

Word for Word

Issue or Problem?

The word *issue* has taken on a new meaning over the past several years. When we hear that someone has *issues*, we immediately know that that person at the very least has something that should be remedied. People have used *issue* to mean *problem* so often that it is now one of Webster's definitions of *issue*. But is *issue* sufficient when describing a *problem* in academic and biomedical writing?

The problem with *issue* is that it is not as specific as *problem* and can be interpreted in more ways. Take a look at the following two sentences and see if one is more informative than the other.



Examples

High cholesterol is an issue among baby boomers.
High cholesterol is a problem among baby boomers.

In the first sentence, high cholesterol MAY be a *problem*, but we don't know for sure. We do know it in the second sentence. Here's another comparison.

Examples

What's the issue with this treatment plan?
What's the problem with this treatment plan?

In the first question, the *issue* may be something innocuous, negative, or even positive. In the second question, the speaker is looking for something detrimental.

Another problem is that *issue* also has more definitions than *problem* does.

Examples

This blog covers many issues related to biomedical writing.

I received the latest issue of the journal.

Your physician may issue a warning about your dietary habits.

The patient had an issue of blood.

In contrast, a *problem* is a negative or distressing matter or question that must be handled or answered. *Problem* also is used to describe a mathematical question.

Another factor is whether to use either word at all in certain instances. Both *issue* and *problem* can be unclear and wordy when you're describing something in a biomedical article.

Examples

Correct but wordy: An issue regarding clinical trials of this treatment is the problem of a lack of eligible control subjects.

Better: Clinical trials of this treatment are hindered by a lack of eligible control subjects.

References

1. *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*, 11th ed. Springfield, MA: Merriam-Webster; 2003:665.
2. *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*, 11th ed. Springfield, MA: Merriam-Webster; 2003:989.
3. Evans H. *Do I Make Myself Clear? Why Writing Well Matters*. New York: Little, Brown and Company; 2017:145-146.

--Don Norwood

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