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Writing for a General Audience

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 Handouts

Writing for a general audience means writing for educated adults who are not a part of your field. The first step is to recognize jargon within your writing and rewrite to avoid or clearly explain such concepts. The second step is to eliminate unnecessary words and make your writing simple, concise, and direct.

Recognize and Avoid Jargon

Jargon is specialized terminology that those outside your field may not understand. For example, the phrase "conglomerate cellular apoptosis" would be unclear to those outside biology. To identify jargon in your work, try some of the following techniques:

•Think back to when you first began learning about your field. What terms were you unfamiliar with at that point? What terms did you have to memorize and learn?

•Share your writing with a friend outside your field. Have them circle terms and concepts that they do not know. You can practice explaining the concept to them in different ways.

•Schedule an appointment at the writing center and work with a consultant outside your field. They can help you find jargon and create clearer explanations for a general audience.

Consider the complex and unfamiliar terms in the following example:

The specific aim of this research is to determine the methane potential of selected industrial wastewaters and the reaction kinetics of various processes involved in anaerobic digestion. Throughout the experiment we will observe the pH level and also perform solid analysis to measure the percent solids, the fixed solids, and the volatile solids in the wastewater. Co-substrates of horse manure and potato wastes will then be added to observe the effects on methane production and pH levels, solids analysis will also be performed on the horse manure and potatoes. COD analysis will also be performed before and after addition of co-substrates to the wastewater slurry in order to track the degradation of organic compounds and their effects on the anaerobic digestion process.

The previous example contains the following jargon:

•methane potential

•industrial wastewaters

•reaction kinetics

•anaerobic digestion

•pH level

•solid analysis

•percent, fixed, and volatile solids

•co-substrate

•potato wastes

•COD analysis

•wastewater slurry

After you have identified jargon, decide if these terms are necessary for the goals or objectives of your assignment. If the jargon are not necessary, replace them with a simpler phrase or word, when possible. If the term is necessary to your discussion or you can't replace it, then define/explain it upon first use, for those without knowledge of your field.

One technique for rewriting without jargon is to pretend you are explaining the concept to your parents (or a close friend outside your field). See the following revisions:

•Original, with Jargon: Identifying conglomerate cellular apoptosis of H. sapiens, through the systematic utilization of a digital sphygmomanometer.

•Revision, without Jargon: Employing a blood pressure meter to determine death in humans.

•Original, with Jargon: The research objective is to determine a causal relationship between auditory stimulation, by way of vibrational information and electrical interpretation in the cerebrum and standard measures of academic success.

•Revision, without Jargon: The research objective is to determine the effect of music on studying.

•Original, with Jargon: The objective of the study was to explore the connection between foraging patterns, metabolic rate, and size in three species within the clade avialae: Poecile carolinensis, Baeolophus bicolor, and Picoides pubescens.

•Revision, without Jargon: We compared size, methods for finding food, and rates of digestion in three kinds of birds: Carolina chickadee, Tufted titmouse, and Downy woodpecker.

Use Simple and Concise Language

Once you have replaced or explained jargon, make your writing even more accessible to general readers by eliminating unnecessary words.

•Keep your writing simple and straightforward. For example, “the organisms exhibited a 100% mortality response” is a wordy and pretentious way of saying “all of the organisms died.” Although a general audience could understand the first example, the second example uses less words and communicates the main idea in less time.

•Keep related words together. Consider the following sentence from a scientific publication: “Lying on top of the intestine, you perhaps make out a small transparent thread.” Do we actually have to lie on top of the intestine to see the thread? The author meant that “a small transparent thread lies atop the intestine.” Keeping related words together creates better clarity.

•Use active voice. Write strong subjects who are actually completing the action. For example, "I examined patients" (active voice) is clearer and more direct than "Patients were examined" (passive voice). If you cannot use first-person "I," then create active third-person constructions, such as "The study procedures included examining patients."

•Write positively. Positive wording usually uses less words and is quicker to understand than negative wording. For example, "The rats were always sick" is the positive version of "The rats were never healthy."

•Delete unnecessary words. Many common phrases in English could be replaced with one word that has the same meaning. For example: ◦the question as to whether = whether

◦advance notice = notice

◦at this point in time = now

◦be that as it may = but

◦in the event that = if

◦general consensus = consensus

◦young juvenile = juvenile

◦student body = students

◦due to the fact that = because

◦chemotherapeutic agent = drug

The following example avoids jargon but uses wordy expressions that may still overwhelm general readers. The sentences are numbered for easier comparison to the edited version below:

[1] In order to use an independent t-test, we must make the assumptions that the samples are random, the variance is the same for both of the samples, and that the samples fit a normal distribution. [2] The first assumption is simply saying that someone or something has an equal chance to be in either group, so that we do not have a bias. [3] For the second assumption, if the variance is different then we are essentially looking at two completely different samples. [4] You could have two samples with the same mean but if one sample has a huge variance and the other is tiny, those two distributions will look and are different. [5] Lastly, we need to make sure that the samples fit the normal curve in order for there to be no skew and to generalize to the population.

Some phrases in the previous paragraph could easily be condensed:

•in order to = to

•make the assumptions = assume

•is simply saying = implies; ensures

•so that we do not have a bias = to avoid bias

•are essentially looking at = are analyzing

•you could have two samples with the same mean = two samples could have the same mean

•will look and are different = are different

•for there to be no skew = to avoid skew

The fully edited version has 65 less words than the original, while still communicating the same ideas:

[1] To use an independent t-test, we must assume that the samples are random, similar in variance, and normally distributed. [2] Random samples ensure an equal chance to be in either group, to avoid bias. [3] If the variance is different, we are analyzing two different samples. [4] Two samples could have the same mean but different distributions. [5] Lastly, samples should fit the normal curve to avoid skew and to generalize to the overall population.