

# Overcoming yourself

KENNETH D. MAHRER, *University of Denver, Colorado, U.S.*

Recently I was reminded of the most memorable saying of Pogo, the 1950ish cartoon possum with keen insight: "We met the enemy and he is us." I wondered...Can writers be their own worst enemy? Do writers cling to concepts, ideas, or methods that preclude successful documents?

My answer is obvious. If I didn't think so, I wouldn't be writing this column.

Consider voice, a term that in this context does not represent the pitch of a Pavarotti but the relationship of subject and verb. Do you feel writing in active voice is wrong because active voice is subjective? That reasoning mandates the use of passive voice because it is objective and objectivity is the cornerstone of science? These beliefs may be hurting your writing. Technical writing needs both voices to maintain clarity and cohesiveness. Force-fitting your material to passive voice weakens your ability to explain and illustrate.

Next consider weight. Are you of the mind that ponderous language makes the article seem more valuable? This is another error because, in writing, "regal" tones tend to obscure; big words, too many words, and convoluted syntax/explanations make science difficult to understand.

In the late 1970s, I postdoc'd under J. D. Eshelby, an icon in materials, fracture mechanics, and related disciplines. Once, after slogging through an inflated manuscript, Eshelby bellowed, "It is the duty of all scientists to make the difficult easy. If you can't, you are not ready to publish." Eshelby applied this philosophy to his own work. He published few papers but these remain benchmark references, even though some were published in the 1950s! Remember, when internally debating the use of majestic intonations, that most readers are probably commoners and don't care to wade through heavy prose.

Do you prepare before you write or do you just write? If you just write, you are probably your worst enemy. When you've worked on a project for months, you know it inside out. Unfortunately you know it so well that you may be seduced by it and lose sight of your readers. You believe the value of your work is what you did. Your readers believe its value is the benefits it brings to them. And they are right. Remember readers can always stop reading you. You must appeal to their interests and needs, not your own, to keep them around. So, before writing, prepare. Consider your readers and what they need, want, and what they should not walk away without.

If you are a student, does this sound familiar? "I've written lots of term papers. My grades and professors tell me I am a good writer." Maybe you are or maybe you are not, but student papers and professional documents are not the same! Professional documents have accountability, are written to be read and used, and are archived; student papers are written to fill a requirement, get a grade, and show work effort. Rarely do student papers have a life beyond the end of the term. If student writing is your model, reconsider.

If you are a recent graduate, does this ring a bell? "I have an (advanced) degree therefore I can write." How does one follow from the other? How can you profess this skill? Osmosis? Would you trust a sociologist to fix your car? Certainly not without proper training or experience.

If you feel your degree guarantees good writing, please reconsider. How many confusing, poorly written articles by PhDs have you read?

Do you think, "My native language is English, therefore I can write well in English." I suggest that, if you feel that you write well in English because you speak English natively, you test yourself. Get a good tech writing book. (I can recommend some.) Randomly pick some sections and read them. Did any light bulbs turn on in your head? If not, read some more. If so, read some more.

Are you one who recognizes that your skills could use some updating but you are too busy? Hmmmm. Professional geoscientists should be writing about 20% or more of the time. Should the product be the result of the same kind of effort that goes into your science or is a lesser effort acceptable?

Do you accept mediocrity? Have you ever said, "I'm not a good writer, but I am an OK writer." I have heard that much more than you could imagine. What a caveat emptor! You've absolved yourself of responsibility and legitimized junk! How can you be sure you are even OK? Consider the view of the great Scottish poet Robert Burns: "Oh wad some Power the giftie gie us To see oursels as ithers see us" (To a Louse, 1786). Is your writing really just mediocre? Or has no one told you the truth? I suggest if you profess acceptable mediocrity, read something you wrote more than a year ago. If it's good "enough," you can defend your opinion. If it's no good ... you can figure out the next step.

Well, those are a few of Pogo's enemies in technical writing. So, are you your own enemy? Only you can answer that. A good place to start your search for the answer is your reports and manuscripts. Do they get through the mill easily or do you always face an uphill battle?

Blockette. (Adapted from an editorial in the *Journal of the Irish Medical Association*, January 1958)

## The Reviewer's Passport

The Reviewer stood 'fore the Heavenly Gate,  
His features pinched and cold.  
He bowed before the Man of Fate,  
Seeking admission to the fold.  
"What have you done" St. Peter asked,  
"To gain admission here?"  
"I was a journal reviewer, Sir  
For many a weary year."  
The Pearly Gates swung open wide  
As Peter pressed the bell.  
"Come in and choose your harp," he cried;  
"You've had your share of hell!" E

Corresponding author: kmahrer@du.edu