

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



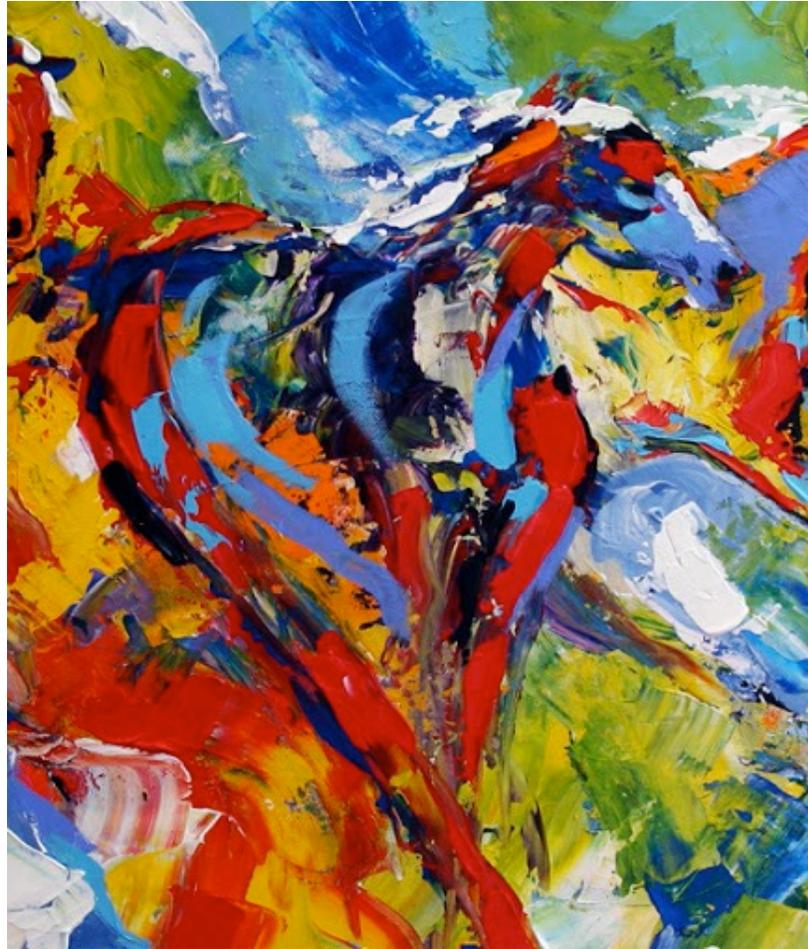
REJECTED

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?



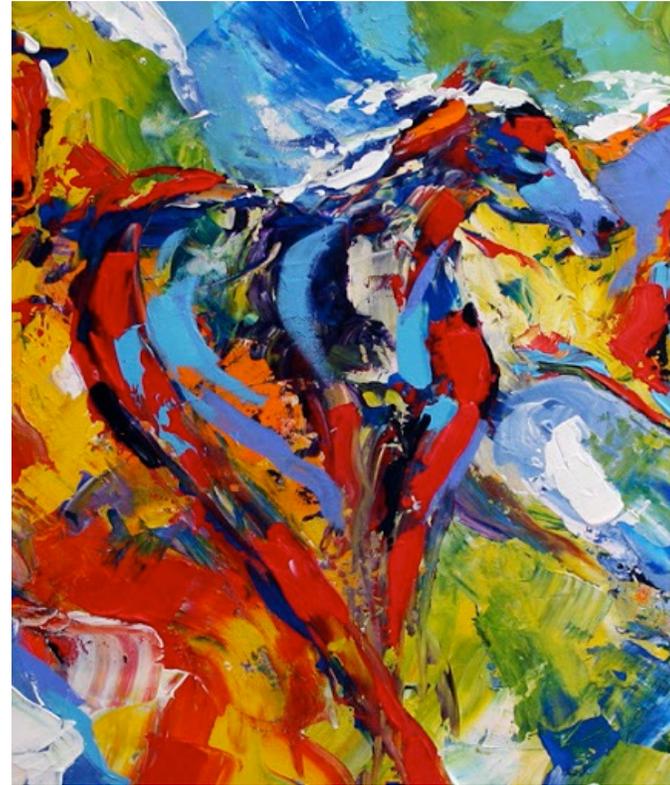
And this?



