

Academic Writing Is a Team Sport

2025 Moerschbaeche Academic Forum

Department of Orthopaedic Surgery
in collaboration with the Faculty Development Committee

The Writing Coach: Supporting Others' Academic Writing with Effective Feedback



Rachel Walden, MS, ELS
Assistant Professor
Director of Editorial Services
Department of Orthopaedic Surgery
The Johns Hopkins School of Medicine

I have no conflicts of
interest to disclose.

Introductions

About me

Rachel Walden, MS, ELS

- JHU Ortho since 2014
- Dir. of Editorial Services
- Formerly at *Am J Epidemiology*
- Teaching & coaching writers

About me



About you

How do you identify as a
writing coach?

Do you identify as...



Or...



Or...



Or...



Or all of them at times?



About you



Roles?



Challenges?



Needs?

Learning objectives

1. Formulate objective, actionable feedback on others' academic writing
2. Develop skills to effectively coach others around their personal obstacles to writing
3. Use tools to enable more efficient review of others' writing

Today's agenda

- What is writing coaching?
- Five tips for writing coaches
- The coach's toolkit
- Critique an abstract
- Q & A

What is writing coaching?

(And what is it *not*?)



“Coaching’s not a job, it’s a privilege.”

--Lee Corso
Football coach
ESPN Broadcaster

Writing coaching is...

- More than feedback on a draft
- Building skills
- Identifying & overcoming weaknesses
- Addressing the **process** of writing
- Helping the mentee evolve as a writer

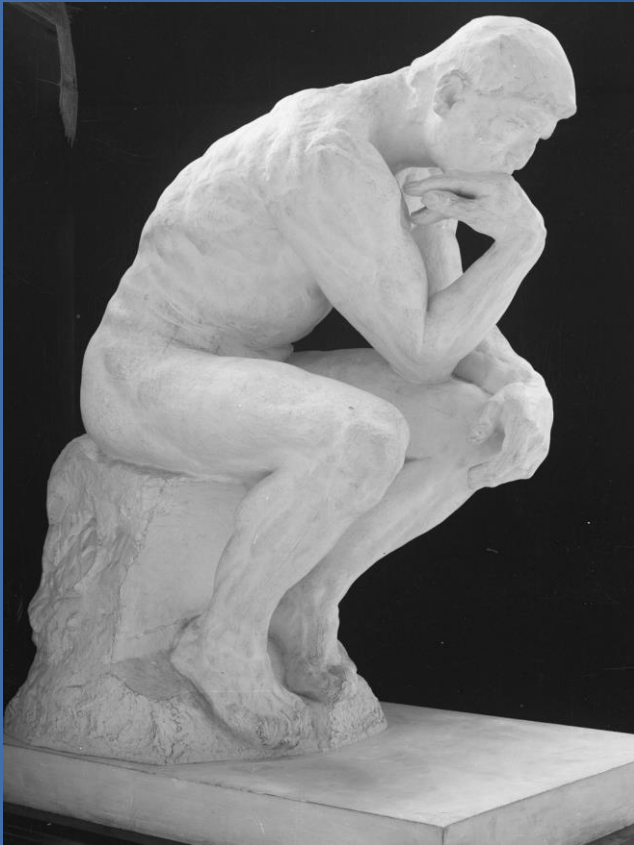
Writing coaching is *not*...

- Rewriting it yourself
- (Just) editing
- (Just) critique



Five Tips for Writing Coaches

Tip #1



Recognize that you may be coaching the *thinking*

- Is the problem with the writing?
- Or is it the logic?
- Be willing to go there

Coaching the thinking

Warning signs

- The study questions (as written) don't align with the results
- The intro is twice as long as it should be
- The conclusion could have been written before the study was done

Tip #2



Start by *talking* about the study

- Many people are more confident talking about their study than writing about it
- Goal: achieve coherence of ideas, not exact phrasing

Prompts

You have 60 seconds with a colleague at a conference.

- What *new thing* did you find in your study?
- Why should *your team* get this grant?

