

Writing Scientific Papers in English: Tips and Resources

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Welcome!



Overview

- Essentials—and challenges
- 12 tips
- Some exercises along the way
- Some resources
- Questions and answers

Essentials—and Challenges



The Essentials

- The essentials of a successful scientific paper are **content**, **organization**, and **clarity**.
- If a paper has excellent content, is well organized, and is clear, it is likely to be accepted even if the English is so-so.
- If a paper has poor content, is badly organized, or is unclear, it is likely to be rejected even if the English is excellent.

Challenges

- Use of English—the most obvious challenge, but not the only one
- Common culturally related challenges
 - Directness of expression
 - Amount of detail
 - Attitudes toward using material from others' writing
 - Attitudes toward time
 - Publication norms

12 Tips on Scientific Writing



1. Write to communicate, not to impress.

- Desirable impression: that the material is clear, important, and interesting
- Undesirable impression: that you have a big vocabulary but that the subject matter is confusing
- Good writing is largely “invisible writing.”
- Remember: Many readers know relatively little English, and most readers are busy.

2. Establish a productive mindset.

- Remember that you are writing to communicate, not to impress.
- Realize that those reading your work want you to do well.
 - Journal editors
 - Peer reviewers
 - Professors

The purpose of their constructive criticism is to help you succeed.

3. Know the ethics.

- Authenticity
- Accuracy
- Originality
- Credit
- Ethical treatment of humans and animals
- Disclosure of conflicts of interest

4. Follow the instructions.

- Surprisingly, this advice is often ignored.
- Extremely important for scientific papers (and grant proposals)
- Instructions to authors may especially help those unfamiliar with publication norms.
- A good resource: “Instructions to Authors in the Health Sciences”
(<http://mulford.meduohio.edu/instr/>)

5. Gather plenty of suitable information.

- An article can be no better than the information gathered.
- In addition to gathering new data, search the literature, so your findings are presented in context.
- Often an excellent resource: librarians
- Make note of sources of information, to avoid problems later.

6. Use good models.

- Good scientific writing: largely a matter of imitation
- Use articles in your target journal as models.
- Some things to notice:
 - Length (total and of individual sections)
 - Number and design of tables and figures
 - Amount of detail
 - Subheadings
 - Words and phrases commonly used

Mini-Exercise

Think of a highly regarded article that (1) is on research similar to yours and (2) is in a journal where you would like to publish.

Promise yourself that you will

- Identify structural aspects of the article that could serve as models.
- In the article, find words and phrases that could be useful in writing about your research.

Example, with some useful words and phrases **in red**

Source: Abstract of “Measuring adherence to antiretroviral therapy in northern Tanzania: feasibility and acceptability of the Medication Event Monitoring System” by Ramsey A Lyimo, Jossy van den Boogaard, Elizabeth Msoka, Harm J Hospers, Andre van der Ven, Declare Mushi, and Marijn de Bruin. *BMC Public Health* 2011, 11:92doi:10.1186/1471-2458-11-92

Published: 9 February 2011

Background

An often-used tool to **measure adherence** to antiretroviral therapy (ART) is the Medication Event Monitoring System (MEMS), an electronic pill-cap that registers date and time of pill-bottle openings. Despite its strengths, MEMS-data can be compromised by inaccurate use and acceptability problems due to its design. These barriers remain, however, to be investigated in **resource-limited settings**. We evaluated the feasibility and acceptability of using MEMS-caps to **monitor adherence** among HIV-infected patients attending a rural clinic in Tanzania's Kilimanjaro Region.

Methods

Eligible patients were approached and asked to use the MEMS-caps for **three consecutive months**. Thereafter, qualitative, **in-depth interviews** about the use of MEMS were conducted with the patients. MEMS-data were used to **corroborate the interview results**.

Results

Twenty-three of the 24 patients approached agreed to participate. Apart from MEMS-use on travel occasions, patients reported no barriers regarding MEMS-use.

