


Do you remember these? What colours do you see?



# Ambiguity and Vagueness: How to avoid them

ENGLISH FOR ACADEMIC RESEARCH

Adrian Wallwork

## English for Writing Research Papers

*Second Edition*

 Springer



REJECTED

Why do papers get rejected?  
Too much mental effort.

- 1 Long convoluted complex sentences
- 2 Redundancy
- 3 Words in the wrong order
- 4 Massively long paragraphs
- 5 **Ambiguity and lack of clarity**



What is this?





And this?



**Which is more immediately understandable?**



Concrete



Abstract



# Why do some authors use so many abstract terms?

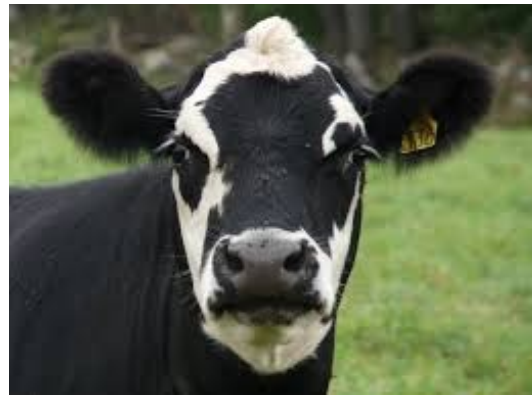


They don't really understand the importance and relevance of what they are writing.



Ask yourself:

What is important about my work? What is new about it?  
What real contribution am I making?



You can only write in a concrete way if you know the answers to those questions.

Ensure you use specific examples to explain the importance of your work.





The problems of  
imprecision and  
vague writing





What is a “novel”  
approach?

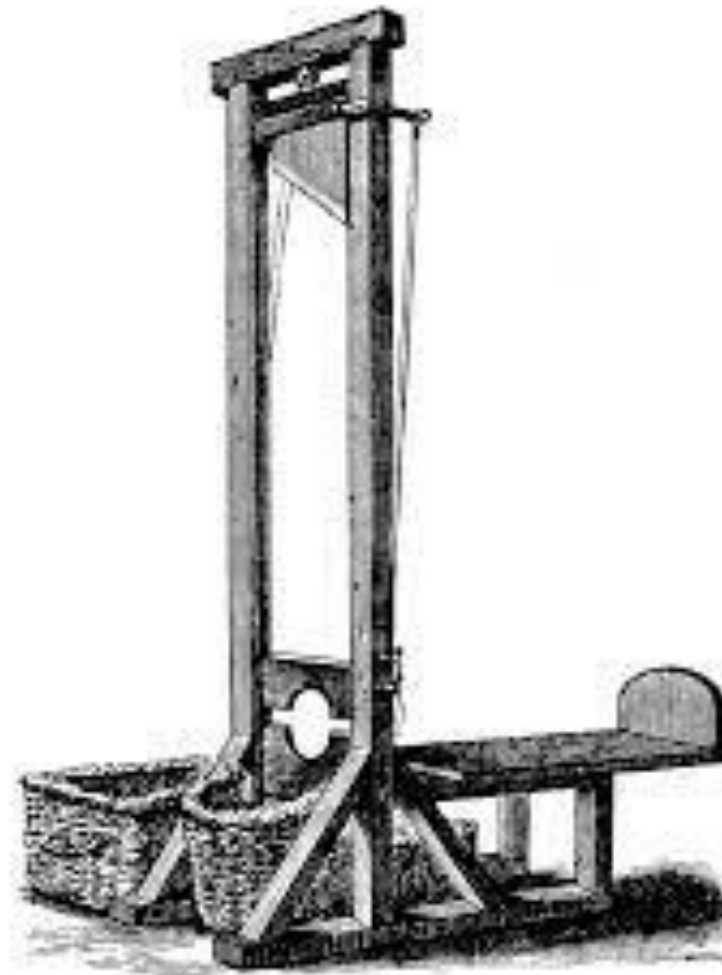




# Imprecision – why?

Robespierre was killed at the same place as King Louis XVI, Georges Danton, and Camille Desmoulins.