Prompts

Think about why your study matters

- Who needs to know about your findings?
- What can they do with them?
- How can your finding help others take better care of patients?

Tip #3 (this one's mental)



Address attitudes about writing

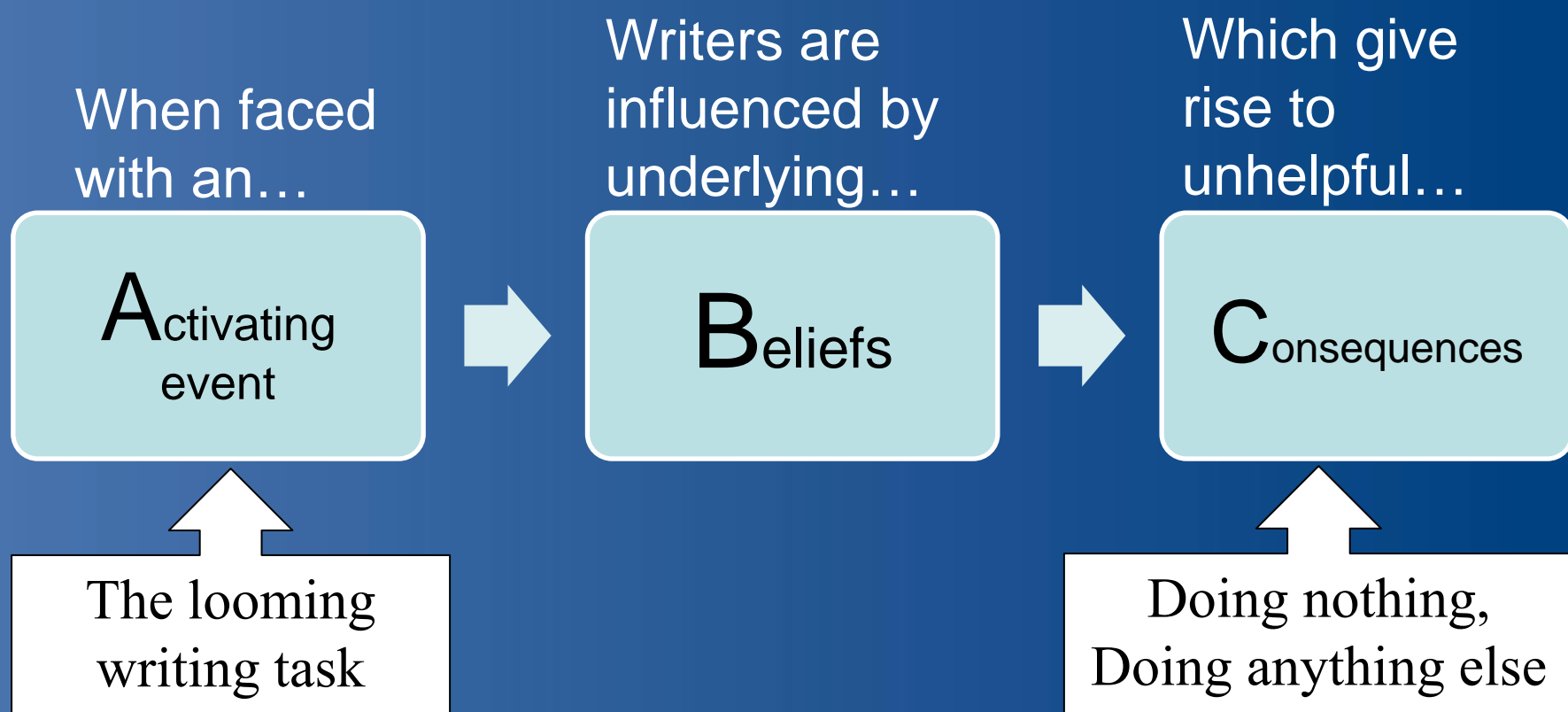
- What are the writer's underlying beliefs?
- Beliefs shape practice

A-B-C-D-E Model

- Gardiner & Kearns model
- Based on cognitive behavioral coaching
- Intervene to reshape the writer's behaviors

Gardiner M, Kearns H. The ABCDE of writing: Coaching high-quality writing. *Intl Coaching Psychol Rev.* 2021;7(2):247-59.

