



Concision: the art of linguistic liposuction

by Bob Johnson (*wordfixer@yahoo.com*)

Previously published in *Science Editor* 28(4): 134–135. July/August 2005.

“Murder your darlings.”

—Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch

A sundial in the corner of a garden not far from here bears this epigram on its base: “The moving finger writes, and, having writ, moves on: Nor all your piety nor wit shall lure it back to cancel half a line, nor all your tears wash out a word of it.”

Despite the antique usage, for me those 34 words of Omar Khayyam distill the brevity of life, the finality of death, and the regret over roads untaken—and mistaken—in a way longer writings do not. They succeed as an example of the power of language to capture an idea succinctly.

Editors are paid to render writing more efficient—to “boil that cabbage down”, in the words of the old fiddle tune. But how do we do this without writing “stick-English” (think of the stick-figures in art class) or resorting to a metronomic “procession of neat monosyllables”, as Amy Einsohn expresses it in *The Copyeditor’s Handbook*? How do we compress our authors’ ideas into their irreducible but still graceful components?

Here are a few suggestions for walking the line between paucity and gratuitousness.

Prune pointless adjectives

Consider: A tall skyscraper (do you ever see a short one?); my personal opinion (do you ever have an impersonal one?); in close proximity (is proximity ever remote?). Not every oak has to be gnarled or every problem thorny. And what is a guarantee if not absolute?

Strike empty adverbs

Where possible, delete vacuous modifiers and what Sir Ernest Gowers (in *Plain Words: Their*

Contents

Concision: the art of linguistic liposuction ..1
Editorial: Ten years of editorializing2
STC’s vision and mission.....2
Book Review: Undergraduate Writing in Psychology4
Book review: Together with Technology5
Fun on the Web9
Discussion groups9

ABC calls “adverbial dressing gowns”)—in such couplets as completely unique, wholly unjustifiable, thoroughly mistaken, woefully inadequate. Have the courage to leave a word unmodified. If a word is too weak to stand alone, scour your vocabulary for a stronger one before resorting to a modifier.

Switch to the active voice

In some documents, you can save a lot of space simply by switching passive-voice constructions to active. Not only do passive-voice constructions enfeeble the writing, they require more words. No building company ever posted a sign in front of a house under construction that said “Pride in our work is taken by us.” No suitor ever dropped to his knee before his beloved and proclaimed “You are loved by me.” “We take pride in our work” requires only six words, and “I love you” only three.

Nuke circumlocution

Circumlocution is omnipresent in today’s academic writing. It constitutes a form of backdoor passive voice. “These data are indicative of perturbations to the genome that are deserving of further study.” No. “These data indicate perturbations to the genome that deserve further study.”

Cull hedge words and intensifiers

In *Style: Ten Lessons in Clarity and Grace*, Joseph M. Williams indicts the following “hedge words and intensifiers”, saying that they make
(continued on page 3)

Editorial: Ten years of editorializing

By Geoff Hart (ghart@videotron.ca)



Imagine my surprise when I started preparations for this issue and discovered I'd completed 10 uninterrupted years as its editor. Wow! Where did the time go? On the whole, it's been a satisfying 10 years, and the work I've put in as editor has been a pleasure. I suppose that must be obvious, otherwise I wouldn't still be here. Rather than my usual exploration of a specific aspect of science or scientific communication, I thought it might be interesting to look back at my 40 editorials to see what kinds of topics I've covered over the years. In no particular order, here are some of the sermons I've preached:

Numbers are just the start

Scientists love numbers, but numbers alone are rarely sufficient. Particularly when we're trying to reach a general audience, the message won't get through if we forget that facts, and particularly raw statistics, don't speak for themselves. We must seek ways to make the numbers meaningful to our audience. This is most apparent when we talk about statistical significance: mathematical significance is all very well, but numbers also have to be practically significant (i.e., important). Outliers (things that appear to be statistical anomalies) often seem to be sufficiently rare that they lack practical significance, but sometimes they represent a crucial audience we must reach with our message. Aiming to meet majority needs doesn't free us of the obligation to consider whether these outliers are also important.

