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Words and Phrases to Avoid

There are certain types of words phrases to avoid that muddle the clarity and conciseness of scholarly writing. Use the following list to:

1. Learn which kinds of words you should avoid.
 2. Learn which kinds of phrases you should avoid.
 3. Improve the clarity and conciseness of your writing.
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1. Avoid Clichés

1. Some common phrases that you use in everyday speech don't translate well to academic writing. Often such phrases are hyperbolized (i.e. exaggerated), too casual, and so overused that most readers glance over them.
2. This list is a small selection of phrases meant to illustrate the style of informal phrases. If you're uncertain about a phrase that you want to use then think about which column it would fit under best.
3. Some informal phrases are acceptable in various disciplines when the writing is meant to be more conversational and/or directed at a non-academic audience. i.e. medical practitioners; community development practitioners.

Example 1: Avoid cliché phrases

Informal Phrase	Scholarly Phrase
Sleeping like the dead	In a deep sleep; Sleeping heavily
On the other hand	Conversely; At the same time
At the end of the day	In the end; In conclusion

2. Avoid Contractions

1. Words such as *can't*, *she'll*, and *should've* need to be spelled out: *cannot*, *she will*, *should have*. Contracting words makes your writing informal and not appropriate for a scholarly audience.

3. Avoid Weak Thesis Statements

A thesis statement makes the argument for your article. You want it to be succinct and defensible.

1. Do not start a thesis statement with a phrase like *Since the dawn of time...* This is so broad it will not help you convey your point.
2. Do not make a statement that is so commonly accepted that it does not need to be argued. For example, do not write *The glaciers are melting more rapidly than ever recorded*. Instead, you could write *The glaciers are melting more rapidly than ever due to human activity*. This thesis statement makes an argument that you can then defend with supporting information.
3. Do not write a thesis statement as a question. It's a thesis *statement*, not a thesis *question*.

4. Avoid Vague Quantities

1. Use an exact amount whenever you can. If you don't have an exact quantity, then use a more formal word such as *many*, *countless*, *myriad*, or *numerous*.

Example 2: Use exact quantities

Farmers distribute their produce through **myriad** distribution channels.

This sentence uses “myriad” because the number of distribution channels cannot be quantified since they are so diverse and constantly changing.

Farmer Jane produced **6,000 pounds** of zucchini this year.

This sentence uses an exact amount because the number can actually be quantified.

5. Avoid Totalizing Words

1. Totalizing words make an oversimplified claim and turn a complex situation into an irrefutable fact, which is frowned upon in the scholarly community.

Example 3: Avoid totalizing words and claims

Incorrect: **The number of cars on the road has caused global climate change.**

This is a totalizing statement placing the blame of climate change on cars. Cars might add to climate change, but they have not singlehandedly caused it.

Corrected: **The number of cars on the road has contributed to global climate change.**

2. Words like *always* and *never* make claims too strong for academic writing. They can lead you to generalize your results when it is not appropriate. Use less

totalizing words like *usually*, *generally*, and *rarely*. There are exceptions to this; for example, if your results consistently reveal the same result then you can say *always* or *never* as long as you specify that it is within the scope or context of your study.

Example 4: Avoid generalizing words

Incorrect: **Bluebirds always nest in eastern facing nesting boxes.**

You cannot say “always” for two reasons: 1. It’s impossible to observe all blue bird nesting patterns, and 2. You would be generalizing your research to include all blue bird populations.

Corrected: **Blue birds generally nest in eastern facing nesting boxes.**

If you conducted a study and all the blue birds you observed did nest in eastern facing nesting boxes, then you can qualify your statement with a phrase such as, “in this study” so it is clear you are not speaking about blue birds in totality.

All blue birds in this study nested in eastern facing nesting boxes.

6. Avoid Dogmatic Claims

1. Dogmatic claims are those that state your opinion in a pompous manner.

Example 5: Avoid dogmatic claims

While business models will ultimately drive the sustainability of a program, the curricular objectives must be what drives the program experience.