Which is more immediately understandable?



Concrete



Abstract



Why do some authors use so many abstract terms?

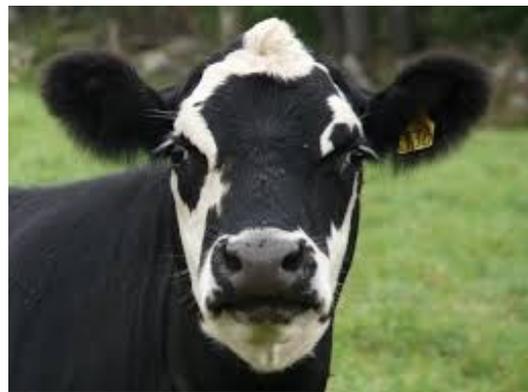


They don't really understand the importance and relevance of what they are writing.



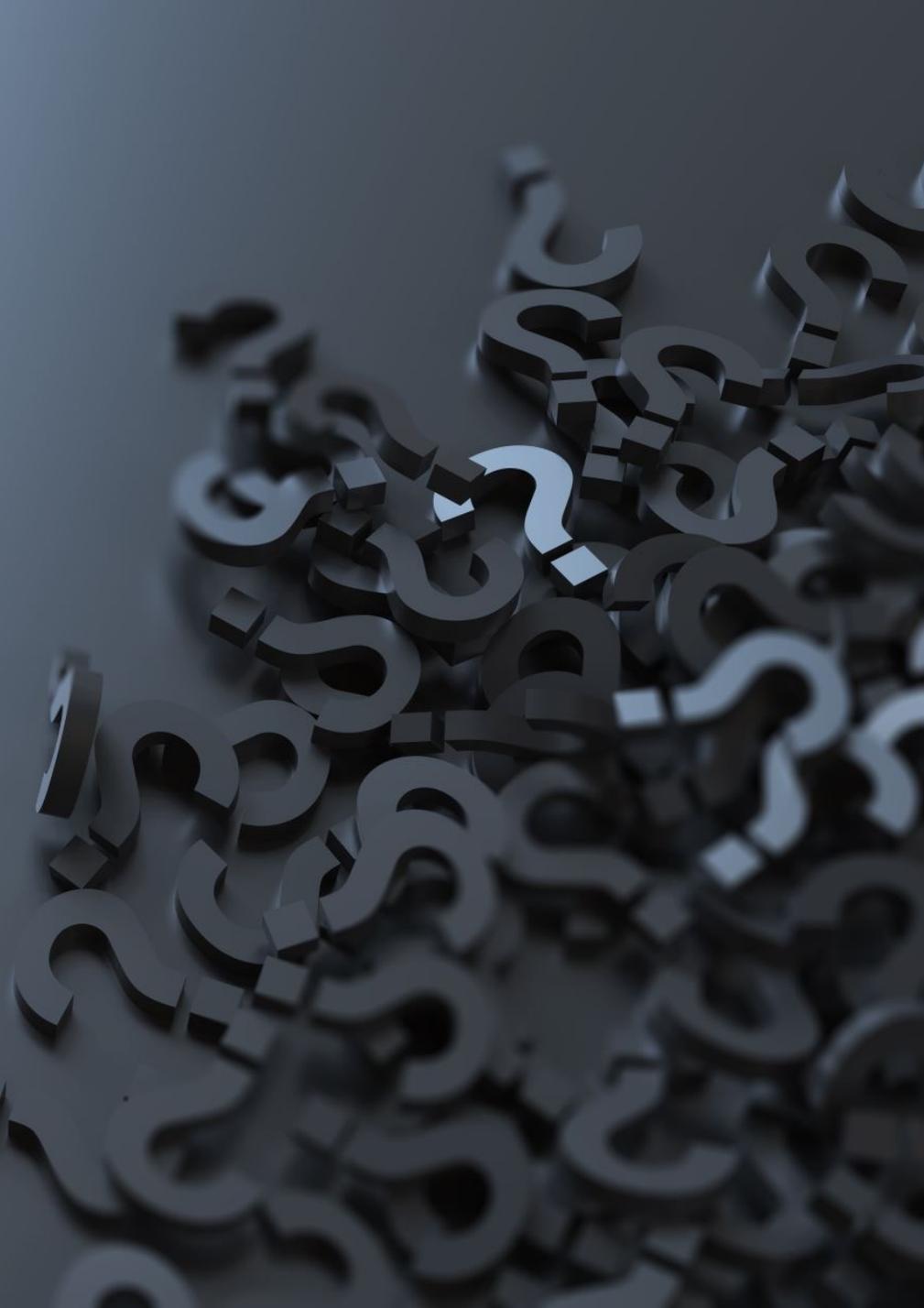
Ask yourself:

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?

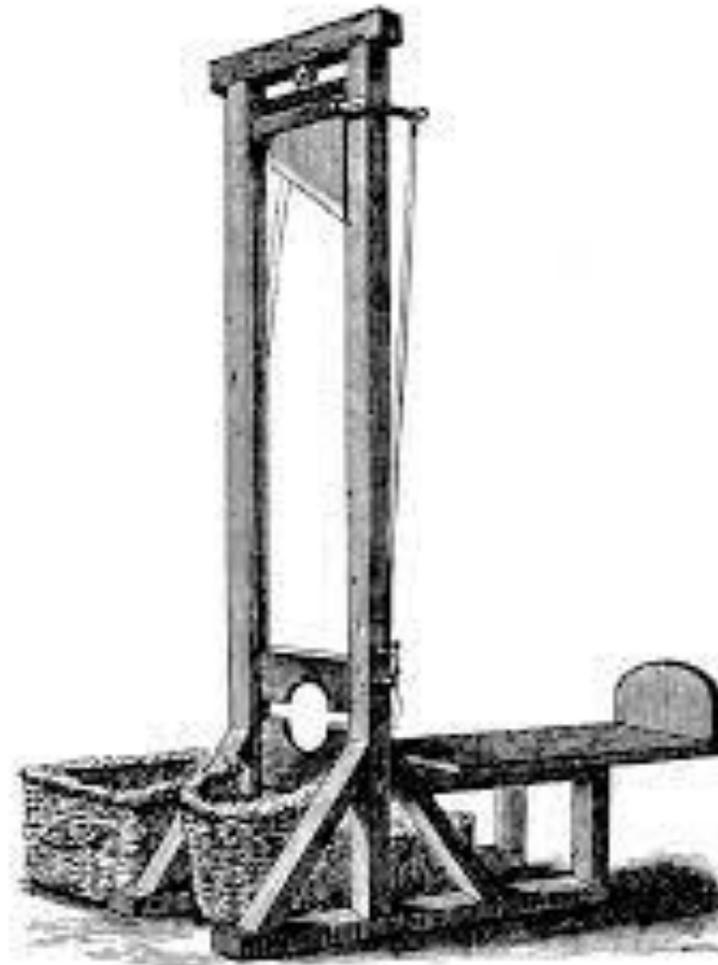




Imprecision – why?

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**.



Painted by J. Boys

Engraved by James Scherzpile

THE DEATH OF ROBESPIERRE

Who was guillotined in Paris the 28th July 1793, overthrown from his bloody Throne, endeavouring to escape from that punishment to

LA MORT DE ROBESPIERRE

Qui fut guillotiné à Paris le 28 Juillet 1793, à 7 h. du Soir renversé de son Trône Sanguinaire, 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.