Practical significance can take different and surprising forms. For example, we must make an effort to understand the limits of our knowledge's scope and applicability for any given audience. Sometimes an idea can only be carried so far, particularly in the case of metaphors; they're a powerful tool for simplifying and communicating more effectively, but they have clear limits that we must recognize and communicate to our audience.

The social context

Science is a powerful way to analyze our world, and offers a system of checks and balances and peer review that balance the need for conservatism (preserving and protecting what works) with the need for change (when new facts tell us the old understanding is inadequate). No other system of discovery and discourse offers an equally powerful tool for validating and expanding our knowledge. However, the scientific

(continued on page 6)

the Exchange, Vol. 17 No. 1, March 2010.

The Exchange is published four times per year on behalf of the Scientific Communication community of the Society for Technical Communication (www.stcsig.org/sc/).

Copyright for material published in *the Exchange* belongs to the author. For permission to reprint an article, please contact the author. We welcome comments and letters to the editor.

Submissions: To submit an article, please contact the editor. By submitting an article, you grant a license to this newsletter to publish the article in print and online. In your cover letter, please indicate whether the article has been published elsewhere, and confirm that you hold copyright to the text.

Editor: Geoff Hart (ghart@videotron.ca)

Manager: Kathie Gorski (kgorski@execpc.com)

Webmaster: Matt Hunt (matt@likeable.org) and Scott Hughes (RaySHughes@Eaton.com)

© 2010 **Society for Technical Communication**

9401 Lee Highway, Suite 300

Fairfax, Virginia

22031 U.S.A.

Tel.: 703-522-4114 / **Fax:** 703-522-2075

Web: www.stc.org

STC's vision and mission

STC's vision: Technical communication is recognized as an essential part of every organization's competitive strategy.

STC's mission: STC advances the theory and practice of technical communication across all user abilities and media so that both businesses and customers benefit from safe, appropriate, and effective use of products, information, and services.

Concision, continued from page 1

writing appear “not just redundant, but mealy-mouthed”: usually, often, sometimes, almost, virtually, possibly, perhaps, apparently, somewhat, most, many, some, may, might, can, could, seem, appear, suggest, indicate, very, pretty, quite, rather, clearly, obviously, undoubtedly, certainly, of course, indeed, central, crucial, basic, major, principal, essential, show, prove, and establish.

In fact, I recommend the entirety of Williams’s chapter (titled “Concision”) as an admirable summary of the principles of linguistic liposuction. An excellent list of unneeded words and phrases appears in the Council of Science Editors’ own *Scientific Style and Format*, sixth edition (pp. 123–126).

Try a bulleted list

Where formatting and style permit, a bulleted list can eliminate repeated introductory words or phrases. Compare:

“Nellie has high blood pressure. She also has cataracts and glaucoma. In addition, she suffers from pain in her left hip, left knee, and left foot.”

With:

“Nellie has:

- High blood pressure.
- Cataracts and glaucoma.
- Pain in her left hip, knee, and foot.”

Think like a headline writer

Newspaper editors agonize over their front pages, where every millimeter is precious. Although inelegant, “Solons Eye Agenda” captures the idea with fewer characters than “Senators Consider Schedule”. This breezy approach is inappropriate for elevated prose, but you get the idea. When you have finished your editing and it appears grammatically correct, reread it with the idea of using shorter, simpler words and fewer adjectives and adverbs. Reread, rethink, trim, compress.

