

How to Write Clearly

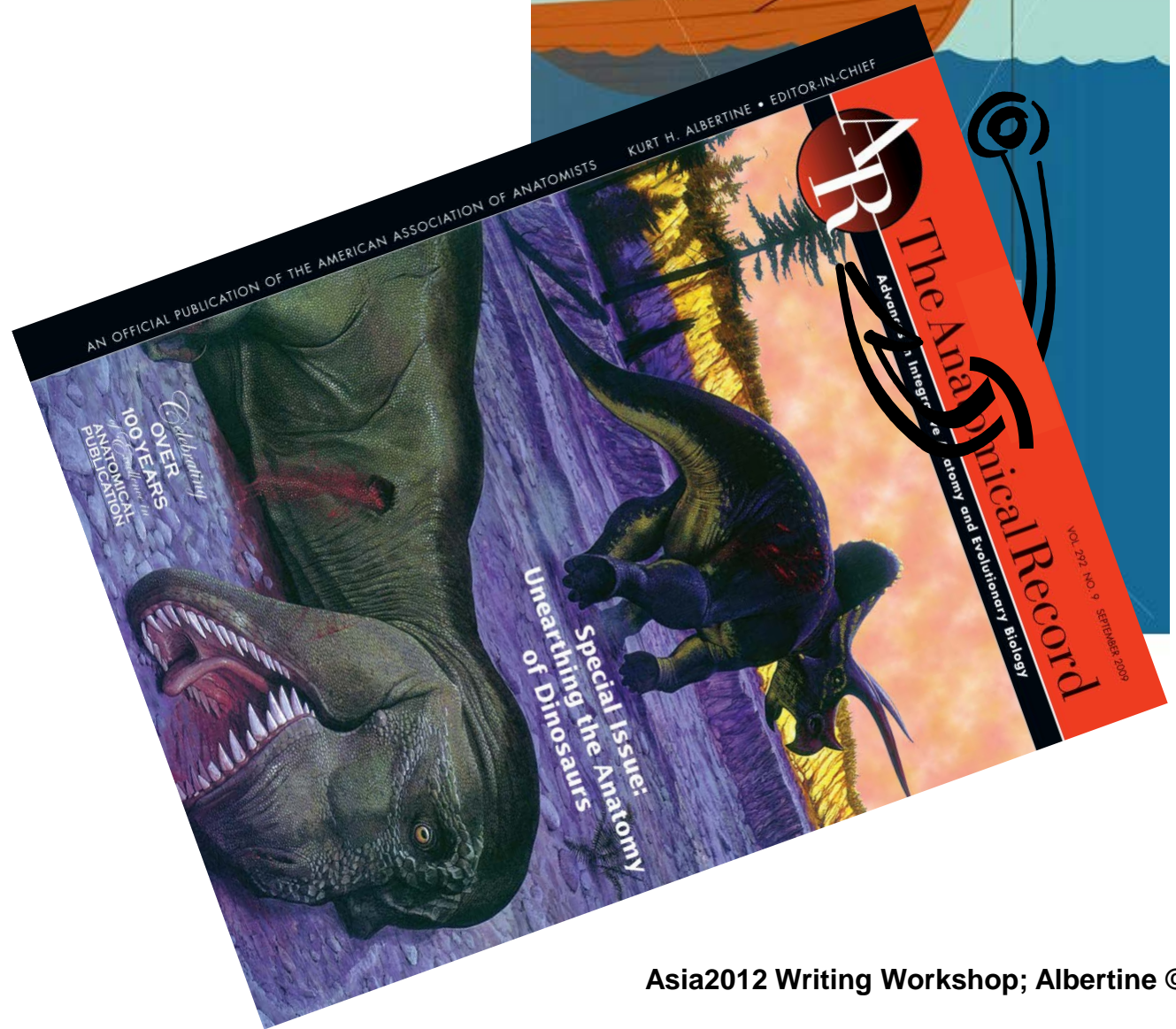
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Hook the Reader



❖ **Excite the reviewers**

- **Why?**
 - **So that they want your manuscript published**

❖ **Excite readers**

- **Why?**
 - **So that they want to read your publication**

The Bottom Lines



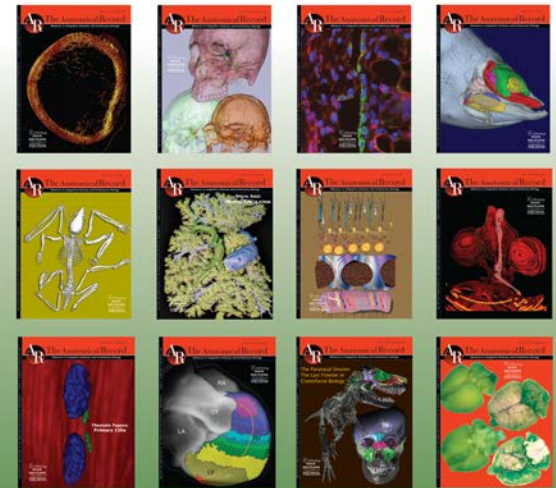
What Do Editors Look For?

