On Telling a Story

Most people likely tell stories, and some of us even put those stories into written form. The format dictates a couple of main differences. For example, when someone tells a story rather than writes it, their facial expression, gestures, body stance, and so forth reinforce some points. In writing, it is the words that provide emphasis. When we tell stories, we typically use slang, exciting words, and almost no citations. When we write stories, we sometimes create such formality that the story no longer is appealing, even though it is factually correct and complete. This statement brings me to the example I now use about clarity and brevity.

My husband and I have a favorite restaurant that includes a chef bar (a bar extending around the kitchen area), where we always sit. In addition to watching the staff prepare the evening’s options, we also hear stories—sometimes from and about the staff, and other times from the staff but about someone else, especially their families.

One of our favorite people has a daughter who is now three. If you remember, children at that age love to think they are reading. As a result, if you skip a page, they quickly remind you, “You missed something!” Then they take you to the page you skipped. They also retell the story in their own way.

Emma Ruby Crawford loves the story of the Eensy Weensy Spider (AKA—the Itsy Bitsy Spider). In case you don’t remember the story (it really is more of a song), the spider climbs up a water spout, but it is raining and so the spider is washed out. The sun dries up the rain, so the spider takes off again up the water spout. The story is usually accompanied by moving fingers and thumbs to provide the illusion of a crawling up motion.

Not to be distracted with all of those words, Emma decided she could tell the story (Figure 1). Using a version of the thumb to finger motion, she said, “Water! Oh, NO!” as she placed her hands along the sides of her face. Even if we didn’t know the story, we would get the gist that something was awry! (It is helpful here to think of Edvard Munch’s famous The Scream to get the full visual effect.)
That gesture and those words would be where the flood came down. Then she lifted her hands as if the sun were rising and declared, “All better!”

I love the story! Yes, I had to know the gist of the original story to follow such an abbreviated form, and yes, the gestures definitely helped. Yet, it reminded me of how wordy we often become about some simple concept. Some of us were taught to use a more complex word even if a simpler form with the same meaning was available. In only five words, I had that story running through my head for days!

What does that story have to do with this journal? Here is the message: We don’t need to share everything we know about a topic to be scholarly. We need to provide a complete picture (for example, the pros and cons of an issue, the best evidence we can find on a particular topic, a differentiation between fact and opinion, and some kind of clear code for lengthy terminology). We need to use simple words, ones we all know, and save the more complex words for when only they will do in conveying a message.

That brings me to the 7th edition of the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association* (2019). Authors are told to use first-person pronouns rather than third-person pronouns. Thus, rather than saying, “the research team conducted,” authors can now officially say “we conducted.” Clarity. It is a critical concept for clear writing (and storytelling). You will find some other changes you may love (like clarification of using the pronoun “who” for people and “that” for inanimate words or “they” as a gender-neutral word even if it is referring to one person).

Whether authors report on research or a quality improvement (QI) project or provide examples of solving some issue many of us experience, the key is we are telling a story. Sometimes the story is much more structured (e.g., using SQUIRE Guidelines to report QI work), but we really are telling a story of how we came to take on certain work, what we did, and what we learned from doing so. And, I hope, all of our work ends with “all better”—that is the goal of scholarly writing. Making something better for the next person who undertakes a study or tests a new strategy is what we do in developing others. Learn on—and on!

**REFERENCE**


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**EDITOR’S NOTE**

As local, national, and international conferences are being canceled due to the COVID-19 outbreak worldwide, we at JCEN want you to know we support decisions by planners to determine what is best for the events they sponsor. Some groups might be relatively low-risk exposures, and so planners decide to continue. Others may have the potential to impact across thousands of participants and their colleagues as they return home. We know these are tough decisions and that every one of us who sponsors live continuing education events will take into account the evolving evidence related to this current public health issue. Know that we recognize the huge financial implications that are a part of this decision-making process. Know that we also recognize that nurses act on evidence and do what is right for their patients and their communities. We thank you for your thorough and thoughtful responses in the days ahead.