Chuckle of the Month

Palo Alto Daily News headline: “Law Aims to Curb Hot Dogs”. The story is not about improving human nutrition, but about mandating adequate summertime ventilation for canines in unattended vehicles. Ω

Bob Johnson (wordfixer@yahoo.com) writes the “Word Hawk” column for Science Editor, the bimonthly publication of the Council of Science Editors (CSE). Following university training as a biologist, Mr. Johnson discovered a love for writing and editing, holding senior positions at Annual Reviews, Frost & Sullivan, SRI International, and Applied Biosystems. He is a member of the Board of Editors in the Life Sciences (BELS). He also has a degree in French. In 2000, Mr. Johnson was language arts editor for the statewide California High-School Exit Examination (CAHSEE). He was a reviewer of the AMA Manual of Style, 10th Edition (2007), and the CSE’s Scientific Style and Format, Seventh Edition (2006). Currently self-employed, his recent work includes editing two books: Is It You, Me, or Adult A.D.D.? (Pera 2008) and the two-volume Encyclopedia of Love in World Religions (Greenberg 2007).

“The conventional view serves to protect us from the painful job of thinking.”—John Kenneth Galbraith

—
“Mistakes are a part of being human. Appreciate your mistakes for what they are: precious life lessons that can only be learned the hard way. Unless it’s a fatal mistake, which, at least, others can learn from.”—Al Franken

—
“Westheimer’s discovery: A couple of months in the laboratory can save a couple of hours in the library.”
—Frank H. Westheimer, chemistry professor

—
“An expert is a man who has made all the mistakes which can be made, in a narrow field.”—Niels Bohr

—
“My hopes, and those of any scientist, are only worth considering as potential biases that can block our understanding of nature’s factuality.”
—Stephen Jay Gould, *The reversal of Hallucigenia*

—
“True science is distinctively the study of useless things. For the useful things will get studied without the aid of scientific men. To employ these rare minds on such work is like running a steam engine by burning diamonds.”
—Charles Sanders Peirce

—
“Man is the best computer we can put aboard a spacecraft and the only one that can be mass produced with unskilled labor.”—Wernher von Braun, rocket engineer (1912–1977)

—
“The aims of scientific thought are to see the general in the particular and the eternal in the transitory.”
—Alfred North Whitehead

Book Review: Undergraduate Writing in Psychology

Landrum, R.E. 2008. *Undergraduate Writing in Psychology: Learning to Tell the Scientific Story*. American Psychological Association, Washington, DC. [ISBN 978-1-4338-0332-1. 192 p., including references and index. \$29.95 USD (softcover).]

By Jackie Damrau (jdamrau3@airmail.net)

Previously published in: *Technical Communication* 56(1):72–73, February 2009.

Psychologists must write technical content for medical journals and their colleagues as well as in common language for nonmedical audiences, like their patients. *Undergraduate Writing in Psychology* is a course textbook that instructs psychology students on the importance of writing their scientific content according to the American Psychological Association's (APA) own definitive style guide and standards. Many universities require graduate students to write their research papers using the APA style; mine did.

R. Eric Landrum parallels scientific writing with screenwriting or telling a good story: character relies on the behavioral variables or phenomena of interest; backstory tells what is and is not known; plot describes the past, present, and future; setting describes the environment and its variables; and details report the results for others to replicate. Storytelling has the same elements, although they may be more entertaining. Landrum says, "Good science involves communication of new knowledge, and poorly written research papers and articles . . . fail to communicate clearly" (p. 106).

Scientists write in categorical forms that include expressive, exploratory, informative, scientific, literary, or persuasive. Their writing relies on including evidence and testing the validity of evidence. Opinions should not enter their writing. Landrum cites three evaluative areas for writing to a scientific audience: authorship and expertise, currency and timeliness, and accuracy and corroboration. Like technical communication, scientific writing requires vocabulary appropriate

for the reader, level of formality, relevant details, and avoidance of abbreviations. This last one is interesting because the rule Landrum shares is that you should use a term at least four times if you're going to abbreviate it.

Landrum covers the standard method of writing that can be adapted to writing online, where you select a topic, create an outline, collect your reference sources, collect your direct quotes and sources, group and arrange the outline and direct quotes, write the rough draft, and validate that you have cited all your reference sources appropriately. Directly quote when you find "expert

declaration (a quote from an authority figure), direct support, effective language (the elegance and clarity of the author's words), historical flavor, specific example, controversial statement, or material for analysis" (p. 48).