The word “must” makes a strong claim in the form of an order. This is also called pontificating.

While business models will ultimately drive the sustainability of a program, the curricular objectives should be what drives the program experience.

This sentence is now framed as a suggestion instead of an order.

7. Avoid “Used to”

1. *Used to* is a wordy way to make an action past tense.

Example 6: Avoid “used to”

Incorrect: He **used to** believe in Santa Claus.

Corrected: He **believed** in Santa Claus when he was younger.

8. Avoid Gendered Language

1. Sometimes gendered language unavoidable, for example your research particularly focuses on either men or women, or compares the two groups.

Example 7: Avoid gendered language

Our exploration of men’s responses to food-based incentives to work extra hours shows that men are willing to work up to one extra hour for a donut, and three extra hours for a burger.

In this case, the study is about men so it is okay to use male specific language.

2. Whenever possible, avoid gendered language. American Journal Experts states that using gender-neutral language will improve your chances of getting published.
3. You can make your language gender-neutral by using words such as “person” or “people” rather than “man” or “woman.”
4. If you can, break gender stereotypes by removing the gender bias from occupations such as firefighters, farmers, soldiers, fishers, chairpersons, etc.
5. Instead of using “his” or “him” in examples, use “her” or “she.”
6. Do not make pronouns plural to avoid gendering them if the antecedent noun is singular. (Do not change “him” to “their.” This is grammatically incorrect.)

Example 8: Avoid gendered language

Incorrect: **Fast-forward three years and we might see the average man’s weight increase by 10%.**

This sentence uses gendered language

Better: **Fast-forward three years and we might see the average man’s/woman’s weight increase by 10%.**

This is getting better but including both genders makes the sentence wordy.

Best: **Fast-forward three years and we might see the average person’s weight increase by 10%.**

This sentence is gender neutral and concise.

9. Avoid Introductory Phrases

1. Introductory phrases get clunky and can often be eliminated or shortened. If you find yourself using a phrase like the ones below, experiment with shorter and more succinct ways to say the same thing.

Example 9: Avoid introductory phrases

Introductory Phrase	Corrected
It is important to note	Importantly
In order to	To
The fact that	Because; Since
In terms of	About; Just state the subject
First and foremost	Firstly
Not only A, but B	B also; Additionally, B

10. Avoid Intensifiers

1. Adverbs such as *very*, *extremely*, *literally*, and *highly* are intensifiers. They modify a verb but are unnecessary to convey your point in academic writing.

Example 10: Avoid intensifying words

Incorrect: The new neck brace prototype was **very** promising because of its superb comfort and lean production cost.

Corrected: The new neck brace prototype was promising because of its comfort and lean production cost.

11. Avoid Repetitive Phrases

1. Repetition can occur in the sentence structures and the words that you use.

Example 11: Avoid repetitive phrases

Incorrect: The data **were collected** using semi-structured interviews, and **were analyzed** using Atlas.ti.

The two bolded phrases are repetitive and uninteresting.

Corrected: The data **were collected** using semi-structured interviews and **analyzed with Atlas.ti**.

Changing one of the repetitive phrases creates more interest in the sentence while retaining the same meaning.

Incorrect: **Barometric pressure** can indicate imminent weather changes. The **barometric pressure** dropped right before the rainstorm last week.

These sentences have repetitive opening phrases. Converting these sentences into one sentence makes it more interesting.

Corrected: **Barometric pressure** can indicate imminent weather changes; in fact, it **dropped** right before the rainstorm last week.

Sources and Additional Resources:

1. Avoid Common Pitfalls
2. Avoiding Cliches in Writing
3. Clumsy Phrases to Avoid

4. American journal Experts: Editing Tips: Writing in Gender-Neutral Language
5. The Thesis Statement: 5 Common Mistakes to Avoid
6. Cargill, M. & O'Conner, P. (2009). *Writing scientific research articles*. West Sussex, UK: Wiley-Blackwell Publishing.