

## Supernovas of style

Ann T Gregory

Quotes from MJA contributors in 2006

Journal style incorporates many elements — for example, defined formats for abstracts, specified subsections for different article types, the obligatory statistical results; and, at the “micro-level”, a particular use of punctuation and capitalisation, and of preferred words or phrases. However, journal style is but one aspect of writing style. In Strunk and White’s classic guide, *The elements of style*, White devotes a chapter to the broader aspects of writing style: “style in the sense of what is distinguished and distinguishing”. Here, warns the famous “little book”, we leave the solid ground of what is correct, or acceptable, in the use of English. A writer will find no satisfactory explanation, no infallible guide to good writing, and no inflexible rule by which to shape his or her course. “He [or she] will often find himself steering by stars that are disturbingly in motion.” After all, “Who can confidently say what ignites a certain combination of words, causing them to explode in the mind?”

At the MJA, we are principally interested in the novelty and clinical relevance of our contributions, but we are also intimately concerned with all matters of style, firstly Journal style but then, more generally, writing style and the impact on readers. We would like to share with you the supernovas, some style-related, that passed through our ever-expanding galaxy this year.

### All creatures great and small

*“I’m well aware of the likely costs to me of publication of this letter, so on reflection I’ve decided that while I’m prepared to be hung for a sheep, it’s not worth it for a lamb (ie, a shorter letter). I would therefore like to withdraw my submission.”*

*“This particular tome is a dog’s breakfast (think: pack of feral canines) of a production that doesn’t warrant publicising . . .”*

### Cruising

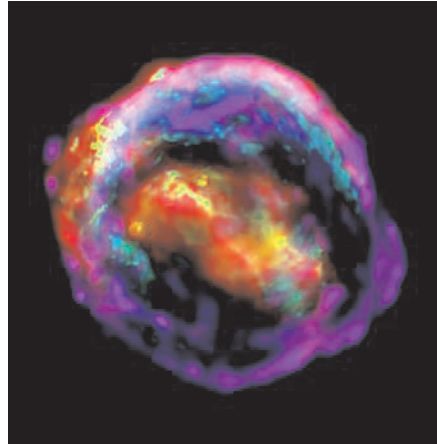
*“The inertia of the socio-economic system means that, as for [an] ocean liner, we cannot expect to be able to turn it around more quickly in future than we can now.”*

### Americana

*“The article will need to be ‘cleansed’ of some North American terms or concepts to make it more comprehensible to down-under readers. I don’t believe the Mafia control our waste disposal services here, unlike New Jersey, although they are welcome to them.”*

### Entitlements

**Reviewer:** *“If this article is to be an update, the subjective comments and flowery language should be removed.”*



**Author’s response:** *“The reviewer is entitled to [his/her] personal aesthetic but there is no requirement in general or specifically in the Journal’s Instructions to Authors for any scientific article to be written in dull and lifeless prose.”*

### First impressions

With the current information overload, an author needs to grab the readers’ attention during their first quick perusal of an article. Some inadvertently send the wrong signals, as one reviewer noted.

*“Ronald Reagan advised us (among other things) never to begin a speech with an apology. The present version of the manuscript is testament to*

*the effect of not heeding Reagan’s advice. By excessively emphasising their non-support of several issues in the Introduction, the reader is left wondering whether the article is of any significance at all. By the time the reader reaches the Results, he or she would have been met with so many of the authors’ caveats about the study that I wouldn’t be surprised if readers were to put the article down without going any further.”*

### Limitations unlimited

Peer reviewers encourage authors to acknowledge the limitations of their study, and occasionally, they point out that the authors have gone a little overboard in this duty. Rarely is this advice given in such a spectacular fashion as follows.

*“Think of this in terms of medical publishing’s answer to The Gong Show. It is traditional for us to hand authors a large stick and ask them to hit themselves repeatedly over the head — a process we affectionately term ‘describing the limitations of the study’ — at which point the editors bang the gong to put an end to the spectacle and assign the performance a score. Usually this bloody demonstration takes place AFTER the authors have performed their dance routine.*

*“In the manuscript’s present form, the authors start hitting themselves just as they’re called on stage to perform. They inflict so much punishment on themselves that they become extremely dazed, resulting in a predictably lacklustre dance performance, after which they engage in more self-punishment. In fact, the present version of the manuscript is written in such a manner that the limitations tend to overshadow the findings — akin to the authors adding glass shards on the club head to inflict more pain. As scores are dependent on their performance of the dance, the authors don’t earn themselves extra points for the extra round of savage clubbing they receive.”*

### Author details

Ann T Gregory, Deputy Editor  
The Medical Journal of Australia, Sydney, NSW.  
Correspondence: medjaust@ampco.com.au

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