Undergraduate Writing in Psychology is a great resource for seeing what other professionals are required to comply with as their standards. It helps you understand why trade journals have varying formats for their specific fields of interest. Landrum provides examples of the very technical and shows how it can be written clearly, concisely, and understandably. He says, "Good scientists are good communicators. . . . Objectivity is the hallmark of scientific writing, so the tone reflects distance from the topic, and the linear order of presentation reflects a thinking process that values measurable hypotheses and results above opinion" (p. 55). Ω

Jackie Damrau (jdamrau3@airmail.net) has over 20 years of technical communication experience. She is a fellow and member of the STC Lone Star community and the Instructional Design & Learning SIG, manager of the Nominating Committee, and member of the Competitions Task Force. She enjoys reading philosophy and psychology besides spending time with her grandson.

"It is a capital mistake to theorize before one has data. Insensibly one begins to twist facts to suit theories, instead of theories to suit facts."

—Arthur Conan Doyle, physician and writer (1859-1930)

Book review: Together with Technology

Swarts, J. 2008. *Together with Technology: Writing Review, Enculturation, and Technological Mediation*. Baywood Publishing Company, Amityville, NY. [ISBN 978-0-89503-362-8. 178 p., including index. \$44.95 USD.]

by Donald R. Riccomini (driccomini@scu.edu)

Previously published in *Technical Communication* 56(1):81–82, February 2009.

Together with Technology argues that technology can increase the quality of writing review within organizations by replacing the traditional model of hardcopy assessment with “textual replay”. Like instant replay on television, textual replay allows the reviewer and the writer to revisit the composing process itself and not just the semi-finished draft. This helps the reviewer understand the writer’s process in creating the draft, as well as the draft itself, and provides two major benefits: the reviewer can help the writer understand the rhetorical reasons for the organization’s writing requirements, and the writer can influence those requirements with insights that would otherwise be obscured by the fixed review method.

Swarts reports on studies he conducted comparing the classical artifact-based method of review against the practice-based approach. He divided organizations into two groups: practice-oriented, where writing is the primary output or product (newspaper, media relations), and artifact-oriented (donor relations, engineering agency), where writing is secondary. He then installed Camtasia software on subjects’ PCs to capture screenshots of the draft text at short intervals; at the end of the process, the sequence could be reviewed, stopped, rewound, and paused, providing opportunity for collaborative assessment by the reviewer and the writer of the writing process as well as the product.

Swarts discovered that in both practice-oriented and artifact-oriented organizations, textual replay increases writer participation, encourages the reviewer to facilitate rather than direct

changes, and results in interactive, mutually instructive discussion between writer and reviewer. The reviewer can participate in the earliest stages of development, and the writer can more clearly understand what the organization requirements are, and why. Each party can therefore contribute to the creation of a higher-quality final product. Much of Swarts’s book provides evidence in support of this argument: screenshots of textual replay, explanations of statistical methods, and graphs illustrating the contrast between textual revision and textual replay. Throughout, Swarts also makes the point that writing review demonstrates the need for organizations to involve individuals more dynamically in the development of their “cognitive architecture”, and conversely

for individuals to become enculturated more efficiently into the organizational values embodied in that architecture.

Although promising, textual replay has its problems. The software can capture and replay textual development but prevents direct editing. Writer and reviewer must switch between the replay text in one medium and draft text in another, a cumbersome and time-consuming process. The video files are

too large for efficient network transport, reducing their usability. And replay can lock writer and reviewer into a purely process perspective, undercutting the value of also considering the text as an artifact. Of these, Swarts says, the “most pressing problem” is that “textual replay is not an editable medium” (p. 147). Improvements in technology suggested by Swarts can theoretically overcome these issues.