❖ Excitement, such as

- Novelty
 - New discovery
 - More thorough insight
- Innovation
 - New methods, reagents, transgenic mouse
- Substantive, clear (understandable) results
- Scientific controversy



Advances in Integrative Anatomy
and Evolutionary Biology



interscience.wiley.com/journal/ar

ARCOVER2008

Expectations About Manuscripts - 1

❖ Reviewers and readers

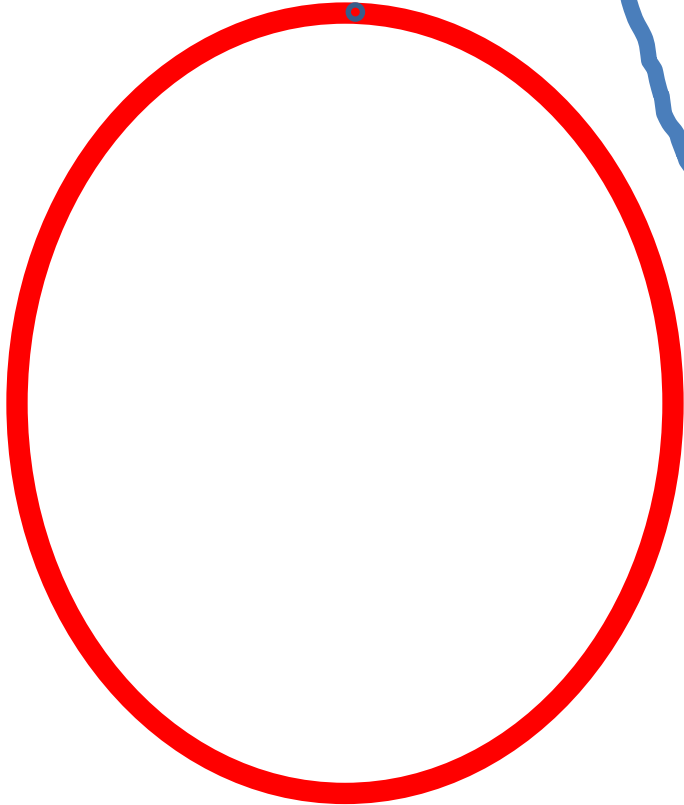
- **An interesting story that**
 - **Revolves around the hypothesis or question**
 - **Conclusion that answers the hypothesis or question**

Not!

A Good Story...

Starts
here

This
way?



Outline

❖ **Reviewers' hell**

❖ **Write clearly**

**Please, do
not write
reviewers’
“Hell”!**



“Hell”, El Bosch, Garden of Delights, Prado Museum, Madrid

Critical Self-Evaluation

❖ Does the reviewer have to work to understand your manuscript?



● No



● Yes



Worth Pondering

- ❖ **Reviewers have a job and life, too! They are writing manuscripts and grant applications**
- ❖ **What should you do?**

- **Write thoughtfully**
- **Write clearly**



Writing Clearly (for Understanding)

❖ Goals

- **Unambiguous writing**
 - **Creates the least confusion**
- **Logical story**
 - **Creates a storyline**
- **Clear, simple, informative figures and tables**
 - **Makes the results obvious**
- **Place your study and results in context**
 - **Brings focus on significance and impact**

Guides for Writing Clearly

❖ To write for understanding...

- Target the audience
- Determine how much to tell the reviewers
- Be a credible writer

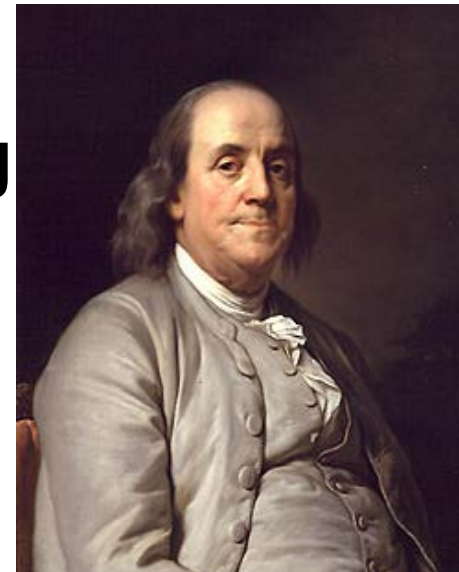
Analogy: The First Date

- ❖ **You want a second date**
- ❖ **Make the first impression a good impression!**
 - **Title and Abstract**
 - **Captivate the imagination of the reviewers**
 - **Clear writing**
 - **Significance**
 - **Impact**
 - **Gives reviewers something to look forward to; not dread!**

