

A boring test

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Do you write boring papers? Of course not. Your papers are interesting. Right? Not right? Well, maybe once in a while a manuscript escapes that's a bit less than interesting, but it's certainly not boring. Right? How could your papers be boring? Your work's not boring, so your writing must not be boring. You read and reread your manuscripts, and each is interesting, concise, valuable, maybe even exciting. (Wow! Let's not get carried away.) In addition, your colleagues always say, "Interesting paper!" So, tell me, if your writing isn't boring, what is the font of boring papers? Other people, you say.

Consider other-people-not-me write boring papers. I have researched it. I've asked and been given the same answer: other people. Confused, I searched for the "other people" and have yet to find any. This means the density of "other people" is sparse and seemingly below the threshold for producing the existing density of boring papers. Hence, the other-people-not-me explanation fails.

So, we come back to same question: Who produces the boring papers? After further research, the only answers are: (a) a new property of the ether, that undetectable, all-pervasive "stuff" that 19th century scientists originally manifested to explain the confusing behavior of electromagnetism; or (b) there are those among us who are not aware of the condition of their papers! We can safely eliminate the former—just think of the authorship and copyright problems it would cause. Would you trust a paper written by undetectable stuff? Unfortunately, that leaves only the latter.

Are you wondering whether you are a member of that club? Perhaps it would help if you took a membership or qualification test. Funny thing, I just happen to have a boring test. However, first, let's make sure we're all on the same page. What makes something boring? Eric Haseltine writes ("The beauty of boredom" in the March 2000 issue of *Discover*): "The answer lies buried deep in our nerve cells, which automatically damp down their initial excited response to stimuli every subsequent time a stimulus occurs. Those neurons also

enhance response to things that change—especially that which changes quickly. We probably evolved this way because our ancestors got more survival value, for example, from attending to what moved in a tree (such as a panther) than to the tree itself. Boredom, as a reaction to a static environment, turns down the level of neural excitation so that a new stimulus (such as that panther) stands out more. It's the neural equivalent of extinguishing a porch light to see the fireflies."

Haseltine seems to be saying that writers drive readers to boredom by being monotonous, predictable, repetitious, circuitous, or long-winded. With this in mind, take this boring test. You're safe—there's no score. Judge your own answers and draw your own conclusion(s). I have parenthetically included some points to ponder when considering your answers.

Your general philosophy. Do you assume that your work must be as interesting to all as it is to you? (This falls under the umbrella of "writer's folly"—i.e., my work is supremely important and will make everyone do things differently in the future. Reality check! Unless your name is Newton or Einstein or you've found a cure for cancer, world hunger, global warming, or a comparable issue, chances are your work is, like that of most, a small but valuable piece of humanity's knowledge.)

Do you recognize that persuasion is part of successful technical writing? (Many writers follow the philosophy the science sells itself, and fail to hook, attract, and persuade their readers. Readers become bored and move to something else. Successful writers recognize that they are salespersons of their work and present solid arguments for its value, utility, and benefits in addition to the science.)

Do you stop writing because you are done or because you're out of interest, time, or steam? (If writing about this material bores you, what do readers find?)

Your abstract. Do you compose a concise, stand-alone, and terse summary of the new information in your paper

or do you just slap something together? (A boring abstract clues the reader that the rest of the paper won't be much better.)

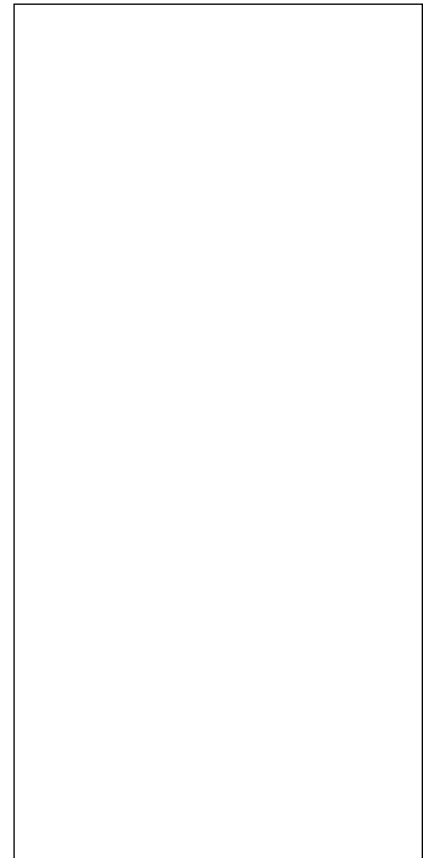
Is writing your abstract hated labor? (If so, readers will know this and assume, again, that the rest of your writing is the same.)

Does your abstract droll on? (Unless your article is a tome, your abstract should be about 4-6 exacting, information-intensive sentences.)

Do you stubbornly cling to the belief that abstracts must be in passive voice? (Passive voice easily falls prey to long, indirect sentences that say very little, while appearing to say a lot. Typically, abstracts in passive voice are a boring information void.)

Your introduction. Do you copy your abstract and use it as the first paragraph in the introduction? (*Boring!*)

Do you feel the success of an introduction is based on the number of references cited, the more the better? Or, said a bit differently, do you feel that numerous single-sentence descriptions of work by other people make



good introductions? (Readers want concise writing. Beating your chest by citing everything you've read does not add value to your work, it only bores readers.)

Are your introductions page after page of somewhat related material without focus? (Telling everything you know about a subject is not the path to a successful introduction.)

Your means and methods sections. Do you overwhelm with unnecessary details? (Verifiability and repeatability are critical to correct science or engineering, but excessive detail bores. Use appendices for the dry but necessary details.)

Do you choke readers with equation after equation? (Readers are looking for value; endless equations show effort not value. Again, use appendices for dry details and keep the reader's focus with value and benefit.)

Your results section. Do you inundate readers with a flood of figures that document every second of your effort? (Figures are critical to technical writing but unless your figures are equivalent to tables—i.e., specific data can be extracted from each—choose only representative figures.)

Similar to the previous question, do you fail to focus your work and therefore assume that overwhelming readers with (repetitive) figures expands its value?

Your conclusion. When you start to write your conclusion, do you find that you've run out of gas? (One-paragraph conclusions that are real or de facto copies of the abstract don't work. Also, conclusions are not summaries. Why do readers need a summary? They just read the article. The conclusion makes the final sale; it cements

the values, benefits, utility, etc. of your work. You should not sell your work short.)

Are you guilty of unrealistically overvaluing your work, assuming that everything you write must be the next paradigm? (I suspect industry is not going to change because of one paper, but some may benefit from your work ... if you show them why.)

General style. Do you like long sentences? (Long sentences are almost always tedious. In packs, they are boring and lack impact. Impact comes from shorter sentences, each with an obvious focus.)

Do you choose concise verbs or write in a stream-of-consciousness flow? (Weak verbs give rise to word patching—i.e., adding more and more words to clarify meaning—and long, unfocused, and boring sentences.)

Do you cut-and-paste the same passage(s) throughout the document? (If yes, you must be joking. Do you really think you can keep the reader's attention by saying the same thing?)

Well, there's my boring test. If you passed, congratulations! If it brought you some thought and awareness, great! We all benefit from better writing. If my test did nothing but bore you, we have two possibilities. Either I failed the test or you need to go back, take it again, and find the hidden meanings. Remember, readers are interested in your writing if it has value, benefit, utility to them, not just your sweat input. They are not interested in all the necessary, yet tedious, details through which you struggled to bring forth those values, benefits, and utilities. Remember what Hazeltine said: *You drive a reader to boredom.* ■

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