



# Effective life-science writing in English

University of Bergen, Molecular and Computational Biology Research School  
Monday–Wednesday, 21st–23rd September 2009

A 2½-day programme on tactics for writing or editing reports, journal articles, theses, or other life-science texts

**Tutors: Peter Hunt and John Kirkman**

## Monday 21st September

- 1230–1250 Self-introductions by seminar participants.  
1250–1340 **Lecture/discussion: Preparing to write readably.**  
Developing the appropriate attitude; writing in a way that is accurate and readable, and brings credibility and esteem; reading as ‘language-processing’.  
1350–1440 **Lecture/discussion: Getting off to a good start.**  
Form and style for titles and abstracts.  
1440–1500 **COFFEE**  
1500–1600 **Lecture/exercise: Making language-processing as easy as possible.**  
Delivering information in manageable sentences; considering accuracy, information load, readability, and tone; avoiding excessive ‘pre-modification’.  
Evening **Preparation:** Reading a text ready for an abstract-writing exercise.  
(Participants work at home. Time required up to one hour).

## Tuesday 22nd September

- 0830–0920 **Lecture/exercise: Choosing words wisely (1).**  
Creating ‘comfortable’ text by careful mixing of special terms and ‘plain English’.  
0920–0940 **COFFEE**  
0940–1025 **Lecture/discussion: Providing orientation and focus for your readers.**  
Form and content for introductions and conclusions.  
1035–1145 **Exercise: writing an abstract.**  
1145–1230 **LUNCH**  
1230–1340 **Evaluation:** Evaluating answers to the abstract-writing exercise (2 groups x 8 answers).  
1350–1435 **Lecture/exercise: Choosing words wisely (2).**  
Avoiding ‘roundabout’ phrasing and excessive ‘nominalisation’ (for example, choosing *reducing* instead of *achieving a reduction*).  
1435–1455 **COFFEE**  
1455–1600 **Exercise: Writing a short text.**

## Wednesday 23rd September

- 0830–0925 **Lecture/discussion: The heart of the matter — verbs.**  
Stating what you did and what happened, not what was performed and what was observed to have occurred.  
0925–0945 **COFFEE**  
0945–1035 **Lecture/exercise: Points on punctuation.**  
Using punctuation marks as skilfully as you use intonation, pace, and stress in speech.  
1045–1145 **Evaluation: Evaluating answers to the writing exercise** (2 groups x 4 answers).  
1145–1230 **LUNCH**  
1230–1310 **Lecture/exercise:** avoiding ‘fashionable’ words.  
1320–1430 **Exercise: Punctuating a text; revising a draft text.**  
1430–1450 **COFFEE**  
1450–1550 **Evaluation: Evaluating answers to the writing exercise** (2 groups x 4 answers)  
1550–1600 **Farewell.**

## PLEASE NOTE

In the writing exercise on Tuesday, 1455–1600, we shall ask you to write a brief text (about 200 words, not more than one A4 side) about your own work. There is no need for any preparation in advance. We would like you to wait until you have heard our advice before you begin writing. Obviously, you can think in advance about what you will write, but we do not want ready-made extracts from PhD theses, and we do not want pieces of texts that have been edited and published previously. Our objective is to get about an hour’s fresh, original writing from you, preferably describing to Peter and me the aims, interests, and problems of your work. We recognise that it may be difficult to explain specialist scientific work to non-scientists like us, so if that seems too difficult, you will be free to specify the audience you have in mind for your description.

# The John Kirkman Communication Consultancy

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***John Kirkman was formerly Director of the Communication Studies Unit at the University of Wales in Cardiff. His consultancy is an association of specialists in scientific and technical communication — Peter Hunt, Trevor Kemp, James Paradis, and Susan Starks. They have presented lectures and courses for more than 320 organisations in 23 countries.***

**JOHN KIRKMAN** was at the University of Wales Institute of Science and Technology, Cardiff for 22 years. He taught English and Linguistics, and specialised in practical aspects of communication in science and technology. He has been a Visiting Lecturer in Technical Communication at the University of Michigan and at Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and a Visiting Fellow in Linguistics at Princeton University. He has served as an External Examiner in Technical Communication for universities in Great Britain and Ireland. He has published more than 70 articles, and has written, edited, or contributed to 10 books.

**PETER HUNT** is an Emeritus Professor of English of the University of Wales, Cardiff. He has been teaching scientific and technical communication within the University and as a consultant since 1968. He has been a Visiting Lecturer in Technical Communication at both the University of Michigan and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. He has lectured extensively in Europe, the USA, Canada, Australia and New Zealand. He is also a novelist and an internationally renowned expert on children's literature.

**TREVOR KEMP** is a consultant on technical communication, based in Karlsruhe, Germany. He is a graduate in chemistry with a strong background in analytical instrumentation and computing. He has lectured in more than 20 countries, and has contributed widely to scientific journals and books. He is working currently on all aspects of on-line documentation. In particular, he is interested in the design of computer based teaching aids and the use of multi-media in computer-based instruction.

**JAMES PARADIS** is Director of Technical Writing at Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cambridge, USA. His initial training was in chemistry and biology, but his higher degrees are in English, and for more than twenty years he has been teaching technical writing, first at the University of Washington, and now at MIT. He is co-author of two books on technical writing, and is widely experienced in consulting on technical communication in business and industry. He has worked with JKCC in the UK, Denmark, Finland, Italy, and Sweden.

**SUSAN STARKS** is a freelance editor, specialising in working with management consultancies and other public and private sector organisations. She helps staff to structure and write proposals, reports and presentations. Recent clients have included McKinsey and Company, Arthur D. Little Ltd., Cranfield University, and the National Audit Office. She has a degree in Oriental Studies and a post-graduate diploma in Management Studies. She has been an associate of JKCC since 1989, teaching widely in Europe and the USA.

