

Book & Media Reviews

Write Like a Chemist: A Guide and Resource

by Marin S. Robinson, Fredericka L. Stoller, Molly S. Costanza-Robinson, and James K. Jones

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reviewed by Jeffrey Kovac

Because writing is an essential professional skill, there is increasing awareness that it is important to provide chemistry students, both undergraduate and graduate, with formal instruction in the kinds of writing that they will engage in during their careers. Since most chemists have little experience and training in the teaching of writing, it is important to have high-quality materials readily available; therefore I was delighted to receive a copy of this new book, *Write Like a Chemist*. It is the result of a unique collaboration between a chemist (Marin S. Robinson) and an applied linguist (Fredricka L. Stoller) that was supported by two NSF grants. The resulting book and supplementary Web site (1), which were written with the collaboration of two co-authors (Costanza-Robinson and Jones) and have undergone extensive pilot testing, are an outstanding addition to the literature on teaching writing in science.

Write Like a Chemist can be used as a textbook or as a resource for individual study. Learning to write is a life-long process and even experienced writers can benefit from the ideas and strategies in this book. It is based on the read-analyze-write method. The student reads carefully-chosen passages from the chemical literature and then analyzes them to discover the writing conventions of the particular genre, such as journal article or proposal. A series of structured writing tasks culminates in an authentic assignment. Four important genres are taught in three separate modules: journal articles, conference abstracts and posters, and research proposals. The book concludes with a superb appendix on Language Tips and a second that summarizes what the authors call "move structures" that are essentially flow charts for the organization of the various genres.

The textbook's supporting Web site has both student and instructor resources. For example, the authors recognize that many students will not have a sufficiently developed research

project to write about so they have provided four "canned" research projects with description and data that provide the material for a journal article or poster. Sample posters are shown in black-and-white in the book, but are provided in full-color on the Web. For faculty, the site provides an answer key as well as examples of both analytical and holistic grading rubrics for the major assignments.

As someone who has thought a lot about teaching writing to chemists, I am very impressed with *Write Like a Chemist*. It approaches the writing tasks systematically, providing guidance in organization through an analysis of the most common move structures employed in scientific writing. Using a technique called corpus linguistics, which involves the empirical computer-based analysis of prose, the authors provide practical advice on chemical writing style, helping students learn to write like chemists. The book is beautifully written and graphically attractive. Above all, it is a teaching book, filled with excellent exercises, both analysis and research and writing tasks. The marginal icons that are used to highlight important ideas, mark exercises and writing tasks, and indicate the results of the computer-based analysis of chemical language should be helpful to students and make the book a more useful reference. It is a book that provides the basis for an outstanding course in writing for chemists, a course that I think should be part of every undergraduate and graduate curriculum.

Literature Cited

1. The Web site for the text is <http://www.oup.com/us/write-likeachemist> (accessed Oct 2008). The Student Resources are open to anyone; the Instructor Resources need a username and password that may be obtained from a publisher's representative.

Supporting JCE Online Material

<http://www.jce.divched.org/Journal/Issues/2009/Feb/abs170.html>

Abstract and keywords

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