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Improving Communication Through Writing

Greetings GPNSS members! By the time you read this editorial, most of us will be enjoying the summer vacation and all that the Great Plains has to offer. Warmer temperatures, increasing day length, and time in the field are a welcomed change from the seemingly endless grip of “old man” winter (for those of us in the northern Great Plains). Of course, believing that anyone could truly enjoy the clouds of tormenting, biting insects and high humidity across the Great Plains is hard to imagine, in my opinion. There are plenty of summer activities for the outdoor enthusiasts among us, though for the cold-loving endotherms among us, July and August are the months that have us wishing we had saved a frozen bag of snow from last winter to remind us that cooler temperatures are only a short four months away!

I chose to dedicate this editorial to improving communication through writing, a topic I hope you all can relate to and find of interest. The emphasis placed on writing to communicate has become increasingly important in recent years (Chamberlain 2009). In our professional capacity, we have always had to communicate through writing when constructing quarterly reports, final project reports, and scientific manuscripts. Our ability to successfully convey information in these documents often means the difference between securing additional research funding or acceptance and rejection of a manuscript (Chamberlain 2009). With the ever-increasing advancements in electronic technology, we perform many tasks in our day-to-day lives using email, text-messaging, or social media. The editorial board of *TPN* conducts all journal business through writing, most of which consists of an electronic format starting with initial submission of manuscripts and cover letters by authors and followed by formal peer-review and revision through written communication. Associated manuscript inquiries or concerns from authors are almost always conducted using email. Likewise, I conduct virtually all of my activities as Editor-in-Chief using email, which places increasing emphasis on the need for effective written communication with authors or prospective authors (Chamberlain 2009).

Over the past six years, I have corresponded with dozens of authors by email regarding various degrees of manuscript revision, ranging from mechanical issues intended to bring manuscript formatting in line with current submission guidelines, to rejection of a manuscript for publication. In doing so, I have experienced a full range of email responses from authors, some of which I have interpreted as somewhat terse only to have authors send follow-up responses conveying their hope that previous emails did not come across as being terse (Chamberlain 2009). I'm sure most of us can relate to this same scenario, which becomes an issue of conveying emotion and potentially misinterpreting the tone of an email. As is often the case and seemingly difficult to assess, emotion often becomes a determining factor in email exchanges,

and is a central part of the peer-review process - particularly when an unfavorable publication decision is rendered (Chamberlain 2009). For some of us, conveying emotion through writing is especially difficult. Nevertheless, effectively expressing emotion through writing is especially important in how we communicate with each other in a landscape of increasing electronic technology, which has prompted me to invest considerable time and effort to develop more effective communication through writing. I'm especially interested in improving written communication using email and other electronic writing platforms, which includes several forms of written communication that is broadly applicable not only to email communication, but also applies to the preparation of reports and scholarly articles.

When drafting a manuscript or report, make it a priority to keep the presentation succinct, concise, and simple. Remember the recommendation to “trim the fat and cut to the muscle?” As I often convey to my students, scientific writing demands a clear and concise presentation of data to avoid misunderstandings or uncertainty in your effort to deliver your message. I offer that keeping your writing simple and succinct will minimize confusion and misunderstanding in your effort to disseminate your work to the scientific community.

I am a firm believer in the old saying “you are your own worst critic.” In the spirit of self-criticism, I would encourage you carefully review your own writing. More specifically, proofread every word several times before submitting a manuscript for consideration for publication or send an email message. Keep in mind that whether intended or not, once a manuscript is submitted or an email sent, the message is delivered (Chamberlain 2009). In maintaining the highest standard in scientific writing, I would like to think that none of us would submit a report to a supervisor or a manuscript to a scientific journal without having someone proofread your work. Though I'm sure the same diligence likely does not apply to email or your own written words, though we have all probably found many errors upon proofreading these forms of written communication. Being diligent about proofreading your own work several times prior to submitting or sending will provide you with an opportunity to self-reflect on how your work may be perceived by others (Chamberlain 2009).

My former advisor, and several colleagues since, all have suggested that I wait before submitting a completed manuscript, mainly because you become so familiar with the words in the text body, that you no longer “see” errors. The more time I spend writing and reading how other people convey information through writing, I have that there is value in letting a document age. In doing so, you are more likely to catch errors that you missed originally, and the time away from the manuscript gives you fresh perspective for re-evaluating the

intended message you are attempting to convey to ensure that it is appropriate (Chamberlain 2009). On a related note, I often save emails to a draft folder before responding to author concerns or emotional issues to avoid misinterpretation of the intended message by recipients (Chamberlain 2009).

Lastly, if communication through writing is not producing the desired response, consider a phone call. I rarely receive phone calls on matters related to Journal business, though sometimes verbal communication can mean the difference between misinterpretation and continued frustration and total clarity. If you ever have specific questions regarding matters of the Journal, feel free to pick up the phone! A brief chat by phone is always a welcomed break from email!

As with past issues of *TPN*, this issue contains an array of manuscripts covering diverse topics relevant to natural resource management across the Great Plains. For the ornithologists and disease ecologists in our ranks, there are several manuscripts covering topics ranging from alloparental care and West Nile virus in ferruginous hawks, to the interrelationships between land use changes and diet selection by mourning doves. Likewise, you will find a manuscript on infestation of thirteen-lined ground squirrels with bot flies. For ichthyologists, there are manuscripts detailing food habits of age-0 walleyes, and trap net designs for sampling muskellunge. On the botany and invertebrate fronts, there are manuscripts characterizing vascular plant community diversity, interactions in germination and seed establishment of cheatgrass and Russian wildrye, and habitat-related differences in carrion beetle species composition. This issue also includes a number of book reviews, ranging from field guides to grasses, to Kansas fishes, to trees of North America, to mushrooms of the Midwest, to North American waterfowl,

to the contributions of Rachel Carson and her sisters to shaping America's environment. In sum, the articles in this issue provide interesting and pertinent information to future conservation of natural resources across the Great Plains region.

During my tenure as Editor-in-Chief, I have realized that my job pales in comparison to the work of many others. Troy Grovenburg somehow manages to find time to keep the journal moving forward in a timely manner. The Associate Editors are staff work horses who carry a heavy burden of processing manuscripts in a timely manner in addition to their everyday professional and personal obligations, their efforts are very much appreciated! Many peer referees provide an important service to *TPN* and their comments and suggestions for improvement is essential for the continued success of the journal. Lastly, I genuinely appreciate you, the reader. During my tenure as Editor-in-Chief, I have confirmed again and again that the readers of *TPN* are a devoted group of professionals. In closing, if you have any questions, comments, or concerns about *TPN*, please feel free to contact me. After all, this is your journal, and I very much appreciate your thoughts about it. Until next time, have a safe and productive summer everyone!

—Christopher N. Jacques
Editor-in-Chief

LITERATURE CITED

- Chamberlain, M. J. 2009. Editor's Message – Communication Through Writing. *Journal of Wildlife Management* 73(5):629–630; DOI: 10.2193/2009-158.