There are several reasons why such geographical areas are being impacted at the moment.





# Precision

Robespierre was **guillotined** at the same **Place de la Révolution** where his **enemies** King Louis XVI, Georges Danton, and Camille Desmoulins had been **executed**.

There are **three** reasons why **remote islands** currently have high levels of **infection**.



Printed by J. Bays

Engraved by James Scharspila

## THE DEATH OF ROBESPIERRE

Who was guillotined in Paris the 28<sup>th</sup> July 1793, after being thrown from his bloody Throne, endeavouring to escape from that punishment to

## LA MORT DE ROBESPIERRE

Qui fut guillotiné à Paris le 28 Juillet 1793, après avoir été renversé de son Trône sanglant, et cherchant à éviter le Supplice; auquel sans

Robespierre was **killed** at the same **place** as King Louis XVI, Georges Danton, and Camille Desmoulins.

There are **several** reasons why such **geographical areas** are being **impacted** *at the moment*.

Robespierre was **guillotined** at the same **Place de la Révolution** where his **enemies** King Louis XVI, Georges Danton, and Camille Desmoulins had been **executed**.

There are **three** reasons why **remote islands** *currently* have high levels of **infection**.



**Understand what is important about  
your research.**

**You will then be able to keep your paper and  
your presentation simple and clear.**

**If YOU don't understand the  
importance, how will your READER  
understand?**

## Moral of the story so far

Don't fill your paper or your oral presentation with abstract words and ideas.

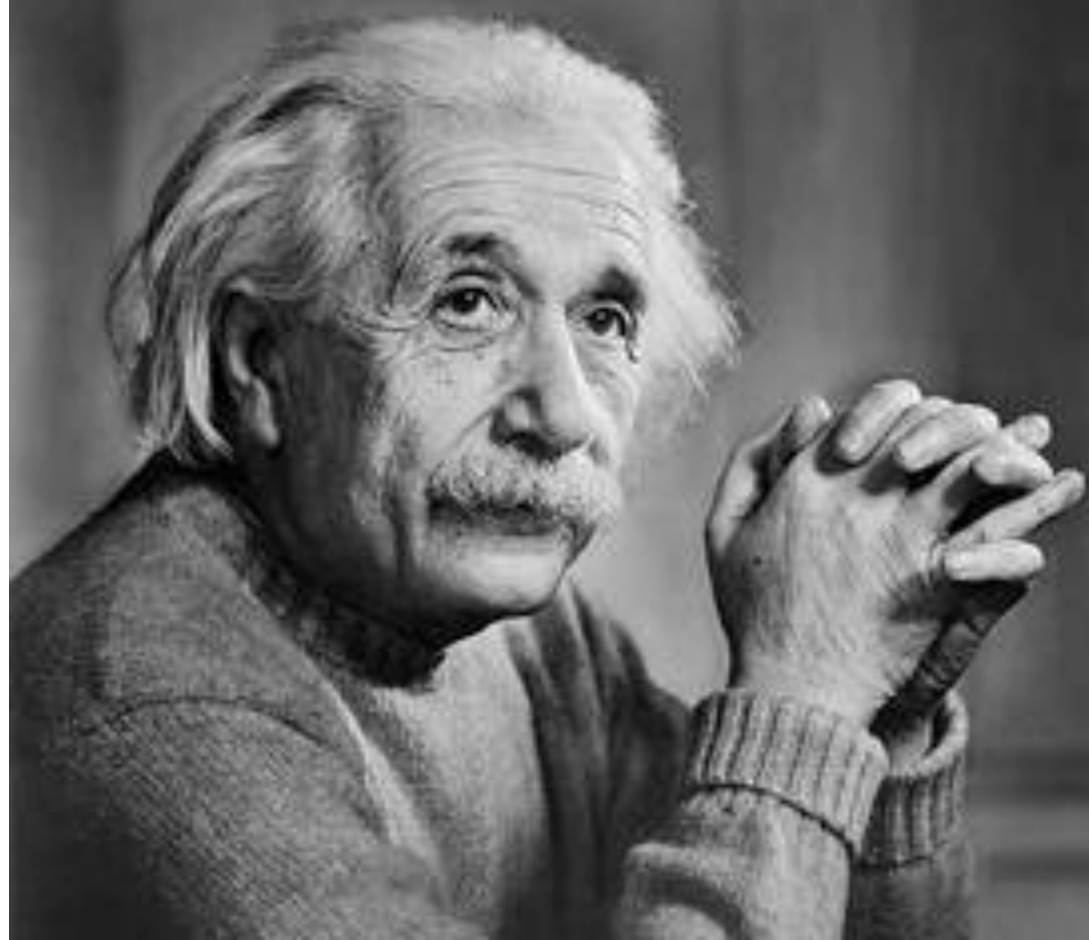
Avoid adjectives.

