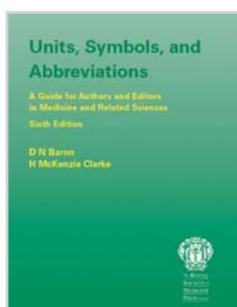


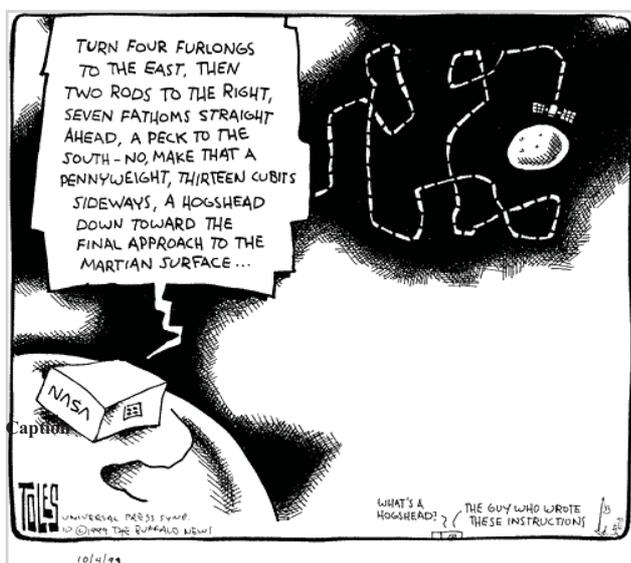
In the Bookstores...

An informative but not essential or comprehensive guide to units, symbols and abbreviations.



D.N. Baron and H. McKenzie Clarke. *Units, Symbols, and Abbreviations: A Guide for Authors and Editors in Medicine and Related Sciences (Sixth Edition)*. The Royal Society of Medicine Press Limited, 2008. ISBN 978-1-85315-624-3 (paperback) GBP £7.95, Euro approx. 9.86. 56 pages.

If you think units are rather unglamorous and boring, just take a look at the “Metric Martyrs” in Britain. In their fight to be able to sell their goods in the old imperial measures, this group of shop owners have set themselves up as the defenders of Britishness against the faceless bureaucrats of Brussels. Still, at least they insist on clearly specifying their units, even if it is hard to work out in your head whether tomatoes sold at 90p/lb in the grocers are better value than those sold at £1.98/kg in Tesco’s (answer: no difference if my calculations are correct). Worse was the mix-up in 1999 between NASA and a contractor—Lockhead Martin—who was involved in building the Mars Climate Orbiter. At a critical moment in the mission, the NASA sci-



entists realized the \$125 million was entering a much lower orbit than expected. As a result, the spacecraft was burnt to a cinder in the thin Martian atmosphere. It later turned out that the company had programmed the spacecraft’s control thrusters to expect imperial units of measure—also known as “standard units” in the United States—when the agency was transmitting its data in metric units. Whoops, it seems those standard units were not so standard. And I thought rocket scientists were supposed to be clever.

Outside the United States, the metric system—or International System of Units (Système International d’Unités: SI)—is almost universal. However, even in science, the system is by no means ubiquitous, and many scientific journals, particularly in medicine and related sciences, will mix and match units. So would the book *Units, Symbols, and Abbreviations* be of use for writers and editors for navigating potential pitfalls of units? In general, for a small book (56 A5 pages), it contains quite a lot of readily accessible information, and with a list price of £7.95, it is hardly expensive. As the name implies, the book also covers other aspects of terminology, such as abbreviations and symbols. It is organized into four chapters, the first dealing with units and the second an alphabetical reference section on symbols and nomenclature. The final two chapters are on layout of references and proof correction marks.

I found the book well referenced, particularly for the introduction to the SI system in chapter 1, which also contains some good advice on usage (for example, “Symbols are international and cross-disciplinary and so should be used whenever possible, especially in equations”). In chapter 2, although the book does not pretend to include an exhaustive list of all abbreviations and terminology, there are often references to where such information can be found.

Many of the references were in the form of URLs that could be readily accessed, something that freelancers who work from home without a good academic library nearby could appreciate. This brings me to what I also think is the main limitation of this book. Much of the information is readily available on the Internet if you know how to search for it, although this holds true to a certain extent for any reference book. And for those who do already have weightier reference books such as the *AMA Manual of Style* (produced by the American Medical Association) or *Scientific Style and Format: The CSE Manual for Authors, Editors, and Publishers* (produced by the Council of Science Editors) it is hard to imagine this book providing much additional knowledge.

