In the Lancet's 2014 series about preventing waste in biomedical research, Paul Glasziou et al. pointed to "poorly written text" as a major reason a staggering 50% of biomedical reports are unusable [1], effectively squandering the research behind them. According to psycholinguist Steven Pinker [2], bad academic writing persists partly because there aren’t many incentives for scholars to change their ways:

Few academic journals stipulate clarity among their criteria for acceptance, and few reviewers and editors enforce it. While no academic would confess to shoddy methodology or slapdash reading, many are blasé about their incompetence at writing.

He adds:

Enough already. Our indifference to how we share the fruits of our intellectual labors is a betrayal of our calling to enhance the spread of knowledge. In writing badly, we are wasting each other’s time, sowing confusion and error, and turning our profession into a laughingstock.

The problem of impenetrable academese is undeniable. How do we fix it?

In “Writing Intelligible English Prose for Biomedical Journals,” John Ludbrook proposes seven strategies [3]:

- greater emphasis on good writing by students in schools and by university schools,
- making use of university service courses and workshops on writing plain and scientific English,
- consulting books on science writing,
- one-on-one mentoring,
- using “scientific” measures to reveal lexical poverty (i.e., readability metrics),
- making use of freelance science editors, and
- encouraging the editors of biomedical journals to pay more attention to the problem.

Many institutions have implemented at least some of these strategies. For instance, SFU’s graduate student orientation in summer 2014 introduced incoming students to the library’s writing facilitators and open writing commons. And at UBC, Eric Jandciu, strategist for teaching and learning initiatives in the Faculty of Science, has developed communication courses and resources specifically for science students, training them early in their careers “to stop thinking of communication as separate from their science.” [4]

Although improving scholars’ writing is a fine enough goal, the growth in the past fifteen years of research interdisciplinarity [5], where experts from different fields contribute their strengths to a project,
has me wondering whether we would be more productive if we took the responsibility of writing entirely away from researchers. Rather than forcing academics to hone a weak skill, maybe we’d be better off bringing in communications professionals whose writing is already sharp.

This model is already a reality in several ways (though not all of them aboveboard):

- Many journals encourage authors to have their papers professionally edited before submission [6]. From personal experience, I can confirm that this “editing” can involve heavy rewriting.
- The pharmaceutical industry has long used ghostwriters to craft journal articles on a researcher’s behalf, turning biomedical journals into marketing vehicles [7]. We could avoid the ethical problems this arrangement poses—including plagiarism and conflict of interest—with a more transparent process that reveals a writer’s identity and affiliations.
- Funding bodies such as CIHR have begun emphasizing the importance of integrated knowledge translation (KT) [8], to ensure knowledge users have timely access to research findings. Although much of KT focuses on disseminating research knowledge to stakeholders outside of academia, including patients, practitioners, and policy makers, reaching fellow researchers is also an important objective.

To ensure high-quality publications, Glasziou et al. suggest the following:

Many research institutions already employ grants officers to increase research input, but few employ a publication officer to improve research outputs, including attention to publication ethics and research integrity, use of reporting guidelines, and development of different publication models such as open access. Ethics committees and publication officers could also help to ensure that all research methods and results are completely and transparently reported and published.

Such a publication officer would effectively serve as an in-house editor and production manager. Another possibility is for each group or department to hire an in-house technical communicator. Technical communicators are trained in interviewing subject matter experts and using that information to draft documents for diverse audiences. In the age of big data, one could also make a convincing case for hiring a person who specializes in data visualization to create images and animations that complement the text.

That said, liberating scientists from writing should not absolve them of the responsibility of learning how to communicate. At a minimum, they would still need to understand the publication process enough to effectively convey their ideas to the writers.

Separating out the communication function within research would also raise questions about whether we should also abolish the research–teaching–service paradigm on which academic tenure is based. If we leave the writing to strong writers, perhaps only strong teachers should teach and only strong administrators should administrate.

Universities’ increasing dependence on sessional and adjunct faculty is a hint that this fragmentation is already happening [9], though in a way that reinforces institutional hierarchies and keeps these contract workers from being fairly compensated. If these institutions continue to define ever more specialized roles, whether for dedicated instructors, publication officers, or research communicators, they’ll have to reconsider how best to acknowledge these experts’ contributions so that they feel their skills are appropriately valued.

**SOURCES**


This post was adapted from a paper I wrote for one of my courses. I don’t necessarily believe that a technical communication-type workflow is the way to go, but the object of the assignment was to explore a few “what-if” situations, and I thought this topic was close enough to editing and publishing to share here.