

Tips for Scientific Writing in the English Language

You: This word should be avoided in scientific writing.

I/We/Me/Us: Using them too frequently can make the paper appear colloquial (less formal), like a diary entry (“I think... I hope... I wish... I believe”). Do not use them more than a few times per paper, if at all.

Internet Lingo: Avoid using web abbreviations (lol, omg, wtf). Also avoid shorthand, such as “u” for “you” or “b/c” for “because” – yes, students actually do this, unfortunately.

And/But/So/Or: Using these words at the beginning of sentences often generates fragments.

Etc.: Usually, “etc.” can and should be avoided. Generally, the use of “etc.” reflects a failure of the author to determine the most appropriate examples for a given list or even determine when the list should end. Even worse than “etc.” is “etc., etc.”

Citing Sources: Cite a source for any information that is not “common knowledge.” When in doubt, cite a source. Include a page number with the citation when referring to a specific fact, figure, or statistic, when quoting or paraphrasing very closely, or when mentioning an important or controversial point that the reader may want to look up.

Quotes: Whenever quoting material from another source, use quotation marks, and provide a citation with page number. Quotes are frequently overused by novice writers; instead, quotes should be used sparingly, or preferably, not at all. Mundane statements should be paraphrased or summarized, rather than quoted, so in most cases, quoting reflects laziness. Some students turn in papers that are actually 90% quotes, reflecting none of their own thinking. Usually plagiarism occurs when a student is haphazardly quoting ridiculous amounts of information and forgets to add the quotation marks. Many researchers are poor writers or are too busy with other tasks to carefully craft their publications—in other words, their writing often stinks, and most students can summarize and paraphrase more skillfully, given a little effort.

Questions: Questions should rarely be used in scientific writing, perhaps once or twice per paper, but preferably not at all. In writing, questions tend to reflect shallow curiosity, whereas statements tend to reflect more well-developed positions and hypotheses. Thus, in most instances, the overuse of questioning reflects laziness by the author.

Personal Examples: Scientific writers avoid supporting claims with personal examples. It’s best to avoid statements, like “I wanted to research this topic because my brother has Autism” or “Mama says that alligators are ornery because they got all them teeth and no toothbrush.”

Drafting: Multiple drafts are needed to improve writing and also to improve one’s self as a writer. Peer-review by an intelligent friend can be helpful. Also, it can be helpful to meticulously attack and question each individual sentence within a paper.