

## Usage, Grammar, and Evolving Language

Speaker:

**Lorraine W Loviglio**

*New England Journal of Medicine*  
Boston, Massachusetts

Reporter:

**John R Gilbert**

Cookeville, Tennessee

This presentation by Lorraine Loviglio, director of manuscript editing at the *New England Journal of Medicine (NEJM)*, was balm for the wounds of those manning the barricades against nonstandard English and what the speaker called “just plain weird” language practices. It focused on the need to edit biomedical papers in accordance with accepted standards of English usage and grammar.

Much biomedical writing, Loviglio said, contains stilted language that bears little resemblance to what people say in real life. Thus, the task of the manuscript editor should be to move the author’s language into closer alignment with standard English. She amplified that view by discussing several categories of nonstandard writing commonly seen in biomedical-research reports, using copious examples from *NEJM* manuscripts to illustrate key points.

Attendees were reminded of the subtle dangers of specialty jargon—words and phrases that have been assigned new meanings and so are understood by only a small group of investigators working in the same field (for example, “found-down patients” to mean patients found alone in their homes, either dead or too ill to summon help). Although relatively harmless and easy to spot in its milder forms (“the toxic patients”), jargon can become so ingrained in an author’s writing style that changing it is perceived as tantamount to changing a research finding itself (use of “multiparous” to refer to women who have had *one or more* children). Loviglio urged editors to resist the most pernicious forms of jargon, even when authors

insist that they are perfectly understandable to their readers.

Loviglio then discussed shibboleths—arbitrary language rules that are thought to distinguish 1 group or class from another. She pointed out that the sacrosanct status assigned to “none was” actually has no support from reputable writers on usage and grammar. Indeed, her own editorial staff regularly revises this construction to “none were” unless there are compelling reasons to regard the pronoun as singular, in which case the change might be to “not one”. The *NEJM* editors also split infinitives without flinching when the alternative is an awkward or confusing sentence (“the frequency of early side effects was high enough potentially to reveal the treatment-group assignment”). It was reassuring to learn that the rule against splitting infinitives was based on the questionable reasoning that because the infinitive is 1 word in Latin, and therefore cannot be split, it should not be split in English either.

---

*Much biomedical writing, Loviglio said, contains stilted language that bears little resemblance to what people say in real life.*

---

There was also a foray into the world of mathematical logic with suggestions for improving readers’ grasps of measurements and numerical relationships. Attendees were advised that the word “times” used with comparative modifiers, such as “more” and “higher”, can lead to overstatement of the magnitude of a change. For example, a 3-fold increase in probability cannot be accurately expressed as “3 times more likely”; the preferred revision is “3 times as likely”, which correctly says “multiply by 3”. For those interested in further discussions of

mathematics in scientific writing and its uses and abuses, Loviglio recommended *Mathematics: Making Numbers Talk Sense*, by Edward MacNeal.

One of my favorite topics was the common and growing practice of adding unnecessary nouns to phrases that are clear in their unadorned form (“lens-care practices” instead of “lens care”). Certainly, Loviglio pointed out, this trend is not peculiar to biomedical authors; it has precedents in the restaurant business (“fast-food items”) and in television broadcasting (“rain events”). Another favorite was the absent-mindedness that besets authors when they are writing about death and dying (“we observed a strong decrease in those who died within 24 h from randomization”).

Finally, Loviglio answered her initial question of whether medicine will be the death of English: “Of course it won’t, not as long as we guardians of the language stick stubbornly to our posts.” The session ended with comments from the audience that indicated general concurrence with the speaker’s remarks, tempered with an awareness of the energy needed to convert authors from “language slob” to “language snob”.

On 1 level, the session provided a model for journals that might want to improve the quality of the papers that they publish. On another level, it made me wonder about the future place of manuscript editing. With the current trends toward online publishing and reduction in editorial staffs, can one justify the effort needed to ensure a uniformly high standard of biomedical writing? If the answer is yes, can manuscript editing, as now practiced, be integrated seamlessly into online publishing procedures? Perhaps these questions will be answered at the CBE retreat at Airlie House (“Fate of the Scientific Paper in a Paperless Age”). Otherwise, they appear ripe for debate at a later CBE conference. ⑥