Do not be **vague**.

Write and speak using the simplest most direct / specific terminology.

If you can't explain it **simply**, you  
don't understand it well enough.

– Albert Einstein



# Writing clearly so that your audience has minimal mental effort is not just an English thing.

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nale e internazionale.

Poichè L'Ordine Nuovo non si propone di fare opera di accademica cultura, ma si preoccupa di fare del sano proselitismo socialista e si rivolge specialmente agli operai ed ai giovani, i compagni sono pregati di scrivere in modo semplice, vivace e concettoso, che a un tempo stimoli le energie mentali dei lettori senza richiedere da essi uno sforzo inadeguato. I collaboratori devono partire dal presupposto che, in fatto di cultura specifica, la mente dei lettori sia quasi una *tabula rasa*, e devono quindi rivolgersi al loro buon senso, possibilmente richiamandosi a quei più elementari concetti che sono ai lettori familiari, perchè offerti dalla loro propria limitata, ma spontanea esperienza.

Si fa appello alla buona volontà dei compagni, spe-

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## GRAMSCI (Marxist philosopher, writer, politician)

I compagni sono pregati di scrivere in modo semplice ... che a un tempo stimoli le energie mentali dei lettori senza richiedere loro uno sforzo inadeguato.

**Comrades, please write in a simple way .. that stimulates the mental energy of the readers, but without forcing them to make too much effort.**



**Ambiguity:**  
being open to  
more than  
one  
interpretation;  
inexactness

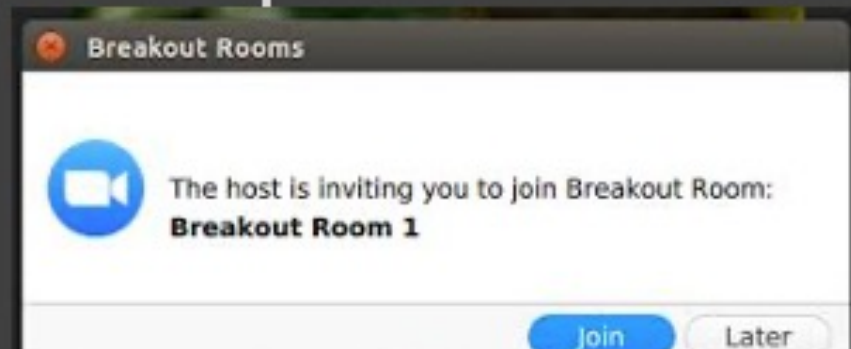


Message on golf course: Any persons (except players) caught collecting golf balls on this course will be prosecuted and have their balls removed.



46

# Breakout



- They delivered food **in a large box** to the elderly residents living locally.
- He had enormous black eyebrows, a moustache and a short beard, **and like Sandra** he had dark brown hair.

**Put the elements in a sentence  
in the most logical order.**

**Make sure subjects are next to  
their verbs.**

# Avoid gerunds (-ing) unless the subject is clear.

If you take your dog in the car don't let him hang out of a window **while driving**.

