

Word Choice Guide

word selection made easy

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Foreword

In 1977, the Apple Computer Company created a brochure for its new product, the Apple II personal computer. They captured their vision in just a few words: **“Simplicity is the ultimate sophistication.”**

I am always intrigued by how some writers can communicate great ideas with the simplest of words. However, not all writers are created equal, and not everyone possesses such a gift. However, that does not mean we should stop trying. As Ernest Hemingway said: *“It’s none of their business that you have to learn to write. Let them think you were born that way”*.

Being a contract research organisation with a robust medical communication function, our daily mission is to communicate our clients’ work in a simple and easy to understand way. Therefore, I challenged our medical writers to prepare a guide that helps us to do this consistently. I am delighted that they have delivered this in the form of a word choice guide.

Please enjoy this fruit of their labour and start the next day and every day by writing in a clear and concise way!

Peng CHAN

Director

Tech Observer Asia Pacific

May 2018

*“It’s none of their business that you have to learn to write.
Let them think you were born that way.”*

*- Ernest Hemingway, American novelist, short story
writer, and journalist*

Authors' Note

As writers or communicators, we often need to write to our clients or support them in preparing different types of documents. Good writing is an invaluable asset.

Good writing is:

- **C**orrect
- **C**lear
- **C**oncise

It is achieved by deliberate selection of appropriate words and careful construction of sentences to convey the idea accurately and in a way that is easy to understand.

Words matter. Our words (what we write) and style (how we write it) are important. Yet, so often, they are overlooked. Many common writing errors can get in the way: inappropriate word usage, ambiguity, wordiness, and so on.

We are all capable of producing good writing. This guide is intended to help us choose words or phrases to convey our ideas appropriately and clearly. We hope that this guide will support us in writing concisely while retaining clarity.

Medical Writing Team
Tech Observer Asia Pacific
May 2018

How to use this guide?

The word choice guide is presented in an alphabetical order. Click on the linked “tabs” to navigate to each section, as in the example below.

In each section, we have listed commonly misused words and redundant, ambiguous, or wordy expressions that should be avoided. Next to these, we present correct, clear and concise alternatives.

A

Click to jump to section



Avoid	Use	Why?
We discussed about this during the meeting.	We discussed this during the meeting.	Redundant: omit “about”

A

Avoid	Use	Why?
We discussed about this during the meeting.	We discussed this during the meeting.	Redundant: omit "about"
...an accurate estimate	...a reliable estimate	Misuse: "accurate" implies complete freedom from error or absolute exactness whereas an "estimate" is an approximation.
almost comparable to almost similar to	comparable to similar to	Redundant: omit "almost"
Around 22.5% of patients were at HbA1c target level of <7% at end of treatment.	HbA1c target (<7%) was achieved by 22.5% of patients at end of treatment.	Misuse: "around" implies an approximation whereas "22.5%" is a precise value. It does not make sense to put the two together. The term "around" is vague, use exact term instead.

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A, continued.....

Avoid	Use	Why?
...as well as	...and...	Wordy: use "and", it means the same.
At the present time, unemployment rate is high. At this point in time, unemployment rate is high.	Currently, unemployment rate is high. Unemployment rate is high now.	Wordy: use "currently" or "now", it means the same.
The food supply was reduced and, thus, the population declined. ...and, hence,... ...and, therefore,...	The food supply was reduced and the population declined. OR The food supply was reduced, thus (hence or therefore) the population declined.	Redundant: to use both a conjunction and a conjunctive adverb is unnecessary. Use one or the other.

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Avoid	Use	Why?
...by means of...	...by...	Redundant: just "by" will suffice in most instances.

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"If you want to be a writer, you must do two things above all others: Read a lot and write a lot. "

- Stephen King, American author of horror, supernatural fiction, suspense, science fiction, and fantasy

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C

Avoid	Use	Why?
...studies were carried out in...	...studies were conducted in... ...studies were performed in...	Colloquial usage in scientific writing.
Compared to placebo,...	Compared with placebo,...	Misuse: "compared with" means to examine differences and similarities whereas "compared to" means to liken one thing to another as in a metaphor. <i>E.g. He compared playing goalie to being a drill sergeant.</i>
... continues to remain persists OR remains ...	Redundant: omit "continues to"

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C, continued.....

