



Medical Writing: a Prescription for Clarity, by Neville W. Goodman and Martin B. Edwards (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

The authors state that doctors, medical scientists, and others who write on medical matters should do so with clarity and precision so that the reader knows exactly what the writer means. No one can argue with that! They further state that doctors write poorly because they were never taught to write well. Doctors also do not have or take the time to read nonmedical books and articles written by good authors. In other words, they write the way they do because of what they read and, consequently, in a way that they think is expected. The writers deplore the quality of medical writing in general, but are particularly critical of American English, as opposed to English English, and of articles appearing in American medical journals (with the exception of the *New England Journal of Medicine*).

Doctors and medical scientists in general *are* poor writers and could improve their writing skills by reading this book. There is much to recommend it, including chapters or sections on planning what is to be written, getting-started guidelines, grammatical terms, word choices, construction of sentences, punctuation, use of passive and active voices, instruction in drawing clear graphs, and 31 examples of poor writing. These examples of poor writing offer readers opportunities to edit sentences and paragraphs using what they have learned and to compare their critiques with those of the authors.

However, this book would be better read by medical editors and copy editors than by medical writers *per se*. Realistically, medical writers will not take time to study how to write well. If they did, Strunk and White's *Elements of Style*¹ would suffice; its 86 pages contain the basics for expressing oneself clearly in writing. The rest of the lessons taught in *Medical Writing* should be left for the editors and copy editors of our medical journals and textbooks.

REFERENCE

1. Strunk W, Jr, White EB. *The Elements of Style*. 3rd ed. Needham Heights, Mass: Allyn and Brown; 1979.

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