

Word for Word

Use or Utilize?

The terms *use* and *utilize* are frequently interchanged. This is particularly noticeable in the media. It also happens frequently in academic writing. But should it?

Whereas the definitions of the two words are similar, their subtle differences in implied meaning should not be overlooked. To *use* something is to employ it or to put it into action or service *for its intended purpose*. In contrast, to *utilize* something is to *make use of it in a new way or for a purpose other than what was intended*.

Examples:

We used MRI to assess the patient's tumor.
They used electron microscopy to examine the cells.

Utilize should be employed sparingly to describe a novel application

Examples:

She utilized a rock to drive a nail into the wall.
I utilized a toothpick to clean my fingernails.



So you see that *use* is more often applicable to scientific writing than is *utilize*. Furthermore, use of *utilize* can make your writing seem pretentious. Remember: clarity, not impressive jargon, is important when reporting your research.

References

1. Merriam-Webster's Dictionary. 2020. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/use>. Accessed June 30, 2020.
2. Merriam-Webster's Dictionary. 2020. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/utilize>. Accessed June 30, 2020.

—Don Norwood

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