

Lean and Mean

I've just returned from a week-long writing workshop in Vermont, and the instructor's words are still fresh in my ear. "Make it lean and mean", he said of our writing. "Make every word justify its existence."

I thought of how often in my role as editor, lulled by the familiarity of certain phrases or dulled by the drone of Medspeak, I have failed to delete unnecessary words from manuscripts. How many sentences have I let stand that began, "It has been shown that" or "Evidence from a number of studies clearly demonstrates that", when perfectly good reference citations made such phrases mere throat-clearing? These do-nothing words can occur in mid-sentence as well:

These are the only agents that have been shown to heal erosive esophagitis (15, 16).

Bethanechol and metoclopramide are reported to be minimally effective when used as solitary agents (27).

The word observed can often be eliminated to good effect. It may appear unnecessarily dozens of times in a manuscript, taking up valuable space and interfering with the natural flow of sentences:

One explanation for the persistent gap in infant mortality observed between blacks and whites in our study . . .

Some extra words are not only redundant but silly: "fatal adverse outcomes", for example. My favorite target in this category is the virtually universal "small [or large] sample size", as in "The difference in conclusions can be explained by the use of small sample sizes." Why not simply "small samples"?

A similar example: "Laparoscopic resection . . . may result in . . . a shorter duration of hospitalization."

A sentence beginning, "The largest magnitude of risk reduction occurred between the lowest and the second lowest quintile" obviously needs pruning to read, "The largest reduction in risk . . ."

Abstracts particularly cry out for sparseness. I recall one that, before editing, referred to "patients with a pathologic lesion of the small intestine consistent with celiac sprue". An exasperated editor slashed that to a nonsense "patients with celiac sprue", adding the marginal comment "Puh-leeze!"

The purpose of clearing out the verbal underbrush is not so much to save space — though that can be important, too — as to clarify the writing by simplifying it. With clarity and economy comes speed of reading, important to any publication aimed at busy professionals.

Before: In situations where a sudden increase in reported cases was noted . . .

After: When there was a sudden increase in reported cases . . .

Before: Acetaminophen was relatively ineffective in reducing temperature in this population as compared with ibuprofen.

After: Acetaminophen was less effective than ibuprofen in reducing temperature in this population.

An already long and tortuous sentence in one manuscript ended with this phrase: "to increase the amount of time spent in healthier and higher quality of life health states". After struggling for some moments to crack this cipher, the manuscript editor translated it as "to increase the time during which the patient feels better". My workshop teacher would have approved.

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