

On Style in Scientific Writing

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In the pages that follow, Steve Aaronson, the editor of our weekly *ISI Press Digest*, demonstrates his talent and style. It takes a good writer to do a good digest. So it isn't surprising that the *Press Digest* receives accolades from so many readers. I don't agree with everything Steve says and quotes. But I do like the way he says it. He's also done some creditable research.

Steve's admonitions about the stylistic value of short words and simple sentences should be taken to heart. There are people who habitually confuse us with long words and complex sentences in a misguided search for effect. But there is a place for both. A certain well-known close colleague of mine, who would find mention of his name embarrassing, writes with a vocabulary that must rival Shakespeare's. I love his use of rare words. Some would stump the average college graduate, as they often stump me. Would Aaronson absolutely deny me the pleasure of using a dictionary?

On the other hand, I have a running battle with my chief editor, Bob Hayne. It never satisfies him that the subject matter is interesting. The manner of its expression must also be interesting. He can, and gladly will, write grammatically perfect sentences thirty

lines long. I tell him I prefer sentences of ten words or so. I am somewhat simple-minded. I prefer to have complex thoughts spelled out in brief sentences. Hayne contends this produces a staccato style that is no style at all. He wants me to write more like Henry James. But I prefer the simple style. This reminds me of the lady who asked for a gift that was "simple but expensive." Like her, I prefer elegant simplicity.

I also happen to value a sense of humor, even in science. Most science writing is unnecessarily dull. A few quips, a light touch here and there, can help the reader get through otherwise dreary deserts of data.

This topic of style in scientific writing was first proposed as something I should undertake myself, with some research and drafting help from Steve. I couldn't, with a clear conscience, have put my name to the "draft" he submitted. And, though I don't disagree with much of it, I didn't want to modify or edit it in order to justify claiming it as my own. So here is Aaronson's "draft," as it was submitted for "review." You can say I got a week's vacation. After reading what he wrote it required little work to write this introduction.