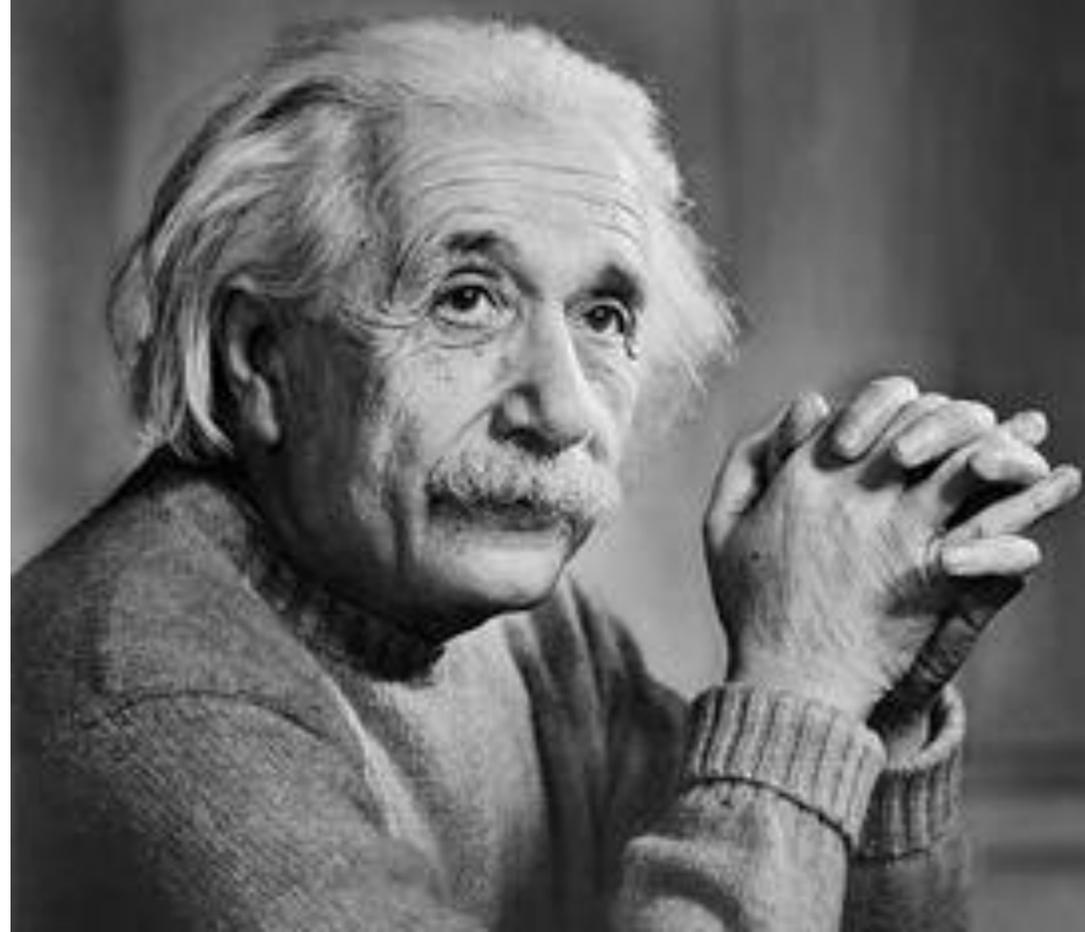
Avoid adjectives.

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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GRAMSCI (Marxist philosopher, writer, politician)

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



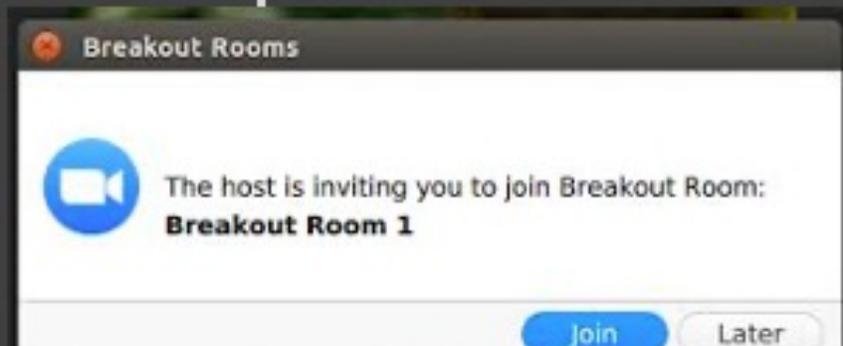
Ambiguity:
being open to
more than
one
interpretation;
inexactness

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**.

