

Advice for new authors

Many authors already have an idea of what they would like to write about, perhaps their own research, some example or application that has caught their interest, or the maths behind some current events.

When writing your piece it is important to have a clear idea about what you want to say, and in particular, what you hope the reader will remember. If they were telling someone about your article, perhaps around the proverbial water cooler, what key pieces of information do you hope they remember? Having a clear idea of this will help focus your piece and give it direction.

Think about your audience

Who is your audience? Picture them in your mind and imagine telling them your story in whatever tone would be appropriate. Anticipate their questions and answer them. Enjoy telling them what is interesting about your topic.

An article is a two-way conversation between the writer and the reader. The writer needs to know what they want to say, what they would like the reader to remember from the piece. And as someone reads the article questions will arise in their mind – why is this important? How does that work? What do they mean by xxx? And ideally the writer will anticipate some of the readers questions and address them in the piece.

Keep your sentences short

This doesn't mean that all your sentences have to be the same length. Mix up short sentences with long ones, but experts say you should aim for 15 to 20 words a sentence, on average.

One fact per sentence, one idea per paragraph

The best way to keep your sentences short is to follow the rule of one important fact per sentence, perhaps with an additional subclause giving context. Similarly, keep your paragraph short: when you move on to a new idea, start a new paragraph.

Read the first sentence from each paragraph in sequence

Reading the first sentence of each paragraph in sequence should make sense, almost like a synopsis of your whole piece. The paragraphs should be in a logical order, and the first sentence of each should pull the reader along.. This tool highlights the importance of the structure of the whole piece, and of the structure of each paragraph.

Put the important stuff at the beginning... or the end

Start with something old, end with something new

You can apply these principles to the structure of a sentence, a paragraph, and even to the whole document. Thinking about the beginning and end of sentences and paragraphs improves the flow of reading. Remember that as the reader scans the page their eye is pulled to the beginning and end of paragraphs, particularly the opening sentence – use this to draw the reader in.

Use an active voice, rather than a passive one

An active sentence is one that starts with the subject: “The dog ate my homework” is active, while “My homework was eaten by the dog” is passive. Active sentences are usually clearer and more engaging.

This isn't a hard and fast rule, sometimes it is appropriate to use passive verbs – they might sound less extreme, more polite, or just sound better. Let your ear have the final say. When you read your sentence out loud, decide which sounds better regardless of any rules.

Watch your language

Jargon: Speak your audience's language. Don't assume they know the technical terms used in your field. Try to minimise technical and non-technical jargon, and only use technical terms if absolutely necessary. Ask yourself: Does your reader really need to know that term? Is there a colloquial term that will do?

Nounifications: The real term is *nominalisation* – when you turn a verb into a noun. For example:

*“The researchers **conducted an investigation** into the effect of GM crops...”*

When a nominalisation – a noun - is used instead of a verb it sounds as if nothing is happening. Nominalisations, like passive verbs, can make writing sound dull and lifeless. Rewriting this sentence with the verb:

*“The researchers **investigated** the effects of GM crops...”*

makes the sentence sound more lively.

Be correct

Your article might be the only information the reader will read on this subject – make sure the facts they are taking away with them are correct. This includes your explanation of the research, and also the spelling of names, the dates and locations of events, and all figures and measurements in your document.

Don't avoid difficult ideas – examples and metaphors are your friends

Don't simplify the science, simplify the writing.

Attracting attention

We don't expect everyone to read every single article in Plus, and indeed few people would read a magazine, newspaper or journal cover to cover. You need to attract readers' attention and draw them into reading your article.

There are a number of ways you can do this. The title of the piece, often the only thing that will make it to a contents page or is listed in search engine, needs to give the reader enough information to make them want to click that link to read more. It can be brief but informative (example), it can be witty or funny (example) (but make sure it isn't to cringeworthy), or it can be intriguing (example), making the reader want to learn more. The same principles apply to abstract or one line description of your article that might appear alongside the title.

The editors of the publication should also help with (or possibly decide on) the title and abstracts for your piece. They will also produce the layout of your article. On Plus we feel it is very important to have images and illustrations throughout articles, and make use of any multimedia available. Pictures not only make articles visually attractive, they also serve to break up and frame the text on the page, giving the mind a chance to pause on a picture and absorb what they have just read, before moving on. Also think about the medium you are writing for – if the publication is printed in black and white, make sure your images and figures can be reproduced in grayscale without losing information (eg. don't refer to the blue lines!). If the publication is online, do you have any movies, sound files, animations that can be included in your article, and can you suggest any links to material elsewhere that would be good for further information for your readers. If you are working with radio, what soundscapes would complement your piece?

Other things to think about:

- **Does 'it', 'this', them' and 'that' mean what you think they do?**
- **Beware of empty words:** actually, really, very, own, with regard to, in the case that - see if you can leave them out
- **Check that your brackets, commas and dashes around subclauses are in pairs**
- **Check all apostrophes**
- **Take care that persons and tenses agree, that singular and plurals match**