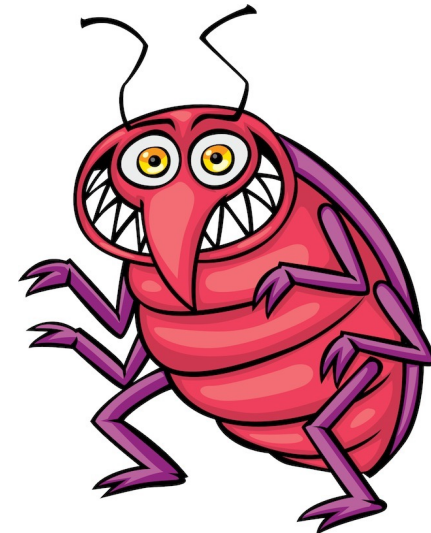


**Gerunds don't have subjects so  
they can be ambiguous**

**I found a bug using the software.**

[bug = defect + insect]

**While I was using the software I  
found a bug.**





# Ambiguity with gerund

Inflation should go down **reducing** taxes.

Does this mean inflation will go down :

- a) **before** taxes are reduced
- b) **after** taxes have been reduced
- c) ????



# Ambiguity with gerund

Inflation will go down **reducing** taxes.

First taxes will be reduced and then inflation will go down.

Inflation will go down **by reducing** taxes.

Inflation will go down first and then taxes will go down.

Inflation will go down, **thus reducing** taxes.

# Ambiguity with gerund

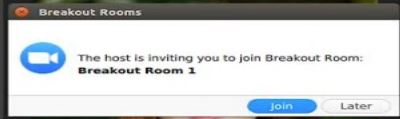
Inflation will go down, **thus reducing** taxes.

**THUS** + gerund = and the consequence is / and then (temporal) [hence, therefore, so]

Inflation will go down **by reducing** taxes.

**BY** + gerund = this is how it will happen

# Breakout



You are not allowed to take anything longer than 1.5 m.

You cannot bend or cut the tube.



2 m steel tube

When you are back in the main room, post your answer in the chat.



**Where is the ambiguity?**

A woman was carrying a 2 meter long steel tube for her house. She had had it for six months.



**Moral of the Story: Avoid using :**  
***it, they, this, that, one* and *the***  
***former/latter***

**Instead, repeat the word that  
these pronouns refer to**

When *the former/latter* is OK

There are two countries involved  
in the project: France and Italy.  
The latter initiated the  
collaboration in 2020.

There is no possible ambiguity in  
the above sentence.

When *the former/latter* is not OK

There are two countries involved  
in the project: France and Italy.  
Blah blah blah blah blah  
blah blah blah blah blah blah  
blah blah blah blah blah blah  
blah blah blah blah blah blah  
blah blah blah blah. **The**  
**latter initiated the collaboration in**  
**2020.**





**What should I tell my doctor BEFORE starting HUMIRA?**

**Also tell your doctor about all the medicines you take.** You should not take HUMIRA with ORENCIA® (abatacept), KINERET® (anakinra), REMICADE® (infliximab), ENBREL® (etanercept), CINZIA® (cortizolizumab pegol), or SIMPONI® (golimumab). Tell your doctor if you have ever used RITUXIMAB (rituximab), JAKINZA® (sulfasalazine), or PURINETHOL® (mercaptopurine, 6-MP).

Wheat J. L. MURRAY ET AL.

**Common side effects of HUMIRA include injection site reactions (pain, redness, rash, swelling, itching, and bruising), upper respiratory infections (sinus infections, rhinitis, sore throat, and cough), and nausea.** These are not all of the possible side effects with HUMIRA. Tell your doctor if you have any side effect that bothers you or that does not go away.

IN THE BEGINNING  
no space and no punctuation

NOW  
reader has no time to read  
everything





In ancient times, medieval times, and probably until the advent of the internet, people **started** reading from the **top of page 1** and read **each word and sentence horizontally** across the page.

