

## Write Effectively: A Quick Course for Busy Health Workers

Tim Albert

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These days it seems that very few books have a good old-fashioned ‘prologue’. Albert’s text does and it is very straightforward. To quote in full: ‘This is a book about writing in which one of the main messages is, “stop messing about and just get on with it. . .get cracking”’.

Parallel with its theme of anti-procrastination is the author’s message about writing concisely. Indeed, the author practices what he preaches as the book itself is rather succinct having only four parts. The first part, namely, ‘The quick course’ (Part 1) comprises 10 brief sessions (rather than chapters). These sessions include, ‘What is effective writing’ (Session 3), ‘Getting started’ (Session 4), ‘Sorting the information’ (Session 5), ‘Putting together a plan’ (Session 6), ‘Writing the first draft’ (Session 7), ‘Rewriting’ (Sessions 8 and 9) and ‘Getting others to help’ (Session 10).

By comparison, Part 2 (the ‘After-sales service’), while perhaps beneficial for some, seemed rather dull. It explores a number of common issues such as not having enough time to write, writing for different audiences, researching, working out the appropriate length of writing, rewriting, editing and finally writing more easily. Rewriting and editing is an important issue and one that undergraduate, graduate and clinical health science writers seem to loathe. Albert notes that rewriting and editing involve both macro-editing and micro-editing processes and emphasises the importance and benefits of getting others to help (not hinder) and finally bringing the writing piece together.

When drafting and then rewriting, Albert asks the writer several ‘key’ questions: ‘Does your writing contain a clear message?’; ‘Do you have (or still want) a message to get across to the target audience (market)?’; ‘Is the message supported by the evidence?’; and ‘Is the structure and then tone appropriate for the audience?’ Within the text Albert sets a number of helpful activities and exercises to address such issues and to build the budding writer’s confidence. These activities, however, are easier said than done and a bit tricky to undertake alone.

Albert also explores ‘Some points on design’ (Part 3) and provides some very basic examples of style and layout. Within this particular text, however, Albert fails to take note of the constraints that are placed on health care writers in terms of the numerous and idiosyncratic rules of health care related journals that health science based professionals need to conform to when writing. The basic inverted-triangle structure familiar to newspaper journalists, which Albert argues ‘discourages sensationalism’ and avoids vagueness or

‘burying’ of information, is almost a cliché technique among journalists who really detest the more scientific style of writing (p. 42). Of course it could be argued that journalists do not like academic scientific writing because it means they have to wade through a great deal of detail and try to understand the complexities of the research they are reporting, when all some journalists really want is the paparazzi news flash that will get them a notable headline, a by-line and accolade. On the other hand Albert does present some helpful ideas and structures that an experienced and imaginative teacher would find useful for helping students understand how specific pieces of work hang together.

In Part 4 there are some very helpful appendices called ‘Lists for the very keen’ – 17 lists altogether – which at first seems excessively extensive and potentially threatens the author’s goal of being short and snappy. Each list however is brief and advises some very useful principles regarding ‘The parts of speech’ (List 2), ‘Useful grammatical terms’ (List 3), ‘Punctuation’ (List 4), ‘Words often misspelled’ (List 5), ‘Posh words’ and their less pompous equivalents (List 9), ‘Clichés’ – which should be avoided (L 10), ‘Redundant words’ (L 11), and ‘Ten sensible principles’, such as ‘Don’t trust the spell check’ (List 15). Perhaps the most brief of these is that of ‘Racist and sexist words that you can’t print’ (L 13) (which you need to read for yourself to understand – professional honesty guards us from plagiarism here!). There are however a number of books dealing with these issues, so the short chapters really only scratch the surface of the problems they address.

It is important to note this new text is one of a number that Albert has written in the field.<sup>1</sup> Also, while Albert has not drawn upon a range of theoretical models, he has used examples taken from the 300 courses on writing and editing skills that he has conducted with health professionals over the last 10 years. It also contains useful and pertinent guidelines for health care workers writing documents, letters and reports in their working environment. As it is, at times, very journalistic in its advice (understandable given the author’s background in journalism) it is not designed, nor appropriate for, scientific, postgraduate Master’s or Doctorate manuscripts, but could be applied to everyday activities such as writing personal letters, writing text analysis for secondary school students, some undergraduate essays and even book reviews! Some of the techniques are however adaptable for thesis students, so its usefulness for some should not be totally discounted.

