
Writing Styles

By Tom Cox, [KT9OM](#)

This monthly editorial column is intended to provide some behind-the-scenes insight into what some informed readers may have to say at times about important issues of the day.



Tom Cox, KT9OM

Despite that, for reasons best known to himself, Jack Stone has asked me if I would make some observations about my manuscript writing style, which style stands in contrast to the work of some of the heavy hitters who contribute to this magazine — the engineers, scientists and inventors who regularly grace the pages of *antenneX* with scholarly, detailed and sophisticated reports on their studies and investigations.

Why, when he can get serious, informative content from these heavy hitters, does he pay real money for content from somebody like me? I have no idea, but I'm riding this pony as far as it will take me.

LIGHT VS HEAVY

Although I have a streak of smugness in my nature (this comes as a complete surprise to Jack, I know), I make a conscious effort to keep the tone of my *antenneX* articles a little lighter than some, for balance with the heavy stuff — and because there'd be no joy in writing if I didn't. I don't pretend to know *antenneX's* audience demographics, but I do know that some of the articles in *antenneX* are a bit over my head, and sometimes they resemble something that would appear in an IEEE journal or an engineering text. The tone is formal, with heavy use of the passive voice, and with little of the personality of the writer coming through.

The work is solid, the authors' credentials impressive, and the contribution to the pool of knowledge substantial, but sometimes... sometimes I wake up as my forehead bounces off the





keyboard, because I dozed off due to incomprehension and bafflement. We liberal-arts types generally have a high level of curiosity, but some of us have a low threshold for scientific complexity and mathematical abstraction. And, in my case, there is a point in my ability to understand higher math where my eyes glaze over, and the fog closes in... and I wake up bouncing off the keyboard.

Like a lot of *antenneX* readers, I do a lot of reading for work and self-education, as well as for entertainment, so I like to spice up the information with some enjoyment. If the topic of a very academically-toned *antenneX* article interests me, I'll take the time and effort to read it, unless the math rises into what (for me) is the esoteric stratosphere, and then I'll peel off and look for something more nuts-and-bolts oriented, with a little bit of humor, or, at least, a little sense of a warm-blooded author behind it. If I don't, I wind up typing with my forehead.

As with my reading, I like to get some enjoyment out of writing. I write what I would like to read, because if I don't like reading it, chances are, I didn't like writing it, and it probably isn't something I should be putting in front of the public, because I won't be proud of it. It'll look as if I'm getting paid by the word. Or, as Microsoft Word's grammar editor suggested to me about the last sentence, "as if the word is paying me." Flat, lifeless and not worth writing, or reading.



There's a lot of technically correct and academically acceptable, but lifeless prose out there in Internet land, on every subject — certainly enough that I don't need to contribute to it, even if I could force myself to write that way. I sure don't write for the money (that's not a slap at *antenneX's* compensation, which is quite fair; just acknowledgment of market realities), so, if I don't enjoy it, there's no point in doing it. I have no intention of quitting my day job.

MAYBE NOTHING NEW BUT SAID DIFFERENTLY

I'm certain from the correspondence I see on the *antenneX* antenna discussion lists that there are high-powered intellects out there that benefit from the really heavy stuff that appears in *antenneX*, but I'm not writing for that audience, anyway, unless they need a little comic relief. Chances are, they already know what I have to say, and maybe even did a thesis or dissertation on it, and know it lot better than I.

I'm writing at people who read for entertainment as well as enlightenment, and who consider some useful information gleaned while reading for pleasure to be a welcome bonus. I believe there are people out there who enjoy a little humanity and personality in their reading, along with the information. I hope there are, anyway. No writer, even a piker who has a real job, wants to think he and his editors are his only audience.



There are people just getting started in antennas and ham radio, who are lucky enough to stumble across *antenneX*. They like to know they are part of the audience too, along with the experts and advanced experimenters. If their eyes glaze over at a deep, technically complex article on a topic they aren't familiar with, it might be a relief to come across another article that is readable, friendly and not so convoluted and advanced they feel like freshmen college students who walked into a graduate engineering class by mistake.

Many of *antenneX's* contributors have powerful professional biographies, decades of vast experience, and have made important and original contributions to the base of knowledge in their fields. I can think of some who are legitimately considered as The Authority in the area of antenna design and theory: Antenna expert L. B. Cebik comes to mind. He is the "E. F. Hutton" of antennas. When he talks, everybody listens, including me. The same applies with Alan Boswell from the UK's Bae Systems and Kirk McDonald of Princeton University.