They made a **lot of effort** while reading. They felt it was **their responsibility** to understand.

# Today you **CANNOT CONTROL:**

- Where readers will start or finish
- How they move their eyes - horizontally or vertically
- Whether they will read everything that you have written
- Whether they will read chronologically

## So, repeating key words is not bad style.

# It is ESSENTIAL.



Writing clearly so that your audience has minimal mental effort is not just an English thing.

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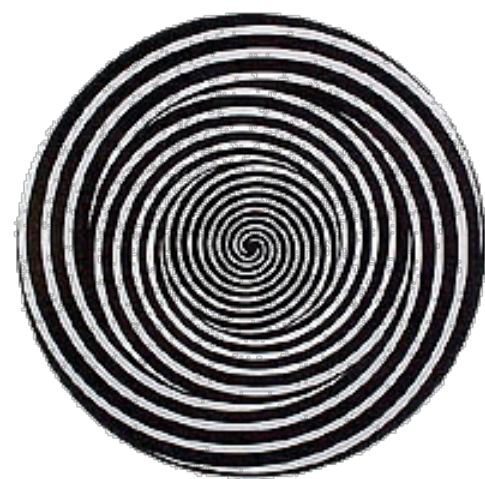


**GRAMSCI (Marxist philosopher, writer, politician)**

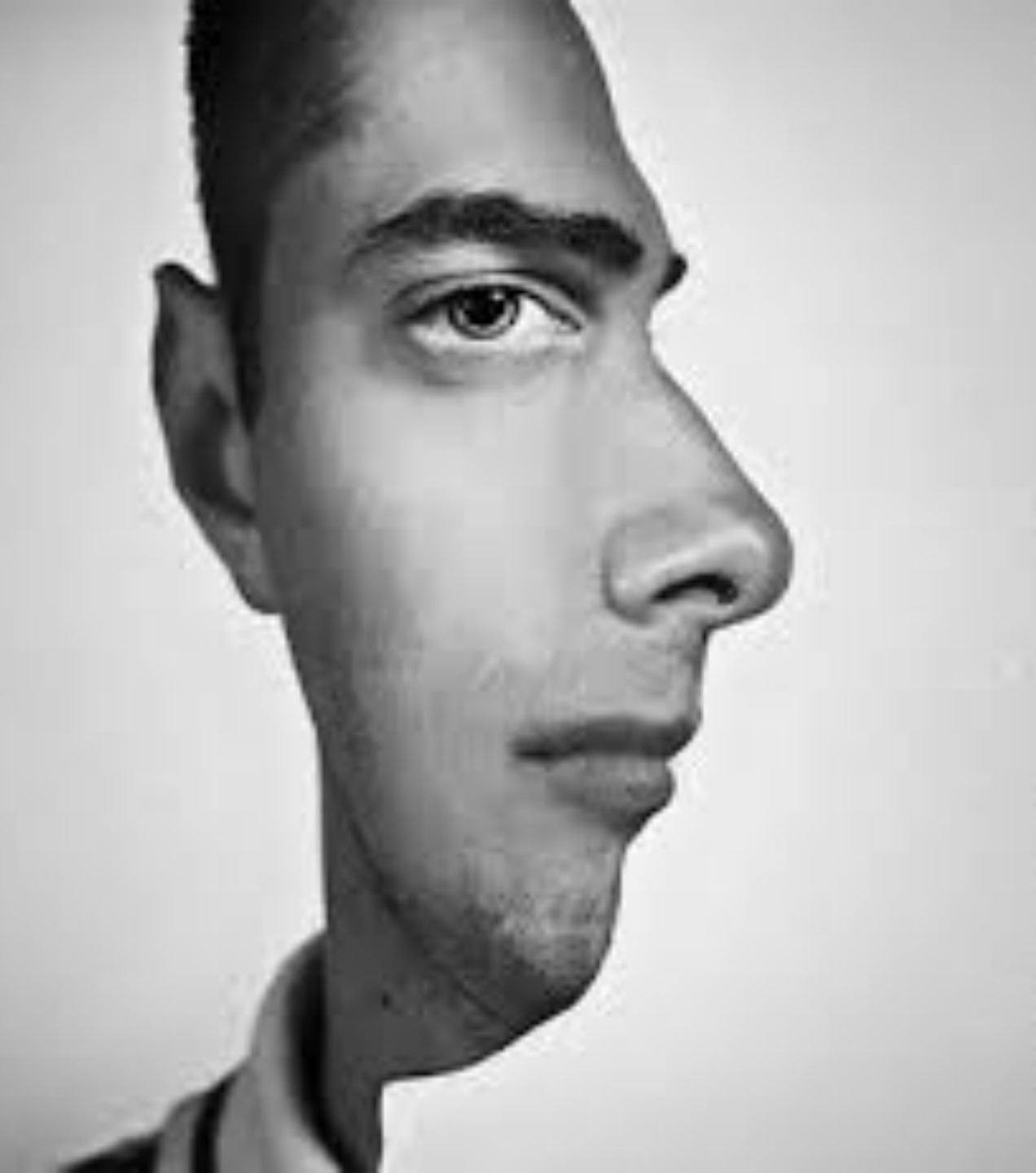
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**Comrades, please write in a simple way ... Stimulate the mental energy of the readers. But don't force them to make too much effort.**









