

## Rain Event, Rain Event, Go Away

You hear it during the morning weather forecast: “Clear today, with a possible rain event tomorrow.” And in the traffic report: “The accident scene occurred at 6:30 this morning.”

And like me you may wonder, When did “rain” stop being a freestanding noun and become a mere modifier of the superfluous “event”? And who decided that “accident”—at least in traffic reports—must be tailgated by the unnecessary “scene”?

This manifestation of the language-bloat imperative is all around us. I’ve seen “fast food” rendered as “fast-food items” and independent films called “independent-film products”. As expected, the virus has spread to scientific writing (if it didn’t in fact originate there). Thus, authors say not “membrane ruptures” but “membrane rupture events.” Not “pastoral care” but “pastoral care services”. Not “lens care” but “lens care practices”. Why? I can only speculate, but it seems to be part of a general rejection of concision in favor of a highfalutin prolixity, meant to impress, that increasingly

characterizes the language of our time.

Other examples from recent manuscripts:

[P]rotracted labor activity increases the risk of maternal and neonatal infection.

[T]he urea clearance rate also depends on the . . . permeability of the membrane structure.

If you know of a formal name for this usage, please tell me what it is. In the meantime, I’ll continue to call it “rain event” for short. But Gene Kelly had it right the first time; “Singin’ in the Rain Event” just doesn’t cut it.

It’s easy to confuse this usage with its cousin, tautology. In rain events, the unnecessary word means something different from the word it’s paired with. Tautology is the needless repetition of the same sense in different words—“suicidal death”, for example, or “prior history” or “intra-dermal skin tests”. A manuscript recently being edited at the New England Journal refers to “mandates requiring” the inclusion of more

women, children, and minority-group members in clinical trials. Another asserts that hospitals have “an obligatory requirement” to provide translators.

Interestingly, the tautology most often seen in medical manuscripts is one that mirrors the iteration it describes. Almost without exception, authors seem to find the singleton word “twins” inadequate. Instead, they speak of “cotwins”, “cotwin pairs”, and “identical cotwins”. (Such double-talk would be fresh meat to William Safire’s Squad Squad—word-savvy readers of his “On Language” column in the Sunday New York Times Magazine, whom Safire describes as “hunter[s] of prolix tautologies”.)

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