Be a Credible Writer

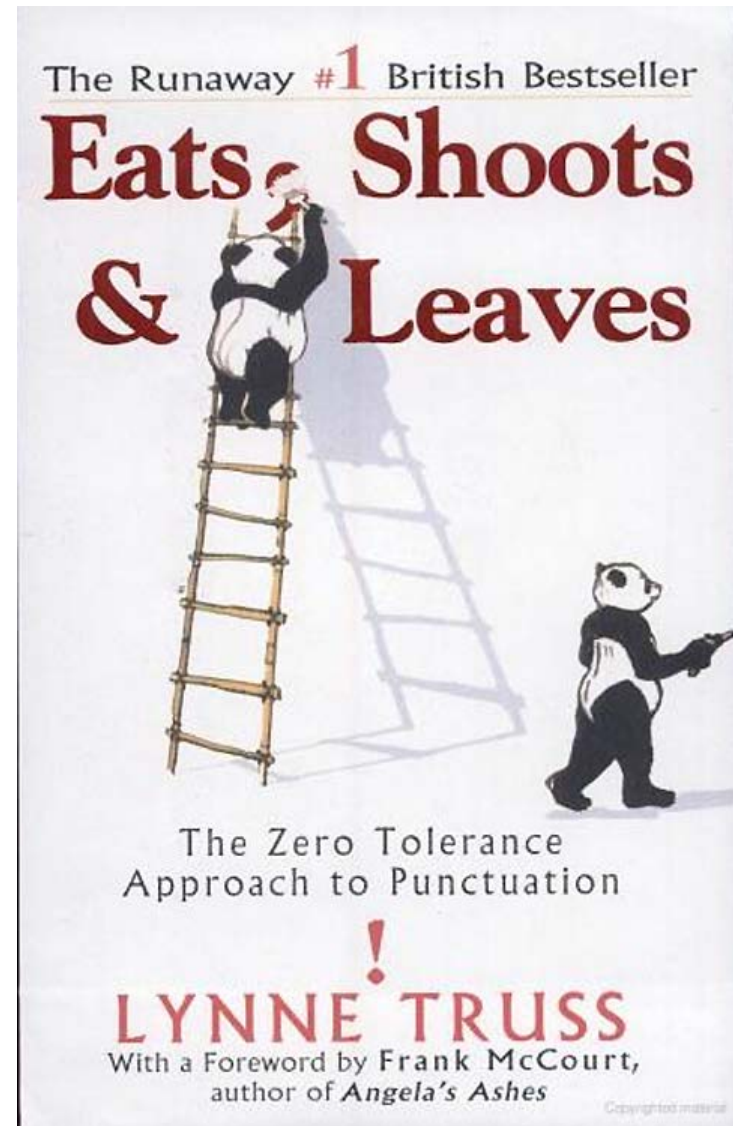
- ❖ **To attain clear understanding, clear writing is required**
 - **The study of writing is NOT a waste of time!**
 - **Proper grammar, punctuation, and sentence and paragraph structure are essential**
 - **Tools to attain understanding**

**Benjamin
Franklin**



Appropriate Use of Punctuation

- ❖ “Standards of punctuation in general...are approaching the point of illiteracy; self-justified philistines.”



Truss L. *Eats, Shoots & Leaves*. 2004

Keywords

❖ Most important words

- Why?