Swarts provides persuasive evidence to support his thesis, but the book isn’t easy to read. The style is repetitive, the vocabulary excessively abstract, the tone dry, and the argument at times overly complex for the content. Organization could be improved by putting the issue very simply and concisely in the introductory chapter, then describing how the software works, and finally getting into the analytical discussion. This would ground the somewhat theoretical and jargonish discussion in a concrete referent easier for the untutored reader to follow. As presently organized, the text assumes a fairly specialized

(continued on page 6)

“... in both practice-oriented and artifact-oriented organizations, textual replay increases writer participation, encourages the reviewer to facilitate rather than direct changes, and results in interactive, mutually instructive discussion between writer and reviewer.”

Together with..., continued from page 5

audience who are already conversant with the problems and the jargon, a characteristic probably reflecting the book's origin in Swarts's dissertation (cited in the bibliography). Some reorganization and simplification would have enabled Swarts to retain the academic focus of the text while extending its appeal. The document design is fairly basic but useful, the glossary helpful, and the index thorough. The book is also noticeably and unfortunately marred by at least 11 copyediting mistakes.

Although the book would have more appeal if it were shorter and the style simpler, overall *Together with Technology* does successfully argue that textual replay improves the quality of mediated texts in both artifact- and practice-oriented organizations. Swarts's account has motivated me, as an instructor, to investigate the Camtasia software and to consider its pedagogical possibilities. It would be interesting to see a how-to guide aimed at teachers of technical writing as a sequel to Swarts's book. Bottom line: recommended for readers, academic or professional, willing to endure stylistic awkwardness and repetitiveness to find a more systematic way to discuss process in writing and interested in applying this method in their own environments. Ω

Donald R. Riccomini (driccomini@scu.edu) is a member of STC and a lecturer in English at Santa Clara University, where he specializes in teaching engineering and technical communications. He previously spent 23 years in high technology as a technical writer, engineer, and manager in semiconductors, instrumentation, and server development.

"What we call 'language' is, in fact, a formal collective of imprecise verbal signals that serve as oblique coefficients of intuitive states wedded to analytical and discursive figurations of thought, and secondarily referential to perceived experience. This is why communication is so difficult."

—Sandra Boynton, *Don't let the turkeys get you down*

"*Cogito cogito ergo cogito sum* (I think that I think, therefore I think that I am.)"—Ambrose Bierce

"In mathematics you don't understand things. You just get used to them."—Johann von Neumann

Editorial, continued from page 2

method is not universally persuasive because not everyone is rational, and even the most rational among us has emotions, prejudices, and preconceptions that interfere with their ability to think. Particularly when we must communicate outside the scientific community, we must remember that the tools of rhetoric (persuasion) can be more important than simple logic.

We must particularly beware the temptation to shut our eyes to other ways of seeing the world. Sometimes what we see as useful conservatism becomes atherosclerotic dogma, and a fresh perspective proves the only way to liberate us from that dogma. Recognizing our own passions and enthusiasms, and acknowledging that others have different passions and enthusiasms, lets us find ways to share with others in a way that inspires them to hear and appreciate and respond emotionally to our message. We must find ways to make even the dubious and skeptical (perhaps the majority of modern society) understand why science is interesting and important, and we can't do it with facts alone.

Science attempts to be ethically neutral, but because it always exists within a human context, both science and our efforts to communicate it have ethical implications. We must always consider how this affects our communication, and take the necessary steps to communicate in an ethical manner. For example, we must consider the social implications of our message, which may lie one or more steps beyond the context we think we're communicating within. For example, obesity is clearly a health risk, but in overselling that message, have we inadvertently encouraged or contributed to the modern cult of female anorexia? Evangelism of what we consider important is clearly one of our roles, but we must remember there are consequences whenever we preach.

Words are flawed tools

We must remain aware of the differences among denotation (the dictionary definition), connotation (how that definition has evolved over time), and jargon (the idiosyncratic meaning of a word within a given discourse community). As in the recent case of Pluto losing its status as a planet, a change in terminology that makes good

(continued on page 7)

Editorial, continued from page 6

sense within a particular community (in this case, planetary scientists) may make no sense to the wider public. In some cases, it's doubtful whether we should really try to explain; in others, trying can be very important indeed.

