

Book review

SCIENTIFIC WRITING = THINKING IN WORDS SECOND EDITION

By David Lindsay

2020. Published by CSIRO Publishing, Melbourne. 172 pp.
Paperback, AUD \$35.00, ISBN 9781486311477

David Lindsay is a Senior Honorary Research Fellow at the University of Western Australia where he researched and taught in animal biology and behaviour, for 33 years. At that university he initiated formal studies in writing for undergraduate and postgraduate students. His background clearly provides him with the appropriate experience and knowledge to produce this book on scientific writing.

The aim of this book, though it is not explicitly stated, is to educate the readers in how to write scientifically. It principally focuses on writing the scientific paper. However, its last quarter does dip its toes into the 'other' things that scientists write e.g. posters, literature reviews, theses and grants.

It is a book in four sections beginning with some opening essays that position the readers to open their minds. Section 2, the largest section, provides seven sub-sections on how to write a scientific paper. Section 3 is devoted to improving your writing style and the last section advises on how to write those 'other' things. All the sections have value. In addition, the book carries two forewords, a contents and an index. The largest, most informative and most useful section is on how to write a scientific paper. This section delves deeply into how to write each section including the: title, introduction, materials and methods, results, discussion, abstract and 'other bits'. Without doubt the author is trying to educate scientists, presumably graduate students and early career researchers given the subject material.

The strength of this book is in its simple, clear and concise use of the English language, which sets the example for those learning from reading it to follow. It speaks from experience. Given I have written over 100 scientific articles myself and that I fancy myself as a teacher of this subject – how to write – I was pleased to keep nodding in agreement as I moved through its text. Yet, I also picked up new ideas on quite a few points on structure and style as I progressed. Its greatest weakness was that it was not available to me 25 years ago when I started writing papers.

This book will be an aid to the academic/scientific discipline. I suggest that it has great potential to be used in extra-curricular postgraduate activities. Don't wait for a supervisor to initiate a course using this book as the text, get copies and discuss writing your papers at lab meetings. Draw on this book as you write your first papers. Read the sections relevant to you and the paper/poster/talk you are currently working on. But, more senior academics will learn something from this text. I know they will, because I have read their papers – submitted to this journal. Yet, the least experienced writers have the most to gain.

The educative value of this book lies predominately in helping postgraduates and early career researchers to write their papers and to write them clearly. I also believe it will give

confidence to those nervous about writing their first papers, helping them move forward. In this regard it was pleasing to see a different writing sequence suggested; different from attempting to write a paper following the A–Z of a scientific manuscript's structure. I write my methods first and usually the introduction last. If not, I do what this book advises in drafting the introduction first and returning to it at the finish to tidy it up.

All the good advice from David Lindsay is unreferenced (well most of it); it is clearly based on his experience and pertinent. He considers what the editors and reviewers want and advises the readers proficiently in how to give it to them. Since this book is researched from memory, experience and conversations with colleagues it is not formally referenced. The author is simply passing on his personal thoughts developed from practice. This book is not an academic treatise as such, it is a guide given in an engaging and friendly voice. Yet, it is clearly underscored with years of research and development through practice. Readers wanting references could look at a guide published in *Pacific Conservation Biology* by Tress *et al.* (2014).

The writing style is in clear plain English as all good scientific writing must be. Plain means appropriate, without jargon and without long sentences unless these are given as examples of what not to do. And many such examples are presented educationally throughout the book. Despite having already formulated my own ideas on how to write I was encouraged to keep reading by the engaging and friendly style in the text. This is a light read and not too formal. It is entirely possible to take it to bed.

Supplementary material in the book amounts to pictures of two posters that are discussed as good and bad examples, and a graphically designed cover depicting an abstract idea of linkages (I think). There are boxes with examples throughout that are filled with a grey background to highlight that they are different from the main text; they work well with no need for them to be pink or have flowers in the corners. The whole book is in a glossy paper that reflected light annoyingly as I tried to read, but it was easy to clean my coffee from.

I would recommend this book to postgraduate students, including honours students who intend to publish, and early career researchers. There is even something in it for the more experienced at the professorial level – even if that it's only used for teaching. I have not read other books espousing this much information on writing scientifically, although as I read it, I kept nodding in agreement. Occasionally I even raised an eyebrow and thought that I might adopt this and that approach.

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Reference

Tress, G., Tress, B., and Saunders, D. A. (2014). How to write a paper for successful publication in an international peer-reviewed journal. *Pacific Conservation Biology* 20, 17–24. doi:10.1071/PC140017