

Word for Word

Very good—or, more accurately, useful—guidance on avoiding vague modifiers

Using modifiers like *very*, *fairly*, *quite*, *somewhat*, and *rather* can be problematic. If someone tells you that a joke is “quite funny,” just how humorous did they find it? Or if a doctor describes a lesion in a patient’s lung as being “very large,” what exactly does that mean? To make things clear, especially in scientific writing, it’s helpful to supply more specific information with or without the inclusion of a modifier.

Examples:

Unclear: The lesion in the patient’s lung was very large.

Better: The lesion in the patient’s lung was 5.2 cm in diameter.

Or: The lesion in the patient’s lung was very large (5.2 cm in diameter).

Unclear: After treatment, the patient’s symptoms were somewhat better.

Better: After treatment, the patient’s fever and headache resolved.

Modifiers like *very* also tend to be overused, which makes them less meaningful. In general writing, such as emails or letters, try replacing them with synonyms or providing more detail to make your writing more expressive and interesting.

Examples:

Original: The puppy was very cute.

Better: The puppy was adorable.

Or: The puppy was irresistible.

Original: I was rather excited to see William.

Better: I was overjoyed to see William.

Or: I was delighted to see William.

Bibliography

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2. Bates.edu. Word usage in scientific writing. Accessed December 19, 2022. <https://www.bates.edu/biology/files/2010/06/Word-Usage-in-Scientific-Writing.pdf>

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