Unexpectedly, the MEMS-bottle design reduced the patients' fear for HIV-status disclosure. Patients indicated that having their behavior monitored **motivated** them to adhere better. MEMS-data showed that most patients had **high levels of adherence** and there were no bottle-openings that could not be accounted for by medication intake. Non-adherence in the days prior to clinic visits was common and due to the clinic dispensing too few pills.

Conclusion

MEMS-bottle use was **readily accepted** by patients. Although the MEMS-bottle was used accurately by most patients, patients need to be more **explicitly instructed** to continue MEMS-use when travelling. Even HIV-clinics with sufficient staff and free medication may impose structural adherence barriers by supplying an insufficient amount of pills.

7. Organize the information carefully.

- Robert A. Day: “The preparation of a scientific paper has less to do with literary skill than with *organization*.”
- Time invested in organization can save much time later.
- Usual organization of a scientific paper: IMRAD or a variant thereof
- Usual organization of paragraph: overview before details (in other words, topic sentence and then other sentences)

The IMRAD Format

- **Introduction** What was the question?
- **Methods** How did you try to answer it?
- **Results** What did you find?
- **And**
- **Discussion** What does it mean?

8. Set aside blocks of time for writing.

- Reserve times for writing.
- Consider having regularly scheduled times to write.
- Choose the times according to when you tend to function best.

Mini-Exercise

Identify a time (or 2 or 3 times) to set aside each week for writing. Tell the people around you what time(s) you chose and why.

9. Write in English from the start.

- Write even the first draft in English.
- Do not write the paper in your native language and then translate it. (Doing so tends to produce a paper with the sentence structure, thought patterns, organizational patterns, etc of your native language.)
- Do not worry about making the English perfect right away. You can revise later.
- Some people say they write more exactly and clearly in English than in their native language.

10. Revise, revise, revise.

- Even native speakers of English benefit from revising their papers repeatedly.
- Revise for content, organization, clarity, readability, and language use.
- Pay particularly attention to aspects of language use that tend to be problems (examples: verb tenses, prepositions, articles such as *the*, sentence structure, sentence length).

Mini-exercise:

Revising for readability

Where feasible,

- Use simple, common words
 - attempt→ fundamental→
- Delete needless words
 - red in color→ totally destroyed→
- Condense wordy phrases
 - at this point in time→ in the event that→
- Use verbs, not nouns made from them
 - produce relief of→ provide an explanation→

11. Credit sources adequately.

- In general, use your own words.
- When using others' words:
 - Put the material in quotation marks if it's short.
 - Indent it if it's long.
 - Cite the source.
- If a fact or idea isn't your own (and isn't common knowledge), cite the source.
- Use the requested citation format.

12. Get pre-submission peer review.

- If possible, obtain feedback from people who know your field and have a strong command of English-language writing.
- Consider having one or more papers edited by a professional scientific editor.
- Analyze the suggestions and revisions, and apply what you learn to writing future scientific papers.

