

The DSB method— Persuasive writing made simpler

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As I have discussed in previous columns, successful technical documents possess critical qualities. One of these and the one most commonly missing in weak documents is persuasiveness. Simply, *persuasiveness* is demonstrated value or utility to the reader. Weak writers assume value if they highlight the hoops through which they jumped in completing their work. This is not the case. Effort is not value; value is value, and it has to be shown.

It's easy to misconstrue persuasion or selling the value with a vision of a scientist or engineer as a stereotypical used-car salesperson with a gaudy sports coat and a slap on the back. That is not the case. By selling or persuading, I mean overtly and unquestionably demonstrating value, utility, and benefits and *not placing the burden of finding value on the reader*. Most readers won't go looking for value, and the document will fall into the abyss of the eminently forgettable. No authors want that.

So we agree that persuasion is an important quality. Then, why is it so often overlooked or ignored and how can writers increase the persuasiveness of their documents? The answer to the first question comes from the traditional structure of technical writing. This structure is IMRaD, an acronym for Introduction, Means/Methods, Results, and Discussion.

IMRaD is pervasive. It's pervasive because it's easy; it's easy because it simply follows the work chronology. As discussed below, that's also its weakness. Before we discuss that weakness, let's analyze the parallel between IMRaD and work chronology.

The first thing the researcher does or has done is background reading. The first element of IMRaD, the Introduction, is typically a boatload of summaries of papers, books, reports, abstracts, theses, etc. Some authors attempt to focus the summaries on their work. More often the Introduction reads like a random walk through a literature survey. Rarely does it explicitly define a problem and the importance of that problem. Hence, from the beginning, the value of the work (e.g., solving a problem) is left for the reader to find.

Next, the authors typically do their research. Similarly, the document usually has the Means/Methods section immediately after the Introduction. Although it may be called something besides Means/Methods, it reports the tasks leading to the results. Typically, this section is built upon a combination of two templates. One is development that mimics the work order. The other is a verbiage weighting *inversely proportional to hiatus since the task was done* (i.e., tasks done long ago are discussed briefly; tasks done recently are discussed in detail). Value or utility does not enter these templates.

A compilation of findings follows the actual research. Similarly, the document usually follows Means/Methods with the Results section. Results sections typically fall into one of two types: too short probably because the thinking of the writers was in their work and not its benefits (i.e., "a problem looking for a solution") or much too long because everything that was examined is reported. The too-long sections could use some very heavy culling, based on

Blockette. My middle-school daughter gave me the following Dr. Seuss-like poem on English. It's by the famous author Anonymous.

Why is English Hard

We'll begin with a box, and the plural is boxes.
But the plural of ox should be oxen, not oxes.
Then one fowl is goose, but two are called geese.
Yet the plural of moose should never be meeses.
You may find a lone mouse or a whole lot of mice.
But the plural of house is houses, not hise.
If the plural of man is always called men.
Why shouldn't the plural of pan be called pen?
The cow in the plural may be cows or kine.
But the plural of vow is vows, not vine.
And I speak of foot and you of feet.
But I give you a boot ... would a pair be called beet?
If one is a tooth and the whole set are teeth,
Why shouldn't the plural of booth be called beeth?
If the singular is this and the plural is these,
Should the plural of kiss be nicknamed kesse?
Then one may be that, and three may be those,
Yet the plural of hat would never be hose.
We speak of a brother, and also of brethren,
But though you say mother, we never say methren.
The masculine pronouns are he, his, and him.
But imagine the feminine she, shis, and shim!
So our English, I think you will all agree,
Is the trickiest language you ever did see!

value or expected utility of the work to the reader. Instead, the template here is simply a catharsis of everything found.

The parallel between work chronology and reporting continues into the final or Discussion/Conclusion section. In research, once results are compiled, conclusions are drawn—maybe. It's obvious that for some work, conclusions are not drawn and the Conclusion section becomes a minisummary of the work (see *Writer's Block*, October 1998). In other efforts, the writers draw and report conclusions. Hence my original statement: IMRaD parallels the work chronology.

As stated, IMRaD is easy, but, unless one is a talented, aware writer, IMRaD is also an easy path to a poor document. IMRaD is a blueprint for a writer's paper—one that only the writer (and those few engaged in the same work) appreciates. Most readers are confused, misdirected, or hard-pressed to find value or utility in writer's papers.