Steps A, B, C



Steps D & E

The coach can...

Dispute
those beliefs



To help the writer
adopt an...

Effective

...new outlook
and behavior

Beliefs & disputations

Theme: Readiness

Belief	Disputation
I'm not in the mood to write	Your mood often shifts after you get started
I don't have enough time	A little time can yield a surprising amount of product
It should come naturally	All writers struggle; "naturally" is a myth

“Good writers talk themselves into writing, whether they like it or not, whether they know what to write or not, whether they like or hate what they see appearing on the screen. **Keeping on**, even when the writing starts ugly, is the key.”

Story, Not Study (2021)
Lingard and Watling

Beliefs & disputations

Theme: Clarity

Belief	Disputation
It needs to be clear in my head first	Writing can help make things clearer
I just need to think for a bit longer	Think about what you've written afterward
I don't know how to start	Start where it's easiest: the methods?

Beliefs & disputations

Theme: Quality

Belief	Disputation
It won't be good enough	You've written good work before, you can do it again
It's got a lot of mistakes	All drafts have mistakes. Focus on one thing to improve
If I share this, it will expose me as a fraud	It's called imposter syndrome. It's common

Tip #4



Talk about the conditions of writing

- *Where?*
- *When?*
- *How we write can have powerful effects on our output*

Where, when, & how

Regarding this...	You might suggest...
Where to write?	Where you're least distracted
When to write?	Morning (see: distractions)
How long to write?	45 minutes (snack vs binge)
How often to write?	5x/week
How to start?	Use a template

WAGs: increase productivity

Writing Accountability Groups

- 4-8 people
- 1 hour, once a week, 10 weeks
 - *15 min: report on prior week's activity & set goals for today*
 - *30 min: write independently*
 - *15 min: report on today's activity & set goals for next week*

Tip #5



Reflect on the coaching

- How did it go for the writer?
- How did it go for you?

Reflection

For the writer...

- Why do you feel this way about writing?
- How have you come to organize your writing projects this way?
- What are you learning?

Reflection

For the coach...

- How effective was my strategy?
- Did I amplify the writer's voice or made it sound like my own?
- What is holding the writer back, and how can we address it?

The writing coach's toolkit

The writing coach's toolkit

Clinical article template

Designed for someone who...

- Needs to write up a clinical study
- Is intimidated by the blank page
- Wants to capture essential elements
- Only has 5 minutes to think about the manuscript today

Clinical article template

INTRODUCTION

What is known about your topic?

[background]

It is understood that_____

What is unknown about your topic?

[hook]

We do not understand_____

What question did you ask (only the main one)?

[study question]

Our primary question was_____

Clinical article template

What did you think the answer would be?

[hypothesis]

We hypothesized that _____

Why did you ask this question?

[clinical relevance]

The answer is important because _____

Who cares about this question?

[target audience]

The findings of this study are important to _____

What secondary question(s) did you ask?

[secondary questions]

Our secondary question(s) was/were...

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

Clinical article template

METHODS

How did you go about asking your questions?

[paragraph 1]

Study design (eg, retrospective, cohort, review)_____

Data source(s)_____

Time period_____

Location(s)_____

Who were your subjects and how many were there?

[paragraph 1/2]

Age? _____

Race/ethnicity?_____

Sex? _____

Other relevant characteristics?_____

Comparability of study groups? _____

Clinical article template

How did you identify subjects/studies?

[paragraph 2/3]

Inclusion criteria? _____

Exclusion criteria? _____

What were your outcomes of interest?

[paragraph 2/3]

Primary outcome _____

Secondary outcomes

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

Clinical article template

How did you measure your outcomes of interest?

[paragraph 3/4]

Who did the measuring? _____

What were units of measurement? _____

At what time points did you measure? _____

How precise were your measurements? _____

How did you handle interobserver disagreement? _____

What equipment did you use (including model, manufacturer)?

