

## Agricultural Extension in South Asia

### WRITING FOR SOCIAL SCIENTISTS: HOW TO START AND FINISH YOUR THESIS, BOOK AND ARTICLES (II edition)

Howard S. Becker (2008)

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This is a book written by H. Becker, a sociology professor with 30 years of research and teaching experience. He also taught a course on scientific writing for graduate students. In this book review, I am trying to summarize a few take-home messages from the book.

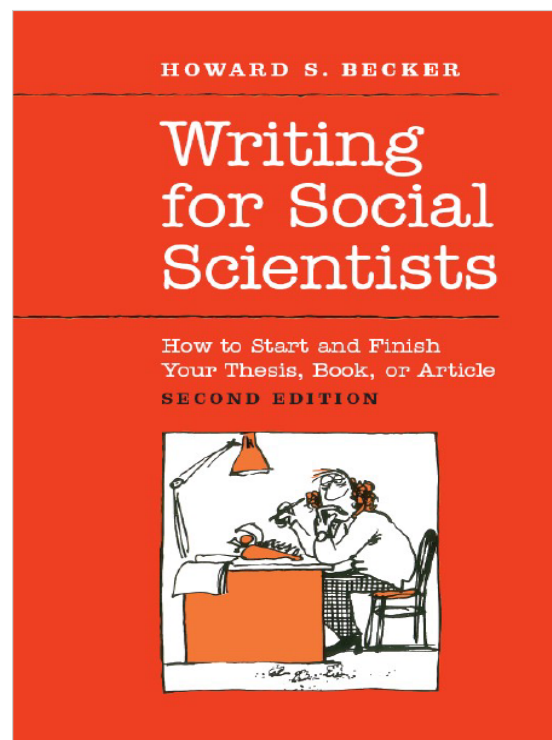
Before I start with the summary, a few pointers on what to expect in this review.

1. I am not going to try to be comprehensive and talk about only those points which I found helpful. Because, the book is written by a sociologist and many points made by the author are not generalizable. Anyhow, I recommend that you read the book.
2. In some parts, I have copied verbatim what is given in the book.
3. All the issues I raise here are from the author and there are no obligations for either you or me to agree with them.
4. I have grouped the points based on my sense of logical ordering and they do not follow chapters in the book.
5. I am yet to adopt the writing tips given in the book; do not expect to find their applications in this piece of writing!

### Why read this book?

Let me start with what Becker says in the concluding chapter of the book. "Reading this book will never solve all of your writing problems. It will hardly solve any of them. No book, no author, no expert - no one else can solve your problems. They are yours. You have to get rid of them".

Then why read this book? It might help you to diagnose problems in your writings and find ways to solve them. Only you can figure out the methods that will work for you. "If these tips (given in the book) are to work, try to get habituated. Use them in a variety of contexts and situations. Nothing will happen without work. You need not practice writing only with a research paper. You can do it while writing a letter, a mail or a memo."



## Why most students/ young academicians find it hard to write a journal article?

- Because the process of writing a research paper is rarely taught in schools or colleges. Usually, undergraduate students write short term papers, often just before the submission deadline, and submit. Rarely will they be asked to work on the draft again. Graduate students feel bad when the draft they submitted to the professor for correction comes back with many comments and edits (true in my personal experience at least). This is because students think that 'Good Writers' can produce an 'acceptable draft' in the first attempt and the papers are accepted and published in one go. Students never get to see how many times the professor rewrites the original draft before it gets to the stage of being published.
- The fear of not being able to express the idea often acts as a hindrance to writing an article. The risk of being judged and ridiculed by the professor or a colleague based on the quality of the first draft makes them hesitant in writing and submitting the paper.
- Understand this - "Good writers don't get everything correct in the first attempt itself. They also write and re-write to produce 'good writing' which we finally get to read!"

## How to write your first draft?

- There are many 'right ways' to write a sentence. If you seek "the one right way" to write something, you will never write. Start writing as you think and you can always edit subsequent drafts and arrange logically.
- Remember, your first draft is just that, a "first draft"; it is not going to be the final write-up. Without the fear of sounding silly, or getting judged, simply write what you know about the subject.
- There is a technique commonly referred to as 'Freewriting'- typing as fast as you can about a topic without thinking about structure or style or organization. Once you spit out whatever you know about the paper you intend write, all the ideas, then make an outline and start editing and working on the draft.

## Economical writing

- Write a sentence with as few words as possible without compromising its meaning. Read each sentence and ask yourself, does this word/phrase needs to be here. If the word has no purpose, remove it. Often the writings are full of fancy writing and pompous phrases. Example; "the way in which" can be replaced by "how". Another common mistake is using qualifiers unwarranted: vague phrases writers use to play safe. For example, rather than saying "A causes B, some say, "A might possibly cause B under certain conditions". This makes the sentence fuzzy, ignores methodological principles of generalizations on which research is based. You do not need to replace technical languages - it is just the filler material which needs to go; most of them are meaningless placeholders.

