

# FROM OUR SOUTHERN CORRESPONDENT



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**So, an era finishes as Alan Crowden steps down as Bulletin editor – a personal thanks to Alan from me for his work on the Bulletin. It's one of the few society bulletins I actually look forward to leafing through. But it's Alan's offline banter that I most appreciate. Dealing with recalcitrant authors is never easy, and Alan brought a certain piercing wit to the task of dragging a Southern Correspondent piece out of me twice a year. I hope he hasn't passed on to the incumbent editorial team his accumulated war chest of techniques to make Hobbs cough up the goods.**

The occasion of Alan's editorial exit made me realize that it's 20 years since Peter Thomas, Alan's equally illustrious predecessor, caught me in an unguarded moment while sitting in the balmy heat outside the INTECOL meeting in Florence, Italy in 1998. Rather sneakily, while topping up my red wine, he suggested that it would be a great ruse to have wise words from the antipodes appearing periodically in the Bulletin. And hence over a rather nice Tuscan wine, the Southern Correspondent feature was born. Wise words have probably been relatively few and far between, and the antipodean theme has been mixed with whatever else popped into my head as the inevitable deadline approached. Surprisingly, however, feedback suggests that some Bulletin readers actually quite like the regular southern correspondence.

Despite initial misgivings about taking on yet another task, contributing the Southern Correspondent piece has been unexpectedly enjoyable. In reflective

moments, I've tried to analyse why I keep doing it. One obvious answer is that it's been good sport to bait successive Bulletin editors. Alan Crowden has been especially rewarding to interact with over deadlines. In addition, it is a rare pleasure these days to be able to write about pretty much anything and to do so in an unconstrained manner. Beyond editor harassing, writing the Southern Correspondent articles has reminded me about what scientific writing needs to be about. As well as contributing to our understanding of the natural world and how to manage it, ecology is, and clearly needs to be, FUN! Photos of ecologists doing fieldwork, counting birds, or whatever, generally illustrate people who are happy as Larry with what they are doing. Hence writing about it should also theoretically be fun.

However, observation suggests that many people find writing far from fun. Doing and applying the science is one thing, but reporting it is entirely another. There are probably many reasons for this, some to do with the writer and others to do with the process of writing something that will be accepted in a scientific journal.

Looking at the writer first, in order to write effectively, never mind enjoyably, a person needs to have some basic tools and understanding of how language is put together. This then assists the writer in constructing whatever piece of writing they need to do. This is analogous to building a house – one needs both a design and plans, but implementing the design requires tools, nails, pieces of wood and so on and the ability to stick

everything together. When I were a lad (oh dear, the old fart syndrome rears its ugly head again), we were taught proper grammar and had to tear sentences apart, understand their parts, and know how to stick them back together again so that they made sense. We knew not only what verbs and nouns were, but also weird things like adverbial clauses and split infinitives. We also knew what gerunds were, and contrary to some opinions, they are not small furry animals that live on islands off east Africa. Sadly, fads in education led to the misplaced belief that all this learning grammar wasn't really necessary and that language could be learned organically. So a generation grew up with only a scant idea of how to construct sentences and absolutely no idea where to put punctuation such as commas. Feral commas have reached plague proportions. And while you can get away with grammatical murder when texting your friends or when tweeting, this unfortunately doesn't work when trying to write anything more complicated than a shopping list, and especially not reports, essays, thesis chapters and journal articles. And so the university lecturer's lot was to become a latter-day grammar teacher, retrofitting grammatical sense into otherwise unintelligible assignments.

Fortunately, the tide seems to be turning again and at least some students enrolling for higher degrees seem to have a working knowledge of how language works. It remains enigmatic that, often, students with English as a second language actually write better English than native English speakers.

A particularly perverse aspect of the loss of proficiency in correct language usage is the journal editor or copy-editor who subscribes to an idiosyncratic view of grammar and demands subservience to this revisionist perspective on how things should be written. Some rogue editors even go so far as to rewrite text so that the original meaning is completely obscured or reinterpreted. I know of one journal that authors retreated from in droves because the managing editor insisted on more or less re-writing the manuscript, not always to the benefit of the submitted work.

This leads to the second element – namely, the process of writing something that will be accepted in a scientific journal. Lapsing into old fart mode again, I note that reading ecology papers written in last century's formative years of modern ecology is a joy. The papers are not only full of good ideas and amazing data – they are also well written and often quite lyrical in their tone. Something happened during the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and any hint of lyricism was well and truly stomped out of scientific writing. Indeed, indigestible, turgid, dense prose seemed to be the order of the day. The first person



approach was out, and passive tense was the rule ("An experiment was conducted" instead of "I conducted an experiment"). The more obtuse you could make the text, the better it was received. Then came the tyranny of ever-shrinking word counts that added another blow to any lingering desires to add a bit of lyricism or playfulness to the otherwise dry presentation of jargon-laden results.

This process was enhanced by the increasingly KPI-driven nature of the scientific enterprise. If rewards are given and jobs retained by producing x number of papers per year, there is a strong incentive to conform to expectations. Produce the papers and do whatever it takes to get them published. Even if this means squeezing any hint of creativity and individual expression out of the process. This is odd, given that science is essentially a creative process: we're increasingly shoe-horning creative thought into KPI-driven outputs. Which aren't necessarily fun to produce – or to read. And as for accessibility to a broader audience – well, if fellow scientists find them dull to read, what hope does the general public have?

"Well, Hobbs – enough whinging, what's the answer?" I can hear a certain Alan Crowden ask. This is a valid question that, fortunately, is beginning to be asked more widely. Recent commentary (Doubleday & Connell, 2017) and books on scientific writing (Greene, 2013; Schimel, 2012) point to the need to break out from the norms adopted in the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. These authors point out that clear, concise – and interesting – writing can actually play a large part in successful publishing, work being cited, and grants being won. This doesn't mean that everyone has to morph into a JK Rowling or start writing in sonnets. And it will remain the case that some people find writing comes easily while others sweat over every word. But writing needs to be part of the ecologist's toolbox, just as much as field methods and statistics, and hence should be included in the basic ecological curriculum.

Part of the answer has also to be a move away from assessment based on quantity towards one based on quality. Of course, counting the number of papers a person has produced is easier than assessing the individual merit of particular pieces of work – however, quality based assessments are not impossible. Citations are used to some extent a surrogate index of quality. Maybe if we rewarded folks on the quality of their work rather than on simple quantity, we could all enjoy writing about our work more and, in turn, enjoy reading about other people's work more.

I recall a pivotal moment in my career, when I attended a BES symposium as a PhD student in the early 1980s. At that stage there was no Powerpoint and lectures were delivered with slides displayed via, sometimes dodgy, projectors. The order of the day was, as with written material, fairly dire presentations of not very interesting material. At a particularly dreary moment in the symposium, Bob May got up to give a talk. May was a legend even back then, and what astounded me was that he delivered a conference talk that was both scientifically amazing and also really entertaining. It had never dawned on me till then that scientific talks could be fun as well as informative. If we can reinstall fun into our scientific writing too, I think we'd all be much better off. And the science might actually resonate more with a broader audience. In a world increasingly enamoured with anti-scientific sentiment, there's a lot to lose if we don't get it right.

## REFERENCES

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