[paragraph 4/5]

Medical devices _____

Instrumentation _____

Measurement tools _____

Software _____

Other _____

Clinical article template

How did you analyze your data?

[paragraph 5/6]

Types of statistics presented _____

Statistical tests used _____

Statistical software (version, manufacturer) _____

Alpha level? _____

Power analysis? _____

What kind of ethical approval did you receive?

[first or last paragraph]

IRB approval (number) _____

Patient/parent consent _____

Exemption _____

Clinical article template

RESULTS

What were the answers to your questions?

Primary question _____

Secondary questions

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

Clinical article template

DISCUSSION

Provide a brief summary of your study:

How did you address your main question? _____

What new findings do you report? _____

Clinical article template

Which other studies have investigated this topic?

Study 1 _____

Study 2 _____

Study 3 _____

Study 4 _____

Study 5 _____

Study 6 _____

How is your study stronger/different than others?

(Compare with studies listed above.) _____

How do your results compare with other studies?

(Compare with studies listed above.) _____

Clinical article template

Were these the results you expected? If not, what possible mechanisms are at play?

What are the implications of your findings?

For patients _____

For clinicians _____

For other researchers _____

For society _____

Other _____

Clinical article template

What were the strengths and limitations of your study?

Example

Limitation: *Our sample size was small*

Importance? *We may have failed to detect significant differences*

Justification? *The sample size is reasonable given the rarity of the condition*

Limitation 1: _____

Possible effects? _____

Justification? _____

What questions remain unanswered?

Future research should focus on _____

8-Step coaching process

Step	Task	Mins
1	Assess content (high-level review)	20-25

8-Step coaching process

Step	Task	Mins
1	Assess content (high-level review)	20-25
2	Briefly assess style/form	5-10

8-Step coaching process

Step	Task	Mins
1	Assess content (high-level review)	20-25
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3	Draft note to author requesting revision	5-10

8-Step coaching process

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1	Assess content (high-level review)	20-25
2	Briefly assess style/form	5-10
3	Draft note to author requesting revision	5-10
4*	Author revises per guidance	

P.S. Give them a deadline.

*Repeat as needed.

8-Step coaching process

Step	Task	Mins
1	Assess content (high-level review)	20-25
2	Briefly assess style/form	5-10
3	Draft note to author requesting revision	5-10
4*	Author revises per guidance	
5*	Review revision, provide feedback	25-30

*Repeat as needed.

8-Step coaching process

Step	Task	Mins
1	Assess content (high-level review)	20-25
2	Briefly assess style/form	5-10
3	Draft note to author requesting revision	5-10
4*	Author revises per guidance	
5*	Review revision, provide feedback	25-30
6	Review in detail for style/form	30-45

*Repeat as needed.

8-Step coaching process

Step	Task	Mins
1	Assess content (high-level review)	20-25
2	Briefly assess style/form	5-10
3	Draft note to author requesting revision	5-10
4*	Author revises per guidance	
5*	Review revision, provide feedback	25-30
6	Review in detail for style/form	30-45
7	Author revises per guidance	

*Repeat as needed.

Give them another
deadline.

8-Step coaching process

Step	Task	Mins
1	Assess content (high-level review)	20-25
2	Briefly assess style/form	5-10
3	Draft note to author requesting revision	5-10
4*	Author revises per guidance	
5*	Review revision, provide feedback	25-30
6	Review in detail for style/form	30-45
7	Author revises per guidance	
8	Read whole paper in detail and offer final input	45-60

*Repeat as needed.

