How to Write a Memorable Article
Cynthia Saver

The point of writing for publication is to deliver a message to your readers, whether it is the results of your latest research study, how to take care of a patient with heart failure, the need to rethink an ethical question, or some other timely topic. But if the reader doesn't remember your message, it's unlikely any change in attitude, belief, or behavior will occur. The effective message is the memorable message.

The first of three stages of memory is the sensory stage, which lasts less than a second (Mohs n.d.). The second is short-term or working memory, which refers to information that you temporarily hold in your brain, such as a phone number that you plan to use immediately. The capacity of short-term memory ranges from five to nine items, with the most common number listed as seven. As an author you’re concerned about converting short-term memory into the third stage—long-term memory—memory that stays with you. The good news is that you can apply principles related to improving long-term memory to your writing to boost the likelihood that readers will remember your message.

Pay special attention to beginnings and conclusions. People remember beginnings and endings better than middles.

**Beginning:** You have just seconds to gain a reader’s interest, so make your first paragraph or two count. If you’re writing for a more informal journal, you might want to lead with a memorable case or put the reader inside the action, as in this example:

“Hold CPR.” “No pulse.” “Resume CPR. Give epi 1 milligram now.”

Erin, an RN, taps a key on the computer in the resuscitation room and glances at the information:
Devon, 22-year-old male, motor vehicle trauma, massive blood loss, shocked three times in transport, mother and brother on the way. (Twibell et al. 2009)

Sometimes an impressive statistic can be part of an effective opening for a scholarly article. Use statistics with care; you want to get readers’ attention, not bombard them with numbers. Think of statistics as a strong spice: The right amount adds to your article, while too much distracts from it. Here is an example of an opening that uses a statistic:

Almost half of all patients with heart failure are older than 75 years (Roger et al 2012), and the condition has been labeled the quintessential disorder of cardiovascular aging... (Falk, Ekman, Anderson, Fu, & Granger 2013).

**Ending:** The importance of "endings” and memory was explained in a classic study of patients undergoing colonoscopies (Redelmeier 2003). When the colonoscopy ended with the colonoscope left in the rectum for a short time before removal to allow patients to experience a time without discomfort, they rated the experience as less unpleasant than those who didn’t have the additional time. In fact, the additional time patients were more likely to return for a repeat colonoscopy.

Apply this finding in your writing by paying close attention to your conclusion section. Too many
times authors breeze through this, relieved that the article is completed. However, the ending is the last time you have the reader’s attention. Emphasize the one or two key points you want the reader to remember and don’t introduce new concepts. Write clearly and concisely so that the reader doesn’t experience any “pain,” and you are more likely to make an impact.

Here’s an example of a conclusion from an article about dealing with difficult people (Sherman 2013). The author has discussed how to deal with different types of difficult people but wants to emphasize that a person cannot control another person’s behavior:

"Although these tips aren’t guaranteed to work every time, you’ll find them helpful in many situations. Remember—in the end, the only behavior you can truly control is your own."

**Focus the reader’s attention.** People remember more when their attention is focused (Small & Vogan 2011), and you can tap into this when you write. One technique for focusing attention is using bullet points. For example, which of the following do you think readers will more likely remember?

**Original:**

Multiple scoring systems for massive transfusion (MT) triggers have been studied, but no single system has been found superior in predicting MT requirements. These systems commonly cite the following variables as triggers for MT initiation: systolic blood pressure below 90 mm Hg, heart rate faster than 120 beats/minute, temperature below 35.5° C (95.9° F), pale and diaphoretic presentation, base deficit above 6, hemoglobin below 11 g/dL, International Normalized Ratio above 1.5...

**Revised:**

Multiple scoring systems for massive transfusion (MT) triggers have been studied, but no single system has been found superior in predicting MT requirements. These systems commonly cite the following variables as triggers for MT initiation:

- systolic blood pressure below 90 mm Hg
- heart rate faster than 120 beats/minute
- temperature below 35.5° C (95.9° F)
- pale and diaphoretic presentation
- base deficit above 6
- hemoglobin below 11 g/dL
- International Normalized Ratio above 1.5... (Day, Matsumoto, & Passion 2013)

**Chunk your information.** When you teach a patient, you don't teach them everything you know. Nurses realize that people remember better when information is chunked, for example, by category (Small & Vogan 2011). Organizing information into sections promotes retention. A familiar structure is “disease”: incidence, etiology, prevalence, pathophysiology, signs and symptoms, diagnosis, management, and nursing care.