WHY I WRITE

I, on the other hand, am just "some guy," without academic credentials in radio or engineering. I learn something and want to write about it, so, maybe, somebody else out there will get interested in it, and pick up something useful—and perhaps write even more

extensively. I write about the stuff I talk about with other hams, the stuff that interests me, and (once in a while, I hope), them.

My favorite amateur radio club, the Chief Anderson Amateur Radio Club, of Anderson, Indiana (sponsors of the WA9EOC repeater, 444.675, drop by any time!), has invited me to speak about the wireless data system I run at work, about the onslaught of BPL, and, most recently, about my mast-replacement adventures that resulted from an extreme icy winter storm. I have enthralled (or at least kept awake) audiences of twelve – sometimes as many as *fifteen* – people. I enjoy the talks, and they keep inviting me back, so we all must be getting something out of it.

GOOD MIX OF FOOD FOR THOUGHT

The audiences know I'm not a scientist or an engineer — just a guy with some interests who is willing to put together a little presentation and talk about a subject that interests us, and then they grill me about it. It's fun, and I learn something more in the process too. Other more authoritative contributors to *antenneX* provide the high-protein, gourmet brain food for *antenneX* readers, and I provide the “fast food”, and an occasional “dessert.”



These real experts and I write from different backgrounds, for different reasons, and often, for different audiences. I don't mind if they think some of my writing is a little too informal, a little “light and fluffy,” as long as they don't mind (and why on earth should they?) if some of *their* writing strikes me as a little dry and often WAY over my head, to the extent that I move on to another article, or lapse into forehead-typing again.

WIDE AUDIENCE SPECTRUM

I think I belong in *antenneX*, and those big-name smart guys certainly belong here. We all have segments of the audience to please, and we all can do that, without any of us adopting the other's style or content. In fact, even trying that would probably disappoint both our audience segments.

Not to mention, I don't have another lifetime or two, to learn enough of what they know — let alone to write with authority about it. I'm 56, and although I try to learn something every day, I'll never be an expert at the level of anyone with the stature of many that write the real technical articles at *antenneX* if I live to be 112, or 122, or 132....

I don't have power or influence in the field of antennas. If I were that influential, I'd be in marketing, or politics (same thing, these days), impairing people's good judgment so they'd buy my widgets, or persuading them to vote for me, over, and over, and over.

Some may worry that I sacrifice credibility to be a little entertaining. Do I worry about that? Nah. My credibility is there, in the content, or it isn't. The serious, professional contributors to *antenneX* have all the credibility anybody needs, and they've earned it. If I manage to pass along some interesting tidbits of useful information in the midst of a moderately entertaining article, without any gross errors in fact, grammar or (shudder) advanced math, I consider my mission accomplished.

NO CRITICS SO FAR

Up to this moment, I have not received any correspondence from an *antenneX* readers saying, "You don't know what the heck you're talking about." (I assume that if Jack got any, he'd pass it on.) That's enough credibility for me. If I generate a chuckle or two, or even a groan or an eye-roll, that's a bonus. When it results in a check landing in my mailbox, well, that's an even better bonus. That's really all the encouragement I need.

Perhaps this editorial will encourage a few others out there who worry about submitting articles for fear of being criticized for a different writing style. Not to worry—be unique, just be you and it will show through. **-30-**

Ed: Tom has made many contributions to *antenneX* over the years in the way of article manuscripts and many hours assisting with the editing of at least two books published here. I've never known him not to be willing, even excited to help when asked. — Jack L. Stone

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF THE AUTHOR

Tom Cox, [KT9OM](#), is assistant director of the information technology department of a 10,000-student, 7,000-computer public school corporation. His most recent project is replacing the corporation's leased digital telephone lines with high-speed wireless connections. On his own time, Tom plays with antennas, reads fiction and non-fiction, and gardens or removes snow and splits firewood, depending on the season,

and rides about 250 miles a summer on a bicycle.

He was born to generous and patient parents, Jim and Jeannette Cox (both deceased), in 1949, and has been a Ham since 1982. He shares his Muncie, Indiana home with his lovely and indulgent wife, Sherry, and three dogs. He shares his neighborhood with his brother, KA9PBO, with whom he plays radio and attends hamfests. Tom is an active member of the GARDS.

antenneX Online Issue No. 101 — September 2005
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