The 5 Cs

Element	Description
Clarity	Making sense, the first time it's read

The 5 Cs

Element	Description
Clarity	Making sense, the first time it's read
Cohesion	Sticking together, logical

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The 5 Cs

Element	Description
Clarity	Making sense, the first time it's read
Cohesion	Sticking together, logical
Consistency	Avoiding synonyms; compatibility
Conciseness	Expressing much in few words
Conviction	Being persuasive

Color-coding guide

Element	Description
Clarity	Making sense, the first time it's read
Cohesion	Sticking together, logical
Consistency	Avoiding synonyms; compatibility
Conciseness	Expressing much in few words
Conviction	Being persuasive

Color-coding example

Title:

“An Examination of Concussion Injury Rates in Various Types of Football Helmet Models in NCAA Football Athletes”

Color-coding example

Title coded for conciseness:

**“An Examination of Concussion Injury
Rates in Various Types of Football
Helmet Models in NCAA Football
Athletes”**

Rubrics

Set of 6 analytic rubrics

- *Style & form*
- *Title & abstract*
- *Introduction*
- *Methods*
- *Results*
- *Discussion*

Rubrics

How they work

- *Help writer understand expectations*
- *Provide objective quality assessment*
- *Let you delegate parts of the review process to others*

Rubric sample: style & form

Element	Score			
	1	2	3	4
5 Cs				
clarity	nothing is clear	some things are clear	most things are clear	everything is clear at first reading
consistency	rarely consistent	sometimes consistent	usually consistent	always consistent
conciseness	verbose	economic use of words	no excess words	maximum info in minimum words
coherence	disjoined, very hard to follow	most can be followed	all can be followed	elegant, effective whole
conviction	not convincing	convincing in places	consistent conviction	substantial depth, fullness + complexity of thought

Rubric sample: intro

Element	Score			
	1	2	3	4
Intro to topic, may include clinical aspects, prevalence	<input type="checkbox"/> Overview missing <input type="checkbox"/> Clinical aspects/ prevalence missing	<input type="checkbox"/> Overview present but weak <input type="checkbox"/> Clinical aspects / prevalence weak	<input type="checkbox"/> Overview well expressed <input type="checkbox"/> Clinical aspects/ prevalence well expressed	<input type="checkbox"/> Overview well expressed, incl. novel aspects <input type="checkbox"/> Clinical aspects/ prevalence well expressed, incl. novel aspects
Why is topic relevant now, and in the future?	<input type="checkbox"/> Present relevance missing <input type="checkbox"/> Future relevance missing	<input type="checkbox"/> Some present relevance <input type="checkbox"/> Some future relevance	<input type="checkbox"/> Very good present relevance <input type="checkbox"/> Very good future relevance	<input type="checkbox"/> Very good present relevance, incl. secondary audience <input type="checkbox"/> Very good future relevance, incl. secondary audience
Review and critique state of knowledge	<input type="checkbox"/> Review missing <input type="checkbox"/> Critique missing	<input type="checkbox"/> Review poor <input type="checkbox"/> Critique poor	<input type="checkbox"/> Review is thorough <input type="checkbox"/> Critique is thorough	<input type="checkbox"/> Review is comprehensive <input type="checkbox"/> Critique is rigorous, incl. new perspectives

Rubric: IMRAD content

Section	Task	Yes	No (brief comments optional)
Intro	Necessary background/context		
	Compelling study rationale		
	Clear study question(s)		
	Testable hypothesis (if appropriate)		
Methods	Described in detail so they can be replicated		
	Statistical methods described		

Rubric: IMRAD content

Results	One paragraph per study question		
	Nothing extraneous		
Discussion	State major findings and why they matter		
	Compare/contrast/interpret findings		
	Strengths/limitations (and why they matter)		
	Conclude with the clinical/scientific relevance		

Conciseness

“I have made this longer than usual because I have not had time to make it shorter.”

