

Reviewing a journal article with clarity and politeness: key language tips for non-native English-speaking reviewers

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Abstract

One of the important responsibilities of peer review in academic publishing is to help authors improve the quality of their manuscripts by providing clear, constructive comments that are neither unpleasant nor disparaging. However, non-native English-speaking reviewers sometimes have difficulties in complementing or criticizing with clarity. It can also be difficult for reviewers to write appropriate and inter-culturally sensitive reviews. Thus, the goal of this paper is to help reviewers (and authors) improve clarity and achieve politeness in their writing. This paper focuses on understanding information structure (how information is generally arranged in a given context), cohesion (how ideas or sentences are connected), and emphasis (how to control emphasis with sentence structure or linguistic devices); it also introduces various politeness strategies for writing compliments and mitigating criticisms. The specific strategies include the use of conditionals, hedging, and pairing good news and bad news. Examples of effective and ineffective reviewer comments and cases of potential miscommunication that might occur between reviewers and authors are also presented. Developing skills to write peer review comments more clearly and politely enhances communication between reviewers and authors, which in turn further improves the journal's overall quality.

Keywords

Peer review; Clarity; Politeness; Information structure; Cohesion

Introduction

Journals are well aware that clear communication between the reviewers and authors is indispensable for successful manuscript publication. Sometimes communication fails because the author's main points were not expressed clearly in the paper, or because a reviewer's comments were not clear to the authors. Thus, improving clarity is an important issue for both authors and reviewers [1]. In addition, while non-native English-speaking (NNES) reviewers may have good intentions and a thorough understanding of their role as a reviewer, they may not be fully aware of common sociolinguistic norms in English. They may use inappropriate expressions

Received: July 4, 2020
Accepted: July 13, 2020

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or tone in their reviews, inadvertently offending or confusing the authors [2,3]. By strategically employing the strategies that are introduced in this paper, NNES authors and reviewers can improve their communication skills.

Improve Clarity

Writing with clarity is crucial for effective communication between reviewers and authors, but challenging to both. Authors endeavor to make their content easy to understand so that reviewers and readers clearly grasp the intended meaning, and reviewers strive to write their comments clearly so that authors know exactly what the reviewers expect to be revised or clarified. The following are some tips that could help writers and reviewers improve clarity in their writing.

Choose verbs carefully

When conveying a message in English, carefully chosen verbs affect the intended meaning [4]. To achieve the desired effect, NNES writers and reviewers are encouraged to examine the verbs closely (a dictionary can also be helpful) for specific meanings and nuances. Depending on the writer's intention (which is indicated in parentheses for the following examples), the appropriate verb should be selected, for instance: 1) Hyland (2017) *implies* (suggests indirectly) that other historians have misinterpreted the period; 2) Smith (2019) *claims* (firmly states that something is true; when used in the third person, this suggests that others may disagree with the statement) that the causes of Brexit are mainly economic.

Based on a thorough understanding of the relevant nuances, verb choice can also control the strength of claims. Below are two examples with the stronger verbs italicized: 1) The results indicate/*establish* that there is a link between smoking and lung cancer; 2) The test results *confirm*/suggest diagnosis and guide treatment.

Understand information structure

Information structure refers to how information is expected to be arranged in a given context [5] and cannot be approached intuitively by those who are from a different culture. Thus, NNES writers and reviewers must try to understand how information structure works in English because careful use of information structure in ways that naturally align with the readers' expectations increases readability and enables readers to better understand the author's intended meaning [6].

In this section, I will introduce three basic principles of information structure in English. First, important information is usually placed in the main clause instead of a subordinate clause. Second, new or important information is usually placed at the end of a sentence. For instance, consider these

two examples that convey the same message: 1) This study examined the relationship between A and B; 2) The relationship between A and B was examined in this study. Even though neither of these examples contains a grammatical error, example 1) is preferred. When summarizing or identifying the purpose of a research paper, some NNES writers or reviewers may think that placing "the relationship between A and B" at the beginning of a sentence would be more effective because the information would get more attention in the subject position. In English, however, information placed at the end of a sentence receives more attention. Third, long and complex information is placed at the end of a sentence. An author may write, "That most purposes can be more easily served through a group rather than through individual effort is a common assumption," or "A common assumption is that most purposes can more easily be served through a group rather than through individual effort." The reader will find the second of these two options easier to read. Placing long and complex information in the subject position of a sentence is usually less effective because in English, readers expect to see the main verb earlier in the sentence rather than later.

