

English Scientific Writing Workshop



Dear workshop participants,

I am sending this mail as a prelude to the English scientific writing workshop you will attend in May, to introduce myself and outline the aims and expectations for the course and some preparation I would ask you to carry out for it.

My name is Dr. John Chandler and I am a plant scientist with over 25 years' experience in plant research in the UK, Switzerland and Germany. I also have a degree in English Literature and German, a master's degree in the social sciences and a master's degree in translation Studies (German to English) and have a passion for writing and language. I have written many research papers and reviews and know how difficult it is to write well in English! I have taught workshops in scientific writing at several different German universities and research institutes.

The workshop in Milan will be on the 9 and 10 May, two full days, from 9.00 until about 17.00. I would like to emphasise that it is a *workshop* and not a series of lectures or a seminar; therefore, I invite and would like *active group participation*: the more that you raise questions, discussion points and actively participate, the more we have to discuss and the more fun it is for you if you direct some of the schedule.

Please do not worry or feel insecure about the quality of your English: as a group, you will have mixed abilities and experience. Instead, I hope you will learn something and improve your scientific writing ability and skills, irrespective of your language ability. As an introduction, we will together focus on the structure and content of a typical canonical scientific paper and its language, before looking at aspects of writing such as preposition use, verb use, transitioning, punctuation, writing fluidly and concisely, and style. We will perform some written exercises together on these topics and discuss different aspects. I will also expect you to do some writing yourself during the workshop and to write a short text to bring to the workshop, as outlined in the tasks section below. This will provide the basis for some of our activities as a group. Therefore, I would also ask you to carry out a couple of tasks between now and the workshop and to come prepared with these, so that we have more than enough material for the time (see below).

I look forward to meeting you in May, and hope that apart from being useful and productive, that the workshop will also be fun and enjoyable! If you have any queries or problems before the workshop, please don't hesitate to contact me at:

john.chandler@uni-koeln.de

Institut für Entwicklungsbiologie,
Biozentrum Köln
Universität zu Köln,
Zùlpicher Strasse 47b,
50785 Köln, Germany.

Workshop concept: to raise awareness of all the component aspects involved in effective scientific paper writing in the natural sciences, especially tailored to the non-native English speaker. The two-day workshop focuses on the structure and style of a canonical scientific research paper as a model, including the stylistic and linguistic aspects of the different component sections.

The workshop is intended to be interactive and for students to be as proactive as possible in their participation and actively encouraged to discuss and raise questions. The small group size is ideal for intensive group participation and to learn from each other.

A major focus of the workshop consists of an individualised approach and uses material supplied by the participants, e.g., an abstract or short piece of scientific writing from part of a thesis or from the draft of a manuscript. These texts will be shared among the group for illustrative purposes and worked on via beamer, thus representing a personalised and highly interactive approach. Group editing allows participants to relate what they have learnt on other parts of the workshop to their own writing activities and raises new aspects for discussion. The intention is for students to effectively learn from each other and to improve future writing ability. The ability to critically evaluate others' writing is applicable to scientific literature in general and is a wider implication of the workshop.

Topics covered:

- The conventions and linguistic characteristics of academic scientific writing as a formal genre
- Microelements of writing, including prepositions and punctuation
- Optimum verb use (passive vs. active; formal register; tenses)
- Plagiarism and how to avoid it, by paraphrasing
- Conventions for the use of abbreviations and units
- Writing concisely and eliminating redundancy
- Macroelements of writing: sentence/paragraph structure, transitioning vocabulary, flow, style, syntax.
- Publishing: impact factors, considerations, journal choice, marketing linguistically and optimally.

The concept is to begin by thinking about the microelements of writing, such as prepositions and verbs and to progress to considering more macroelements. By the end of the workshop, the aim is to raise awareness and to have provided a structure that encompasses as many aspects as possible with respect to writing science texts effectively. Additional general aims are to enhance writing confidence and to show that good writing is enjoyable and achievable!

The workshop consists of discussions, short seminar-style instruction, many group activities in terms of hands-on exercises in the language elements mentioned above. The workshop topics are summarised in a ca. 70-page handbook as a resource for future reference.

Tasks:

- 1) Please read the paper enclosed as an attachment. It is a typical plant research paper and I would like to use it during the workshop to illustrate various aspects of writing and it would be useful if you could familiarise yourself with it before the workshop. I would also like to use this as a basis for critically discussing a scientific paper. This is a paper on plants merely as an example of a canonical research article. Do not concentrate on the content, but rather look at the style and *how* things are expressed. Please also make some notes on the accompanying form relating to the paper, under the specific headings, which we can use as a basis for a starting discussion on scientific writing as a genre.
- 2) Secondly, I would like each of you to write and to bring an example of a scientific text. This doesn't have to be a long piece of prose, but something that we can analyse and discuss as a group, so I would ask you bring a photocopy of it for everyone and a digital version, so that we can use a beamer to analyse it as a group and make edits and improvements (I hope none of you will mind sharing examples of your writing as a group). An abstract for a masters project or your current PhD project or the abstract from a conference presentation is fine as an example, including a thought-out title and including the normal components of an abstract: what the project is, the aim of the work, how was it done, take-home message and conclusions etc.

Alternatively, some of you might have a different piece of writing – part a paper you are currently writing, or some of your thesis, or part of a discussion from a master's thesis etc. It might be useful to have different examples of writing to illustrate different parts of a paper, styles of different sections etc. I leave it up to you, but I would rather have an example of your own writing and not something that has been polished or edited by a group or your supervisor, and nothing already published, so that we have some material with mistakes to illustrate different aspects of scientific writing – the more mistakes, the better!

I hope these tasks are not too time-consuming in addition to your other work, but please attempt them seriously. Please also feel free to bring any other examples of work that you might have that would benefit the group if we were to look more closely at them, or any specific queries or problems you might have in terms of English scientific writing as a whole. We will have plenty of time for such things as these are useful as you can learn as much from each other as from me.

I very much look forward to meeting you as a group in May, and hope that apart from being useful and productive, that the workshop will also be fun and that you will enjoy it!

Many best wishes,

John Chandler