Avoid	Use	Why?
Thank you for your continuous support	Thank you for your continued support	<p>Misuse: thanking someone for “continued support” is more appropriate since you are thanking them for support already rendered and are hoping the support will continue. Using ‘continuous support’ implies an assumption that support will not stop moving forward and thus continuous. Since there is no guarantee that support will be rendered continuously in the future, it would be more appropriate to officially thank them only for what they have already rendered.</p>

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Avoid	Use	Why?
Data was collected... This data...	Data were collected... These data...	Misuse: "data" is a plural noun.
...data were taken from Smith et al.	...data from Smith et al. were used.	Misuse: Smith's data may have been used, but they were not "taken" (extracted) from Smith.
Table 1 describes the clinical characteristics of the study	Table 1 presents (or shows) the clinical characteristics of the study	Misuse: the table does not describe the results, it presents or shows
...did not received study medication...	...did not receive study medication...	Misuse: Past tense should never be used after "did not".
...different than...	...different from...	Misuse: it should always be "different from".

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D, continued.....

Avoid	Use	Why?
The study was done in 2015.	The study was completed (or conducted) in 2015. (as appropriate).	Ambiguous: could mean either “completed” or “conducted”.
Renal function remained stable during the course of the study.	Renal function remained stable during the study.	Redundant: Just “during” will suffice.

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Avoid	Use	Why?
Information were...	Information was...	Misuse: "information" is a singular noun.
In order to...	To...	Redundant: "to" will suffice; the remainder is padding.
Karlsson et al. reported significant reductions in BS-11 pain score in treated patients, irregardless of age ($p < 0.05$ for all groups).	Karlsson et al. reported significant reductions in BS-11 pain score in treated patients, regardless of age ($p < 0.05$ for all groups).	No such word; do not use

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"If God gives me give more years, I might become a writer."

- Carl Sandberg, winner of three Pulitzer Prizes: two for his poetry and one for his biography of Abraham Lincoln

M

Avoid	Use	Why?
<p>Majority of patients had a family history of...</p> <p>...was present in majority of patients...</p>	<p>The majority of patients had a family history of...</p> <p>...was present in the majority of patients...</p>	<p>Grammar error: missing article</p>
<p>The duration of diabetes was mean 6.0 years.</p>	<p>The mean duration of diabetes was 6.0 years.</p>	<p>Grammar error: faulty sentence construction.</p>
<p>The mean of age was...</p>	<p>The mean age was...</p>	<p>Grammar error: redundant preposition</p>
<p>Measurements were taken...</p> <p>Measurements were made...</p>	<p>Measurements were recorded...</p>	<p>Misuse: measurements are never "taken" or "made"; they are recorded. Dimensions are measured.</p>

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Avoid	Use	Why?
<p>...not incorrect...</p> <p>...not inconsistent with...</p> <p>...not uncommon...</p>	<p>...correct...</p> <p>...consistent with...</p> <p>...common</p>	<p>Incomprehensible: rephrase and avoid double negatives</p>

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Avoid	Use	Why?
14 out of 17 patients...	14 of 17 patients...	Redundant: in most instances, “out” can be omitted without altering the meaning.

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Avoid	Use	Why?
Please kindly... OR Kindly...	Please...	Misuse ; the use of 'kindly' to make a request may sound demanding to some people and tends to connote the idea of 'Do this -- or else'. Do not use it to avoid misunderstanding.
<p>The incidence of incontinence in our population was 8.5%.</p> <p>The prevalence of systemic lupus erythematosus was 4.6 per 100,000 per year.</p>	<p>The prevalence of incontinence in our population was 8.5%.</p> <p>The incidence of systemic lupus erythematosus was 4.6 per 100,000 per year.</p>	<p>Misuse: "prevalence" is the measure of the number of persons with the disease or condition in a population at a particular point in time. In contrast, "incidence" is the measure of the number of new cases of a disease or condition in a population per unit time.</p> <p>(Click here for more detailed explanation on usage of "prevalence" and "incidence".)</p>

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P, continued.....

