Writing in English as a Foreign Language: 
Tips for Non-Native Speakers and Those Working with Them

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Why bother?

- If you’re a non-native speaker of English, why become adept at writing in English about your work?

- If you’re a native speaker of English, why become adept at working with non-native writers of English?
Some of My Background

• Peking University Health Science Center
• China Medical Board Program in Biomedical Writing and Editing
• AuthorAID project
• Other
Language:
Just Part of the Picture
The Essentials

• The essentials are **content**, **organization**, and **clarity**.

• If a paper has excellent content, is well organized, and is clear, it is likely to be accepted even if the English is so-so.

• If a paper has poor content, is badly organized, or is unclear, it is likely to be rejected even if the English is excellent.
Culture Too

- Ability to communicate effectively not only a matter of vocabulary, grammar, etc.
- Also cultural aspects
- What cultural differences have you observed that can affect scientific communication?
Cultural Differences to Consider

- Directness or indirectness of expression
- Amount of detail
- Attitudes toward time
- Attitudes toward using material taken from others’ writing
- Other
Language Challenges

• If you’re a non-native writer of English, what aspects of the language do you find most challenging?

• If English is your native language, what aspects of English do you find that non-native users have trouble with in their writing?
Some Common Language Challenges

- Verb tenses
- Prepositions
- Articles (the, a, an)
- Sentence structure
- Sentence length
- Spacing
- Other
Some Strategies
Compiling Lists of Words and Phrases Commonly Used in Your Field
Writing Simply

• Relatively simple sentence structures
• Except for technical terms, mainly common words

• Advantages
  – Easier for you
  – Less chance of error
  – Easier for other non-native speakers to read
  – Quicker for everyone to read
Having People with a Strong Command of English Review Your Drafts

• Some possibilities
  – Supervisors, colleagues, and friends
  – Professional scientific editors

• Need not always be native speakers

• And not every native speaker is qualified

• Keep track of the revisions and learn from them
Other Strategies

- Read, read, read.
- Write, write, write.
- Other
Some Resources
Books Such as These

Scientific English
A Guide for Scientists and Other Professionals
Robert A. Day and Nancy Sakaduski

How to Write and Publish a Scientific Paper
Robert A. Day and Barbara Gastel
Videos, Podcasts, etc in Your Research Field

(especially good for pronunciation)
OneLook Dictionary Search
(definitions from multiple dictionaries)
Academic Phrasebank

The Academic Phrasebank is a general resource for academic writers. It aims to provide you with examples of some of the phraseological "nuts and bolts" of writing organised according to the main sections of a research paper or dissertation (see the menu on the left). Other phrases are listed under the more general communicative functions of academic writing.

The resource was designed primarily for academic and scientific writers who are non-native speakers of English. However, native speaker writers may still find much of the material helpful.

The phrases, and the headings under which they are listed, can be used simply to assist you in thinking about the content and organisation of your own writing, or the phrases can be incorporated into your writing where this is appropriate. In most cases, a certain amount of creativity and adaptation will be necessary when a phrase is used.

The Academic Phrasebank is not discipline specific. Nevertheless, it should be particularly useful for writers who need to report their empirical studies. The phrases are content neutral and generic in nature; in using them, therefore, you are not stealing other people's ideas and this does not constitute plagiarism. More about Academic Phrasebank.

This site was created by John Morley
In this study, X was found to cause ....
X provided the largest set of significant clusters of ....
It is interesting to note that in all seven cases of this study....

**Unexpected outcome**

Surprisingly, X was found to ....
Surprisingly, no differences were found in ....
One unanticipated finding was that ....
It is somewhat surprising that no X was noted in this condition ....
What is surprising is that ....
Contrary to expectations, this study did not find a significant difference between ....
However, the observed difference between X and Y in this study was not significant.
However, the ANOVA (one way) showed that these results were not statistically significant.
This finding was unexpected and suggests that ....

**Reference to previous research (support)**

This study produced results which corroborate the findings of a great deal of the previous work in this field.
The findings of the current study are consistent with those of Smith and
Grammar Girl

How to Make Weird Nouns Plural

Some simple rules will keep you from being confounded when you're trying to figure out how to make proper nouns such as "iPhone 5," "iPad 4S," and "Blackberry" plural.

Recent Tips

June 31, 2013

Are You Interurban?

When you split your time between the East Coast and the West Coast, you can call yourself "bicoastal." What about when you're splitting your time between two cities?

June 20, 2013

Retronyms: Scourge of the Language or Helpful Tool?

Would you care for some white milk with your black raisins?
“ESL Short Subjects”

- Guest presentations during 2011 Texas A&M Intensive Course in Research Writing
- Speaker: Susan Aiello, DVM (now editor, *Merck Veterinary Manual*)
- Topics: Verb Forms, Verb Tenses, Modals, Sentence Structure, Articles and Connecting Words, Developing an Academic Writing Style and Building English Vocabulary
AuthorAID

• Project mainly to help researchers in developing countries to write about and publish their work
• Includes materials helpful to researchers elsewhere too
  – From a Japanese scientist: “When it comes to scientific writing, every country is a developing country.”
• Designed for easy use by non-native speakers of English
AuthorAID: A Meta-Resource

• Resource Library—searchable by
  – Subject area (for example, writing scientific papers, preparing oral presentations, preparing poster presentations, writing grant proposals)
  – Resource type (for example, article or presentation)
  – Language

• Blog

• E-mail Discussion List

• Mentorships

• Other
Questions and Answers
Wishing you all the best!