Recap: The Basics

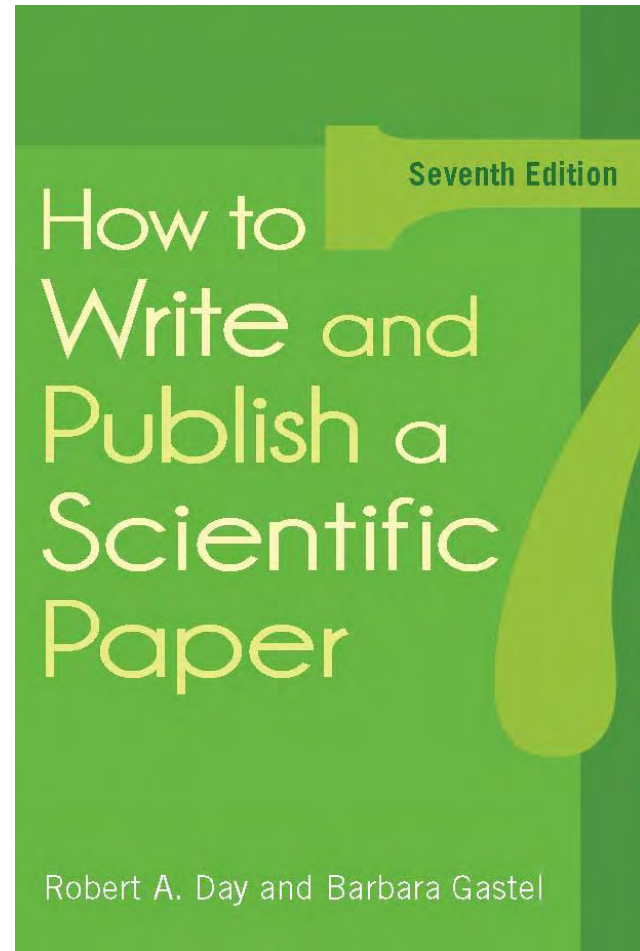
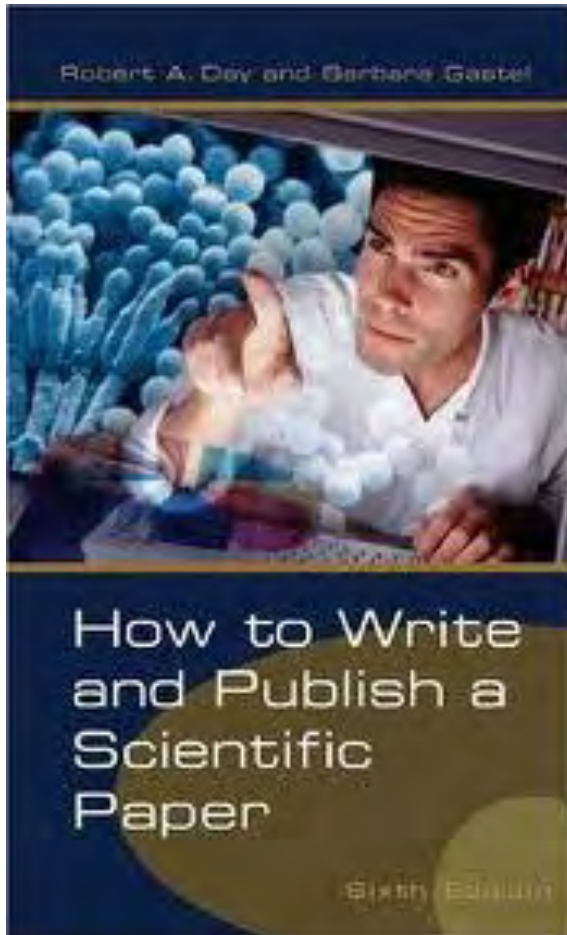
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2. Establish a productive mindset.
3. Know the ethics.
4. Follow the instructions.
5. Gather plenty of suitable information.
6. Use good models.
7. Organize the information carefully.
8. Set aside blocks of time for writing.
9. Write in English from the start.
10. Revise, revise, revise.
11. Credit sources adequately.
12. Get pre-submission peer review.

Some Resources



Books on Scientific Writing

- On scientific writing in general
(example: *How to Write and Publish a Scientific Paper*, by Robert A. Day and Barbara Gastel)
- On writing in specific fields of science
(example: *Essentials of Writing Biomedical Research Papers*, by Mimi Zeiger)
- Often available from university libraries
- Maybe look at several



Style Manuals

- [The ACS \(American Chemical Society\) Style Guide](#)
- [AMA \(American Medical Association\) Manual of Style](#)
- [The Chicago Manual of Style](#)
- [The MLA \(Modern Language Association\) Style Manual and Guide to Scholarly Publishing](#)
- [Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association](#)
- [Scientific Style and Format](#)

