

Writing Scientific Reports

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Good scientific writing and all good writing should funnel, focus and unify. That is, begin with broad interest; tell your reader why he/she should care about this topic. Then, narrow down to your specific objectives and hypotheses. Stay focused on the central point of the report and be certain that all of your sections in the report relate to all other sections¹.

Scientific writing is almost always restricted to a limited length. As such, it is important to be concise, precise, and not verbose in your writing. That being said, scientific writing is also descriptive and thus requires great thought when selecting words that both clearly describe observations while at the same time are concise. Try to use familiar rather than technical terms unless such use reduces precision. Also, although you might have been taught to use the passive voice in the past, modern scientific style guides recommend the use of the active voice². For example, when stating an action that was taken in the lab, one might write, “We performed a Gram stain,” rather than, “A Gram stain was performed.” Though we will use an active voice for our writing in microbiology lab, it is important to remember that when we write a scientific report, we are not writing an opinion piece or an argument. We are, instead, hoping to present clear and concise observations, descriptions, and interpretations. Thus, a sentence such as, “I believe that the Gram stain is the best technique in the world,” while possibly true, is more appropriate in a different type of writing (e.g. your lab manual, which can be very reflective).

Citations

Scientific writing is a way for scholars to communicate with one another. As such, it is very important to give your readers as much information as possible about your sources. This will enable a scholarly dialogue in which readers of your work can find and read your sources. Please always include both in-text citation and a reference list whenever you draw on outside information.

1. Writing Successful Science Proposals by Andrew J. Friedland and Carol L. Folt, 2009, Second Edition, Yale University Press.
2. University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill Writing Center (2010-2012). What is Scientific Writing? Accessed on July 17, 2012 at <http://writingcenter.unc.edu/handouts/sciences/>