

A Basic Guide to Keeping it Simple

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*There once was a student whose writing,
Went from bad to just truly affrighting,
From jejune ostentation,
to wild peregrination:
It just couldn't be read without slighting!*

Preamble

My purpose in this short guide is to offer a few hints about avoiding writing reports whose style is uncomfortable to read. Prose which is riddled with cliché, hackneyed phrases, and unnecessarily long words (when much shorter alternatives could be used) runs the risk of obscuring good aspects of a report, resulting in a lower grade. Below some examples of common misuses are given.

- 1. Prefer short to long.**
- 2. Nouns and verbs can stand alone.**
- 3. Cliché and overused phrases.**
- 4. Misuse of technical language.**

Short is better than long

If you can find a familiar short word with a similar meaning to the longer one you are thinking of using, the short word is a better choice.

Examples

“use” is better than *“utilize”*;

“careful” is better than *“meticulous”*

“many” is better than *“prolific”* or *“myriad”* or *“numerous”*.

“fast” or *“quick”* are better than *“expeditious”*

“random” is better than *“aleatory”*.

“hope” is better than *“aspire”*.

Guiding rule: Short and simple beats long and complicated.

Nouns do not NEED adjectives; Verbs do not NEED adverbs

Try to avoid adding strings of adjectives before every noun. While there are times when an adjective can add effect, it is more likely that the adjective chosen adds nothing to the sense.

Examples of redundant adjective use

“**significant** result”, “**valuable** contribution”, “**major** influence”.

Would anyone be interested in “**insignificant** results”, or “**valueless** contributions” or “**minor** influences”?

One way of seeing if a choice of adjective is *adding* rather than *padding* is the following:

You are thinking of writing “adjective noun” (for example “*innovative system*”). Think of a commonly used adjective with a meaning that is nearly the opposite of your choice (for example “*old-fashioned*”, “*out-dated*”, “*redundant*”). Now compare your original choice (“*innovative system*”) with the result of replacing the adjective with one of its opposites, (“*old-fashioned system*”, “*out-dated system*”, “*redundant system*”).

If you are writing about a system you have developed, it is enough to say “*We developed a system for . . .*”. There is no need to stress the fact “*We developed an **innovative** system for . . .*” (this will be understood from the context: you would not claim that “*We developed an **out-dated** system for . . .*”).

Similar care should be taken with adverbs: “**effectively** implement”, “**rigorously** evaluate”, “**exhaustively** researched” could be replaced by “implement”, “evaluate”, “researched” without loss. (Would someone “**ineffectively** implement” or “**carelessly** evaluate” or “**superficially** research”?)

Guiding rule: If in doubt cut it out.

Cliché and overused phrases

One of the obvious signs that text is just being padded out with no attempt at focus, is the use of clichéd and hackneyed phrases. For example: “*state of the art*”, “*user friendly*”, “*hot topic*”, “*set the stage for*”, “*hands-on*”, “*ever changing landscape*”. It is unlikely that such phrases add anything useful to the text.

Guiding rule: If a phrase has been used by many in the past, avoid it.

Wrongly used technical language

There are a lot of terms whose meaning is understood in a particular sense in Mathematics, Psychology, Humanities, Law, etc. For example, “*exponential*”, “*decimate*”, “*complex*”, “*actionable*”. “*myriad*”, “*nucleus*” and so on.

When such words are used without care the result can be that what has been written makes no sense.

For example:

“There are a ***myriad*** of possible approaches to this problem.”

The word “*myriad*” is not an alternative to “*many*”¹.

“We intend to deliver a software tool which will offer ***actionable*** advice.”

The word “***actionable***” has an exact sense in Law: “that which provides grounds for a legal action to be brought”. It is unlikely that “*a software tool which will offer actionable advice*” would be consistent with Professional Codes of Conduct.

Guiding rule: Try and avoid using words from other fields of study.

Typical Example

“In this project I will endeavour to contribute significantly to the ever expanding and currently fast growing arena of utilizing contemporary ML technology in the complex and challenging application sphere of speech recognition. In order to undertake this journey I intend to proceed by initially conducting a comprehensive and in-depth investigation of the relevant literature aspiring to discern the most pertinent and ground-breaking insights promulgated by the myriad of distinguished researchers who have made headway in this field. From the knowledge gleaned from this survey I will then embark on the main business of the work itself putting to good use the fruits of my discoveries. The ultimate goal towards which my project is headed being that of a state of the art realisation by which the primary aims are leveraged into actionable outcomes.”

Simplified version

“In this project I will be looking at using ML methods for speech recognition. I will start by looking at previous work and, from what this offers, select methods which are suitable. The aim of the project is to build a system which can produce text from speech.”

¹ The source of the English word “*myriad*” is the classical Greek word “μυριοι” (intended to suggest “*countless*” but understood as “10,000”).

Some Useful Resources

[Plain English Campaign Guide](#)

The **Plain English Campaign** is a non-profit organisation which aims to improve the standard of written English in public documents, e.g., as produced by Government Departments, Banks, Insurance companies, Utility suppliers, Local Councils. This resource is a more detailed presentation of several of the topics covered above.

For quick reference the following are useful.

[Drivel Defence](#)

This is a web-based application promoted by the Plain English Campaign. Although not completely accurate it does provide helpful suggestions on improving written text.

[Simple alternatives](#)

An A-Z list of frequently used long words together simpler alternatives.

[Ernest Gowers Complete Plain Words \(1954 edition\)](#)

Gowers' text was written to be used by UK Civil Servants. The 1954 text is now out of copyright. There have been several revisions, the most recent from 2015. Although the 1954 text may seem a little bit out of date it continues to be a helpful guide.