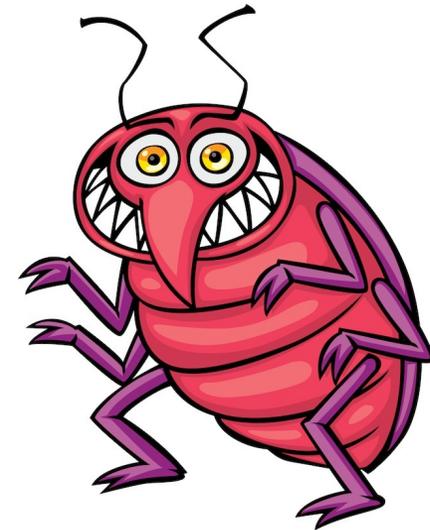


**Gerunds don't have subjects so
they can be ambiguous**

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

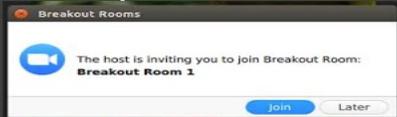
Inflation will go down, **thus reducing** taxes.

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

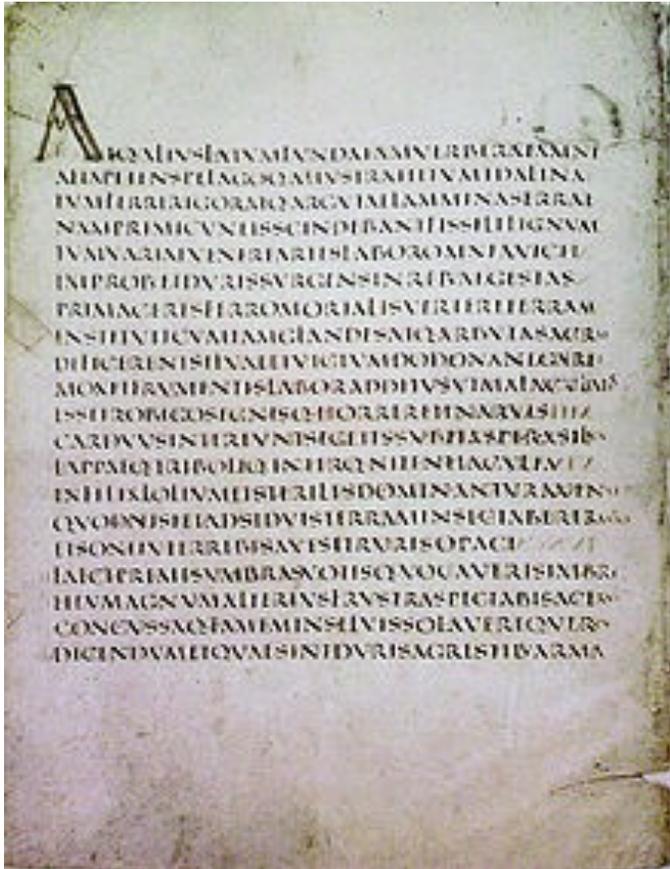
**There are two countries involved
in the project: France and Italy.
The latter initiated the
collaboration in 2020.**

**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. **The latter initiated the collaboration in 2020.**





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.

IMPORTANT SAFETY INFORMATION
ADALIMUMAB (adalimumab)¹

When you take HUMIRA, there is important information I should know about HUMIRA[®]

You should know the potential benefits and risks of HUMIRA with your doctor. HUMIRA is a TNF blocker medicine that can lower the ability of your immune system to fight infections. You should not start taking HUMIRA if you have any kind of infection unless your doctor says it is okay.

Some serious infections have happened in people taking HUMIRA. These serious infections include tuberculosis (TB) and infections caused by viruses, bacteria, and fungi that have spread throughout the body. Some people have died from these infections. Your doctor should test you for TB before starting HUMIRA, and check you closely for signs and symptoms of TB during treatment with HUMIRA, even if your TB test was negative. If you have TB, you are at risk you may be treated with medicines for TB.

- **Children and adults taking TNF blockers, including HUMIRA, the chance of getting lymphoma or other cancers may increase. There have been cases of unusual cancers in children, teenagers, and young adults using TNF blockers. Some people have developed a rare type of cancer called hepatosplenic T-cell lymphoma. This type of cancer often results in death. If using TNF blockers including HUMIRA, your chance of getting two types of skin cancer (basal cell and squamous cell) may increase. These types are generally not life-threatening if treated; tell your doctor if you have a bump or open sore that doesn't heal.**

When you take HUMIRA, there is important information I should know about HUMIRA[®]

Tell your doctor about all of your health conditions, including if you:

- Are being treated for infection, or have symptoms of an infection
- Get a lot of infections or infections that keep coming back
- Have diabetes
- Have TB or have been in close contact with someone with TB, or were born in, lived in, or traveled where there is more risk for getting TB
- Live or have lived in an area (such as the Ohio and Mississippi River valleys) where there is an increased risk for getting certain kinds of fungal infections, such as histoplasmosis, coccidioidomycosis, or blastomycosis. These infections may happen or become more severe if you use HUMIRA.