Clear Keywords

Vague Keywords

Rats

Animals

Unclear Word Choice

- ❖ **Example: “Change”**
 - **What does “change” mean?**
 - **Who knows?**
 - **Increased/decreased?**
 - **Longer/shorter?**
 - **Heavier/lighter?**
 - ***Etc.***

Vague Words to Avoid

- ❖ **Modifying words (adjectives, adverbs)**
 - **Adjective: ‘Sick’ (sick baby)**
 - **Adverb: ‘Very’ (very big)**
- ❖ **Jargon (“out there”)**
 - **Where?**
- ❖ **Euphemisms (“to pass away”; die)**

Pretentious Writing

- ❖ *"I'm disinclined to acquiesce to your request..."*

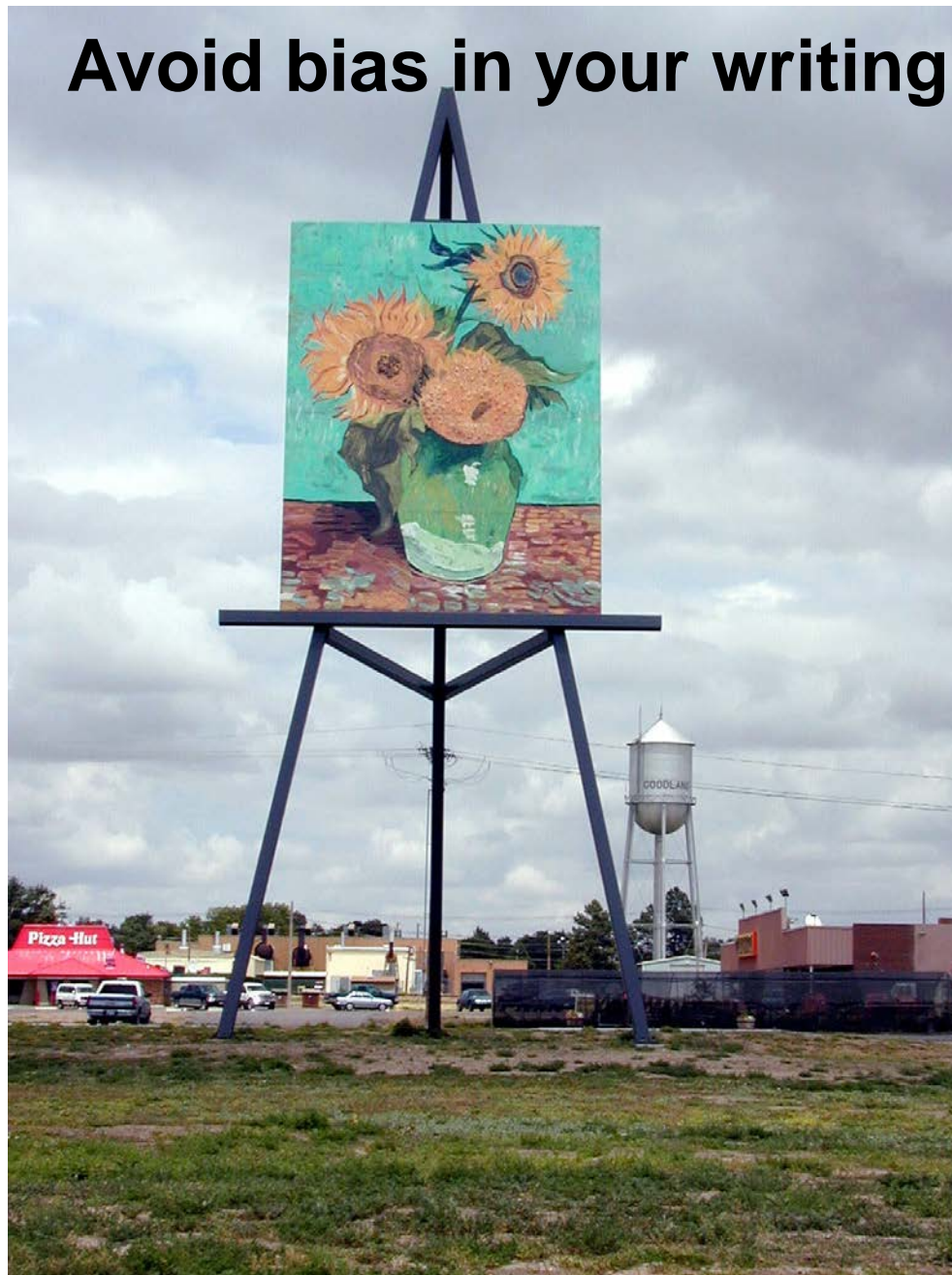
... improvement

- ❖ **"No"**
 - **Captain Barbossa
to Elizabeth Swann**



* *Pirates of the Caribbean - The Curse of the Black Pearl*, 2003

Avoid bias in your writing



Definition of Clear Writing

OK to start-out fuzzy



❖ “Clear writing is writing that is incapable of being misunderstood” *

❖ Quintilian, a Roman rhetorician, who lived in the first century A.D.



