

Hints and Tips for Scientific Writing

PUNCTUATION RULES

- Insert a comma wherever there would be a slight pause between words or phrases in the spoken sentence.
- Insert a semicolon between two parts of a sentence; the proviso is that both parts must be able to stand alone as separate sentences.
- Use a colon to introduce an explanation or an example of something: here is an example. If there are several simple explanations or examples, separate them with commas; otherwise, use semicolons.
- Avoid excessive use of parentheses (). Use them to make an aside (an extra remark) only if commas could be confusing. Never use parentheses within parentheses: find another way of saying it.
- Use brackets [] for material inserted into a quotation and ellipsis (three dots) for material omitted: According to Smith (1999), "few such [descriptive] studies were done... before 1950."
- Use dashes--two hyphens with no spaces anywhere--for emphatic asides.
- Use one or two spaces after a period, colon, or semicolon. Note, though, that Web browsers delete more than one space unless you make them non-breaking spaces.
- Use double quotation marks (") for speech and verbatim quotations.
- If a quotation is long, type it as an indented block of text without quotation marks, as shown in this example:

According to Smith (1982)...

The "newbie effect" disappeared when behaviors were studied in this manner. Examples of methods included indirect observation, self-reports, and retrospective questionnaires. (p. 276)

- Use double quotation marks the first time you introduce a newly coined or slang term; do not use quotation marks thereafter.
- Use single quotation marks (') for quotes within quotes.
- Use the apostrophe (') to denote possession:
an athlete's responses, two athletes' responses.
But note that its = of it, whereas it's = it is.
- Put commas, semicolons, colons, and periods outside closing quotation marks: "this", for example, but not "this," or "this." Exception: "If the quotation ends in a complete sentence, the period is part of the quote and should therefore go inside the quotation marks, like this."
- Use of and/or instead of or is acceptable when you want to emphasize either or both.
- The forward slash (/) can be used instead of or in sentences that are already replete with ands and/or ors.
- Use Title Case (initial upper-case letters for words of four or more letters) in:
 - the title and subheadings of your article;
 - titles of journals;
 - titles of books or articles in the text, but not in the reference list;
 - proper nouns, including trade names (Wilks's lambda, Aspro, the Web)

WORDS AND WRITING STYLES TO AVOID

Vague words and phrases

On-going: isn't English (though "goings-on" is); usually unnecessary and always avoidable ("we have an ongoing traffic light situation").
at this point in time : means "now".

escalate: "escalator" is a good English noun; there is no verb "to escalate", an unnecessary neologism (made up word) for "increase".

easy/hard: Things are only easy or hard to you, the writer. Science places no value on the difficulties you encounter.

Pomposites

envisage: means to "contemplate" or "look at", not to "imagine" or "suppose".
anticipate : means to "to forestall" or "get in first"; if you mean "expect" or say so.

commence: is a silly word for "start" or "begin".

perceive, observe : no doubt have their uses but both generally mean "see".

majority: a good word cheapened by overuse: "The majority of people" means "most people". The word is singular so "the majority is" not "the majority are....".

Illiteracies

different : A is different from B, not different than B or different to B .
imply/infer : much misused (as mentioned above), even by those who should know better; "I infer from the fact that...." but "the facts imply that...."

decimate: means to kill 10 per cent of a population on a quasi-random basis (an old Roman practice); it does not mean "to kill a large proportion of....".

practice, practise : despite, American usage, the first is a noun, the second a verb ("the practice of practising the trombone is a good one"). Think of "advice" "advise" as a helpful mnemonic for correct usage. Or think of the order of noun and verb and practice and practise in the alphabet

effect, affect : tricky and often muddled; "to effect" is "to accomplish" but "to affect" is "to influence" or "have an effect on"; the former is both verb and noun, the latter is a verb only.

minimal: means "least" or "smallest possible", not merely "very small".

criterion, datum : are singular of which the plurals are respectively criteria,

data. "By this criterion the data show that...", "by these criteria the datum shows that...".

supersede, intercede : are spelled thus.

Beware of loose phrasing

"It has long been known" == "I can't be bothered finding a reference."

"Correct to an order of magnitude" == Not correct. (Everything is correct to an order of magnitude)

Almost reached significance at the 5% level == Didn't reach any significance.

"The system should..." == The system doesn't or I haven't checked (both are bad)

The Apostrophe

These are used either to indicate the absence of a letter e.g. isn't it (for is not it) doesn't (for does not). Note the difference between (it is) it's a boy and its, which is the possessive adjective of it (everything in its place). To denote possession (the boy's bike). If a word ends in s, the apostrophe may be placed after the s and the final s omitted (the calves' eyes).

Spell Check

Handing up a document that is not spell checked is pretty much equivalent to saying "I don't care about this work at all". If you don't care about it, don't expect anyone else to. Note: You should always proof read spell checking will only spot invalid words, it won't see grammar mistakes, nor will it spot valid words out of place.

(yes the mistakes above are examples of what I am talking about)