PROLOGUE

Scientific psychologists need to write well to communicate their findings with others, but their training typically includes few opportunities to master this skill. Undergraduate psychology majors are first exposed to scientific writing in a research methods course, where they write reports of research conducted in class. Some undergraduates later write a senior thesis, and as graduate students they write a master’s thesis or a doctoral dissertation. These are all valuable experiences, but they are insufficient to allow students to become masters. After all, athletes or musicians who have a similar level of experience are considered novices; they’ve just started the long trip to mastery.

My goal in this book is to help you improve your scientific writing. I view scientific writing as a skill, a view that has two implications for the book. First, in most skills, experts often know “tools of the trade”—strategies, tips, heuristics—that make their writing seem clear, concise, cohesive, and compelling. This book is designed to teach you some of these tools that expert authors use to write well. Second, like most skills, learning to write well requires massive amounts of practice—10,000 hours is commonly cited as the amount of practice needed to become an expert in many domains. This book includes exercises that will allow you to practice your craft without having to wait until your next opportunity to prepare a full-fledged research report.

The book is organized around seven lessons: three devoted to sentences, one to paragraphs, and three to writing research reports. In each lesson, I describe tools that experts use to write effective sentences, paragraphs, and reports. In addition, each lesson includes exercises that allow you to try out the tools and ends with “For Practice,” which suggests ways to improve your writing by looking at strengths and weaknesses of published articles.

This is not a book to be read in one setting; the book’s real value for you is in doing the exercises. Just as athletes master skills by practicing them (not by reading about them), you need to do the exercises to improve your writing. With that said, let’s begin.¹

¹Throughout the book I use contractions because I want you to feel as if we’re talking casually about writing. But don’t use contractions in your scientific writing because most editors consider them too informal.