

Effective Use of Grammar and Style

San Francisco Edit

www.sfcedit.net

Grammar and style are very important and helpful in meeting the writing process goal of ensuring the clear communication of ideas.

Grammar includes any writing problem for which there is a definitive right or wrong answer. Errors in grammar disrupt and confuse readers, making your meaning unclear.

Style includes any issue that is a matter of preference. Each journal has its own expectations about what's appropriate in writing. Some journals differ dramatically in what stylistic choices are acceptable.

Below we list some common grammar and style issues. There are, of course, many more.

Grammar

It is important that your manuscript be written in correct English grammar. Most journals will reject a manuscript if it is not written in correct English, even if the content is worthy of publication.

Subject-Verb: The correct form of a verb is determined by the subject of the phrase and not the noun that precedes the verb. Place the verb as close to the subject as possible.

Which versus That: "That" introduces essential information, but phrases that begin with "which" give additional, nonessential information and are set off by commas.

Dangling and Misplaced Modifiers: Be sure modifiers actually modify what they are intended to modify. Keep modifying phrases as close as possible to the word they modify to avoid distorting the meaning of the sentence.

Verb tense: Use the past tense for the Materials and Methods, and the Results. Use the present tense to describe established experiments and data that exist in the literature. It is important to check the journal's requirements.

Articles: Most nouns in English are preceded by an article (e.g., "a," "an," "the," "several") every time they are used. This applies to nouns directly preceded by an adjective. However, there are instances where no article is needed. There are many contradictory elements of English grammar.

Comparative terms: Comparative terms are words and phrases such as, bigger,

smaller, more, less, etc. Sentences containing a comparative term without completing the comparison are meaningless.

Split Infinitive: An infinitive is made up of two words, usually the word “to” in front of the bare verb, such as “to measure”. A split infinitive puts an adverb between the two parts of the infinitive. “To carefully measure” is a split infinitive. “Carefully” splits “to measure.” As a general rule, you should avoid splitting infinitives.

Style

Most journals require their own writing style. The author guidelines usually explain in detail the journal’s requirements. Here are some general tips for ensuring you adhere to the journal’s requirements.

Tone: Your writing, depending upon the journal’s style or your audience, should be either formal and structured, or informal and loosely organized.

Passive vs. Active Voice: Many journals believe the passive voice is more objective and, therefore, more suitable for scientific writing. However, we suggest using the active voice wherever appropriate. You should check the author guidelines or review some of the journal’s articles to determine the journal’s style.

First vs. Third Person: If there is one stylistic area where scientific disciplines and journals vary widely, it is the use of first vs. third person constructions. Limit your use of first person construction (i.e., “I (or we) undertook this study ...”).

Abbreviations and Acronyms: An abbreviation or acronym is justified only if the full expression is excessively long or if the abbreviation is well known to all researchers in the discipline. When using an abbreviation or acronym, define it in parentheses the first time it is used.

References: It is very important to make sure all references are cited in the text and in the required format.

Numbers: Numbers should be spelled out when they begin a sentence.

Wordiness: Words that don’t enhance content or meaning may bog down the reader. Effective writers use as few words as possible to convey precisely their information or ideas.

For more detailed information regarding writing a manuscript for publication, please review some of our other articles at <http://www.sfcedit.net/newsletters.htm>. These articles approach such subjects as Writing the First Draft, Writing Effective Results, Methods and Materials, Discussions, Selecting a Journal, Responding to Reviewers, etc.