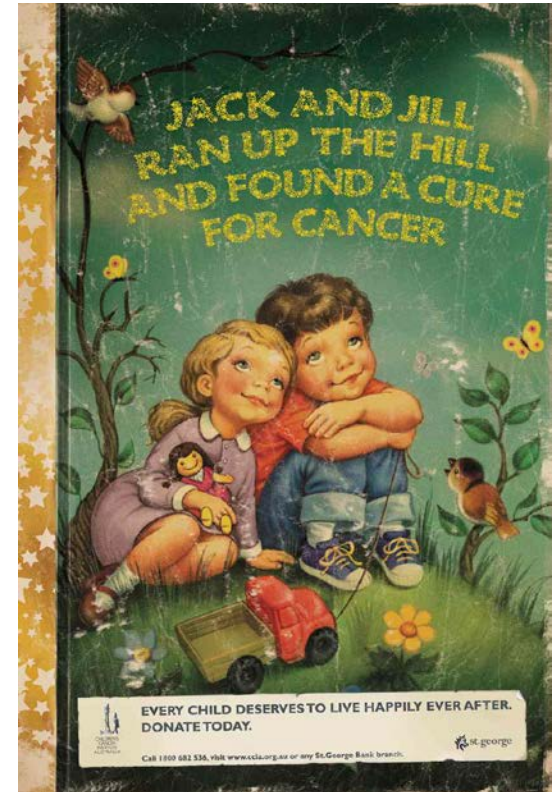
Crisp finish

* Zeiger. *Essentials of Writing Biomedical Research Papers*. 2000

Good Sentence Structure

❖ Noun verb completer

- Jack and Jill ran up the hill
- Keep sentences about 20 words or less
- Avoid starting sentences with names of authors, lab groups, or years
 - Keep the science the subject!



Say What You Mean, Simply - 4

❖ Avoid

- **Complicated descriptions (e.g., a scientist's directions to any where)**



Parts of a Paragraph

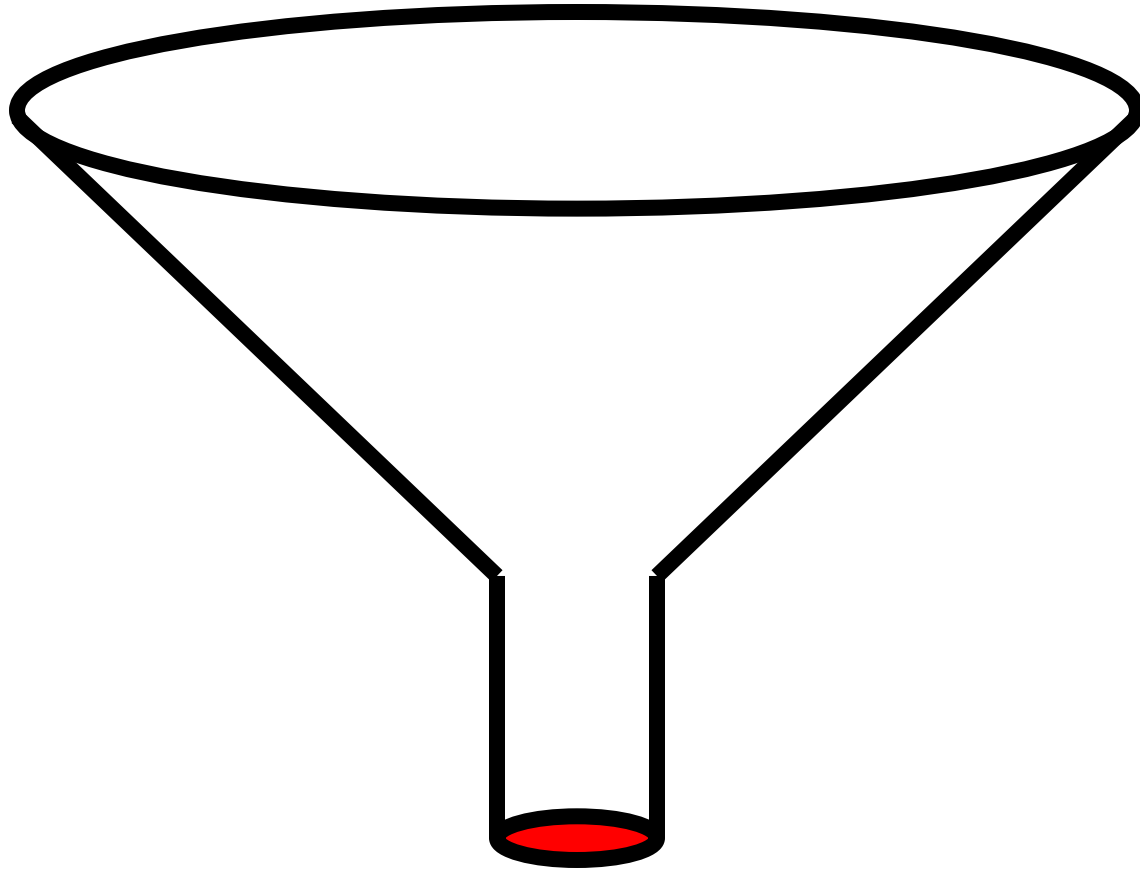
- ❖ **First sentence is special**
 - **Called the ‘topic sentence’**
- ❖ **Subsequent sentences**
 - **Present your line of reasoning**
- ❖ **Last sentence**
 - **Conclusion for the topic**
 - **Or, transition to the next topic (paragraph)**