Achieve cohesion

Cohesion, which refers to how sentences or ideas are joined together, helps readers better understand the information flow. An important principle of information structure that helps achieve cohesion is the "given before new" principle, according to which given or familiar information is placed before new information [7]. By first providing readers information that they already know, it becomes easier for them to connect the familiar information to the newly introduced information that follows. This point is exemplified by the following two examples: 1) Nancy spends her Saturday nights at Sweet Bakery. Mr. Smith owns the bakery. He has been making pastries the French way since opening the bakery in 1995; 2) Nancy spends her Saturday nights at Sweet Bakery. The bakery is owned by Mr. Smith. He opened the shop in 1995 and has been making pastries the French way ever since. Although there are no grammatical errors in the examples above, native English speakers generally agree that due to the "given before new" principle, example 2) flows better. In example 2), the new information (Sweet Bakery) in the first sentence becomes given information, as expressed through the synonym that immediately follows (the bakery). Thus, example 2) is easier for native speakers to process than example 1), in which new information (Sweet Bakery) is followed with other new information (Mr. Smith).

Cohesion can also be achieved by using demonstrative pronouns [8]. Demonstrative pronouns such as *it*, *this*, *these*, or *those* are common linguistic tools used to connect sentences.

NNES authors and reviewers sometimes have difficulties choosing an appropriate pronoun as an effective connector. The following two basic principles clarify their usage: 1) If only a word or a phrase is being referred to in the following sentence, use *it*. 2) To refer to the entire content of the previous sentence(s), use *this*. Here is a sentence that can be used as an exercise: “Dating back to only the late 19th century, electrical engineering is one of the newer branches of engineering. (*This/It*) is the branch that deals with the technology of electricity.” The corresponding antecedent for *this* or *it* appears to be a phrase (electrical engineering). Thus, the appropriate transitional pronoun should be *it*. Here is another sentence for an exercise: “When first waking from anesthesia, you may feel confused, drowsy, and foggy. (*This/It*) usually lasts for just a few hours, but for some people, confusion can last for days or weeks.” Since the entire content of the previous sentence serves as the antecedent, the appropriate transitional pronoun should be *this*.

The use of pronouns such as *this* or *that* can be effective when it is clear what the writer or the reviewer is referring to, but using these connectors alone can sometimes be confusing to the readers. A possible way to avoid this confusion is to use *this (or these)+summary word* or *this (or these)+interpretive word*, as shown in the following examples: 1) The Faculty-Training Program Assessment site provides information about ENGG 101 assessment including its goals and rubrics, sample scoring, and assessment results. Beginning fall semester 2020, we will be assessing student work in ENGG 101. This *assessment* will be divided into three phases; 2) In recent years, the number of students applying to medical schools has increased steadily, while the number of places available has remained constant. This *situation* has resulted in intense competition for admission; 3) Data shows that incidence and mortality from tuberculosis have dropped tremendously over the last 50 years. This *improvement* can be attributed to enhanced access to health care services. A keyword that was used in the previous sentence(s), can be repeated (example 1); the whole message expressed in the previous sentence(s) can be summarized in one word (example 2); or the author’s attitude can be reflected by using an “interpretive word” (example 3).

Create emphasis

There are various ways to add emphasis to writing. One useful tip is to use an isolation strategy. When a transitional expression such as *however* or *therefore* appears between a subject and a verb, the subject inevitably receives more emphasis by being isolated from the rest of the sentence. Various linguistic devices such as *in regard to*, *as to*, or *so far as X is concerned* can also be used to isolate the word(s) that need emphasis. Here are some examples: 1) To become a board-certified

physician, one must complete a medical degree, and thereafter follow it up with a residency program. The path to becoming a physician, *however*, begins with earning a bachelor’s degree from an accredited university or college; 2) *In regard to heroes*, John says there are two kinds. The emphasis is placed on the phrase “*the path to becoming a physician*” in example 1) and on the word “*heroes*” in example 2).

Writers can even control different degrees of emphasis by using sentence structure strategically [9]. In the following examples, the same ideas are conveyed using different sentence structures. One particular sentence, however, can be selected over the others depending on the writer’s intended degree of emphasis. In a situation where an author wants to emphasize the information that the children were excited, the following options are available, arranged from the strongest to the weakest: 1) The children were excited. They could not contain themselves; 2) The children were excited, and they could not contain themselves; 3) Because the children were excited, they could not contain themselves; 4) The children, being excited, could not contain themselves; 5) The children, in excitement, could not contain themselves. The information that is intended to be emphasized (the children were excited) receives the strongest emphasis when it is included in a full sentence with no other information (example 1). The information receives the next strongest emphasis when it is presented in a compound sentence (example 2), where two ideas are presented in one sentence; the information obviously receives less emphasis in a compound sentence because the reader has to process two ideas instead of only one. The information receives the third strongest emphasis when it appears in a subordinate clause (example 3) of a complex sentence. In English, a subordinate clause is a dependent clause, and so it receives less emphasis than the main clause. The information receives the fourth strongest emphasis in a participial phrase (being excited), which originates from a verb (example 4). The information receives the weakest emphasis in a prepositional phrase (example 5). As can be seen in the examples above, the writer can control the degree of emphasis by employing different sentence structures in a given context.

