

Sidestepping Common Writing Pitfalls

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Paper: Unless you are referring to something written in high school, try “manuscript,” “article,” “thesis,” or “dissertation.”

Contractions: Don’t use contractions in formal writing unless writing about the birth process.

Double negatives: Do not use no double negatives. They are a no-no.

Verbs has to agree with their subjects: So don’t tell me that data is never flawed.

Do not verb nouns: I strategized and dialogued about this writing pitfall.

Never *utilize* a long word when a *diminutive* word will do.

Future Tense: Use sparingly. Do not write: “This article will explore three main points.” The article is here and now. Write: “This article explores three main points.”

Citations: Kiewra (2006) says to begin paragraphs and sentences with ideas, not with citations.

Quotations: Use quotations only when the author’s exact words are needed. “Use your own words,” Kiewra advises.

Commas: Use comas to separate three items such as Moe, Larry, and Curly. Do not use them unnecessarily, and inappropriately.

Eliminate unnecessary phrases of preposition: Change “Performance on the test of recall showed that girls in high school scored higher than boys in high school” to “High school girls recalled more than boys.”

I think: I am sure that you do, but I believe you mean “I believe.”

I feel: Again, I believe you mean “I believe.” Most readers, I am sorry to say, are not concerned with your sense of touch or physical well being.

Very: A very vague adjective. Drop it or replace it with a descriptive adjective if one is needed. Avoid the phrase “*highly* significant.” Differences are significant or they are not. Think “pregnant.”

Can, may, might: Can means capable, may means allowed, and might means possible.

Center around: A physical impossibility. The correct phrase is “center on.”

While and since: Use only in relation to time; otherwise use “although” or “whereas” for while, and use “because” for since.

Conditions: Research participants are assigned to conditions, but researchers compare the performance of *groups*, not conditions.

Group Names: Provide descriptive group names such as “note takers” and “non-note takers.” Never refer to groups as Group 1 or Group A.

Describe the results in words: Report means and statistics that support results later. “Consistent with the attention hypothesis, note takers recalled more facts than non-note takers as seen in the middle row of Table 2. A t-test confirmed that the mean difference was reliable...”

Proofread carefully to see if you any words out.

Final Advice: Be certain your manuscript is understandable, interesting, and valuable. Is the manuscript understandable to those outside your domain such as an agronomy professor, a community college administrator, or your next-door neighbor? It should be. A comprehensible manuscript is jargon-free and includes ample definitions and examples. The writing is crisp, clear, and organized. Heading, signals, and transitions direct the reader.

Those same readers should also find the manuscript interesting and enjoyable. “Do not hesitate to make your paper interesting,” Holbrook (1986) advised writers. I believe that manuscripts are most interesting when they tell a memorable story.

Your manuscript must be valuable. It must clearly explain its contributions and implications. If it does not, then the work is useless.

In conclusion, perform the *Friend Test* before submitting your work. Give your manuscript to a few friends unfamiliar with your domain. Have them read it, and ask them later what they learned and if they enjoyed reading it. If they don’t “get it” and enjoy it, then the intended readership probably won’t either.

Holbrook, M.B. (1986). A note on sadomasochism in the review process: I hate when that happens. *Journal of Marketing*, 50, 104-108.

Additions from Michelle Howell Smith; things I got tired of looking up all of the time

et al. - and others, or an elsewhere (no period after et!)

e.g. – for example

i.e. – in other words

Assure, ensure, and insure all mean "to make secure or certain." Only *assure* is used with reference to a person in the sense of "to set the mind at rest": *assured the leader of his loyalty*. Although *ensure* and *insure* are generally interchangeable, only *insure* is now widely used in American English in the commercial sense of "to guarantee persons or property against risk."

Words and phrases to avoid without explanation

Appealing aspect	Helpful	Meaningful, Meant a lot to me
Appealing to me	Helping people	Remarkable
Appreciate	I can contribute	Rewarding
Challenging	I like helping people	Satisfying, Satisfaction
Enjoyable, Enjoy	I like it	Significant
Exciting, Excited	Incredible	Significant
Fascinating	Interesting	Stimulating
Feel good	Invaluable	Useful
Gratifying	It's important	Valuable

Compiled from:

<http://www.sjsu.edu/faculty/gcallaghan/graduate/winningstatement.htm>

<https://career.berkeley.edu/grad/gradstatement.stm>