Said a bit differently, writer's papers are predisposed from IMRaD. This is because each component is an "I/we" section. The Introduction is a manifestation of "Here is what I/we read." Means/Methods manifests "Here is what and how I/we did." The Results is "Here is what I/we found, derived, modeled, or measured." And, the Discussion is sometimes "Here is what I/we like and disliked about my/our work," but more often it's "Here is a one-paragraph summary of what I/we did." Nowhere is the reader specifically included in the IMRaD structure and

nowhere is the reader explicitly shown the value of the work. Instead the document is a smorgasbord of the writers' work, thoughts, etc. that is laid out in front of the reader and which the reader is invited to sample. Unlike food, which many of us could benefit by indulging a bit less, a smorgasbord paper is tasted and then left on the table.

So, if IMRaD is a path to writing a weak, nonpersuasive document, what is an alternative? Or, as posed above, how can writers write persuasive documents? Simply, write a "reader's paper." Write a document that brings readers into the document via strong, explicit reasons to value the work and for spending the time reading it carefully. Easy to say, but easy to do? Actually it's not that difficult, but a writer must be willing to use an upgrading of IMRaD.

This is done by using DSB—Definition, Solution, and Benefits. DSB's structure shares many qualities with IMRaD but, in addition, it forces the writer to explicitly bring the reader into the document. It's less smorgasbord and more maître d's (i.e., an insider's) recommendations.

The Definition is a reformulated Introduction. Instead of a clump of one or two-sentence summaries and citations, the Definition focuses the reader's attention by identifying and explicitly stating the problem that is being solved. The problem is not implied but specifically stated. In many documents this is not easy, but it is necessary because it immediately "hooks" the reader: It says, "Here is a specific problem that I/we have solved or to which I/we have found fresh new insight and which is important to you." This immediately persuades readers that they will receive value and utility.

Here's an example. Assume the authors have developed a new algorithm. Such a paper typically begins by

presenting existing literature on similar work. It then derives the new algorithm, followed by some examples of output. If the algorithm is faster or more accurate than existing algorithms, the speed difference or accuracy is usually mentioned in a sentence or two buried within the depths of the Results or Conclusion section. The paper can be a real struggle to readers, unless they're doing similar work. This is a classic writer's paper.

Instead, at the beginning the writers should state explicitly that there is a problem with the slowness or inaccuracy (i.e., inadequacy) of the existing algorithms—otherwise why was this work done? In addition, to enhance value, details of the inadequacy should be given. Here is where the background reading summaries come in. All this helps define the problem, add value, and bring readers "into" the paper. The algorithm can now be developed, because the reader is hooked.

Defining the problem, the specific problem, may not be as easy and as obvious as in this example. It may require a lot of brain activity by the authors. For one thing, it may require authors to justify their work, something they may not have done before. Too often justification is equated with different and novel, perceived values, as opposed to real value. Nevertheless, the exercise of defining the problem is well worth the effort. Readers who see a definitive problem and the statement that a solution follows can relate to the work and its need.

Within the Definition section (of course, it does not have to be called that in the paper), there is room for some but certainly not all the background reading cited in the (old) IMRaD Introduction. Perspective, background, and other ingredients of the IMRaD Introduction can be included, but the key point of the Definition section is an explicit statement of the problem. This section must say to the reader, "Here is an important problem to consider" not simply "Look what I read and studied."

Following the Definition, the readers expect a solution. Successful writers meet these expectations. Hence, the Solution section follows. It has many of the qualities as Means/Methods and the Results sections of IMRaD. However, these sections should be directed toward giving the steps that lead to the solution of or findings concerning the defined problem.

After the Solution section, the writers need to bring home the impact of this work. This is the function of the Benefits section. Instead of being the old Conclusion/Discussion, the Benefits section must be designed to "close the deal." It must tell readers that their time has been well invested because this work can enhance productivity, increase understanding and decision-making confidence, or some other specific benefit(s). In other words, the authors must relate the value of their work to the reader's work. Like the problem in the Definition section, this must be done explicitly, and it must be done with authority and not with wild speculation. This section has to say to the reader, "This solution is important and useful to you because..."

That's the DSB structure. It's not a radical departure from IMRaD, a structure with which most of us are comfortable. Rather it's an enhancement of IMRaD and designed to make documents much more persuasive and more acceptable to readers, especially those pesky journal reviewers and editors. E

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