

Clear-Writing Workshop

November 14, 21, and 28

Eric Jandciu

jandciu@mail.ubc.ca

If technical terms are introduced, then they must be explained or handled in such a way that the general reader gets to understand them. Jargon should not be used to fog over anything that is difficult to explain.

– Richard Fifield
Executive editor, *New Scientist*

Outline

Day 1: Knowing your audience, avoiding jargon, using the active voice

Day 2: Simpler writing, concise writing, communicating uncertainty (part 1), making good comparisons, giving feedback (part 1)

Day 3: Giving feedback (part 2: peer review session), communicating uncertainty (part 2), keeping your readers happy

Which do you prefer?

The chemical mixture was poured carefully into beakers, before it was stirred and transferred to an ice bath.

PASSIVE

We carefully poured the chemical mixture into beakers before we stirred and transferred it to an ice bath.

ACTIVE

Simpler writing

Complicated

- approximately
- attempt
- commence
- concerning
- construct
- demonstrate
- elucidate
- endeavour
- fabricate
- frequently

2

Simpler

- about
- try
- start
- about
- build
- show
- explain
- try
- make
- often

about / class
to
try
start / begin.
about
make.
show
reveal / di
try
create.
of her

Simpler writing

Complicated

- indicate
- initiate
- manually
- multiple
- optimal
- perform
- possess
- provide
- sufficient
- superior

Simpler

- show
- start
- by hand
- many
- best
- do
- have
- give
- enough
- better

*show.
start
by hand.
many/more.
best(?), ideal
to show / to do
has / contains
give.
enough.
better.*

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The Loom

« Denver: Get Tangled This Thursday!
ExtInked »

The Index of Banned Words (The Continually Updated Edition)

Over the summer, I posted a list of words I banned from my science writing class at Shoals Marine Lab. Readers offered some equally abysmal suggestions. And this fall, teaching a seminar at Yale, I came across some others. I suspect that this list is just going to keep growing. So I'm giving it a home here, where I can add in new entries as they arise in assignments in my classes. You can easily direct people to it through this url: <http://bit.ly/IndexBanned> (caps required).

By assembling this list, I don't mean to say that no one should *ever* use these words. I am not teaching people how to write scientific papers. What I mean is that anyone who wants to learn how to write about science—*and* to be read by people who aren't being paid to read—should work hard to learn how to explain science in plain yet elegant English—not by relying on scientific jargon, code-words, deadening euphemisms, or meaningless cliches.

[Update: Here's a post where I go into more depth about why words matter—along with sentences, paragraphs, etc.]

Access (verb)

And/or (Logic gates do not belong in prose)



Science writer Carl Zimmer keeps a list of banned words!

Distill your sentences

Such a process is ~~a~~ very rare event~~.~~

The

The process is rare.

~~The fact of the matter is that no~~ ^{No} results have been obtained.

There are no results.
we have no results.
passive.

Distill your sentences

The results were of an intriguing nature.

The results were intriguing.

~~The situation regarding the shortage of equipment~~ is a serious problem.

The equipment shortage is problematic.
The equipment shortage is serious.

Ambiguity

“The impurity level was impressive.”

“...increased by one half...”

“I have been researching plant systems in the Rockies.”

How would you describe...

the Bohr model of the atom

the human heart

the human genome

...to someone outside the field?

Tools for description: simile

Simile: uses *like* or *as*

The technician is *as* tough, bright, enduring and valuable as a diamond.

The river is *like* a snake winding across the prairie.

Tools for description: simile

- It is **like** a hole burning through paper. As the hole expands, the edge is where the fisheries concentrate until there is nowhere left to go.
- The fishing industry has acted **like** a terrible tenant who trashes their rental.

Daniel Pauly

Tools for description: metaphor

- The technician *is* a diamond (reader interprets the comparison)
- The river *is* a snake winding its way...
- The river *snakes* its way...
- ...taking antibiotics the wrong way creates an evolutionary arms race...

Tools for description: metaphor

- Beware: mixed metaphor
- Various thorny problems that we try to sweep under the rug continue to bob up all the same.
- Various thorny problems that we try to weed out continue to thrive all the same.

Tools for description: metaphor

- Beware: overused, dead, inappropriate metaphors
- The human genome is the book of life; The rainforests are the lungs of the planet.
- ...plough through traffic; world wide web; branches of government
- The tide of emotion suddenly stopped.

Questions from today?

Next week

Please come with marked-up summaries

Be ready to give constructive feedback to your peers

If you can't be here, please let someone know

Writing toolkit (so far!)

Know your audience!

Avoid jargon!

Use the active voice! (when appropriate)

Use simpler words

Be concise

Watch for ambiguity

Use analogy (metaphor, simile, etc.)