

## General Writing Advice:

### Course Handout Created by Rachelle Gaudet

Use the active voice, especially in the results section. Example: use the active form “we used untransfected cells as a control” rather than the passive form “untransfected cells were used as a control”.

Use the past tense to describe results – whenever you’re describing something that happened in the past, the past tense is the correct tense! Inferred conclusions can be in present tense.

Use simpler words unless they lack precision. For example, “use” over “utilize”. Science writing is complicated enough, there is no need to make it sound more complicated than it is.

Start by making an outline. A brief outline may simply include a list of section titles. A more detailed outline could include a bullet point idea for each paragraph. This gives you a place for each piece. Then fill in the outline – in whichever order you see fit.

Limit each paragraph to one main idea and keep that idea in mind as you write. If you realize that you are including a second idea, reexamine your goal for that paragraph: Should this new piece be moved to a different planned paragraph? Or do you want to change the main idea of the current paragraph? Or do you want to split the current paragraph into two paragraphs?

In general, remember the principle of telling the reader what you will tell them, telling it, and telling them what you just told them.

Save often, and back up. And back up. Make sure the document or at least one of the back-ups is in the cloud, accessible from other devices.

### Formatting

- Read through the relevant submission guidelines *before you start* and follow them *from the beginning*.
- In general, use just one font and one font size in a document.
- Format everything properly and consistently as much as possible, as early as possible. It makes it so much less likely that errors slip through, and it allows all co-authors to focus on content.
- Use <sup>superscripts</sup>, <sub>subscripts</sub>, *italics*, **bold** formatting as appropriate (e.g., Ca<sup>2+</sup> or variables like  $K_M$  in italics).
- In general, do *not* use underline. Underline is mostly a remnant from the days of hand-written manuscripts, and was often used to indicate sections that should be italicized when typed up.
- Numbers under 10 (or 20 by some guidelines) should be spelled out in most texts (one, two, three, ...), unless it’s a number with unit (e.g. 5 mM). Similarly, any number at the start of a sentence needs to be spelled out: “Five mM EDTA was added to the buffers...” If you find this awkward, find a way to rephrase so that the number is not at the start of the sentence: “EDTA (5 mM) was added to the buffers...”
- There should always be a space between numbers and units
- Introduce proper symbols, for example:
  - “Å” not just an “A” (note – on a PC, ctrl+shift+2, followed by A, will give you Å in Word)
  - “α” and “β”, not “a” or “alpha” or “b” or “beta”, “μ” not “u” – for all Greek symbols
  - The degree symbol ° is an actual symbol, not a superscript “o” character. On a PC, ctrl+shift+2 followed by a space will give you the degree symbol in Word. Option+Shift+8 on a Mac.

- Use tracked changes for introducing edits when trading with co-authors or when reviewing a text. When you receive tracked changes, accept or reject as appropriate before introducing new ones. When using tracked changes, put comments in comment boxes, and reply to comments using “reply” rather than a new comment.
- Use yellow highlight as an efficient way to mark things that need your attention later (e.g. “Figure X” when you don’t yet know what the figure number will be). It makes it easy to find, and difficult to forget. You can quickly skim a document to make sure all highlighted items have been addressed. And once we’re satisfied that we’ve dealt with all the items that need attention, it’s easy to remove highlighting throughout – not the case with other formatting like italics or bold or all caps.

### **Rachelle’s pet peeves**

For each of these below, a full search (or search/replace), examining each case for accuracy, can be good way to clean up your text.

- “use” instead of “utilize”.
- Don’t use “though” as the informal short form of “although”.
- Use “whether” rather than “if” unless it is an “if ... then” situation.
- “In order to” can most of the time be shortened to “to”.
- Expressions like “it has been shown that...” are most often unnecessary verbiage. One exception is when it is followed by a technical detail like “... by mutational analyses”.
- Use demonstratives (this, that, these, those) sparingly and always make sure that the use is grammatically appropriate so that even a naïve reader understands what you are referring to.