Ask your doctor if you are unsure if you have lived in these areas

- Have or have had hepatitis B
- Are scheduled for major surgery
- Have or have had cancer
- Have numbness or tingling or a nervous system disease such as multiple sclerosis or Guillain-Barré syndrome
- Have or had heart failure
- Have recently received or are scheduled to receive a vaccine. HUMIRA patients may receive vaccines, except for live vaccines. Children should be brought up to date on all vaccines before starting HUMIRA
- Are allergic to rubber, latex, or any HUMIRA ingredients
- Are pregnant, planning to become pregnant, breastfeeding, or planning to breastfeed
- Have a baby and you were using HUMIRA during your pregnancy. Tell your baby's doctor before your baby receives any vaccines

Also tell your doctor about all the medicines you take. You should not take HUMIRA with ORENCIA[®] (abatacept), KINERET[®] (anakinra), REMICADE[®] (infliximab), ENBREL[®] (etanercept), CIMZIA[®] (certolizumab pegol), or SIMPONI[®] (golimumab). Tell your doctor if you have ever used RITUXIMAB[®] (rituximab), AZATHIOPRINE[®] (azathioprine), or FURNETHOL[®] (mercaptopurine, 6-MP).

When you take HUMIRA, there is important information I should know about HUMIRA[®]

HUMIRA can cause side effects, including:

- **Infections and infections caused by viruses, fungi, or bacteria.** Symptoms related to TB include a cough, low-grade fever, weight loss, and night sweats.
- **Upper respiratory infections.** Symptoms include muscle aches, feeling very tired, dark urine, skin or eyes that look yellow, little or no urination, and decreased bowel movements, fever, chills, stomach discomfort, and skin rash.
- **Allergic reactions.** Symptoms of a serious allergic reaction include hives, trouble breathing, and swelling of your face, eyes, lips, or mouth.
- **Neurological problems.** Signs and symptoms include numbness or tingling, problems with your vision, weakness in your arms or legs, and problems with your balance.
- **Low blood cell counts.** Low counts of red blood cells (decreased blood cells that help fight infections or stop bleeding). Symptoms include a fever that does not go away, bruising or bleeding, or looking very pale.
- **Fluid retention (swelling).** Symptoms include shortness of breath, swelling of your ankles or feet, and sudden weight gain.
- **Skin problems including a lupus-like syndrome.** Symptoms include chest discomfort or pain that does not go away, shortness of breath, joint pain, and a rash on your cheeks or arms that gets worse in the sun.
- **Liver problems.** Symptoms include feeling very tired, skin or eyes that look yellow, poor appetite or vomiting, and pain on the right side of your abdomen. These problems can lead to liver failure and death.
- **Skin rashes (new or worsening).** Symptoms include red scaly patches or raised bumps that are filled with pus.

Call your doctor or get medical care right away if you develop any of the above symptoms.

Common side effects of HUMIRA include injection site reactions (pain, redness, rash, swelling, itching, or bruising), **upper respiratory infections** (sinus infections, headaches, rash), 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.