Online Resources



AuthorAID at INASP

(www.authoraid.info)

- A project to help researchers in developing countries to write about and publish their work
- Also can help researchers elsewhere
- Main components
 - Mentoring
 - Workshops
 - Openly accessible content (sort of a meta-resource)



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(It's *free* and *easy* to register)

Upcoming Events

[AABS/Emerald Case Competition 2011](#)
11 Feb 2011

[Eppendorf & Science Prize for Neurobiology](#)
15 Jun 2011

[CODESRIA - Workshop on Writing for Scholarly Publishing: Call for Applications](#)
11 Jul 2011

[More events...](#)

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Three More Resources
By [Barbara Gastel](#) | 13 Feb 2011
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This week I'm introducing 3 more resources.
The first is a poster repository that I learned of this week. This repository, named [F1000 ...](#)
[Read More...](#) (3 Comments)


Tip of the Week #11

Researcher search

Search

Restrict results to find: ☐ Mentors ☐ Mentees
Need more options? Try our [full researcher search](#)

Featured researchers

 **Dr. Dhruba Kumar Gautam** Nepal
Research interests: Strategic Management, Strategic Human Resource Management, Organizational behaviour, Organizational change and development, International business,

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[English Communication for Scientists](#)

[Proposal Writing Short Course](#)

[Detecting and Preventing Plagiarism](#)

["From the AuthorAID Train-the-Trainers Workshop" \(Chinese Translation\)](#)
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- ☒ Neither of the above

AuthorAID updates and discussion group

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The first is a poster repository that I learned of this week. This repository, named [F1000 Posters](#), contains research posters in biology and medicine. All are openly accessible.

If you're in biology or medicine, you might be interested in these posters. And you might consider [Read More...](#) ([3 Comments](#))

[Tip of the Week #11](#)
By [Bernard Applah](#) | 08 Feb 2011

When you quote a source in your article, you should triple-check the quote. Doing so may help you avoid putting "false" words into the mouths of those quoted. You should especially be careful with quotes from sources, such as non-electronic papers, that require typing.

[Read More...](#)

[A Resource on Proposals and One on Plagiarism](#)
By [Barbara Gastel](#) | 05 Feb 2011

Greetings again. I hope you had a good week.

Here in College Station, this week was unusually cold, with a low of 19 degrees Fahrenheit (negative 7 degrees Celsius). On Friday, our university was closed because of ice and snow. I hope you enjoy the accompanying photo of

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Whatever field you're in, viewing the posters might provide ideas about poster design. (By the way, the [AuthorAID Resource Library](#) contains—in several languages—a presentation on poster presentations and oral presentations.)

Also, this week Dina Andersson, from the AuthorAID partner [IFS](#), mentioned a good resource on communicating science. Titled [English Communication for Scientists](#), this online guide from the Nature Publishing Group contains 6 units:

- Communicating as a Scientist
- Writing Scientific Papers
- Writing Correspondence
- Giving Oral Presentations
- Interacting during Conference Sessions
- Communicating in the Classroom

The unit on interacting during conference sessions includes a part on [chairing conference sessions](#). I plan to read this part before next Saturday, when I'll moderate a session at the American Association for the Advancement of Science [annual meeting](#).

