Chapter 6: Precision and Clarity in Language

In revising, authors should look carefully at their word choice and usage. Using the most precise wording and ensuring ideas are communicated clearly result in a more readable work. The sections in this chapter concern some of the more common problems in this area, some of which are also covered in the various style guides previously discussed. When in doubt, always follow the required style guide.

Biased Language

Biased language is words or phrasing that shows either favorable or unfavorable dispositions toward individuals or groups of individuals. Terms commonly used a few years ago may be considered offensive in current usage. Although gender bias may be the most common form, other forms of language bias also must be avoided.

Gender Bias

No longer is it acceptable to use masculine pronouns or nouns to refer to persons of both genders who belong to the same group. However, eliminating biased wording may result in twisted, illogical sentences. To eliminate gender bias, consider the following:

- Rewrite to change masculine or feminine pronouns to plurals:

  Incorrect: *The nurse wore her school pin on her collar.*
  Correct: *The nurses wore their school pins on their collars.*

- Change gender-specific nouns to genderless nouns.

  Incorrect: *The chairman banged the gavel three times.*
  Correct: *The chairperson banged the gavel three times.*

- Avoid invented combinations.

  Incorrect: *The student may refer to the work as his/her capstone project.*
  Correct: *Students may refer to the works as their capstone projects.*

- Avoid alternating gender-specific wording.

  Incorrect: *The student brought his work to the class and offered her opinions during discussion.*
  Correct: *The students brought their work to the class and offered their opinions during discussion.*

Other Forms of Bias

Authors should be cognizant of the specific style guide rules governing language that may be sexually, racially, or ethnically biased or that may objectify individuals according to disability or

age. However, authors must also be cognizant of historical contexts and not use neutral or inclusive language if it alters the historical accuracy of the context in which the language is being used.

NOTE: Capitalization rules for races and ethnicities vary from style guide to style guide. Be sure to follow the requirements in the guide for your potential publisher (see Chapter 11: Capitalization).

Slang and Shortened Word Forms

Authors should avoid the use of slang and colloquial or regional expressions in scholarly and academic writing. Such wording is seldom clear to all readers because slang expressions become dated quickly and may have different meanings based on the regions and cultures in which the terms are used. If such language is important to the understanding of the topic being discussed, be sure to define these terms or expressions.

Shortened forms (e.g., *TV* instead of *television*; *phone* instead of *telephone*; *taped* or *recorded* instead of *audio tape-recorded, digitally recorded, audio recorded, video recorded*) should also be avoided in formal writing. Use the full terms unless they are in a direct quotations.

Coined Words and Expressions

As with slang, new terminology may be fresh but, because the words are not well known, may also be unclear to readers. Authors should define all such terms and use them sparingly unless the terms are essential to the topic being discussed. (See Quotation Marks for punctuation of these terms.)

In addition, authors should avoid the temptation to coin terms. Before doing so, authors should be sure no existing word or expression exists that has the same meaning of the created word. Although the creation of specific wording to convey new concepts or theories is an acceptable practice in scholarly work to advance the field of study, doing so should be weighed against the possible confusion and misunderstanding that may occur.

Imprecise Words

Authors should always aim for the most precise language possible in writing. In academic and scholarly writing, that principle is even more important. Authors should avoid the use of incorrect, inexact, and ambiguous wording or of wording that evokes inappropriate feelings in the context in which the wording is used.

- Use words that have the exact denotation required. *Denotation* refers to the meaning of a word, its name or dictionary definition. Check the dictionary.

- Use words that connote the feeling the writing is supposed to evoke. *Connotation* refers to the emotional connections words create, the images the words evoke in the readers' minds. For example, *it was dark* and *it was gloomy* give two different emotional images, even though the sentences are descriptions of the same place.

- Use specific, concrete terms rather than abstract terms whenever possible. In academic and scholarly writing, authors deal with concepts and abstractions. Therefore, the more concrete the word choice, the clearer the writing. Specificity also increases clarity.

