THE SHAPE OF EVIDENCE

Cormac McCarthy is one of the great American novelists. He was influenced by Hemingway and Faulkner, and has won a Pulitzer Prize for fiction. Blood Meridian and All the Pretty Horses are his masterpieces, the second forming part of the stunning Border Trilogy, which also includes The Crossing and Cities of the Plain. Later novels include No Country for Old Men and The Road, both made into acclaimed films. McCarthy’s style is sparse and idiosyncratic, with little punctuation, no quotation marks and often no attribution of dialogue. Imagine my surprise when a friend sent me an article from Nature setting out McCarthy’s tips on ‘how to write a great science paper’.1

It turns out that McCarthy has been a fellow at the Santa Fe Institute in New Mexico, where he has helped to edit works by theoretical physicists and biologists, and has worked with an evolutionary biologist, Pamela Yeh. His most important tip is ‘to keep it simple while telling a coherent, compelling story.’

McCarthy and Yeh’s other words of wisdom include using minimalism to achieve clarity, deciding on the theme and two or three points you want every reader to remember, keeping each paragraph to a single message, keeping sentences short, simply constructed, and direct, avoiding footnotes, and not over-elaborating. They have a lot to say about the use of commas, dashes, parentheses and elaborating. They have a lot to say about the use of commas, dashes, parentheses and exclamation marks, and recommend injecting comments on these would be as follows.

IMRD (Introduction, Methods, Results, and Discussion) is the tired, stock-in-trade vocabulary of traditional science writing.

An analysis of general practice data by Jessica Lee and colleagues suggests that the exciting experiment in devolution in Greater Manchester has not yet fulfilled its potential to re-distribute funding to practices in highly deprived areas with well-documented extra needs. There is still work to do to ensure that the even greater social experiment — the NHS itself — delivers equitable health care.

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REFERENCE


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