Some of my graduate students also will attend the AAAS meeting. Their activities will include writing, for [Science](#)

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3. [Detecting and Preventing Plagiarism](#) | 05 Feb 2011
Video blog post by prominent medical editor George Lundberg. Emphasizes the need to avoid plagiarism and identifies some tools for detecting plagiarism.
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Some Other Resources

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(http://sciencecareers.sciencemag.org/career_magazine/previous_issues/articles/2007_04_06/caredit.a0700046)
- English Communication for Scientists
(<http://www.nature.com/scitable/ebooks/english-communication-for-scientists-14053993>)
- *On Being a Scientist: A Guide to Responsible Conduct in Research*, 3rd edition
(http://www.nap.edu/catalog.php?record_id=12192)

Other Resources (cont)

- *The Elements of Style* (www.bartleby.com/141/)
- OneLook Dictionary Search (www.onelook.com)
- Academic Phrasebank
(www.phrasebank.manchester.ac.uk)
- Grammar Girl (grammar.quickanddirtytips.com)
- Advice on Designing Scientific Posters
(www.swarthmore.edu/NatSci/cpurrrin1/posteradvice.htm)

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Career Advice
Tips for Publishing in Scientific Journals
By Katrina Kalner
April 06, 2007

A string of impressive publications can propel a young scientist to the next academic stage, whereas an insufficient publication record can derail a career. Publications are the main way scientists publicize their work, and ultimately, it is by their papers that they will be judged.

So what makes a good paper? The most fundamental ingredient is excellent research. Work with the best scientists you can, in the best lab you can find. You will absorb the most about doing excellent science if you are surrounded by it during your training. Then make sure that the questions you investigate are important and of interest to others in the field. As an editor at *Science*, I see that the most successful papers are those that present innovative research. But the best papers also present their story in a clear and logical way. The thinking behind the paper is clear, so the writing is clear. Writing research papers with all these qualities can require a bit of strategic thinking, practice, and know-how.

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English Communication for Scientists

What information should you include in an abstract, and in what order? How can you get your message across in an oral presentation — with or without slides? How much text is acceptable on a poster? Communication is an integral part of the research you perform as a scientist and a crucial competence for a successful career, yet it is an activity you may not feel prepared for.

English Communication for Scientists is a brief guide on how to communicate more effectively in English, no matter how much previous experience you have. Although it was developed with non-native speakers of English in mind, it should prove useful for native speakers, too. Organized as six self-contained units, it will help you understand basic communication strategies and address various audiences (Unit 1); design and draft not only scientific papers (Unit 2) but also e-mail, résumés, and short reports (Unit 3); structure, support, and deliver oral presentations (Unit 4); create and present posters, chair sessions, and participate in panels (Unit 5); and prepare, run, and evaluate classroom sessions (Unit 6). Created by seasoned communicators, *English Communication for Scientists* provides no-nonsense, directly applicable guidelines, illustrated with examples of written documents, oral presentations, and more. Improving your scientific communication is only a click away: start today!

About the Authors

Dr. **Jean-luc Doumont**, the Series Editor and Lead Author of *English Communication for Scientists*, is an engineer from the Louvain School of Engineering and a Ph.D. in applied physics from Stanford University. A world-acclaimed expert on scientific communication, Jean-luc has 20 years of experience running lectures and workshops on writing scientific papers, giving oral presentations, graphing data, and related topics in English, French, Dutch, and Spanish. His audiences include graduate students, postdocs, and faculty at top-notch universities around the world (including MIT, Stanford, UC Berkeley, Caltech, and Harvard), scientists at public research centers (such as NIST, CDC, VIB, ICFO) and at private R&D centers (such as HHMI, Shell, Johnson & Johnson), attendees at international conferences (such as those of SPIE and IEEE), and many more. Jean-luc is a founding partner at *Principia*, a lecturer with SPIE and OSA, and the author of *Trees, maps, and theorems*, a book on "effective communication for rational minds."

Unit 3 was authored by Dr. **Laura Grossenbacher**, Director of the Technical Communication Program at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, and Dr. **Christina Matta**, a lecturer in this program.

