



What the *IJDVL* expects from authors: Better writing

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The *IJDVL* receives some manuscripts that have scientific merit, but are not readily comprehensible. A dedicated team of editors attempts to correct errors of grammar and syntax and rephrase the content more lucidly and elegantly without affecting the meaning.¹ However, some articles require rewriting that is so extensive that it can be done only by the authors. Despite the authors' best efforts in response to our suggestions, revisions are often unsatisfactory and the manuscript is rejected.

Scientific writing can be difficult, particularly for non-native English speakers. However, it is a skill that can be honed by observation, analysis and practice. In this editorial, we have offered some suggestions on basic writing skills to improve the quality of submissions to the *IJDVL*.

Before starting to write the manuscript, read similar articles and study the *IJDVL*'s instructions to authors. Box 1 which contains some elements from the *IJDVL* Style Sheet, provides readers an idea about what the journal considers to be the prerequisite of acceptable standards of scientific writing. Table 1 contains some of our language preferences from the Style Sheet.

Be consistent in terms of spellings, abbreviations and punctuation throughout the manuscript. Aim for conciseness and clarity; using complex words, flowery phrases, scientific jargon and lengthy and convoluted sentences only hinders readability and increases the word count.²

Write Cohesive Paragraphs

Try to stick to a single theme or concept in a paragraph. A simple tip would be to follow the IAC algorithm: **Issue** (the first or 'topic' sentence which states what the paragraph is about), **Analysis** (the 'supporting sentences' that explain the issue or finding) and finally the **Concluding sentence** (which sums up the paragraph and provides a transition to the next one).^{2,3}

Maintain continuity by using well-connected sentences that maintain the flow of ideas in a logical sequence with smooth transition into paragraphs. Maintain continuity by repeating key terms early in the sentence. Use transitions (e.g., but, however, instead, later, subsequently, therefore, thus and yet) to indicate relationships between ideas.⁴

Construct Sentences Carefully

- Vary the beginnings, type and length of sentences.⁵
- Write in the active voice which is stronger and more direct than the passive one, e.g., 'The patient noticed the lesions' is better than 'The lesions were noticed by the patient'. The exception is when who does something is less important than the recipient of the action, e.g., 'The patients were administered the drug' is better than 'We administered the drug to the patients'.^{2,4}
- Try not to start a sentence with pronouns like 'it' unless what 'it' refers to is very clear.^{6,7}

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Box 1: Selected points from the IJDVL Style Sheet

- We prefer short, crisp sentences to long, convoluted ones.
- Numbers:
 - Make sure that if a sentence starts with a number, it is spelt out in words and not as digits, for example, “Seven patients were lost to follow up” in place of “7 patients were lost to follow up”.
 - Do not hyphenate numbers when written in words, for example, “Thirty five patients had psoriasis” is correct, but “Thirty-five patients had psoriasis” is not.
- Avoid capitals in the middle of sentences, whether referring to drugs, diseases, or departments, for example, “We administered acitretin to 30 patients with hidradenitis suppurativa attending the department of dermatology in our hospital” instead of “We administered Acitretin to 30 patients with Hidradenitis Suppurativa attending the Department of Dermatology in our hospital”.
- When referring to the authors of a study in the article, use only the last names, for example, “Kandan and Bose reported that...” and not “Kandan S and Bose DM reported that...”
- The words “few” and “little” may cause confusion. Purists hold that when the words are preceded by “a”, that is, “a few people” and “a little strength”, they refer to small numbers or quantities. When the words are used alone, that is, “few people” and “little strength”, these mean “no people” and “no strength”, respectively. Non-purists are not so fussy. However, to avoid confusion, we recommend using “some” for small numbers and quantities, or “a few” and “a little”. Completely avoid the use of “few” or “little”.

Table 1: Some linguistic preferences from the IJDVL Style Sheet

Not preferred	Preferred
Male patient	Man
Female patient	Woman
Pediatric patient	Child
Papules over the leg/face	Papules on the leg/face
He was put on isotretinoin	He was treated with isotretinoin
According to the patient,which the patient claimed Parents of the child stated...	These statements are all redundant and can be deleted
“In the form of”, for example, “The skin lesions presented in the form of papules and plaques”	“The skin lesions presented as papules and plaques” or, even better “There were papules and plaques”

- Make sure that the subject is closely followed by its verb and predicate. For example, the sentence ‘The patient, who is a chronic alcoholic and has a history of long-standing diabetes mellitus being treated with oral hypoglycemic agents, developed itchy lesions over the leg’ tests the reader’s patience.⁴
- Don’t misplace the modifiers; the modifiers in a sentence must be placed near the phrase they modify, e.g., ‘The drug can cause arrhythmias which may be fatal, being prone for interactions’ is better phrased as ‘Being prone for interactions, the drug can cause arrhythmias that may be fatal’.⁴
- Articulate the action of every clause or sentence in its verb rather than in the noun, e.g., ‘We examined the scalp’ is better than ‘We did an examination of the scalp’.^{4,7}
- Avoid ‘strings of nouns’ or clusters of nouns used as adjectives,⁴ e.g., ‘Government COVID patient referral

guidelines’ confuses the reader and is better phrased as ‘governmental guidelines on referral of COVID patients’.