Given that meanings vary, and that some words and phrases are more precise than others, it behooves us to do more than just write clearly: we must also seek ways to error-proof our communication. This relies on a deep understanding of the numerical and other issues I've described earlier in this editorial. A particular challenge arises when the high-powered jargon our scientist colleagues use is inappropriate for non-scientist audiences. The solution is to simplify, but this leads to two problems. First, oversimplification can mislead by obscuring the true complexity behind an issue. Second, the repeated need to simplify can mislead us into assuming that our audience is somehow less intelligent than our scientists—or worse yet, that they are less intelligent than we are. Even when we really must simplify, we must resist the urge to “dumb it down” (a phrase I've heard many scientists use). Our audience deserve respect; moreover, some audience members are considerably smarter than we are.

We humans are also flawed

A sad thing about the human brain is that we seem to learn best from errors. Some errors provide powerful insights into ways to do things better, but sometimes they're just the dreaded and humiliating “learning opportunity”. We must remain aware of the risk of error, but rather than fearing it, we should take advantage of its ability to teach us how to do better next time. Errors are also important in the work of our scientist colleagues, since science is often dangerous to scientists—but it is also dangerous to those who use the results of research and often to unanticipated audiences. Risk analysis and crisis communication are important but often neglected aspects of our work. My review of an important recent book on risk and crisis communication should appear in the May 2010 issue of *Technical*

Communication, and will eventually make its way into this newsletter.

Examining our assumptions—sometimes with help from others less blind to them than we are—is a powerful tool for reducing miscommunication. Our personal view of the world and of any communication situation is inevitably biased, flawed, and vulnerable to our unexamined preconceptions. In this context, our choice of words can have a surprisingly powerful influence on how we think about a situation. For example, scientists tend to think in binary terms, expressing situations as “either... or...”, and we can fall into this trap too when we try to simplify complex situations for an inexperienced audience. Reality is far more complex and interesting, with many shades of grey. Though binary dichotomies are useful ways to simplify, we must not let them blind

“Though binary dichotomies are useful ways to simplify, we must not let them blind us to the true complexity or its consequences, particularly when we try to quantify the unquantifiable...”

us to the true complexity or its consequences, particularly when we try to quantify the unquantifiable; science emphasizes numbers, but many things (such as emotion or pain) are not easily quantified.

All of this relates to a theme I've touched on repeatedly: the notion that other perspectives are essential. However, they are not always to be welcomed. Sometimes the ill-informed, or those with an anti-science agenda, must be met in open verbal combat to prevent dangerous misconceptions from taking hold.

New ways to communicate

Even traditional magazines such as *Scientific American* (more than 150 years old at this point) are dabbling with new approaches such as interactivity, and have begun moving their communication online to improve dialogue with their readers. Our SIG has an e-mail discussion group (see the last page of the newsletter for details), but we rarely see any messages. How could we change that? Creativity is an important part of who we are and what we do for a living, so I urge you to apply that creativity to finding ways to make our online presence work better for you. Rick Sapir of STC's Technical Editing SIG (<http://www.stc-techedit.org/tiki-index.php>) has done some impressive things with their Web

(continued on page 8)

Editorial, continued from page 7

site by implementing a range of Web 2.0 technologies. If these interest you, write in to suggest how we could use them—or better still, volunteer to implement them for us.

One peril of such technologies is that online information becomes transient. How can we preserve important information that flits past via tweets, e-mail messages, temporary blogs, and the like? Possibly we need to ask the professional archivists to help us find ways to capture and preserve this short-lived knowledge.

Financial pressures forced us to move our newsletter online back in early 2003, and on the whole, the transition went smoothly—except for the many SIG members who think we've stopped publishing because they never got the message. That's both a warning (we should never *assume* communication has occurred) and a call to action: if you know someone who could benefit from reading this newsletter, please share it with them.

