

## INSTRUCTIONS TO AUTHORS: Improving Your Writing

*The Southern Research Station (SRS) Technical Publications Team is committed to full compliance with the Plain Writing Act of 2010. Plain writing isn't rocket (or forest) science. But you do need to know things that untrained writers miss. We offer these guidelines to help you write manuscripts that will require fewer clarifications and corrections, boost reader trust in your findings, and even save time and money. If you have any questions, please contact Gary Kuhlmann, Team Lead for Technical Publications, by email at [gary.kuhlmann@fs.fed.us](mailto:gary.kuhlmann@fs.fed.us) or by phone at 828-257-4390.*

### USE OF WORDS

Use a US-English spelling checker.

Make sure you use words according to the precise meaning understood by the average person.

Ideally, you would check whether every word could be deleted or replaced by a better one.

Aim for economy: **because** instead of **based on the fact that**; **for** or **to** instead of **for the purpose of**.

Similarly (words to strike are bolded): **there were** several subjects **who** completed...; **it is suggested that** a relationship may exist...; **both** alike; **one and** the same; **a total of** n subjects; four **different** groups; **absolutely** essential; found **previously**; small **in size**; in **close** proximity or **in** close **proximity**; **very** close to zero; **much** better; **period of** time; summarize **briefly**; **the reason is** because; **also** included; **in order** to; except **for**.

Aim for precision: **plot** or **tree** instead of **subject**; **concentration** or **frequency** instead of **level**.

Don't generalize unnecessarily. For example, don't say **some** if you know of only one instance.

**This** on its own is known as an ambiguous antecedent. Use instead **this test** or **this problem** or whatever.

Avoid hype (hyperbole). Words like **very** and **extremely** are usually unnecessary.

**Affect** or **effect**? Examples of correct use: Temperature affected the outcome. There was an effect on outcome.

Try this to help you remember which is which: Affluence affects attitudes. The effects of effluent are everywhere. Note also: the new regime effected (i.e. produced) substantial changes. Affect can also mean emotion.

Note these singular and plural forms: criterion, criteria; datum, data; medium, media; phenomenon, phenomena.

Don't use **however** or its synonyms twice in one paragraph, because changing the direction of an argument twice in one paragraph may annoy readers.

Don't use **however** more than once every 10 paragraphs. Try a thesaurus for synonyms.

Avoid the so-called non-human agent. For example, use **the authors concluded that...** rather than **the study concluded that...**

Avoid colloquialisms, such as **steer clear of**.

Avoid **as such**. Poor: The SCAT is a reliable test of state anxiety. As such, it is suitable for experimental studies. Better: The SCAT is a reliable test of state anxiety; it is therefore suitable for experimental studies.

Avoid **her, his** and any other sexist language, even if the subjects are clearly of one gender.

The following common style rules, in our view, are old fashioned and need not be adhered to strictly:

- Use **while** and **since** to refer to time. Do not use them when the meaning is **whereas, although, or because**.
- Don't start sentences with **because, since, or as**.

(In other words, we think it's okay to break the above two rules!)

## GRAMMAR

Make sure you write well-formed sentences, and keep their structure simple.

Use the first person (*I* or *we* **tested six runners**) rather than the passive voice (**Six plots were tested**). Similarly, say **Smith reported** instead of **reported by Smith**.

With comparatives (**more than, less than**), the **than** may need to be **than that of** or **than with** or **than by** etc. to clarify the meaning. Similarly, **similar to** may need to be **similar to that of**. Examples: The measure was more valid than that of Smith et al. (1994). We experienced fewer problems with the revised instrument than with the published version. The method was similar to that of an earlier study.

Don't use a long string of qualifiers in front of a noun: a modified test of cognitive function is better than a modified cognitive-function test.

Use the past tense to report results (yours or others!). Use the present tense to discuss them. Examples: We have found that...; Smith (1989) reported a similar result. A simple explanation of these findings is that...

Avoid so-called misplaced modifiers. Examples: When sedentary, protein supplementation resulted in... Athletes were consulted when designing the questionnaire... If necessary, subjects were tested... Based

on these results, we conclude... The next two examples are marginal: Using stable tracers, it is possible to measure... Given the importance of body mass, there has been little study of its effects... Note that a noun was verbed to verb something (e.g. an experiment was performed to test this hypothesis) is also technically incorrect but is used so widely that it has to be accepted. A noun was verbed (by) verbing... is also acceptable. The active voice would avoid these awkward expressions.

Put **only**, **partly** and **mainly** next to the word they modify. Example: The test consists only of new items.

Note: **partly** vs **wholly**; **partially** vs **completely**. In the same vein, **continual** = **repeated**, whereas **continuous** = **without a break**. Not many writers get these right!

The following rules are broken so frequently that I doubt whether they can be considered rules any more.

**Which** or **that**? Simple rule: **Which** always follows a comma (and a pause), but **that** never does.

Examples: This study, which cost \$10,000, was a success. The study that cost \$10,000 was a success.

**Owing to** or **due to**? Simple rule: **Owing to** always has a comma, **due to** never does. Examples: The data were lost, owing to computer malfunction. The loss of data was due to computer malfunction.

An adverb is placed usually after the verb. Placing it before the verb produces a split infinitive. For example, to boldly go... is acceptable if you are emphasizing go, but if the emphasis is on boldly, to go boldly is better.

## **FLOW OF IDEAS**

Focus your thoughts by writing the summary first, even for articles that don't require one.

Three ways to help get your ideas in a sensible sequence are to make an outline in the form of headings, to put the draft aside for days or weeks, and to get others to comment on the drafts.

The first sentence of a paragraph usually sets the topic for that paragraph. Don't have any unlinked ideas (non-sequiturs) in the same paragraph.

A paragraph must consist of more than one sentence.

Try to make the ideas within each section flow together.

Don't put things in the wrong section or subsection. Skim the finished document to make sure.

When appropriate, keep the order of ideas the same in different sections of the article.

Check that you don't contradict or repeat yourself in different sections of the article.

Aim for simplicity: many readers are less intelligent and less knowledgeable than writers.

## **STYLE FOR CITED PUBLICATIONS**

Cite references consistently in the style the Station requires.

Make sure every publication referred to in the article is in the reference list, and vice versa.

Follow the SRS style guidelines for literature citations, and make sure the reference information is accurate. Responsibility for accuracy of the citation (e.g., date of publication, page numbers, etc.) is the author's. These guidelines are given in detail at

[www.srs.fs.usda.gov/working/author/guidelines\\_for\\_citations.pdf](http://www.srs.fs.usda.gov/working/author/guidelines_for_citations.pdf)