-Blaise Pascal, 1657



Conciseness "cheat sheet"

Instead of...	Write...
In order to	to

Conciseness "cheat sheet"

Instead of...	Write...
In order to	to
Is able to	can

Conciseness "cheat sheet"

Instead of...	Write...
In order to	to
Is able to	can
Past history	history

Conciseness "cheat sheet"

Instead of...	Write...
In order to	to
Is able to	can
Past history	history
The majority of	most

Conciseness "cheat sheet"

Instead of...	Write...
In order to	to
Is able to	can
Past history	history
The majority of	most
With the exception of	except

Conciseness "cheat sheet"

Instead of...	Write...
In order to	to
Is able to	can
Past history	history
The majority of	most
With the exception of	except
Shorter in length	shorter

Jargon “cheat sheet”

Instead of...	Write...
Chart	Medical record

Jargon “cheat sheet”

Instead of...	Write...
Chart	Medical record
Normal range	Reference range

Jargon “cheat sheet”

Instead of...	Write...
Chart	Medical record
Normal range	Reference range
Status post	after

Jargon “cheat sheet”

Instead of...	Write...
Chart	Medical record
Normal range	Reference range
Status post	after
Etiology	cause

Jargon “cheat sheet”

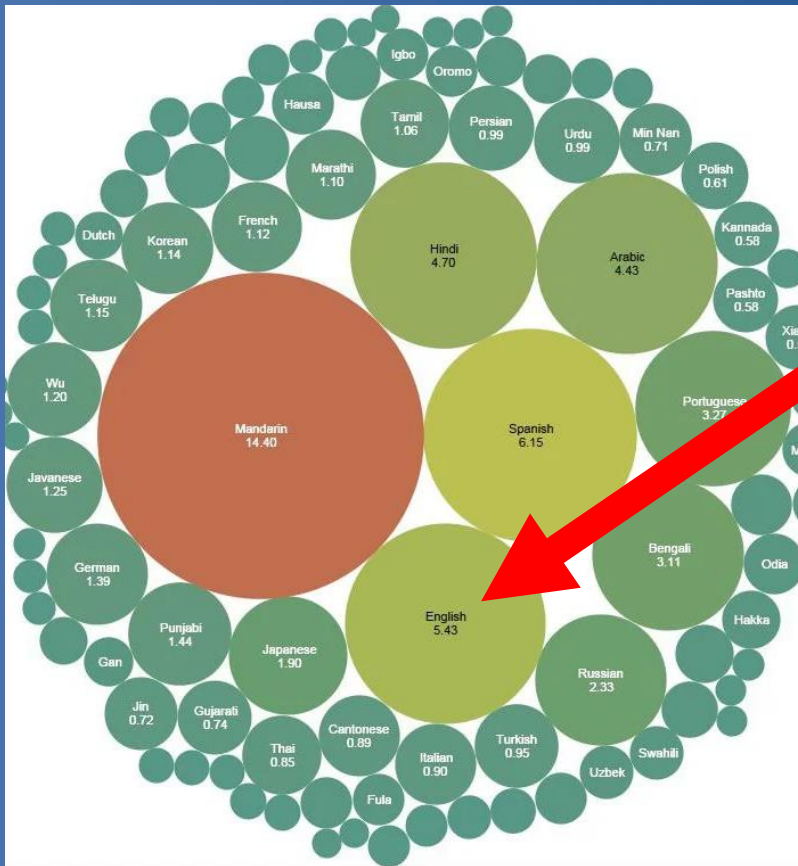
Instead of...	Write...
Chart	Medical record
Normal range	Reference range
Status post	after
Etiology	cause
Prepped	prepared

Jargon “cheat sheet”

Instead of...	Write...
Chart	medical record
Normal range	reference range
Status post	after
Etiology	cause
Prepped	prepared
Mortality	death