Another is the structure of a research article: introduction, methods, results, and discussion (IMRAD). Use of the IMRAD format increased dramatically in the 1970s, becoming the dominant pattern in the 1980s (Sollaci & Periera 2004). Because readers are accustomed to this organization, it’s easier for them to read—and remember—the research.

**Use visuals.** Use figures, photographs, tables, charts, and other mechanisms to emphasize key points. For example, don’t just talk about “undermining” of a wound: include a photograph. Use visuals to save your readers time and account for different learning styles, which will make them feel better about your article and improve retention. For example, don’t waste readers’ valuable time
by making them wade through a text-heavy paragraph describing the demographics of the respondents to your survey; organize the results in a table. The adage “A picture is worth a thousand words” applies not only to photos, but also to other visuals.

**Associate ideas.** Remember mnemonics from nursing school? “On old Olympus' towering top a Finn and German viewed some hops,” representing the 12 cranial nerves is an example. You can still use mnemonics and acronyms to help readers remember information. For example, CRAFFT is a screening tool for use with children under the age of 21 to assess for substance abuse ([http://www.integration.samhsa.gov/clinical-practice/sbirt/screening-page](http://www.integration.samhsa.gov/clinical-practice/sbirt/screening-page))

- C - Have you ever ridden in a CAR driven by someone (including yourself) who was "high" or had been using alcohol or drugs?
- R - Do you ever use alcohol or drugs to RELAX, feel better about yourself, or fit in?
- A - Do you ever use alcohol/drugs while you are by yourself, ALONE?
- F - Do you ever FORGET things you did while using alcohol or drugs?
- F - Do your family or FRIENDS ever tell you that you should cut down on your drinking or drug use?
- T - Have you gotten into TROUBLE while you were using alcohol or drugs?

Certainly CRAFFT’s developers could have simply listed the questions, but highlighting the words Car, Relax, Alone, Forget, Friends, and Trouble make it easier for clinicians to remember the key points of what they are asking.

Associating ideas through analogies and metaphors helps readers create a visual image, which enhances retention of information. For instance, think of how the “greenhouse effect” has become part of our lexicon and, to cite a health example, how the kidneys are said to act as a filter, like that in an espresso machine.

Another way to associate ideas is to put them in context. News media outlets do this routinely. When a school shooting occurs, the media reminds us how many school shootings have occurred and under what kinds of circumstances. Context helps the reader apply the information, which also improves memory (Mohs nd). A simple example is the discussion of research results, which puts the current findings in context with the existing literature.

**Never make your reader work.** You certainly want readers to think, but you don’t want to make them work at getting your message, which creates stress. Researchers have found that stress impairs memory (Fernandez, Goldberg & Michelon 2013). You can reduce readers’ stress by avoiding convoluted sentences they must struggle to understand. For example, if you stumble over a sentence when you read it aloud, most likely your readers will too, so revise it. Apply the techniques in this article, such as using visuals, to make it easier for readers to absorb information.

Ask others to review your work to be sure it’s clear. Include not just topic experts, but also those in your target audience (Saver 2011). Ask them what they remember after a first read through.

**MAKING MEMORIES**

The tips in this article will help reduce readers’ stress, focus their attention, and improve the likelihood that they will remember your message. If your message is remembered, it’s more likely the reader will change attitude, belief, or behavior, possibly improving patient outcomes.

**REFERENCES**


**AUTHOR**

Cynthia Saver, MS, RN, is president of CLS Development, Inc., an editorial consulting firm that provides editorial management and writing services, and workshops on writing for publication. She is editor of *Anatomy of Writing for Publication for Nurses*. Ms. Saver’s email is csaver@clsdevelopment.com.

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