Avoid	Use	Why?
Results section: ...was prevalent in 41.9% of patients.	... was present in 41.9% of patients.	Misuse: It is inappropriate to use “prevalent” in the context here as it would be seen as inferential. Describe the results factually.
Results section: Tobacco-related white lesions were more prevalent in men (9.8%) than in women (0.2%).	Tobacco-related white lesions were more commonly reported in men (9.8%) than in women (0.2%)	

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P (Patient unfriendly terms)

Avoid	Use	Why?
Cyclosporine is used to treat organ transplants .	Cyclosporine is used to treat patients who have received organ transplants .	Don't confuse patients with body parts, diseases, or procedures.
We managed the patients with penicillin.	We managed the patients' symptoms with penicillin (or treated the patients with penicillin)	Don't treat patients as commodities.
The patient developed right heart failure.	Right heart failure developed	Don't blame patients for their conditions.
Five patients were treatment failures .	Five patients did not respond to treatment .	It is the treatment that failed, not the patients undergoing it.
Patients suffered from... Patients complained of (or denied)...	Patients had... Patients reported...	Do not use words or phrases that highlights patients' feelings or emotions
Arthritics; diabetics	Patients with arthritis; patients with diabetes	Don't define patients by their disease
The elderly	Patients older than...	Avoid labelling patients
The patient that was in renal failure was started on hemodialysis in 2005	In 2005, the patient, who had renal failure, started hemodialysis	Don't use passive verbs, prepositional phrases, "that/which" clauses.

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Avoid	Use	Why?
... reason why reason ...	Redundant: omit “why”. The “reason” is the “why”..
I will reply you as soon as possible. I will reply your email soon.	I will reply to you as soon as possible. I will reply to your email as soon as possible.	Grammar error: missing preposition
Company X and its president were awarded with the “Top Businesses” and “Excellent Entrepreneur” Awards, respectively , by the Shanghai Management Committee.	Company X won the “Top Businesses” award and its president won the “Excellent Entrepreneur” award.	Reader-unfriendly term: avoid use if possible and rewrite in a more reader-friendly way.
I will revert to you as soon as possible.	I will reply to you as soon as possible.	Misuse: “revert” means to return to a previous state or condition.

S

Avoid	Use	Why?
Jones et al. said ...	Jones et al. noted (suggested, reported, or recorded)...	Misuse: The authors of the cited reference did not "say".
Patients' responses may be subjected to recall bias. The promotion is subjected to our terms and conditions.	Patients' responses may be subject to recall bias. The promotion is subject to our terms and conditions.	Misuse: "subjected to" is a verb ; it is used to mean to be made to undergo an unpleasant experience. <i>E.g. Triathletes are subjected to extreme physical demands.</i> In contrast, "subject to" is an adjective ; it is used to mean (i) having a tendency for something OR (ii) conditional upon

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"Sometimes I have felt that I held fire in my hands and spread a page with shining – (but) I have never lost the weight of clumsiness, of ignorance, of aching inability."

-John Ernst Steinback, Jr. Winner of the 1962 Nobel Prize in Literature.

T

Avoid	Use	Why?
<p>The Table 1 presents...</p>	<p>Table 1 presents...</p>	<p>Grammar error: redundant article</p>
<p>...remained to be stable throughout the study.</p> <p>...was found to be stable throughout the study.</p> <p>...was observed to be stable throughout the study.</p>	<p>...remained stable throughout the study.</p> <p>...was stable throughout the study.</p> <p>...was stable throughout the study.</p>	<p>Redundant: omit “to be”, “found to be”, or “observed to be”. There is no change in meaning.</p>

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Avoid	Use	Why?
I was involved in the updation of the website.	I was involved in updating the website. OR I helped to update the website.	No such word , do not use. The word “updation” is not recognized in either US English or British English. The derivational suffix ‘ion’ cannot not be applied to the word “update”. “Update” is a verb, but the noun is also “update”.
... out of office until Thursday	...out of office and will be back on Thursday.	Ambiguous: there is widespread confusion on whether the stated time is inclusive or exclusive. Avoid if possible.
Utilize	Use	“Use” will suffice. Use simple words that are easy for readers to understand.