The wonderful illustrations are by Dr. **Jorge Cham**, the author of the comic strip *Piled Higher and Deeper*. His comic strip



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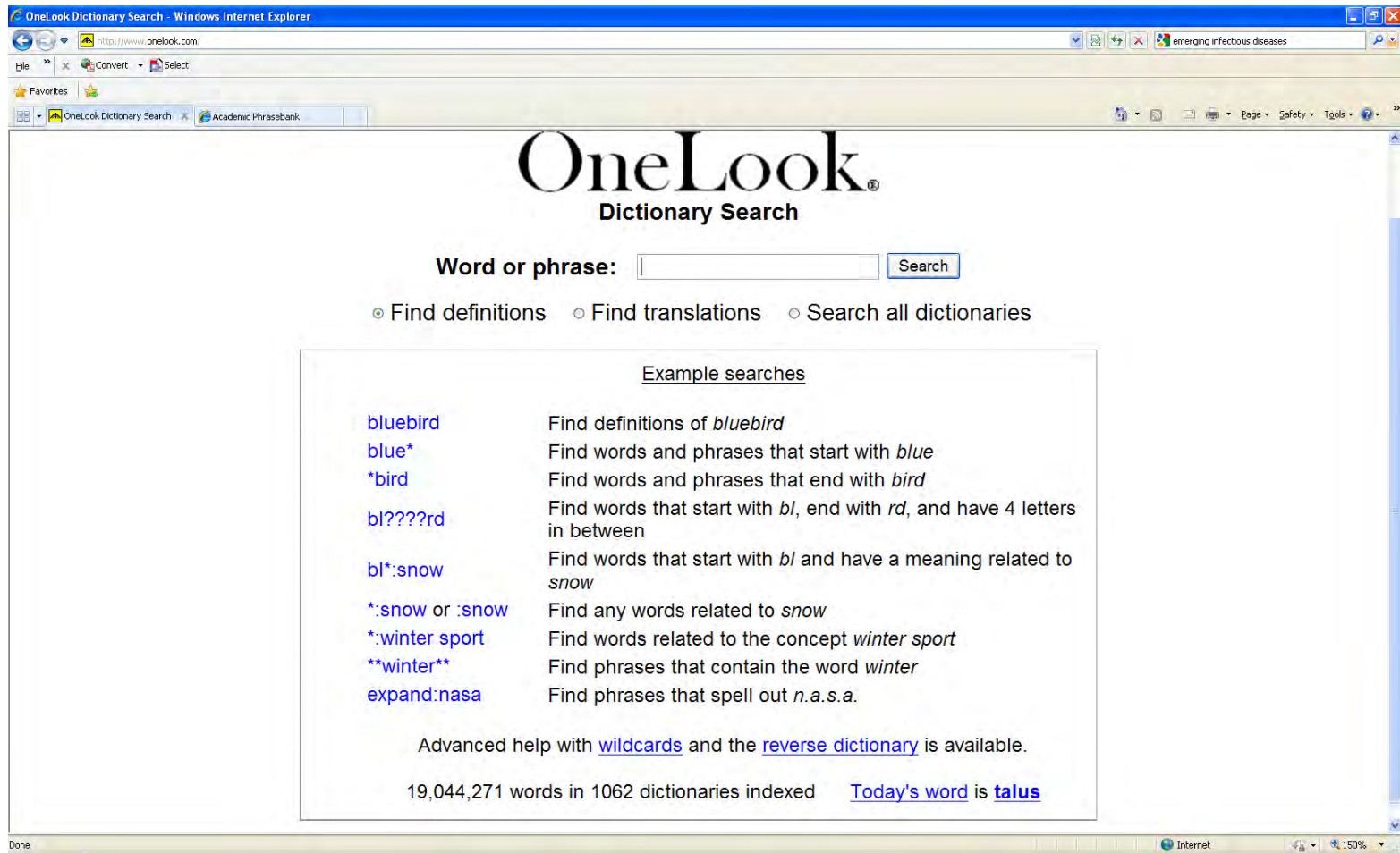
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