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Word for Word

Shorter vs. longer words

Just as using sentences that are too long can adversely affect readability (see the *Word for Word* posting Keeping Your Sentences Short and Simple), using long, overly complex words can frustrate readers and obscure meaning.

Although some writers believe that shorter words sound less scientific, the goal of writing is to be understood. Using shorter words can help clarify complex information so that readers can understand the text more easily.

An example of a word that is frequently used in scientific writing is *utilize*. However, the shorter, simpler word *use* is almost always a better choice. In some cases, *utilize* is chosen for its specific meaning: to suggest "the discovery of a new, profitable, or practical use for something." However, according to the *AMA Manual of Style*, ". . . even where this meaning is intended, *use* would be acceptable."

Example:

> **Not preferred:** This drug can be *utilized* to treat depression.

> **Preferred:** This drug can be *used* to treat depression.

Here are other examples in which simpler words are better choices than longer ones.

Not preferred: The patient's condition improved *following* radiotherapy.

Preferred: The patient's condition improved *after* radiotherapy.

Not preferred: If the patient's condition is worse when this antibiotic regimen *terminates,* the patient will participate in a clinical trial.

Preferred: If the patient's condition is worse when this antibiotic regimen *ends,* the patient will participate in a clinical trial.

The shorter form of a word isn't always the best choice. Just because a shorter word is used in conversation doesn't mean it's appropriate for scientific writing. For example, the word *flu* is often used when talking with colleagues or patients, but *influenza* is the preferred form for technical communications. Similarly, *examination* is preferred to *exam*, and *medical record* is preferred to *chart*.

For more examples of shorter words that can be used to replace longer, more complex words, see the *Word for Word* posting from 2013 Using Shorter Rather than Longer Words.

References

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—Tammy Locke

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