- Use figurative language appropriately. Similes, metaphors, analogies, hyperbole, idioms, and personification may be used judiciously in scholarly writing. Some authors even produce entire works built around a particular metaphor. However, the purpose of the work, the audience, and the field or discipline determine the appropriateness of this kind of language. Authors should also remember that idioms are sometimes regional and may not be understood by all readers.

- Avoid anthropomorphism. *Anthropomorphism* is the attribution of human behavior and motivation to nonliving or nonhuman things. The difference between personification and anthropomorphism is slight; hence, both should be avoided in technical and scientific writing. Authors following APA (2010) guidelines must be careful to avoid anthropomorphism, which appears most frequently in statements such as the following:

  Incorrect: *The study proved that girls outperform boys in spelling.*
  Correct: *The study showed that girls outperform boys in spelling.*
  Correct: *The study indicated that girls outperform boys in spelling.*
  Correct: *The researchers found that girls outperform boys in spelling.*

  Incorrect: *The test found that 2 out of 3 individuals hate paying taxes.*
  Correct: *The test indicated that 2 out of 3 individuals hate paying taxes.*
  Correct: *Researchers found that 2 out of 3 individuals hate paying taxes.*

In both cases, the subjects of the sentence cannot physically do the actions indicated by the verbs: A study or a test cannot prove or demonstrate; only humans can engage in such actions. Studies or tests may show, indicate, or reveal.

Anthropomorphism becomes more of a problem because of the preferences for using active voice and for not referencing the author of an article or dissertation. These issues will be discussed more completely later in this paper. Note, however, that the field or discipline affects the use of anthropomorphism. For example, in computer science and other technology fields, computers, machines, processes, and programs are frequently discussed in terms of human qualities and behaviors. Authors should rely on the required style guide and the standards in the premiere journals in their fields for guidance.

- Avoid clichés and trite expressions. Authors should aim for a level of freshness in their writing without sacrificing clarity.

- Understand the distinctions between commonly misused words such as *while* and *since*, *while* and *although*, *since* and *because*, *between* and *among*, and *compose* and *comprise*. Authors may find these pairs discussed in their required style guides. In

addition, they should consult a good standard dictionary or book on usage, such as *Garner's Modern American Usage*.

Wordiness

Writing should be as concise as possible. In the writing process, authors should aim first to get their thoughts on paper. Then they must aim to eliminate excess verbiage and redundancy without sacrificing clarity. Wordiness may be the result of faulty or circuitous thinking, imprecise language, overemphasis, or unnecessarily complex sentence structure. Before finalizing any work, authors should examine their writing carefully to eliminate unnecessary words and parenthetical expressions, replace general terms with more specific or concrete ones, and rephrase complicated sentences with simpler constructions.

Authors should also understand the difference between effective repetition and redundancy. Repetition is the use of the same word or phrase several times within a paragraph. Judicious use of repetition may enhance a scholarly piece through ensuring the reader understands the importance of the concept being discussed. It is also a technique to create coherence within a paragraph.

Redundancy is using the same word or phrase over and over in an attempt to clarify or to emphasize. Authors may use the same word too frequently for emphasis (repetition gone awry) or may rephrase a thought two or three times to make it clearer. Redundancy may also result in awkward sentence constructions and convoluted paragraphs.

Word Choices in Discussing Results

When discussing research results, authors should avoid using the word *prove*. Results of studies support or fail to support the author's hypotheses or the findings of previous researchers. Most research disciplines hold that nothing can be proven beyond doubt.

In the same vein, hypotheses are never accepted. While the results of statistical analyses can cause a hypothesis to be rejected, they can never cause a hypothesis to be accepted. Rather, they support a hypothesis, may (rarely) strongly support a hypothesis, but never prove a hypothesis.

For these reasons, results should always be discussed using qualifying terms. If a study on the math abilities of children had an equal number of boys and girls, and 80% of the girls scored higher on a math-skills test than all of the boys, the researcher cannot say that girls are better at math than boys are. The results must always be qualified: *Girls tended to score higher on the math-skills test than boys did.* Other qualifying words and phrases include *in general*, *usually*, *frequently*, *rarely*, *often*, *seldom*, *generally*, and *usually*.