About this book

This book is aimed at hands-on scientific editors, those who work with the nuts and bolts of the text—from spelling, punctuation¹ and grammar (copyediting) to meaning and logic (substantive editing). Copyeditors (subeditors) and journal editors will also find something of interest in it.

I decided to write this book when I recognised that the assortment of books on my shelves either don't mention some faults of scientific writing that I regularly encounter, or mention them only in passing. The book collects together many subtle, recurring errors that I've come to recognise in my more than 20 years of editing. It also incorporates a few essays I've written or lectures I've given on things that annoy me about scientific writing. My intention is to fill the gaps that I've found and to challenge some of the accepted wisdom of scientific writing. Many other books (see the Bibliography) cover more common or more visible problems, so I do not cover those problems here. No doubt there are others. If you have a favourite subtlety that I have not covered and would like to see it included in a later—and bigger—edition of this book, please send it to me. There are likely to be subtleties that I have not encountered or recognised, so I welcome additional ideas. Keep in mind as you read, also, that as well as a list of subtle errors, the book works as a primer in thinking critically.

You might find that some of my phraseology sounds odd or some of my "errors" are not wrong in your usage. My English is Australian, so from my perspective, much US usage is perplexing, if not wrong. Your experience of this book might well be the same. And my approach is prescriptivist.

Bear in mind that the advice given in here is my opinion, though supported by reason and authoritative references, and over 20 years' experience. If you disagree with it, that's fine, so long as your reasoning is sound too. But I think you'll find my arguments persuasive, and that you'll find reading this book as satisfying as I have found writing it.

A final word of caution: If the instructions to authors or the publisher's requirements contradict anything I say here, do what they say, no matter how ludicrous you think they are.