keep it  
simple.

keep it simple.

*keep it simple*

Keep it  
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KEEP IT SIMPLE



# Keep It Simple Quiz

**At the beginning of a presentation:** a) Hi  
b) Good Morning  
c) Other (what?)

**When addressing Saxon Baines, a fellow researcher, in an email:** a) Dear Saxon Baines  
b) Dear Mr Baines  
c) Dear Baines Saxon

**When concluding an email:**  
a) I look forward to hear from you.  
b) Best regards



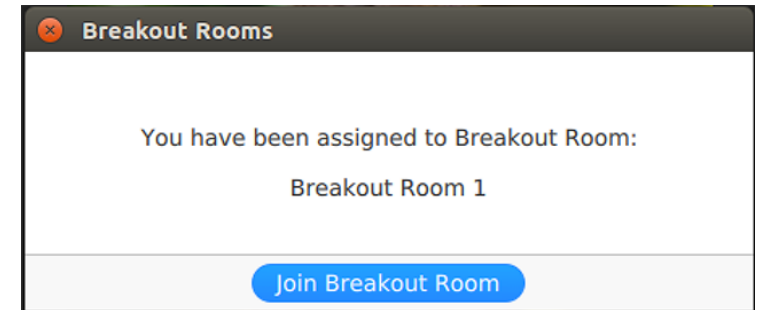
1 Year first email sent? a) 1971 b) 1976 c) 1981 d) 1986

2 For each statement (a, b, c) in an email do men (M) or women (W):

- a) Ask more questions, make more offers / suggestions
- b) Make diplomatic assertions, use polite expressions
- c) Share more info, admit to not knowing something

3 What makes Japanese smileys different from Western smileys? Smiley = :)

4 What is **d**railing? a) emailing while **d**runk b) emailing / messaging while **d**riving c) **d**rafting possibly 'dangerous' emails and waiting prudently before hitting 'send'



