
Stephen W. Gutkin, 2018, 419 pages, CRC Press, $49.95

Review by Norman M. Goldfarb

“Writing High-Quality Medical Publications: A User’s Manual” is a practical and comprehensive guide to the topic. As the following excerpt illustrates, the author knows how to write:

2.2.1 Finding your voice: From Charles Darwin to Chris Matthews

Statements in your Introduction, Results, Discussion and Conclusions should not only report data but culminate a thoughtful, fair-balanced consideration of the findings that enables your essay to draw meaningful inferences to improve or otherwise inform readers’ practices.

To capture the essence of writing that is not only evidence-based but also engaging and memorable, I refer to two solid minds separated by more than a century: naturalist Charles Darwin, who was in intellectual titan but not eminently accessible to us in modern times, and political pundit Chris Mathews, who is more so. To represent the evidence-based aspect, we have the introduction to the Sterling Signature (2008, 2011) edition of On the Origin of Species. David Quammen states:

Seldom in English prose has such a dangerous, disruptive, consequential book been so modest and affable in tone. That's because its author was himself a modest and affable man — shy in demeanor though confident of his ideas — who meant to persuade, not to declaim or intimidate. [His prose] might sound like a gentle uncle, clearing his throat, politely, about to share a few curious observations and musings over tea.

As researchers and communicators, we are almost always seeking to persuade readers of a particular point of view. However, we should do so in a Darwinian modest, calibrated and evidence-based, if not “affable,” way. Slightly rewording a famous quotation of U.S. industrialist Henry J. Kaiser (founder of Kaiser-Permanente), “When your data speak for themselves, don't interrupt.” For instance, if a therapy reduces hospital LOS from 10 to 7 days, it is better to report the 3-day (rather than 30%) reduction in LOS. The 3-day reduction is more likely to have subject matter “hooks” in terms of direct health-care costs.

While striving for an ideal of tempered, evidence-based expression, we also need to engage our readers by being original and, if possible, memorable. The reach and salience of our work are driven largely by its likelihood of being cited by others. To convey the original, engaging and enduring qualities of desirable medical writing, we turn to Chris Matthews. This former speechwriter for President Jimmy Carter and chief of staff to Speaker of the House Thomas “Tip” O'Neill closes his MSNBC telecast "Hardball” with a segment that challenges his guests to “Tell Me Something I Don't [Already] Know.”

Similarly, by evaluating data and arriving at your own unique and original synthesis — in short, by telling your readers “something they don't already know” — you not only engage their interest but also enliven and increase the intellectual currency of your work.
Review literature critically, fashion your own creative synthesis, and then target it appropriately to your likely readers. I find “raw” statistic — millions of patients with a condition; billions of dollars spent on its management — eminently forgettable compared to relationships, trends and rankings.

The book includes four chapters:
- Principles and examples of quality in medical communications
- Drafting the manuscript: Step-by-step guidelines and exercises
- Biostatistics: Issues in study design, analysis and reporting
- Best practices: Consensus recommendations and standards to prepare high-quality ethical, transparently disclosed manuscripts for journal publication

The fourth chapter includes 60 detailed quality-control forms and checklists for six different medical publication topics, including randomized clinical trials, observational studies, and systematic literature reviews.

Reviewer

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