to why this change should be made and why '*g*' should be in italics (to avoid confusion with grams). Another style requirement was the use of exponents rather

than slashes when there are more than two units, e.g. $40\text{mU} \cdot \text{m}^{-2} \cdot \text{min}^{-1}$ rather than $40\text{mU}/\text{m}^2/\text{min}$. Now I know that three slashes are ambiguous whereas two are not—and why. Interesting thoughts are also slipped in, for instance the suggestion that pleonasm (where one word is implied by another) is so common in English because of the influence of Norman French on the (British) court system. Terms were duplicated in both languages to ensure that English speakers and French speakers understood, e.g. 'null and void', 'terms and conditions'.

Generally, concepts in the book are exceptionally well explained and supported with clear examples. One of my favourites is 'Stacked nouns and adjectives'. An example used in this section gives a taste of Steven's clear writing style:

Two words: "bank rate". That's easy enough. Three: "bank rate rise". That's a rise in bank rates. Four: "bank rate rise leak". Now that's getting harder. Five "bank rate rise leak probe". What's that? To get the answer we actually have to read it backwards: a probe (investigation) into the leak of a rise in bank rates.

Danglers are explained as a phrase that has become orphaned and is in need of a subject but is forced to make do with the nearest it can find. The result is that the connection between the phrase and the thing it refers to is lost. 'Times' and 'fold' are very often used incorrectly. Stevens explains the use of these words so well that it would be hard for anyone to come away failing to understand the difference between 'times large than' and 'times the size of'.

There are a couple of points which have insufficient explanations. 'Studies on/of' is dismissed with 'Prefer studies of'. As nearly every report that crosses my desk now is a 'Study on' and I intuitively change this to 'Studies of' it is comforting to know that Stevens would make the same change but it would be even nicer to know his reasons.

Stevens clearly believes in straightforward honest writing. So I was surprised that after advising against writing "sacrificed" because it comes too close to being euphemistic, he suggests that 'euthanase' can be used instead because it means a good death and this is an accurate description of how laboratory animals are killed. I cannot agree with Stevens here. If anything is euphemistic it's the application of 'euthanasia' to laboratory animals. Euthanasia is a Greek word meaning good death. But the current meaning goes beyond this¹. It means a merciful death of a person suffering from a terminal illness or an incurable condition. Even if you were to extend the definition to animals the word certainly does not imply that the person killing caused the condition (which would hardly be merciful) or, which is often the case, that laboratory animals are killed because they are no longer of any use and it is inconvenient to keep them².

This book weighs only 250 g and would be worth squeezing onto the bookshelf between such tomes as the 2-kilo *AMA Manual of Style*.

Elise Langdon-Neuner
Vienna, Austria
langdoe@baxter.com

¹ See for example www.answers.com/topic/euthanasia?cat=biz-fin and www.medterms.com/script/main/art.asp?articlekey=7365

² Buyukmihci N.C. Ethical and practical Concerns for the Use of Nonhuman Animals in Research <http://avar.org/pdf/publication/paper/research.pdf>