

Word for Word

**Eighty-six this language
from your scientific writing**



Good scientific writers make every effort to ensure that their ideas and information will be understood by all readers. Using language that may be unclear to some readers undermines this goal. To be a good scientific writer, take the necessary steps to prevent the following types of language from creeping into your manuscripts and grant proposals.

Jargon includes “words and phrases that can be understood in conversation but are vague, confusing, or depersonalizing.”¹ Jargon is often useful as the “shorthand” of a given medical field, but it should be avoided in formal scientific writing.

Incorrect: The patient's labs revealed a serum creatinine level well above the reference range.

Correct: The patient's laboratory test results revealed a serum creatinine level well above the reference range.

Incorrect: The patient was prepped for surgery.

Correct: The patient was prepared for surgery.

Incorrect: Nearly 40 million diabetics reside in the United States.

Correct: Nearly 40 million people with diabetes reside in the United States.

Clichés are phrases that were once original and thought-provoking but have since become so overused that they lack any real meaning at all.² In many instances, clichés can be replaced with specific, meaningful terms.

Incorrect: We used state-of-the-art technology to investigate the tumor microenvironment of prostate cancer.

Correct: We used single-cell RNA sequencing technology to investigate the tumor microenvironment of prostate cancer.

In other cases, it's better to simply omit the cliché.

Incorrect: The findings of this cutting-edge study have implications for the treatment of prostate cancer.

Correct: The findings of this study have implications for the treatment of prostate cancer.

Idioms and colloquialisms are expressions that are used in informal, everyday conversation; often, their meanings cannot be deduced from the words they contain.² In addition to being informal, idioms and colloquialisms can present barriers to understanding for non-native speakers of the language.

Incorrect: The patient agreed to chemotherapy and radiotherapy, but he drew the line at surgery.

Correct: The patient agreed to chemotherapy and radiotherapy, but he refused surgery.

Incorrect: We cannot continue to put up with the lack of effective therapies for this disease.

Correct: We cannot continue to tolerate the lack of effective therapies for this disease.

Incorrect: The patient flatlined despite multiple attempts at resuscitation.

Correct: The patient died despite multiple attempts at resuscitation.

In addition to the above categories, you should avoid the use of specialized words and phrases borrowed from non-biomedical fields, such as marketing, business, and finance. Although such terms may be useful in their native fields, they are often unnecessary and can introduce confusion in scientific writing.

Avoid: We will leverage these findings to develop novel hypotheses regarding the role of this gene in breast cancer metastasis.

Preferred: We will use these findings to develop novel hypotheses regarding the role of this gene in breast cancer metastasis.

Avoid: The deliverables of our study include an improved understanding of the mechanisms underlying breast cancer metastasis.

Preferred: Our study provides an improved understanding of the mechanisms underlying breast cancer metastasis

Avoid: The knowledge capitol gained from these analyses will be used to investigate other promising therapies for patients with metastatic breast cancer.

Preferred: The knowledge gained from these analyses will be used to investigate other promising therapies for patients with metastatic breast cancer.

Similarly, the use of metaphors, and sports metaphors in particular, should be used sparingly (and judiciously) in scientific writing.

Avoid: In terms of its performance in patients with chronic myelogenous leukemia, imatinib is a home run.

Preferred: In terms of its performance in patients with chronic myelogenous leukemia, imatinib is a great success.

Finally, it almost goes without saying that slang has no place in serious scientific writing.

Incorrect: We eighty-sixed the expired antibiotics.

Correct: We threw out the expired antibiotics.

References

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– Joe Munch

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