

Words and Phrases to Avoid When Discussing Your Research

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To write at the doctoral level means meeting high standards in both content and format. There are things that you can avoid to help improve your scholarly writing. Review each item and make sure you avoid these problems in your writing:

- Avoid making broad generalizations – Be careful in using the words like all, always, must, never, and every.
- Avoid statements or assertions of fact unless documented by a peer reviewed source.
- Avoid words like clearly and obviously. What is clear and obvious to one reader is not to another.
- Avoid declarative statements about what your planned study will achieve. Always couch your language in a scholarly tone
 - Incorrect: The proposed study will show that left handed people live shorter lives.
 - Correct: The proposed study may provide evidence regarding whether left handed people live shorter lives.
- Avoid redundancy – do not repeat phrases or paragraphs in the same chapter and try to paraphrase information needed from a prior chapter.
- Avoid using sweeping adjectives such as: amazing, extraordinary, outstanding, incredible, etc.
- Avoid clichés, casual language, colloquial expressions, slang, or overused phrases; these detract from scholarly writing. If a word sounds overused or trite to you, look for a different one. Avoid reusing the same word or phrase over and over.
- Avoid intensely emotional language, seemingly biased or slanted references, innuendo, sarcasm, hostility, and arrogance. Scholarly writing exhibits a certain degree of humility in its appreciation for the complexities of a topic.

- Avoid using adverbs such as: really, extremely, absolutely, etc.
- Avoid vague pronouns such as: we, us, you, them, their, our, etc. when the reader is not certain who these terms apply to. If you must use a pronoun abide by the following rules:
 - Pronouns must agree in number.
 - Pronouns must agree in gender.
 - Pronouns can be subjects or objects. Use who as the subject of a verb and whom as the object of a verb or a preposition.
 - If you use a pronoun like “their” make certain it is clear whom this is referring to.
 - NEVER use a pronoun to start a paragraph.
- Avoid qualifiers such as: a little, definitely, mostly, etc.
- Avoid vague references to time such as: now, present, today, currently, etc.
- Avoid expletive construction (“there is,” “there are,” “there was,” “who were,” “there were,” “it is,” or “it was”). These are phrases that mean nothing. Unless “there” or “it” is a place or a thing.
 - Wrong: There were five students in Mr. Smith’s class who were apparently cheating on the exam.
 - Right: Five students in Mrs. Smith’s class were apparently cheating on the exam.
- Avoid contractions. Can not is better than can’t.
- Avoid using the word *done* to refer to research that was or will be conducted.
- Avoid the negative form. Whenever possible, find a precise word to express an idea
 - NO: Smith (2007) *did not* find the results . . .
 - Yes: Smith (2007) failed to find
- Avoid discussing a study or publication in terms of “the article” or “the author” or even “he” or “she.” When possible, refer to the author or authors by their last names and cite them using last name and year of publication, .e.g. “Smith (1990) found evidence that...”
- Avoid opinions and judgments – stick to the facts, and all statements or assertions of fact must be documented with a peer-reviewed source or in the data and results that are being presented.
- Avoid inflammatory language such as: Brown supports terrorism as a means of getting what one wants.

- Avoid the word **it** and say what you mean with a noun.
- Avoid using the word **prove** when referring to the results of your study or the results from hypothesis testing. Statistics do not prove anything; they merely give you a degree of confidence regarding your successfully rejecting, or not rejecting, the null hypothesis.
- Avoid anthropomorphisms or personification in your writing, that is, instances in which inanimate objects are granted conditions normally reserved for animate (living) objects.
- Wrong: The data show the effect clearly. Data can't show anything; data are inanimate.
 - Incorrect: Research indicates that writing is a necessary skill; research can't indicate anything; it's not alive.
 - Correct: The effect is apparent from the data. One can conclude from research (provide references) that writing is a necessary skill.
- Avoid anonymous authors and citations that have n.d to frame a scholarly argument.
- Avoid Passive Voice:
 - Wrong: The cherry tree was chopped down by George Washington.
 - Right: Washington chopped down the cherry tree.
- Avoid typos and grammatical errors. Use spell and grammar checkers in your writing software, and if possible, have someone else proofread your work. You can also read the document out loud and slowly, forcing you to read each word individually. This increases the chances of finding grammatical errors.
- Avoid Wordiness
 - *Wordiness* is the use of too many words within a sentence or paragraph for conveying an idea which can be expressed more concisely--that is, with fewer words (like this sentence!)
 - The sentence above can be restated without losing the essential meaning: *Wordiness* is using too many words to express an idea. Here the same idea is conveyed in 22 fewer words!