Where possible, I've tried to attend STC's annual conference and bring back interesting tidbits. Though our newsletter is important, you learn so much more from being present in person and having a chance to talk things through. (That's not a *new* way to communicate, but rather an old one we've forgotten and that deserves to be renewed.) One joy I've experienced many times over the years is listening to someone speak passionately about something that might not, at first glance, seem to have much application to my work. But I've stopped counting how many times an obscure fact, approach, or reference mentioned in a talk improved my own work. I've always appreciated how STC's different perspective on communication improves my scientific communication. In turn, I try to apply some of science's

perspectives to the challenges faced by other STC members.

Some things remain the same

That's a whirlwind tour of a 10 years of musing at much greater length. If these themes intrigue you, visit our newsletter archive (<http://www.stcsig.org/sc/newsletter/newsletter.htm>) and read the full articles from which I extracted these nuggets.

One constant for most of my editorial career has been the inclusion of a range of quotes in the newsletter, not all of which related clearly to a given issue's articles. Some disdain quotes as a shallow form of pedantry, but I've always considered a really good quotation to be one that encapsulates something important in a few pithy words or phrases. By including quotes, I'm not secretly trying to show my erudition. Rather, it's because the quote revealed something to me or spoke to one of my deep beliefs, and I wanted to share it with you in the hope that it would spark an insight, make you smile, or otherwise make you pause a moment and ponder.

Another thing hasn't changed much since I began this work, but this one's less pleasant: it remains an ongoing challenge to find articles—I even wrote an editorial to complain about this back in 2002. Here's hoping that with a new decade, some of you will be inspired to contribute. It doesn't have to be much: long, short, or in between, it's all fine with me. So long as it's something you're passionate about and you make an effort to communicate that passion, I'm confident our readers will enjoy it too. It's been an interesting 10 years. Here's hoping the next 10 will be equally enriching. Ω

"I've stopped counting how many times an obscure fact, approach, or reference mentioned in a talk improved my own work. I've always appreciated how STC's different perspective on communication improves my scientific communication."

Fun on the Web

Scientific Peer Review, ca. 1945

Although this is possibly the single most parodied film clip on the Web, it's still funny in this new context, particularly if you work with journal peer reviews. Caution: Strong language: <<http://tinyurl.com/yex7kzx>>.

Zero-g without space travel

Can't afford the \$20 million required to buy a tour of the International Space Station? For just over \$5000, you can try zero g here on Earth: <<http://www.gozerog.com/>>. Caution for the faint of stomach: There's a reason why the astronaut trainees refer to these flights as "the vomit comet".

MRI scanner surprises

Scientists often find surprises, and this example is one of the better ones: <<http://www.wired.com/wiredscience/2009/09/fmrisalmon/>>. My pet hypothesis is that what the scientists were actually seeing is normal neural activity in the visual cortex, which continues for some time after death. Any thoughts from neurologists in the audience?

A response to relativism

Tim Minchin reports an experience that many of us have shared, namely trying to maintain a polite veneer in the face of irrationality. Caution: potentially offensive language. (I found nothing offensive, but some people with humorless bosses may try watching this at work.) <<http://tinyurl.com/cb8ap2>>

Who says science isn't funny?

There are a great many funny science jokes out there. Here's one collection of assorted physics and science jokes: <<http://wilk4.com/humor/humore30.htm>>.

Discussion groups

Scientific Communication community

STC and our community run an e-mail discussion group that provides a quiet, friendly place to turn for help if you've got any questions concerning scientific communication. To join, point your Web browser to: <http://mailman.stc.org/mailman/listinfo/stcscsig-l>

There's no cost to join, and you can expect a very low volume of mail. Of course, the more people who join, the more traffic there'll be, so please join. It's a great way to make the community work for you.

Editing

If your work involves lots of editing, consider joining the **Copyediting-L** e-mail discussion group, which focuses on editing in all its various forms. The group is not affiliated with STC, but you'll find many STC members there. To join, point your Web browser to: www.copyediting-L.info/

Technical writing

If you do a lot of technical writing, join us on **Techwr-L** to discuss the tools and travails of the technical writer. The group is not affiliated with STC, but you'll find many STC members there. To join, point your Web browser to: <http://lists.techwr-L.com/mailman/listinfo/techwr-l>