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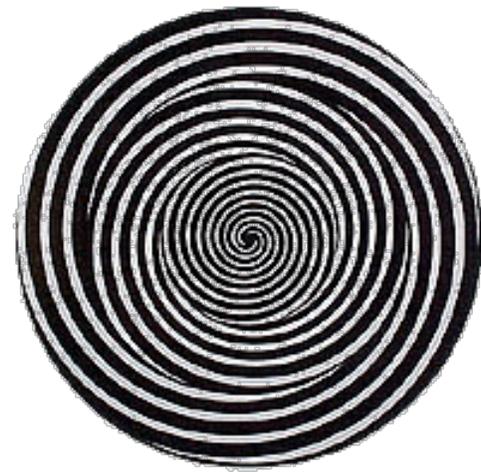
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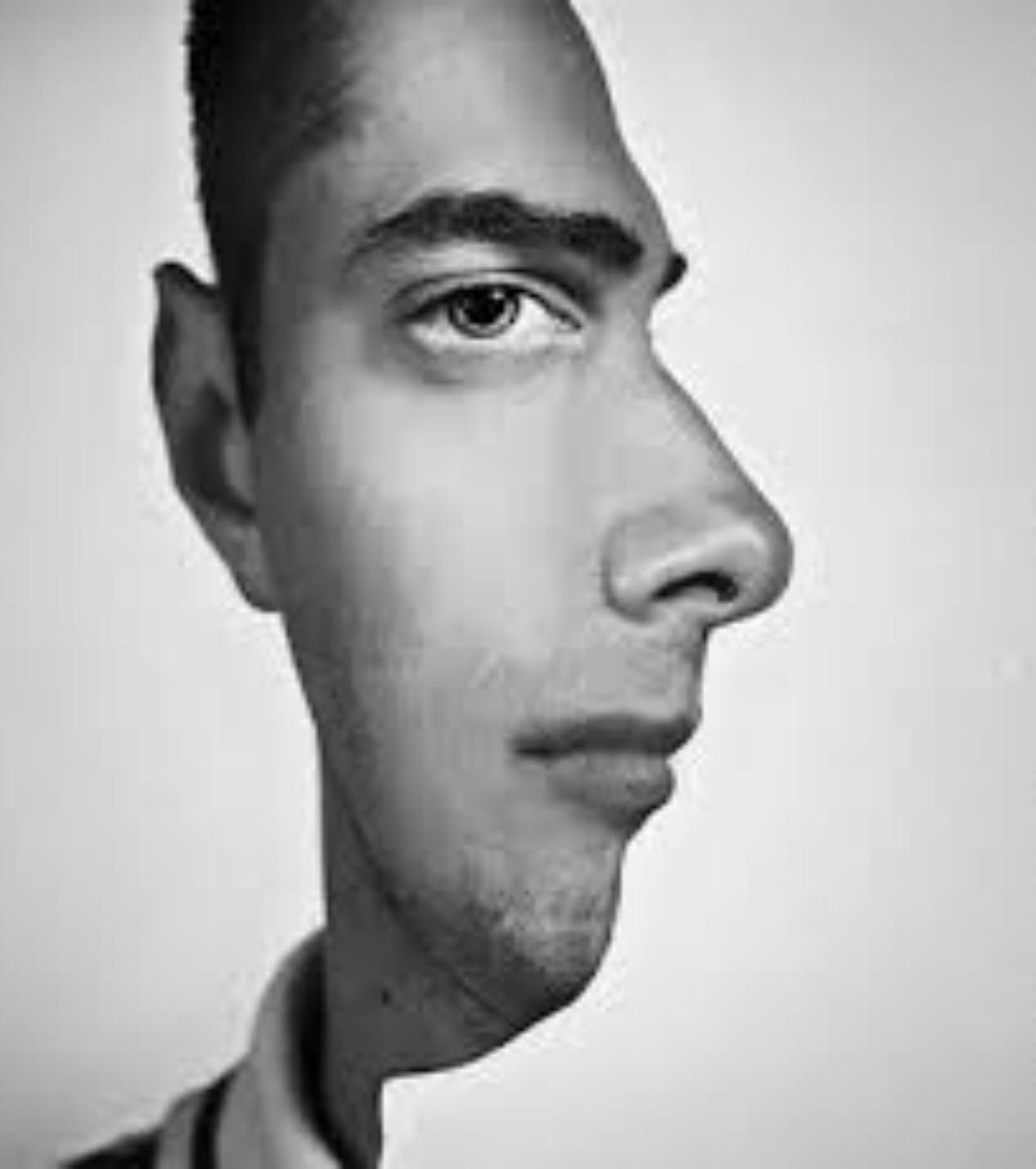
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Comrades, please write in a simple way ... Stimulate the mental energy of the readers. But don't force them to make too much effort.



**Are you a
PSYCHO?**





keep it
simple.

keep it simple.

keep it simple

Keep it
simple

keep it
simple.

