Are You Fuzzy About Clear Writing?

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This is a series of tips published in UMMS Research News about writing proposals.

Every grant reviewer you speak to will attest to the importance of clear writing, but what does it mean to write clearly? Most unclear writing is caused by unclear thinking.

Here are some ways to enhance the clarity of your wording.

- **Visualize, describe, and then apply logic.** The process of thinking may be random and pictorial, but the process of writing is linear. So begin with visualizing your study and describing it in words, then go back and apply linear logic to what you have written, including effective arguments with evidence (e.g., literature references, prior experiences, preliminary data). Headers and subheaders (from your outline) will help the reader follow the logic of your thinking.
- Part of clear is being concise and clean. Concise writing isn’t necessarily brief, but economical. We often get carried away with redundancies and verbose language.

  - While varied sentence length keeps the reader’s interest, try to keep sentences under 20 words. (The average sentence size has been steadily shrinking from Elizabethan times - an extreme example is texting!)

  - Try shorter words, e.g., "use" instead of "utilization."

  - Use words precisely, e.g., "not fabricable" is too vague; the writer really means "cracks when it is cold processed."

  - Just say it, no need for meta-discourse. Cut out unnecessary words, "we would like to take this opportunity to propose" becomes "we propose."

  - Shorten those paragraphs. Lots of short paragraphs with the use of headers and subheaders are much better than long paragraphs that include multiple topics.

触及到空间时，编辑时使最后一行或两行多余的词从段落的结尾移动到前一行，从而节省垂直空间。

- Stick to the point! Everything described in the proposal relates back to your aims or hypothesis. This gets tricky when you do a lot of cutting and pasting. Have someone else read it!

- Think argumentative speech writing: One of the best ways I (inadvertently) prepared to write grant proposals was argumentative speech writing, which I studied as an undergraduate student.

  Argument is mainly about logical appeals and involves claims, evidence, warrants, backing, and counter arguments - convincing the reviewers through critical thinking that what you are proposing is logical, significant and feasible.

- Be careful with jargon: Not all reviewers will be specialists in your field, so do not make assumptions, e.g., "Critical theory seeks to problematize the hegemonic reification of oppressed stratified social constructs." Really? Unless you were a specialist in critical theory this sentence has little meaning.

Clear, concise writing takes time and thought.

"Vigorous writing is concise. A sentence should contain no unnecessary words, a paragraph no unnecessary sentences, for the same reason that a drawing should have no unnecessary lines and a machine no unnecessary parts."

- William Strunk, Jr. (author of Elements of Style)

References:
**Critical Thinking**

**Critical Thinking Is the Road to Clear**