Good Paragraph Structure

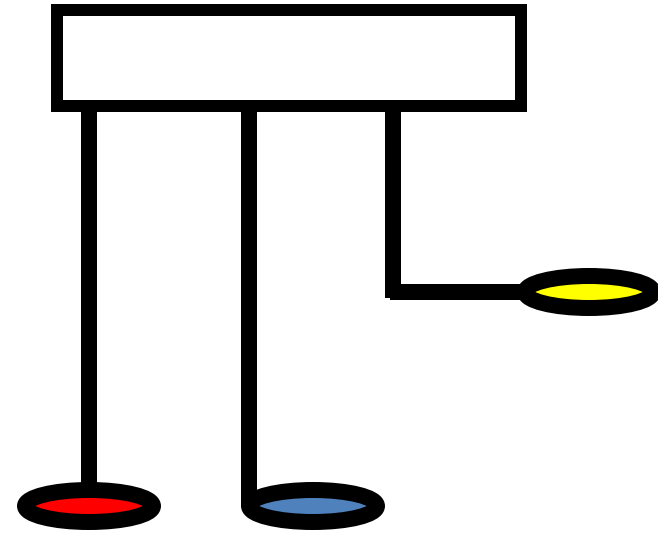
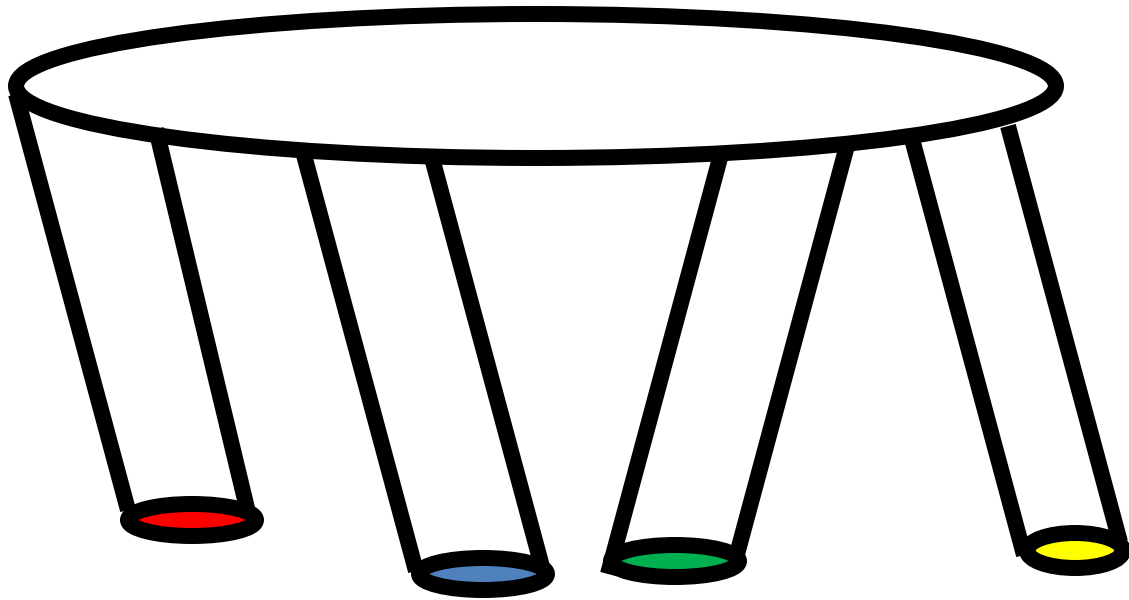
❖ Questions to ask yourself

- Does the topic sentence clearly state the main idea of the paragraph?
- Do the supporting sentences contain specific details and ideas that develop the main idea?
- Is the final sentence a conclusion; or a transition to the next paragraph?
- Do the sentences flow smoothly and logically?