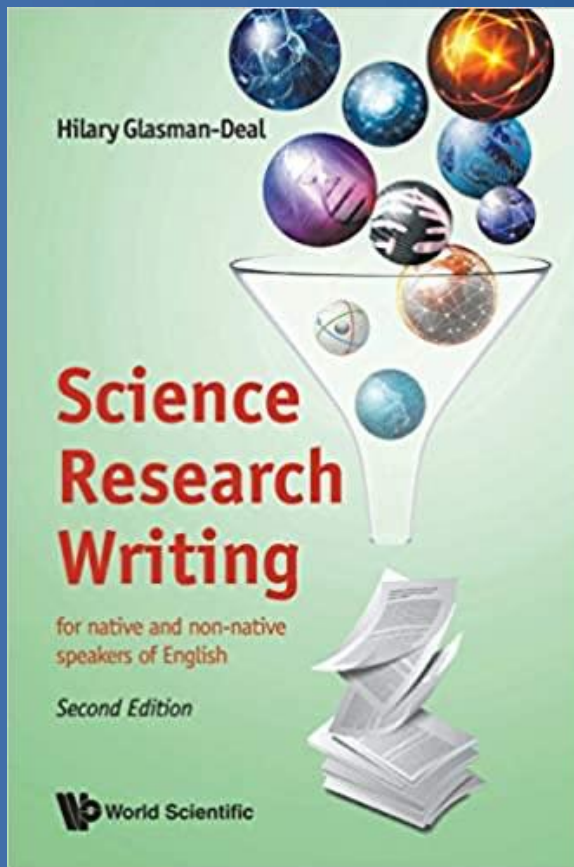
External resources I recommend

English as a proportion



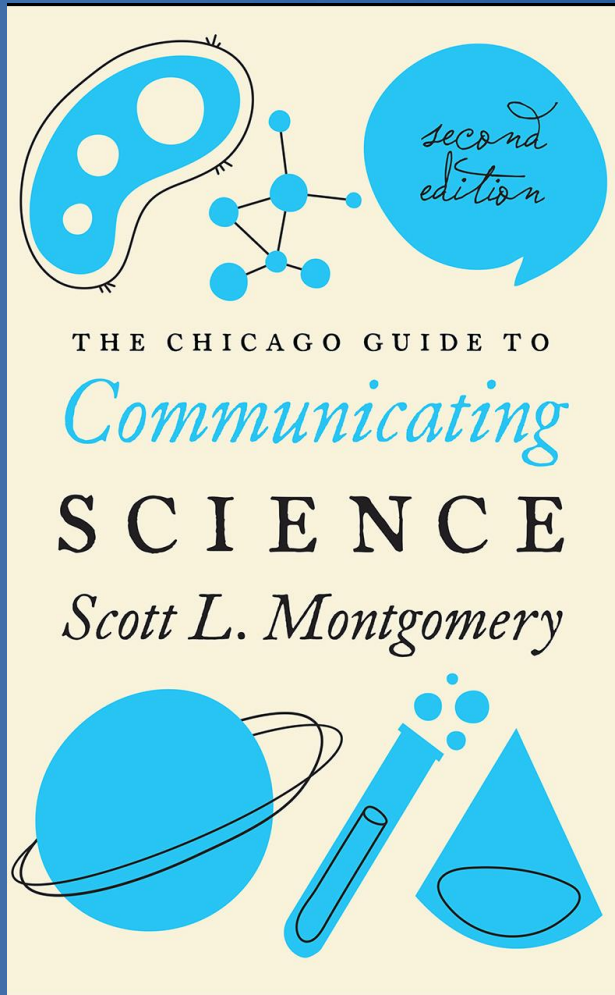
- About 5% of world population speaks English natively
- Non-native writers are *impressive*
- Tailored resources can support

Book resources



- Book for non-native English speakers
- Focuses on each section of the paper
- Vocab/grammar
- FAQs

Book resources



- Addresses numerous types of writing
- Provides many examples
- Targets all levels of writer

Online resources



- Purdue OWL (Online Writing Lab)
- Grammar, mechanics, punctuation
- Exercises, including ESL
- owl.purdue.edu

Online resources



- Grammar Monster
- Free English lessons & tests
- Vocab builder
- YouTube channel
- www.grammar-monster.com

Apply what we've learned

Critique an abstract using a rubric

The task

- Your writer brings you an abstract for feedback
- Use the rubric to critique
- Assign it a grade for each element
- Discuss why you assigned that grade & provide suggestions

Abstract critique

- How did you grade it?
- What did the writer do well?
- What are your biggest concerns?
- What was the effect of using the rubric?



JOHNS HOPKINS
M E D I C I N E

DEPARTMENT OF
ORTHOPAEDIC SURGERY

Questions?

rachelwalden@jhu.edu