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Avoid	Use	Why?
<p>The osmoregulatory organ, which is located at the base of the third dorsal spine, activates only under hypertonic conditions.</p> <p>The control group included patients who were under 65 years of age.</p> <p>Data that were related to age, medical history, and concomitant conditions were collected.</p>	<p>The osmoregulatory organ, located at the base of the third dorsal spine, activates only under hypertonic conditions.</p> <p>The control group included patients under 65 years of age.</p> <p>Data related to age, medical history, and concomitant conditions were collected.</p>	<p>Redundant in these contexts: Omit “which is”, “who were”, or “that were”; it does not change the meaning.</p>
<p>The lowest incidence rate was found in patients 0-4 years of age, while the highest rates were observed in patients 15-24 years of age.</p> <p>While the results are encouraging, future research still needs to be performed.</p>	<p>The lowest incidence rate was found in patients 0-4 years of age, whereas the highest rates were observed in patients 15-24 years of age.</p> <p>Although the results are encouraging, future research still needs to be performed.</p>	<p>Misuse: “while” implies simultaneity. Often misused for “although” or “whereas”</p>

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W, continued...

Avoid	Use	Why?
Our cohort included 16,626 children, of which 79.2% received stimulants, 33.2% antidepressants, and 23.1% a-agonists.	Our cohort included 16,626 children, of whom 79.2% received stimulants, 33.2% antidepressants, and 23.1% a-agonists	Misuse: "of which" should be used for nonhuman entities. When describing patients, "of whom" should be used.
I had written to the sponsor yesterday.	I wrote to the sponsor yesterday	Grammar error: use simple past tense instead.

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Other common errors – to hyphenate or not to hyphenate?

Avoid	Use	Why?
... well developed calf muscles	... well-developed calf muscles	A compound adjective gets a hyphen when it comes before a noun.
... study related activities	... study-related activities	
The gastrocnemius muscle is especially well-developed in people who run fast or jump a lot.	The gastrocnemius muscle is especially well developed in people who run fast or jump a lot.	When the compound adjective comes after the noun, it doesn't get a hyphen.
Insulin was administered once- daily to eligible patients at Visit 1.	Insulin was administered once daily to eligible patients at Visit 1.	

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"The only reason people do not know much is because they do not care to know. They are incurious. Incuriosity is the oddest and most foolish failing there is."

- Stephen Fry, English comedian, actor, writer, presenter, and activist.

Source

1. <http://www.bates.edu/biology/files/2010/06/Word-Usage-in-Scientific-Writing.pdf>
2. <https://ell.stackexchange.com/questions/16139/thank-you-for-your-continued-support-or-continuous-support>
3. <https://www.quora.com/Which-one-is-correct-he-didnt-receive-or-he-didnt-received>
4. <https://english.stackexchange.com/questions/175198/perception-of-the-phrase-kindly-let-us-know>
5. http://www.blackwellpublishing.com/specialarticles/jcn_9_188.pdf (prevalence vs. incidence)
6. Knatterud, M. E. (2008). With respect to patients and readers: deadly terms to excise. *AMWA Journal: American Medical Writers Association Journal*, 23(3), 113-117. (<https://drive.google.com/file/d/0BxNEZjtnSpCwVmhtS3JGWDhtb28/view?usp=sharing>)
7. <https://english.stackexchange.com/questions/45761/to-be-subject-to-vs-to-be-subjected-to>
8. <https://english.stackexchange.com/questions/68169/is-update-a-correct-word>
9. <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/update>
10. <https://ell.stackexchange.com/questions/33340/is-until-inclusive-or-exclusive>
11. <http://blog.apastyle.org/apastyle/2011/05/properly-using-while.html>
12. <http://www.thewriter.com/what-we-think/style-guide/to-hyphenate-or-not-to-hyphenate/>

Additional Resources

1. <http://www.phrasebank.manchester.ac.uk/about-academic-phrasebank/>
2. <https://writingcenter.unc.edu/tips-and-tools/> (Tips & tools)
3. <https://writingcenter.unc.edu/tips-and-tools/articles/> (Article usage (the, a, an, etc.))
4. <https://www.commd.rpi.edu/resources/> (Tips & tools)