<sup>1</sup>For example: Albert T (2000) ‘Winning the publication game: how to write a scientific paper without neglecting your patients.’ (Radcliffe Medical Press: Radcliffe).

Albert does make some points that contradict previously held methods. For example, many have been taught that the last sentence of each paragraph must link to the first of the next paragraph (p. 41). Albert believes this technique is difficult and not necessary. Nevertheless, no matter the degree of difficulty, it is still advisable when writing about theoretical or practical concepts to ensure logical links between paragraphs, or the reader becomes lost in a quagmire of ideas. If the concepts are not related and a new idea is being introduced, then subheadings should be used. Albert also, without proper referencing, quotes George Orwell's 1946 rules on writing style saying, 'never use the passive when you can use the active' (p. 135). In health professional contexts, however, client reports and research is almost always expected to be written in the past tense and therefore the passive form.

It is important to note that in this book Albert has completely omitted two important aspects of health writing. The first of these is the summary 'Abstract', which in scientific writing is intended to make the research topic, rationale for the research, the chosen methods and results very clear. Secondly, whilst the title clearly suggests that this book is aimed at health professionals, the text fails to make any mention of the appropriateness of properly referencing other's works and, while the book has a good index, it has no bibliography or referencing system whatsoever (other than chapter resource lists), which implies that all the ideas within the book are (hopefully) his own!

Overall, Albert's rather enjoyable book contains some interesting tips for making the writing process more effective and will, hopefully, reduce some of the associated angst. As one of his course participants apparently discovered, 'Writing is fun once you realise it is just a big marketing game' (p. 6). There is no doubt to us that many would value Albert's text during their later secondary school years, while completing their undergraduate studies or as an introductory resource for the clinical writer. The book does provide some valuable guidelines in a succinct and easy to read manner and would save students and clinicians a number of years of 'trial and error' with the writing process.

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## **Regulating Water and Sanitation for the Poor: Economic Regulation for Private and Public Partnerships**

Edited by Richard Franceys and Esther Gerlach  
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This book is a compendium of papers and illustrative case studies from an international group of water and sanitation experts. It covers the way different legislative models and sets of regulations have worked to improve the supply of services, mainly through the introduction of private–public partnerships, underpinned by small fees for access.

The preface and Chapter 1 provide an excellent introduction to the research case studies later used to illustrate the theoretical chapters. The discussion of privatisation and price regulation is succinct and leads into a concise discussion of societal involvement, responsibilities, obligations and universal availability. The bookend chapters cover economic regulation and pro-poor economic regulation, and neatly introduce and round out the concepts of regulation in water provision. The penultimate chapter about ‘involving and empowering poor communities’ was not a strength of the book as the tables were a little hard to comprehend and the theory seemed, compared with the rest of the book, quite thin and did not add a great deal to the text.

The legislation chapters are comprehensive, covering economic regulation theory, how to regulate, considerations of divested water utilities, and alternative provisions and providers, in resource poor settings. The case studies that are provided to illustrate the theory chapters are from an assortment of locations from Asia, Africa, South America, the Middle East and England, and include urban, semi-urban and rural settings. The problems of providing services to poor communities are described using the different mechanisms discussed.

The provision of water is fundamental to the health of the public, and critical to the provision of primary health care. I am therefore concerned that there is little attention paid to the peoples who are unable to pay even the small costs described in these chapters. There are occasions when lower grade

services are conceded as quite acceptable for poorer customers. The main message is that once people understand that reliable water and soil disposal is important to health, and that once this is understood, people are willing to pay. However, there are examples contained in the chapters where clearly there were people too poor to pay and hence resorting to other means to find water, so I am not 100% convinced of the argument. Somehow this does not quite sit with the Millennium Development Goal 7, to ensure environmental sustainability, which includes two targets: by 2020 to achieve significant improvement in the lives of at least 100 million slum dwellers, and by 2015 to reduce by half the proportion of people without access to safe drinking water; the Millennium Development Goals get just three mentions in the book: in the introductory paragraph, and once in passing, and lastly in the chapter called ‘Pro-poor economic regulation’, when discussing the problem of ‘transforming “informal customers” into viable utility customers’. The authors rightly point out that the first half is the easy half; what about the rest?

The book is well designed, with excellent glossaries, references, tables, figures and index, but curiously no photographs. As a book to have available to students of primary health, public health, health promotion, and not forgetting development studies this book is an extremely useful resource, and whilst it may challenge some personal ideologies this should not detract from the very sound and informative content – in fact it would produce some challenging tutorial materials.

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