Analogy



NOT!



Follow the Yellow Brick Road...

- ❖ **Why use schemas, cartoons, pathway roadmaps, etc.?**
 - **“A picture is worth a thousand words”**
 - **However, ...**



... the words and figures must agree!



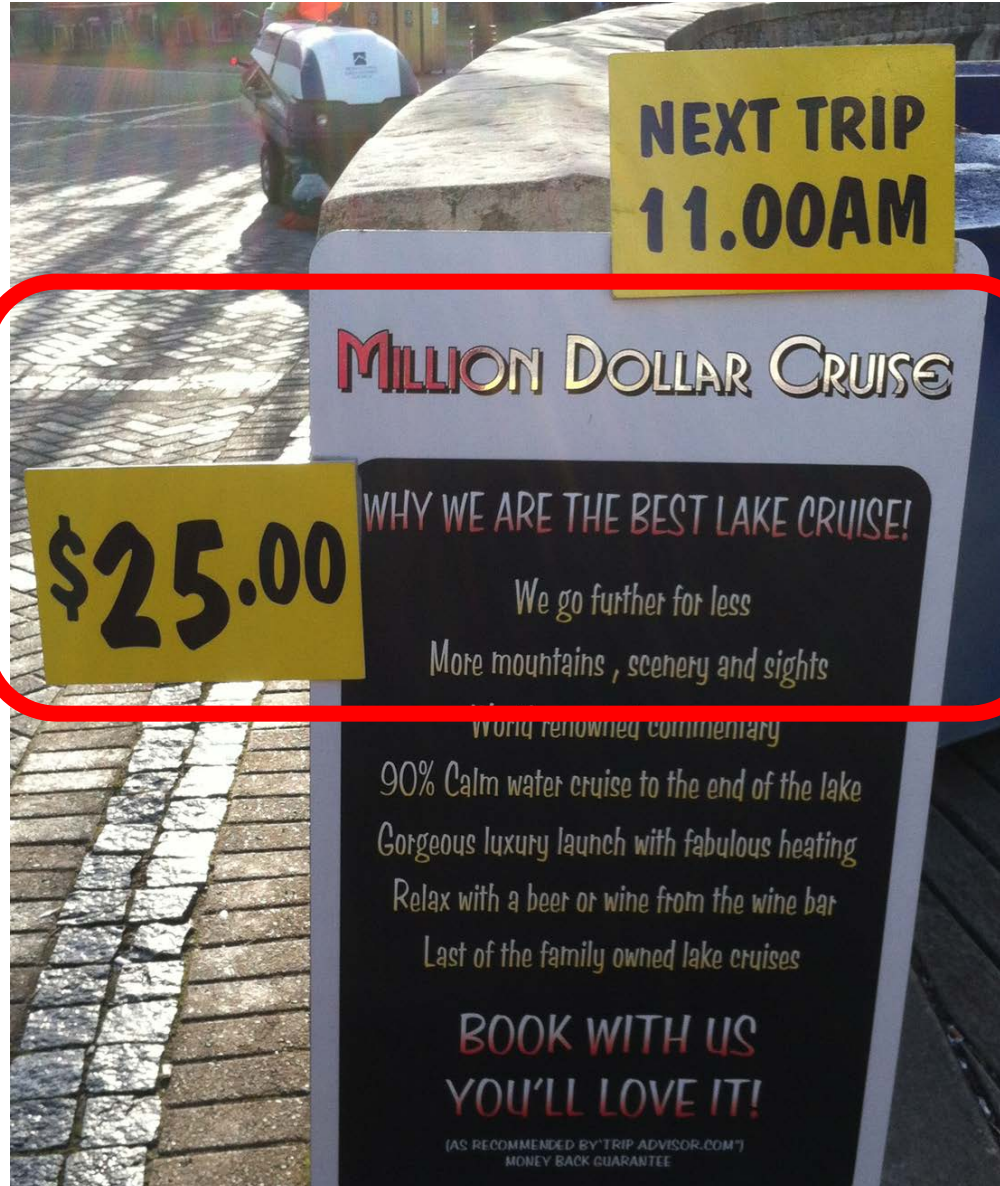
PRONGHORN
LODGE
AND RESTAURANT
LANDER WYOMING
Continental Breakfast

Pronghorn



❖ ... really, the words and figures must agree!

NZ



❖ ... word choice should not be contradictory!