KEEP IT
SIMPLE

Keep it
Simple

KEEP
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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



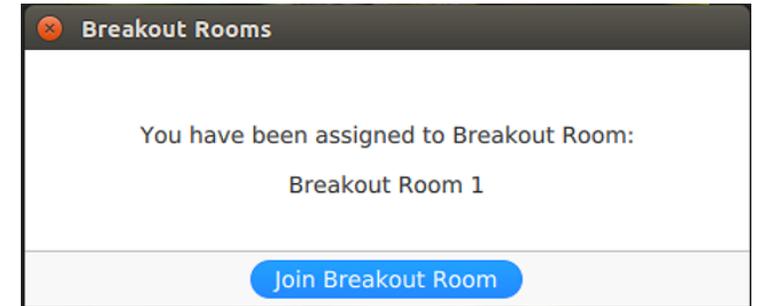
1 Year first email sent? a) 1971 b) 1976 c) 1981 d) 1986

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 **drailing**? a) emailing while **drunk** b) emailing / messaging while **driving** c) **drafting** 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?

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





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

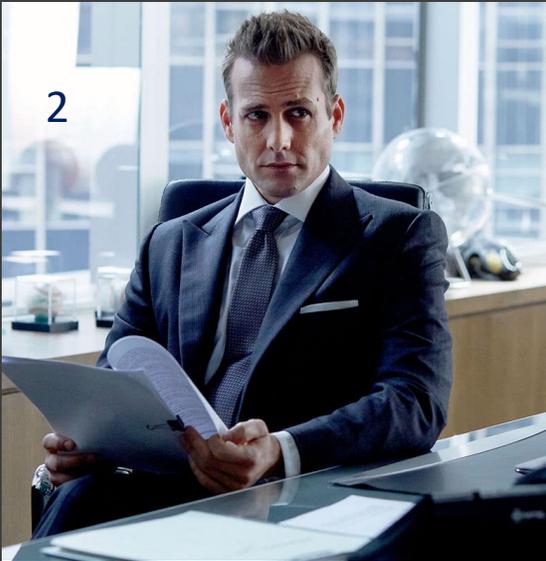
Get colleagues to check too.
But just **SPECIFIC** parts of the
paper.



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

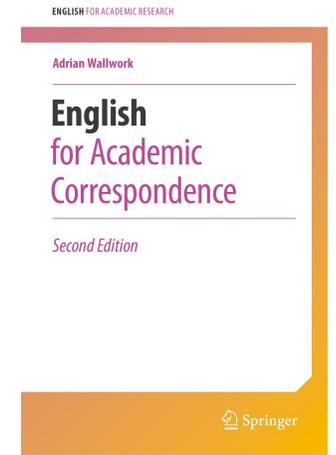
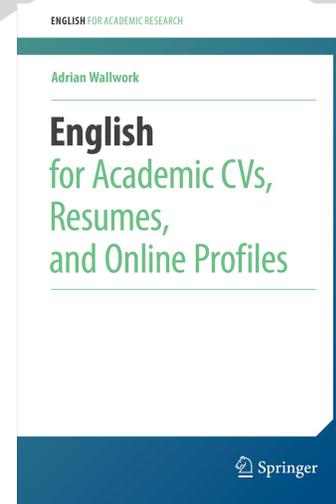
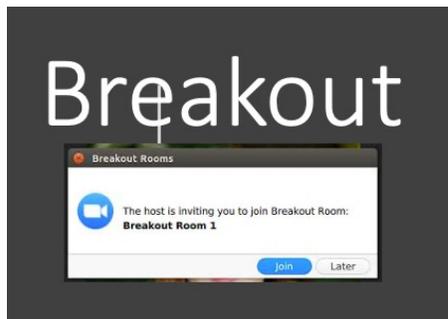
Length of each section

Use of headings and subheadings

Structure of each section – particularly the abstract

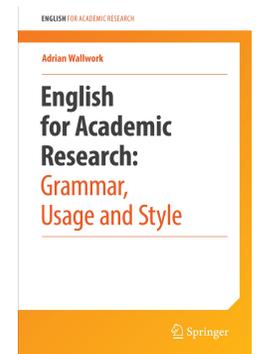
Content of Conclusions / Last paragraphs of Discussion

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!

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**

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 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