A guide to scientific writing in English

An outline of scientific writing: for researchers with English as a foreign language Jen Tsi Yang (Singapore: World Scientific, 1995) 160pp.

PACS numbers: 01.30.-y, 01.30.Kj

The leap from the English learnt in the classroom to that needed to write a comprehensible and coherent scientific paper is often not a small one. Faced by researchers the world over, there is certainly a place for a book which eases this problem. Jen Tsi Yang, a biochemist of Chinese origin with some 50 years experience publishing in English, has aimed to fill this place with his *An outline of scientific writing:* for researchers with English as a second language.

The preface opens with the problem of the word 'the', a good start — having no equivalent in Chinese, and as we know, in Russian — its use makes up around half of the mistakes in submitted manuscripts. Interestingly, prepositions such as 'at', 'in', and 'with', as well as plurals, likewise have no counterparts in Chinese. These problems, of course, are grammatical problems of English in general, and not of scientific English in particular, so Yang elects not to tackle them in his book. Since, however, there are constructions and aspects of grammar which, whilst being rare in everyday English, are frequently encountered in scientific writing, it is rather disappointing that from the second page, he says that he will not tackle grammatical problems at all.

Part I, then, is somewhat surprisingly entitled "English Grammar." It turns out to be a solid, clear and straightforward guide to English compositional style. Simplicity, lucidity and structure are its principles, valuable advice for a would-be writer in any language. In particular it covers such stylistic choices as 'verb over noun':

He made an examination of the patient.

The patient was examined.

and 'active over passive':

A detailed description of the apparatus is presented in this report.

This report presents a detailed description of the apparatus. in each case, guiding the reader according to the principles.

Part II, "Planning the paper," advises the reader on how to go about writing a scientific paper: what makes a good title; conventions on multi-authorship; how to write an abstract; how to arrange the body of the text; design considerations for figures and tables; acknowledgements and references. Again, this is a clear and comprehensive guide: a researcher who stays within these guidelines will produce a well designed paper with all the requisites.

The final part, "Publishing a manuscript," describes the typical procedures involved in getting your paper into print:

Uspekhi Fizicheskikh Nauk **167** (10) 1132 (1997) Translated by G G Michael submission; reviewing, including some anecdotal advice in case of rejection; correction and proofing. There are also some tips on producing enticing posters and giving oral presentations.

This is a useful guide for a researcher who wants to achieve a clear, direct scientific writing style with a logical structure and an attractive design. The more experienced writer, perhaps already experienced in publishing in his own language, hoping to unlock some of the secrets and avoid some of the pitfalls of scientific writing in English in particular, will be disappointed. This is a pity, since this is the very area where Yang, as a non-native but highly experienced writer of English, could have thrown a special light. His book is engaging, for what might be considered a rather dry subject, but if taken simply as a style guide, it inevitably suffers in authority when compared to similar guides by native English authors.

G G Michael