1 First email **1971**



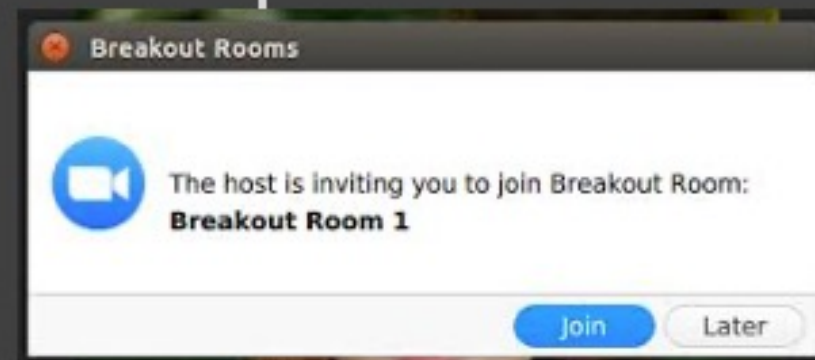
2 a) W b) W c) W

3 (^\_^) smiley  
(>\_<) pain or failure  
(-\_-)zzzz good night  
(-\_-) restrained anger



# 86

# Breakout



What should you do when you have finished writing your paper?

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What you  
probably want  
to do and  
**SHOULD** do





What you  
**should** do.



Cut drastically – words, sentences, paragraphs, tables, figures, even subsections.

Only leave what readers need to know.

You can probably delete 25% without removing useful content.





You will discover  
the joy of  
destruction.





And your referees  
and your readers  
will be very happy!

Key message from this course

**Write less.**

What other important things should you do when you have finished writing your paper?



# Spelling

49



According to research at  
Cambridge University

- What can you conclude?



*Checklist for consistency across reviews.* To help provide consistency across reviews, OSPREY will ask you to answer the following questions. These answers are not conveyed directly to the author.

**1. Do the title and abstract clearly indicate the content of the paper?**

Yes/No

**2. Does the Introduction explicitly state the aims/hypotheses of the work and why it was done?**

Yes/No

**3. Are the methods valid and is there enough information that the study could be repeated by someone else?**

Yes/No

**4. Are all results fully justified using appropriate statistics, tables or figures?**

Yes/No

**5. Are the findings explicitly put in context with the literature to demonstrate their relevance to aquatic science?**

Yes/No

**6. How do you rate the quality of the science?**

Experimentally and/or theoretically excellent, with no flaws/Competent, with no major flaws/Mostly competent, but with some flaws that can be remedied/Weak, with major flaws or inconsistencies/Very

<http://www.publish.csiro.au/media/client/mfrefsinfo.pdf>

Get a  
referee's  
report sheet  
and use it as  
a checklist  
for your own  
paper



## Check:

- paragraphs are not too long
- concordance
- letter to editor

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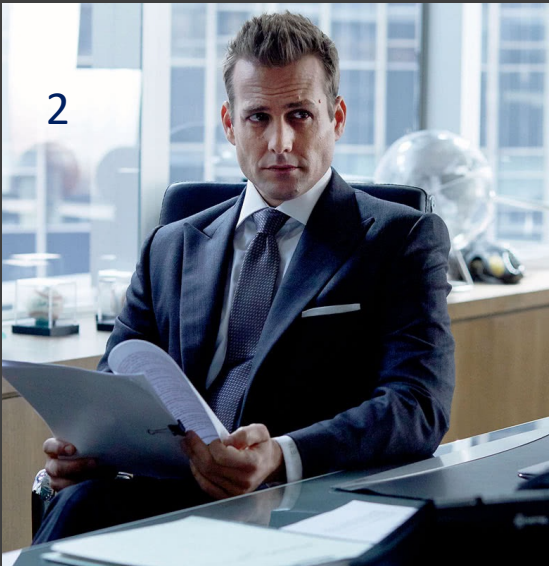
Get colleagues to check too.  
But just **SPECIFIC** parts of the  
paper.



# For every paragraph you write, ask yourself:



- Will the reader understand why I have done x,y,z?
- Will the reader understand why it is important?



