Word for Word

Using precise verbs

Verbs are essential to the meaning of a sentence because they depict action. In other words, verbs tell the reader what is happening. In scientific writing, it is important to avoid using vague verbs. Instead, choose verbs that convey your exact meaning.

Below are some examples of vague verbs and more precise alternatives. The verbs are in italics.

Examples:
Vague: Smoking *affects* cancer risk.
Precise: Smoking *increases* cancer risk.

Vague: Mobilized antigen-deprived chronic lymphocytic leukemia cells *modulate* surface immunoglobulin M.
Precise: Mobilized antigen-deprived chronic lymphocytic leukemia cells *upregulate* surface immunoglobulin M. (adapted from Burger, 2019)[1]

In the examples above, the verbs *affects* and *modulate* are vague because they do not specify how smoking affects cancer risk or in what way leukemia cells modulate immunoglobulin M. The more precise verbs make the relationships in these sentences clear to the reader.

Reference

[1] Burger JA. Going through changes: surface IgM levels during CLL therapy with ibrutinib. *Clin Cancer Res*. 2019;25:2372-2374.

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