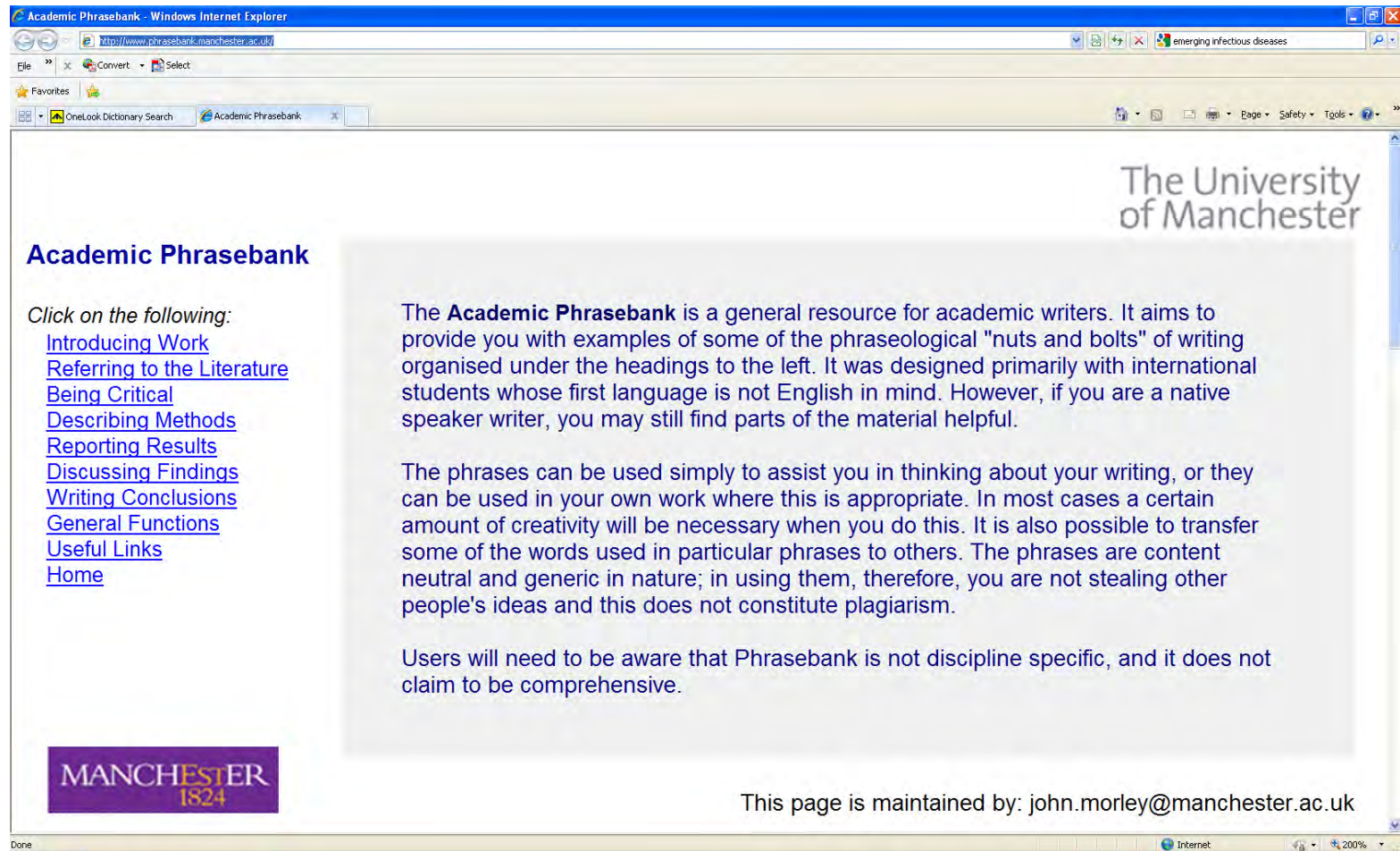
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Colin Purrington, Department of Biology, Swarthmore College, Pennsylvania

A one-sentence overview of the poster concept

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