How Does Your Study Advance the Field

- ❖ **Ask yourself questions about your study that reviewers are likely to ask**
 - **What answers do you want or need?**
 - **Write down the answers**
 - **The list provides an organizational framework (outline)**

Writing Checklist

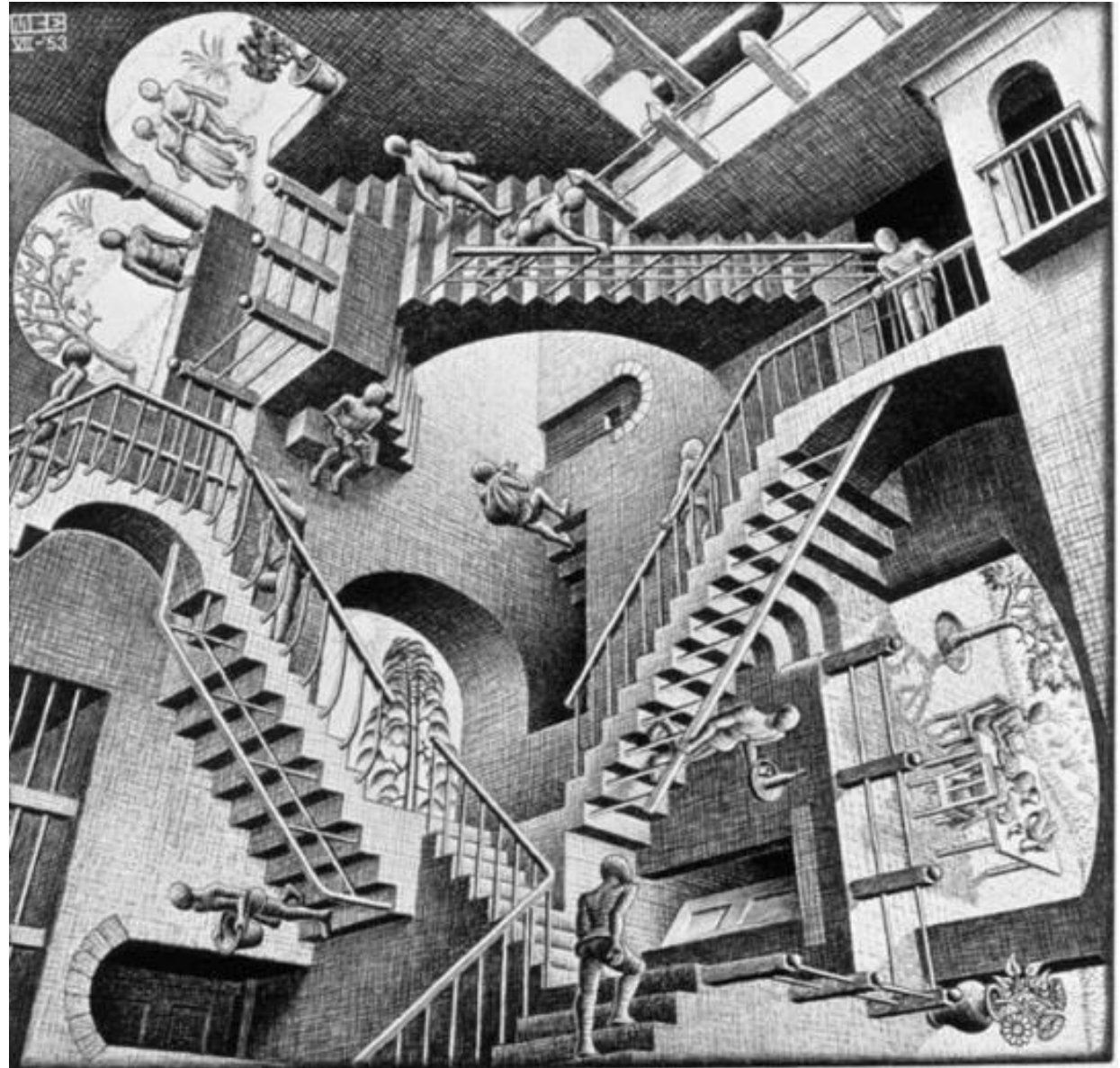
❖ Content

- ✓ Are the major ideas developed appropriately?
- ✓ Are sufficient details presented to support the hypothesis, overall impact, and significance?
- ✓ Are irrelevant ideas removed?

**If you write
this way...**

**All of the
elements are
present, but
where is the
storyline?**

**...expect
“rejected”**



“*Relativity*”, MC Escher, Back in Holland, 1941-54

Thank you!



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