Achieve Politeness

Being aware of how to complement and criticize in the appropriate manner (using politeness strategies) can help avoid unnecessary miscommunication between reviewers and authors. In order to optimize effective communication between reviewers and authors, some useful tips on politeness strategies are introduced [10], and corresponding examples of common English phrases and expressions are provided.

Avoid the second-person pronoun

As a general rule, the second-person pronoun *you* should be avoided in academic writing. Similarly, it is preferable for reviewers not to address the author directly using *you*, which is a command form in English. Here are some examples to compare: 1) “*You* need to include ...”; 2) “*This paper/The manuscript/The author* needs to include ...” If reviewers continue to use *you* to refer to the author (example 1) for each item requiring revision, the author may feel scolded. Using third-person terms instead, such as *this paper/the manuscript/the author* (example 2), helps make the comments sound more objective and less personal.

Use conditionals

Conditionals can soften criticism. For example, a reviewer might say, 1) “You need to include more recent literature to support your views,” or 2) “The discussion would have been somewhat more relevant if the paper had included more recent literature to support the author’s views.” The first example may sound too direct and imply that the reviewer’s comments are absolutely correct, which might generate a hostile reaction from the author. However, when conditionals are used, as in the second example, the criticism becomes softer and tends to convey much lighter dissatisfaction.

Use good news and bad news together

Giving and receiving criticism is difficult for both reviewers and authors. Instead of only offering criticism, including both good news and bad news together in a sentence could mitigate the negative impact of criticism, and the author might be more inclined to have room to accept the criticism with a positive attitude. When good news and bad news are presented together, a reviewer needs to choose whether to offer the good news or the bad news first, and this choice should be based on the reviewer’s intent and the principles of information structure. Compare the following pair of examples: 1) This study is an important contribution and warrants swift publication, but some points need attention; 2) Some points need attention, but this study is an important contribution and warrants swift publication.

Based on the “end-placement” principle, the emphasis is placed on the second point in each example. In example 1) negative aspects (*some points need attention*) receive more attention, whereas in example 2) the positive aspects (*this study is an important contribution and warrants swift publication*) receive more attention. Understanding this principle regarding where to put good news and bad news to achieve the intended effect also shapes the possible types of messages that can follow in the subsequent sentence. If a reviewer plans to add more specific criticisms, it would be preferable to use ex-

ample 1) above, which ends with bad news, thereby building a more effective connection to the specific criticisms that follow.

Use hedging

In academic settings, it is often considered professional for authors (and reviewers) to avoid making categorical statements or claims and to take a prudent and cautious approach, which is known as hedging [11]. Various hedging devices can be used to indicate degrees of uncertainty, and they are often used as politeness strategies. Some examples of these hedging devices are introductory verbs (e.g., seem, tend, appear to be, believe), modal auxiliary verbs (e.g., would, may, could), frequency adverbs (e.g., often, sometimes), probability adverbs (e.g., unlikely, probably). The following examples present some suggestions for using hedging expressions to soften common reviewer comments. One common comment, “The topic of the manuscript *is inappropriate* for the scope of this journal,” can be revised as “The topic of this manuscript *seems somewhat inappropriate* for the scope of this journal” or “The topic of the manuscript *may not be entirely appropriate* for this journal.” Another frequently found comment, “There is already considerable research in this area,” could be revised as “*To the best of my knowledge*, there is already considerable research in this area” or “*To our knowledge*, there is already considerable research in this area.”

Conclusion

Effective communication between authors and reviewers is very important in improving the quality of a journal. The overall impression an author receives of a journal is sometimes determined by the reviewer’s comments to their submission. In order to optimize effective communication, it is crucial for NRES reviewers to be clear and polite when writing comments. Reviewers can achieve better clarity by understanding how to position words and phrases within and between sentences and how to make transitions and place emphasis effectively. To avoid unnecessary miscommunication, it is also essential to be aware of the socio-pragmatic knowledge embedded in English. Offering regular training to reviewers should contribute to improving communication between authors and reviewers, and this, in turn, will ultimately advance the quality of a journal.

Conflict of Interest

No potential conflict of interest relevant to this article was reported.

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