Rules for Writing Well - A guide for new researchers based on problems commonly encountered

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During your time working in the Fluid Science and Resources Division, it is important that you strive to learn and follow these rules as well as possible. We recommend you train yourself to follow them whenever you write as doing so will undoubtedly benefit you in the future too.

Rules about the ‘Building Blocks’ of Writing

1. Read things back to yourself, preferably aloud, sentence by sentence and be critical about whether each sentence actually sounds correct. If it sounds wrong to your ear there is probably a grammatical error.
2. Ensure each sentence has a subject, a verb and, usually, an object. If you don’t know what these terms mean then look them up now.
3. If in doubt, shorten the sentence. Try not to use the same word twice in a sentence.
4. Capital letters do not occur randomly and full-stops are needed at the end of each sentence (including in numbered or bullet-point lists if nothing else is used at the end of each point). Do not start sentences with numbers or acronyms.
5. Do not have (sub-)sections that contain only one paragraph. Do not have paragraphs that contain only one sentence.
6. Paragraphs should deal with one idea and that idea should be identified clearly in the first sentence of the paragraph. The paragraph’s lead sentence must tell the reader what that paragraph is about.
7. Define your acronyms (DYA) the first time the phrase being abbreviated is written.
8. Avoid changes in tense within any paragraph and minimise the number of times the tense changes throughout a document. Use the past tense to describe work you did before starting to write (such as experiments).
9. “However” is not a conjunction and should not be used to join to sentences. Use a full stop or a semi-colon and then start the second part of the sentence with however.
10. Keep the spelling and grammar checkers turned on and do not ignore them. If the software is unsure about anything, you should think about whether it has a good point. However, the converse is NOT true: just because the spelling or grammar checker thinks something is OK does not mean that it is.

Rules about Structure and Style

11. Consider the logical structure and flow of your document – at the paragraph level – before, during and again after you have finished writing it. Be self-critical: does the flow make sense to someone other than you who may not know the history or detail of your project.
12. Do not attempt to convey the actual, historical record of how you came to the point in time you are writing about. Instead convey the story in the most logical, objective and clearest terms possible.
13. Try not to start writing the main text until you know how the story ends. It’s much more efficient if you know the story from beginning to end in your mind before you start writing.
14. Use outlines and complete all figures before writing the bulk of the document. Confer with co-authors about the outline and regularly thereafter.

15. Show a figure instead of writing a thousand words.

16. Be quantitative. Avoid generalisations, global statements and phrases containing value-judgements: distinguish in your mind the difference between an opinion and a fact and avoid the former. Being quantitative usually simplifies the language required.

17. **Avoid repetition** and/or telling the reader that you have already written about a point. If you want to make two slightly different points about a topic put them in the same paragraph or in consecutive paragraphs. When preparing your outline be mindful to avoid repetition.

18. There is a trade-off between accuracy and clarity. You must get the balance right. Often this can be achieved by not trying to discuss detail that is effectively superfluous to the message you are trying to convey. (Hence the importance of knowing the message you actually want to convey.)

19. Avoid writing in the first person.

20. Avoid explicit references in the text to what will be covered in this section, or to the document structure in general. The (possible) exception to this is at the end of the Introduction, where an overview of the document structure can be helpful in the context of the story being told. (This is a matter of style preference.)