

Proofreading Science Drafts for Specificity, Precision, and Conciseness

Science writing is meant to be specific, precise, and concise. When it comes to self-checking a draft for each of these goals, however, it can be tough to find a starting point.

To help get started, this handout

- describes 3 key problem areas,
- provides initial proofreading tasks and questions (to act as a self-check), and
- offers a strategy to revise for each challenge.

Use these when reviewing your completed IMRaD draft (or sections within your draft) to produce clearer, more concise writing.*

**Food for thought: Proofreading is often done best when completed in small chunks.*

Proofreading Science Writing (and maybe other drafts, as well)

1. **Start with sentence structure.** Check the space between your subject and verb. Many science (and other) writers make the mistake of placing too much information or too many words between the subject and verb in a sentence. Prepositional phrases, general/vague terms, and others sneak in between these two import guideposts for your reader in each sentence. By weeding out extra language from this first part of a sentence, you'll accomplish two goals: a) the meaning of your sentence will be clearer to your reader, and b) your sentences will be more concise (Hooray!).

Subject-to-Verb Proofreading Task & Question: Highlight the subject of each sentence in one color and the verb in another. Are there long phrases in between? If yes, try to the following strategy!

Strategy to revise: Read/Say the subject followed by the verb to begin to rephrase the sentence in a clearer more concise manner. As you continue talking through your newly phrased sentence, write/type as you speak!

2. **Weed out repetition.** Sometimes when we're unfamiliar with a new style of writing, we tend to repeat what we know. In science writing, you may find yourself repeating terms or phrases because they feel comfortable. However, this repetition might have your reader circling interpretation and missing your key/significant points. Conversely, weeding out repetition will make your writing clearer, more concise, and will often force you to use more precise terms.

Repetition? Proofreading Task & Question: Read aloud or listen to a section of your draft. Do you keep hearing the same term or terms? If so, try the following!

Strategy to revise: Highlight the either the entire sentence or the specific terms as you hear repetition in your read-through. Then, (a) look up synonyms (words with the same

meaning), OR (b) ask yourself if you actually *need* those terms in every instance. If the sentence is as clear or clearer without that term(s), out it/they go!

3. **Eliminate vague, generic, and/or non-specific terms and language.** What does “vague” language use mean? Well, you might find terms like “some” or “different” before nouns (e.g. “different solutions were used...”) or “a few” preceding measurements. These “vague” terms mean that your readers or fellow researchers will not be able to accurately follow your experiment and methodology to see how you achieved your results. This calls the legitimacy of your data into question.

Vague language? Proofreading task: Read aloud and listen for indefinite/non-specific terms, like those listed above. Carefully examine the adjectives, descriptors, or phrasing before nouns. When in doubt, highlight those which *might* be vague terms, and ask yourself the following questions.

Strategy to revise: Ask yourself/consider:

- a) “Could I replace this language with a more specific noun?”
- b) “Will my reader be able to ask a question about it?” (e.g. “Which *different* solutions?” “How many is *a few*?”) AND/OR
- c) “Could someone else do the exact same experiment that I had done with just this information?” or “Could I reproduce the experiment and achieve my results with this instruction?”

Responding to one or more of the above questions might enable you to make exactly the revision that’s needed for specificity and precision.

References

Gopen, G. D., & Swan, J. A. (1990). The science of scientific writing. *American Scientist*, 78, 550-558. Retrieved March 31, 2021, from <https://production.wordpress.uconn.edu/writingcenterwp1/wp-content/uploads/sites/593/2014/06/gopenswann.pdf>