Make your paper look like it has already been published by your chosen journal

Title – of similar type and length as journal

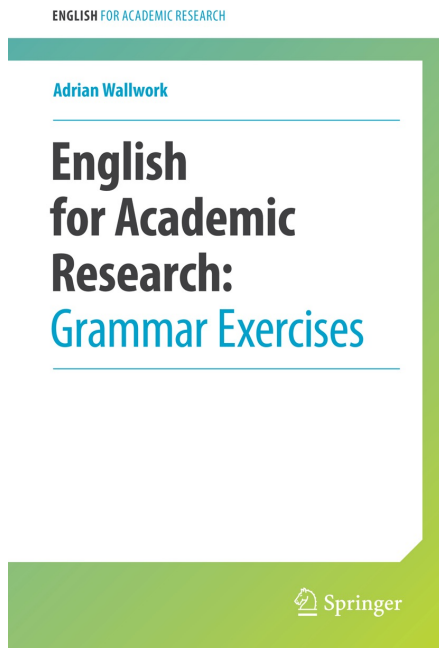
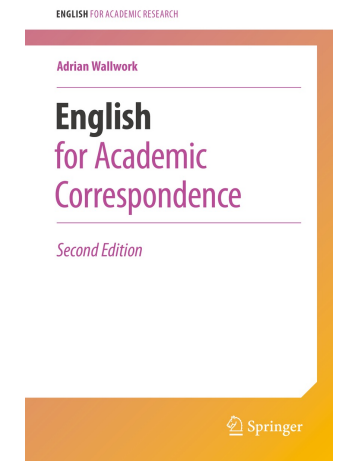
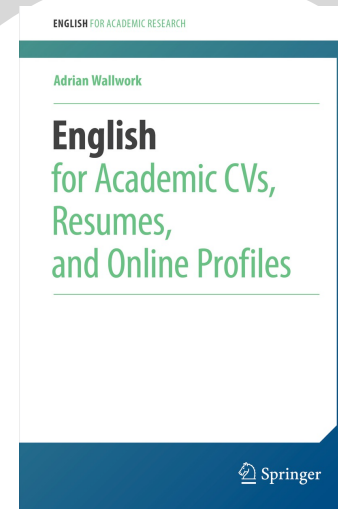
Length of each section

Use of headings and subheadings

Structure of each section – particularly the abstract

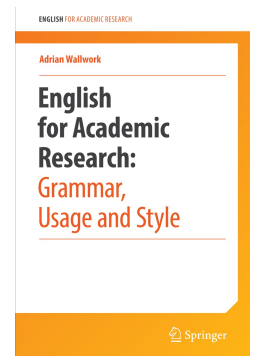
Content of Conclusions / Last paragraphs of Discussion

Layout: use of white space and length of paragraphs



3 tips that you've learned from this course about:

- writing
- presentations
- email
- life ???





**Presentations:** Only follow my advice if you feel comfortable. There is not just ONE solution.

**Papers and Emails:**  
Trust me!

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### **In general**

- Feel responsible towards your audience and readers
- Don't overthink
- Don't try to be too clever
- Always give lots of examples
- Prepare for different situations
  - not everything will always follow the same pattern

Key message: empathy  
and respect

Empathy is **NOT** just  
being polite, listening,  
smiling, hugging

Think about what you  
would like to read ,  
what you would like to  
see.

# FINAL THOUGHTS

Do not put **yourself** first - - understand what your readers/listeners **need** and will make them **happy**

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Stop thinking that someone who doesn't do what you want is **by default an imbecile**.

Do **not** put **yourself** first - - understand what your readers/listeners **need** and will make them **happy**

Stop thinking that someone who doesn't do what you want is **by default an imbecile**.

Do not go into **defensive mode** when you are criticized or when someone says something you don't agree with. Instead, **listen**.



Do not put **yourself** first - - understand what your readers/listeners **need** and will make them **happy**

Stop thinking that someone who doesn't do what you want is **by default** an imbecile.

Do not go into **defensive mode** when you are criticized or when someone says something you don't agree with. Instead, **listen**.

Challenge the **myths** of how we communicate: stop thinking about being a **scientist** and start thinking about improving your **communication** and understanding what is **interesting** and what is not

Finally: Have fun and people will have fun with you. Help people and they will help you in return.

**Thank you!**

*The End*

**Contact me for paper editing**