Word for Word

There there, it's not that hard: Choosing between thereby and therefore

Scientific writing can be dense and difficult to navigate. Transition words such as therefore, however, thus, thereby, and hence are like signposts for readers, helping them make their way through an article or grant and find priceless nuggets of meaning. If the signposts are pointing in the wrong direction, however, the reader can become hopelessly lost.

Take, for example, the adverbs therefore and thereby. Both words are used to show the logical relationships between ideas, but there are subtle differences between them. Choosing the right word will make your writing—and the readers’ path—clearer.

Thereby means “in this way” or “by these means,” whereas therefore means “for this reason,” “consequently,” or “because of this.” In other words, thereby describes how something happens and therefore describes why it happens.

If you don’t know which word to choose, try substituting “in this way” for thereby or “for this reason” for therefore to see if the
Example: p53 initiates apoptosis in response to DNA damage, maintaining cells’ genomic stability and suppressing tumor formation.

To see if *therefore* is the correct word to use, fill in the blank with “for this reason”:

**Experimental substitution:** p53 initiates apoptosis in response to DNA damage, *for this reason* maintaining cells’ genomic stability and suppressing tumor formation.

That doesn’t seem quite right, as initiating apoptosis isn’t the *reason* why p53 maintains cells’ genomic stability, but the *means by which* it does so.

To see if *thereby* is the correct word to use, fill in the blank with “in this way”:

**Experimental substitution:** p53 initiates apoptosis in response to DNA damage, *in this way* maintaining cells’ genomic stability and suppressing tumor formation.

Now the sentence makes sense, so *thereby* belongs in the blank:

**Correct usage:** p53 initiates apoptosis in response to DNA damage, *thereby* maintaining cells’ genomic stability and suppressing tumor formation.

In the example below, substituting “for this reason” shows that *therefore* is the correct choice.

**Example:** p53 maintains cells’ genomic stability by initiating apoptosis in response to DNA damage; ________, it is often called “the guardian of the genome.”

**Experimental substitution:** p53 maintains cells’ genomic stability by initiating apoptosis in response to DNA damage; *for this reason*, it is often called “the guardian of the genome.”

**Correct usage:** p53 maintains cells’ genomic stability by initiating apoptosis in response to DNA damage; *therefore*, it is often called “the guardian of the genome.”

Bibliography


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