

## President's Message

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# The State of Communication and Its Relevance to Environmental Health

## Introduction

Communication is an important tool for environmental health professionals. We use this tool to train and educate our communities on the principles and practices of prevention to influence and promote health and well-being. We also communicate with our peers and other professionals to coordinate work activities, collaborate on issues, and learn about trends, new techniques, and practices in our profession. It is imperative, therefore, that our oral and written communication skills are keen and that we use proper grammar when expressing ourselves.

This column explores the need for environmental health professionals to be master communicators via writing and the technological influences on communication. I also suggest that problems seen in the quality of writing may be related to the speed of written communication associated with technological advancements.

When I first thought about writing this column, I was a bit skeptical about the subject. On several occasions in recent conversation with my peers, however, this subject arose, unsolicited, and they expressed the same concerns and ideas that I present in this column.

## The Problem

Some of the work that I do requires my critical evaluation of other people's writing. This includes my experiences as a senior scientist, as peer reviewer for this *Journal*, and as a university professor teaching graduate- and undergraduate-level courses. Unfortunately, when I review reports, manuscripts, and course papers, I find grammatical, spelling,

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word usage, and punctuation errors at a frequency that I think is unacceptable, especially for undergraduate- and graduate-level college/university students and even professionals in the environmental health workforce.

I think that our spoken language is much less formal than our written language. Consequently, when one writes as they speak, that written product invariably tends to have grammatical problems. I also think that when we use the technologically fast means of communication—email, text messaging, etc.—we tend to write in a way that is closer to the way that we talk. Some examples of problems that I encounter frequently in-

clude the use of “that” versus “which”; use of “effect” versus “affect”; improper use of commas; improper use of the semicolon; improper capitalization; citing and listing references; underlining or italicizing scientific names of animals and plants; long sentences; run-on sentences; lack of paragraph separation; split infinitives; balancing tenses; and hanging (dangling) participles.

In today's world of fast advancing technology, personal and mass communication is very quick, even instantaneous. Computers, including portable microcomputers, cell phones, personal digital assistants (PDAs), and various messaging services allow information to be sent to and received instantly by large groups of people. Social networks like Facebook™, Twitter™, LinkedIn™, and others also allow information to be sent quickly—instantaneously—to large groups of people. This issue was addressed earlier this year, in May's *JEH* Managing Editor/Executive Director Column (see *JEH* 71[9], pp. 61–62), which recognizes that there is a “change in the way our society accesses information” with reference to technological innovations and social networking. Nelson Fabian's column indicates that this technology-driven communication is here to stay, so, I submit that we need to recognize how it can influence the **quality of communication**.

My theory is that our “technological” communication is closer to our spoken, less formal communication. There is some carryover from our “technological” communication to our formal written communication such that the latter becomes more lax, informal, and prone to error.

*continued on page 36*

## Some Solutions

During the summer of 2008, I had the pleasure of serving on a workgroup to review and update the Guidelines for the Accreditation of Environmental Health Science & Protection Baccalaureate Programs. This review was organized and sponsored by the National Environmental Health Science & Protection Accreditation Council (EHAC) and the review group consisted of a mix of environmental health academics and practitioners. Several times during the workshop we were divided into smaller groups where we deliberated on a variety of issues. I participated in a group that had a very active discussion between practitioners and academics addressing the issue of writing competency of recently graduated, entry-level environmental health professionals. The practitioners, myself included, expressed the need to have workers capable of writing reports, including technical reports, which are well organized and use proper English and composition. They need to be able to write in a professional manner that will not embarrass their work organization. In addition to writing in a general manner to communicate thoughts and ideas, environmental health professionals also need to write in a manner that may be considered as specialized. They need to be able to write in a format to produce survey and inspection reports, technical reports, and scientific reports that convey technical information that informs the reader of problems, legal/statutory requirements, and recommended corrective actions that impact community health. These reports also may become legal

documents, thus accuracy of meaning and content is imperative. Generally, the practitioners felt that the entry-level workers lacked appropriate writing skills and had to be trained on the job.

I present the scenario above to illustrate an example of one way that we can correct this problem. By making our environmental health academic colleagues aware of this situation, they can influence their students' writing skills as part of their teaching programs. They also may be able to influence their institutions' English departments in a similar manner.

I do not intend to imply that I am the quintessential writer or an expert in English composition and grammar. I make plenty of mistakes. I do, however, recognize my weaknesses and take some steps to help minimize them. First, I do a thorough **proofread** of my work in which I am able to catch and correct most of the problems. Next, I conduct an informal **peer review** by asking friends and colleagues to review my work and provide feedback. It is amazing how often that I think I expressed an idea clearly, but another reader either thinks it says something different or does not understand it at all. Also, others can catch spelling errors that you are not able to see. When you read information that you write, you tend to read what you intended to write rather than what you actually wrote. This pertains both to misspellings and miscommunication.

Now, when you allow others to review your work like this, you have to be "thick-skinned" and able to accept criticism about your work. But, believe me, this is a valuable tool to help improve your communication. Usually, when you write for a publisher, e.g., a journal article, book chapter, etc., the

publishing process will include a peer review, editorial review, or both, which will help you present a high-quality product. I think that the initial draft that you submit should be high quality, however, and proofreading and informal peer review can help you achieve that quality.

Finally, I periodically refer to various **style writing manuals** to research and reacquaint myself with proper organizational formats and grammar. Several types of these guides are available, but most frequently I use *The Publication Manual of the APA (American Psychological Association)*, *The Chicago Manual of Style*, and the *CBE (Council of Biology Editors) Style Manual*.

## Conclusion

As environmental health professionals, our messages and recommendations are important because they can affect health and the quality of life. We therefore have an obligation to convey them accurately and properly. In order to communicate properly, we must be vigilant in the proper use of language and thus learn how to write properly. We need to say what we mean so that we mean what we say.

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Happy Holidays! I hope that the New Year brings everyone peace, good spirits, and prosperity. In 2010 let's approach our profession with renewed vigor and vitality. LEAN FORWARD! 🐻



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## Managing Editor's Desk

continued from page 54

to any of these advancement considerations, which are the heart of our reason for being. We are now changing that!

We are now revamping the table of contents to actually show you which material falls into the advancing the science, the profession, and the practitioner segments of our program.

We're throwing away convention and doing away with an organizational scheme that presents our *Journal* material in terms of columns, departments, etc., that have little

meaning beyond the publishing world. Instead, we will now structure everything we print into one of three categories—each having to do with one of the levels of advancement. (We also have a fourth section of the *Journal* that presents material having to do with your association.)

By moving into this new organizational scheme, we will build awareness, every time you look through the *Journal's* table of contents, that NEHA is dedicated to your advancement on all three of these levels. In addition, we will make it much easier for you to pick the level

that you are most interested in and then go straight to the material presented for that level.

Our changes will also enable us to demonstrate that by virtue of what we are doing with the *Journal*, we support and honor our mission statement. As our quest to advance you on these three different levels become clearer, we believe that it will be easier to see the value of NEHA, and our *Journal*, to you. 🐻

