

Language matters for impact, not acceptance

Authors from non-English speaking countries can feel disadvantaged if they are not fluent in English. At *Communications Earth & Environment*, we disregard language imperfections in our decisions, and ask our reviewers to do the same—as long as the science is clear.

Shortcomings in language skills are often perceived as an obstacle to success in science. Authors from the non-native English-speaking world are wary of reviewer comments that call into question the publishability of their work on grounds of poor readability. Some feel pressure to engage costly language editing services when they may already struggle to fund their research. At *Communications Earth & Environment*, we aim to minimise potential disadvantages that could arise from our authors' personal backgrounds and geographical locations. We must insist that the scientific content of the papers we publish is clear. But we do not require perfect language. As long as there is no doubt over the science, we will not let the quality of the prose (or reviewer remarks to that effect) influence our decision on whether or not to publish a paper.

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We need scientific contributions from all regions of the globe to maximise our understanding, in the geosciences perhaps more than on other science subjects. For this reason we call on our reviewers as well as our readers and the entire community of geoscientists to generously look past any language-related irritations, and focus on the meaning in scientific publications. We have asked our reviewers earlier to choose a tone that they would use with a friend when commenting on a paper¹. At least as far as language issues are concerned, we ask our readers to do the same with published papers. Just imagine you received the comment on a paper you were obliged to write in Mandarin, Hindi, Spanish, or Arabic (which ever seems most daunting).

That is not to say readability does not matter. The impact of a paper crucially depends on the authors' ability to convince potential readers not only to skim the title,

but to engage with the entire paper and think about the findings. First-rate science is the most important ingredient to entice readers. But the scientific advance needs to be visible, ideally at a glance. There will always be a small advantage for those with a flair for choosing the right words. But there is more to making your work shine than language skill alone: a logically structured paper is likely to find much more resonance than one whose message is hard to find. In terms of clarity of thought, the playing field is level: elegant English is not required.

For all our authors—native speakers of English or not—we recommend a few achievable ways of making a paper easier to follow:

- Prioritise clarity over elegance, short sentences over long ones, active voice over passive voice, and simple words over complicated expressions (especially where you may not be entirely sure of the meaning).
- Clearly define all the scientific concepts you use—the same words may mean different things to people in different communities.
- Replace vague terms like “feature” or “recent” with specifics. “Recent” may be used for timescales of minutes by meteorologists; to a geologist, “recent” could easily mean thousands of years ago.
- Carefully check any placeholder words like “this”, “it” and “they”: is it clear, in every single instance, what the placeholder refers to? It is usually best to add a specific noun, or just use the noun right away.
- Start each paragraph with a sentence that makes the main point of the paragraph, and use the rest of the paragraph to elaborate.
- Make a new paragraph for each key point in your argument.
- Add a two-sentence take-away summary of the section at the end of each section, so that readers have a

thread of your reasoning that they can hang on to if they get lost.

- Before you submit, get a colleague, ideally one whose first language is different from yours, to read your manuscript, and ask them to flag any sentence they found less than crystal clear. Then work on those sentences: if they struggled to understand, so will others.
- Finally, take heart: scientific writing closely follows a formula that has proven successful. Simply answer a few questions in your paper, one after the other: why is your topic of interest? What has been done before? How are you building on that? What have you found? How do your findings change what we thought? What are the possible implications (referring back to the first question)?

At *Communications Earth & Environment*, we would like all the papers we publish to reach their full potential. We ask all our authors to do their best to make their work as clear and attractive as they can. Then we help, in particular where authors struggle with language or structure. During the review process, we make concrete recommendations what we see as the most interesting points of the work, so that authors can focus their manuscript around these points (or convince us otherwise, if we have misinterpreted). When a paper is accepted at *Communications Earth & Environment*, we routinely look over the



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abstract and suggest detailed edits or restructuring where we feel that the central message could be brought out more clearly. To advertise all our papers on our homepage, we write a brief Editor's Summary, and we highlight every article on social media.

Fluent language is likely to help with making your work impactful. Investing time into writing well in English is worth the effort for all scientists.

But wherever our authors are in their journey to perfect English, we are

committed to ensuring that they can submit their manuscripts to *Communications Earth & Environment* confident that the suitability of their work for publication with us will be assessed on scientific grounds alone. All we need is for the science to be clear.

Published online: 15 February 2022

Reference

1. Reviews we trust. *Commun. Earth Environ.* **2**, 32. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s43247-021-00100-2> (2021).



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