## Classy writing Vs Clear writing

- You and I think that the more difficult the writing is the more intellectual it sounds; using classier words and phrases makes articles more attractive. This is not true. For example, *this chapter will examine the impact of money or more specifically independent income on relationships between husbands and wives in the realm of financial affairs* is preferred over a simpler and clearer version: *this chapter will show that the independent incomes change the way husband and wives handle the financial affairs'*. Why? Because the former is classy. Similarly, *'predicted upon the availability'* is assumed to be classier than the *'because of'* and *'for that matter'* over *'depends on'*.

- Why the preference for fancy or classy? When we read something that we do not know we give the benefit of doubt to the writer. If we do not understand the text the fault is ours: the subject is tough and beyond our ability to understand. We never think the author (maybe a well-known individual) is not communicating clearly enough (just like we can never think that emperor has no clothes!). Students and young scholars think that to get the paper through they should adopt this pattern of writing. This is not true. The purpose of writing is to communicate clearly. Use simple, short sentences to avoid confusion. Plain writing is the best form of writing! Do not try to hide behind juggleries. They divert attention and mislead readers.

### Why academicians want to write papers in classy English?

- Graduate students know plain English, but they do not want to use it. They want to convince themselves that it is worth the time and money spent in education and that they are different from the rest. They want to say something to stand out (example: An economist should write like an economist and not like a layperson).
- In a few cases, even editors and referees might prefer stylistic writing over plain uncluttered style. This perpetuates a cycle, with students misunderstanding these “excesses” as “classy”. They believe using difficult terms makes them different and start writing articles with this assumption. Journals publish as they are, and those reading the articles think the excesses are essential to scholarly writings.

### How to edit your draft?

The people who think rules of writing are like algorithms (certain, precise and accurate) find it difficult to use them compared to those who think that writing is more about heuristics (rules of thumb). Editing everything by rule may not always be feasible or advisable, but you can always “edit by ear”: looking at a sentence you can say “this sounds good” or “this looks good”. The ear for good writing develops with reading and writing.

1. Focus on economic writing: think how you can make sentences shorter, direct and clear.
2. Prefer active voice over passive voice: Most common advice you can find in every book on composition. This is because active voice is direct and short.
3. Focus on structure of the draft and logical ordering of the content.
4. Avoid repetition: Do not say the same thing in different words.
5. Identify abstract phrases and sentences. Try to make them concrete and specific.
6. Avoid loose usage of metaphors like cutting edge technologies, growing body of the literature without referring to the metaphor’s contextual use.
7. Edit the draft many times with a focus on improving clarity and comprehension. For feedback, share it with colleagues or friends you trust. Edit again!

Becker emphasizes that writers need to pay attention to what they have written, looking at every word as if they meant it to be taken seriously. By paying attention, the problems take care of themselves.

### Is such detailed editing and rewriting worth the time?

As you keep editing the draft, line by line, word by word, you can easily see that it makes the draft marginally better. But what good is that? Becker uses a beautiful analogy to drive home the message. “It is like looking through the viewfinder of the camera. I give the lens that last quarter turn that brings everything into perfect focus.” This is what good editing does and it is worth the time. Also, the person who writes many times takes less than the time taken by those who write at once. Because, those who write at once spend a lot more time getting each sentence correct, thinking about the flow and

order while they write, whereas, Becker's writing style advocates writing the first draft without thinking about being right or the order of ideas.

### Miscellaneous tips

- The introduction is meant to introduce the paper. If you have not written the paper, what will you introduce? So, it is better if you can write the introduction after writing other chapters of the paper. (The last paragraph of your paper usually hints at what the introduction contains)
- Do you get angry when an editor or a professor misinterprets sentences you wrote and rewrites them? I do feel bad when the papers written by me are subjected to such surgery. But, think it over. Is it not an indication that you have not written clearly enough, resulting in confusion? Rather than blaming the editor, focus on writing clearly to avoid confusion.

### To conclude

Writing a paper and publishing it in high impact factor journal has become the yardstick for hiring and promotion decisions in academia. Unfortunately, it has led to a decline in the quality of papers published. Donald Campbell (1976) explains a phenomenon called "the corruption of indicators"; The more any quantitative social indicator is used for social decision-making, the it will be to corruption pressures and the more apt it will be to distort and corrupt social processes it is intended to monitor (Goodhart's law is similar). Young academicians often give importance only to methodological aspects of the paper and do not consider good writing as a necessary factor for publishing a good paper.

As Becker observes, "Editors and professors reject papers which use statistics incorrectly, but only sigh about poorly written drafts." Given the number of journals, there are many places to get published. It is time graduate students are oriented and trained in the process of (re)writing. Remember, rewriting can be fun, it is like a word puzzle; trying to find the most economical way of saying things- saying what you wish to say, using fewer words without losing meaning. Treat rewriting as a fun activity and not as a necessity to overcome your weakness/shortcomings.

**Note:** The editor of this blog has also asked me to rework the draft (should I say taste of my own medicine?) and I did enjoy the process of editing.

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