- Use positives rather than negatives, and avoid double negatives, e.g., ‘It is not uncommon’.⁴
- Delete any word or phrase if it does not alter the meaning or sacrifice clarity. A few examples of redundant phrases (and suggested changes): ‘prior history’ (history), ‘disease process’ (disease), ‘skin rash’ (rash), ‘the lesion was red in colour’ (the lesion was red), ‘in order to’ (to), ‘appears to be’ (seems), ‘due to the fact that’ (because), etc.^{3,4}
- Use ‘hedging’ in moderation. Hedging is the use of cautious language to make noncommittal or vague statements, e.g., ‘It *appears* that...’, ‘It is *probable* that...’, ‘*Apparently*...’, ‘We *assume* that...’. Often used by authors to convey the limitations of their findings, show modesty or to protect themselves from risk of errors,³ the excessive use of qualifiers can weaken the sentence.^{2,4}
- Avoid clichés and empty fillers. Some sterling examples include: ‘The patient presented to the dermatology department of the hospital...’, ‘A detailed history was taken’, ‘The patients were thoroughly examined’, ‘Further studies are required to investigate...’ and ‘These preliminary findings need to be confirmed by others’. These phrases are unnecessary, unoriginal and exhaust the word count.^{4,7}
- Avoid ‘Indianisms’. These usages, common among Indians, may be incomprehensible to others, e.g., ‘fair’ for light skin, ‘wheatish’ for a lighter brown skin color, ‘expired’ in place of ‘died’ and ‘prepone’ instead of ‘advance’ (as an antonym of ‘postpone’). Some other examples which are sources of unintended humour, though not specific to dermatologic literature, have nevertheless been noted among submissions in this journal, like ‘cousin brother/sister’ in place of ‘cousin’, using the phrase ‘pass out’ in the context of passing an examination, when it actually means ‘to lose consciousness’, etc.

Avoid Common Errors

- Use hyphens when compound adjectives (e.g., well, ill, better and little) are followed by a noun (e.g., ‘well-defined border’) or after the first number of a phrase (e.g., ‘a thirty two-year-old male’ and ‘five-to six-step process’). Hyphens are also used when adjectival compound words like ‘fold’ are used with figures, e.g., a ‘10-fold-increase’.⁴
- Write numbers from one to ten in words and beyond that, in figures. However, if the number is followed by an abbreviated unit, then use figures only, e.g., 2 mg/kg. Also, do not start the sentence with a figure, e.g., ‘5 g of salt was added to the mixture’ is better phrased as ‘Five grams of salt was added to the mixture.’ or ‘We added 5 g of salt to the mixture’.^{2,4}

- Do not mix up singular and plural terms, e.g., ‘data’ is plural, while ‘datum’ is singular. The singulars of ‘labia majora’ and ‘labia minora’ are ‘labium majus’ and ‘labium minus’ respectively.⁶
- Use semicolons appropriately. Semicolons can be used in place of a full stop where two complete sentences are combined. They are also very useful in lists, where they can be used like a ‘super-comma’ for further segregation.^{4,7}
- Most immunohistochemical stains should not be capitalized, e.g., desmin, vimentin and keratin. Recognize the difference between a reagent named for the actual antibody and one named for the antigen to which it reacts; one stains ‘with’ and the other stains ‘for’.
- Do not capitalize the names of diseases or generic names of drugs unless they occur at the beginning of the sentence.
- For eponymous diseases, avoid the apostrophes, e.g., write ‘Darier disease’ in place of ‘Darier’s disease’: Darier did not own or had the disease; he described it.
- Do not confuse mathematical units, e.g., micrograms and milligrams. Always double check the numbers and mathematical units.

Use Writing Software and Online Platforms

Use the spelling and grammar checkers in your word processor. Grammarly, Ref-n-write, SciFlow and EndNote are tools that help in writing, formatting, referencing and publishing scientific material.²

Read, Analyze and Practice

Develop a habit of reading good articles. While reading, note the style, terminology, phrasing and structural elements. Try expressing a new idea or finding in writing and see how you can improve its delivery.

To conclude, scientific writing is a craft. Knowing what is expected is the first step towards achieving mastery in any field.

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