There were certain pieces of information that could perhaps have made such a reference book more useful. For example, if you wanted to know what units are preferred for expressing total cholesterol levels, you would not find that information in this book (though other somewhat more obscure information is, such as the exact equivalence in joules [preferred SI unit] of an electron volt— $1.602176487 \times 10^{-19}$ in case you are interested). When it does pronounce, for example, on whether mmHg should be used for measuring blood pressure, it says that you should preferably also give the SI equivalent in pascals (1 mmHg =

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133.322 Pa) although I certainly don't recall any medical texts with pressures given in pascals.

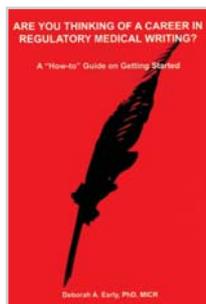
Chapter 3 on layout of references gives an overview of the Vancouver and Harvard systems. Most journals have their own explicit instructions for layout and format of references and, rather than referring to this book, editors and writers would be well advised to go to the instructions for authors of the target journal and look at some recent sample articles if possible. There is a short section on digital object identifiers (DOIs), but further details on referencing online material would perhaps have been useful. The final chapter on proof correction marks may be useful to those who have to correct proofs and galleys. The trouble is that these proof correction marks are the ones recommended by British Standards, and may not be applicable to other countries. Certainly, they are different to the ones I use for correcting proofs for the typesetters of a Spanish publisher.

So would I recommend this book? I think if you already have other comprehensive style manuals such as the *AMA Manual of Style* or *Scientific Style and Format: The CSE Manual for Authors, Editors, and Publishers* the answer would be probably not. If you only occasionally write or edit material for academic publication, and you do not wish to splash out on these more expensive reference books, then this latest edition of *Units, Symbols, and Abbreviations: A Guide for Authors and Editors in Medicine and Related Sciences* could be worth looking into.

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A career in regulatory medical writing



Deborah A. Early: Are you thinking of a career in regulatory medical writing? A 'how-to' guide on getting started. Waratah Communications, 2008. ISBN-13 978-0-9819218-1-5; ISBN-10 0-9819218-1-7 (Paperback booklet). USD \$14.99.

Before widespread use of the Internet, the discipline of regulatory medical writing may arguably not have been well-known to those outside the clinical research industry. Indeed many of us who make a living from it confess to having stumbled upon this noble, but less than, high profile profession.

Deborah Early sings loud and proud about regulatory medical writing as a career option in her excellent booklet 'Are you thinking of a career in regulatory medical writing?' In

this guide to getting started, Early summarises the background information necessary for an industry outsider to understand the documentary requirements for licensing of medicines and how regulatory medical writers enable those requirements to be met. Her style is technical yet concise, as is appropriate to the subject matter, and her enthusiasm for the job shines through.

She gives sufficient allocation to soft topics such as the types of personalities with the makings of a good writer; typical careers paths; remuneration and jobs within the industry—whether in Clinical Research Organisations (CROs), pharmaceutical companies or the freelance sector. She takes nothing for granted and highlights basic techniques to enhance writing skills, not always immediately apparent to the uninitiated.

Over half of the booklet deals with technical matters relevant to the profession including training, organisation of medical writing departments and an overview of basic regulatory documents such as the protocol, clinical study report, narratives, safety reports and various ethics-related documents.

The concise glossary is sufficient to provide a taster of industry jargon without scaring off would-be writers! Early even sets an assignment for prospective regulatory writers that highlights the principles of team working, working to deadlines and task prioritisation—essential prerequisites for success in the profession. A list of web resources and a quick quiz round off the booklet perfectly.

The US focus of the document might have been better internationalised, but that is not to say its relevance is overly diminished for those seeking a career in the European regulatory environment. A European distributor is notable by its absence as copies need to be ordered in US dollars and are sent from the US, both of which inevitably raise purchase costs for those outside the US. Should Dr Early venture east, she might like to deposit a stack with a European distributor, family member or friend who would undoubtedly find them flying off the shelf to various interested individuals and University Careers Advisory Services throughout Europe.

This booklet is an excellent, concise and well-written guide for prospective regulatory medical writers and makes a great job of raising the profile about one of the best-kept job secrets in the industry!

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