

Choosing and using verbs

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ABSTRACT

Choosing precise, vivid verbs improves the clarity and enhances the style of medical writing. Ideally, writers should use precise, vivid verbs in medical writing and other genres. Moreover, employing active voice or passive voice has important implications for meaning as well as style. Editing techniques such as analyzing the use of the verb “to be,” phrasal verbs, and passive voice and learning field-specific vocabulary help medical writers to use verbs effectively in their writing.

Key words: writing, medical writing, medical manuscript, periodicals as topic

INTRODUCTION

In medical writing, the nouns are often predetermined. For example, a writer would find it difficult to write about a “patient” and an “echocardiogram” without using those two terms. Medical writers often have more flexibility in their choice of verbs, the part of speech indicating an action or a state of being. Selecting precise verbs and using them effectively enhances clarity and affects style. Did the patient “have” the echocardiogram? Did the patient “receive” it? Was the echocardiogram “given” to the patient by the technician? Was it “administered” or “performed”? Did the physician “order” it? The nouns in these sentences are quite similar, but the verbs vary in their definitions and even in their degrees of precision. Using strong, vivid verbs helps writers to communicate vital information to their readers.

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DOI: 10.12746/swrccc.2016.0413.179

VERB PRECISION AND STYLE

As with any word choice, verb choice should be precise in order to clearly convey the author’s intended meaning. For example, explaining that an echocardiogram “detected” an irregularity may be clearer than writing that it “showed” an irregularity or “was” irregular. All of these verbs could be used to communicate the action of the same subject (an echocardiogram), but that action is described in varying degrees of specificity.

Stylistically, editors and readers often value vivid, action-oriented verbs. Overusing banal or repetitive verbs causes writing to seem stilted or boring. The third example above, the echocardiogram “was” irregular, is an example of the verb “to be” (the other forms of which are “am,” “are,” “is,” “was,” “were,” “be,” “being,” and “been”). Many editors and teachers of writing exhort writers not to use these verbs in particular because they can be vague or even unnecessary. Consider the following sentence: “It was necessary for the physician to order an echocardiogram to diagnose mitral valve prolapse.” This sentence is somewhat wordy, and the phrase containing the verb “to

be” —“it was necessary”—does not add much to the sentence’s content. The sentence could be revised to replace the verb “to be” with a more action-oriented verb: “The physician ordered the echocardiogram to diagnose mitral valve prolapse.” Despite advice to avoid the verb “to be,” it is often necessary to use it; in fact, this paragraph contains no fewer than five instances of this verb. This verb cannot and should not be eliminated from medical writing. However, the spirit of such advice is useful: precise verbs tend to yield clearer, more vivid, and more concise writing.

PHRASAL VERBS

One method for writing clear, concise, and formal prose involves eliminating phrasal verbs, which are idiomatic expressions consisting of a verb and a particle (a term that “resembles as adverb or preposition, but it is so closely associated with a verb that together they form a unit of meaning”¹). Examples of phrasal verbs include “look into,” “find out,” and “deal with,” to name just a few. There are three potential problems with phrasal verbs: (1) they often add unnecessary words, (2) they tend to be unclear, and (3) they tend to be informal. Usually, writers can revise phrasal verbs by simply replacing them with more precise verbs. For instance, rather than “look into,” “find out,” and “deal with,” one might write “investigate,” “discover,” and “manage.”

PASSIVE VERSUS ACTIVE VOICE

Passive versus active voice is not a matter of word choice but of syntax. In other words, the issue is not the verb itself but how it is incorporated into a sentence. This topic has generated much debate in writing and especially in scientific writing communities.² Most guides to medical and scientific writing recommend primarily using active voice.²⁻⁵ However, many, if not most, scientific writers tend to use passive voice. The term “active voice” describes a construction in which the subject is performing the verb. For example, active voice is used in the following sentence: “The physician ordered an echocardiogram.” In contrast, passive voice describes a sentence in which the verb is performed by the subject of the sen-

tence. For example, passive voice is used in the following sentences: (1) “The echocardiogram was ordered by the physician” and (2) “The echocardiogram was ordered.” In theory, the active voice emphasizes the actor (in these examples, the physician), whereas the passive voice emphasizes the action. Proponents of using active voice argue, among other things, that this structure is more concise and clarifies the actor. Conversely, proponents of using passive voice argue that, among other things, this structure sounds more objective, since it often removes the actor from the sentence, as in example two listed above.

This author believes that the active voice usually conveys an idea more clearly and concisely than passive voice does. However, passive voice is also appropriate in some cases in medical writing, as when an author wants to emphasize an action rather than an actor. For example, “A technician performed the echocardiogram” is accurate and uses active voice; however, the actor may not be important. In this case, “An echocardiogram was performed” may be more appropriate. Or, the actor may need to be adjusted, as in “The physician ordered an echocardiogram.” Rather than subscribing to a dogmatic preference for one voice over the other, writers should evaluate each rhetorical situation and decide whether active or passive voice best fits their audiences and purposes.

CONCLUSION: EDITING FOR VERB USAGE

Critically thinking about word choice, including verb choice, is generally best accomplished during the editing stage, when the majority of the document has been drafted. Spending an inordinate amount of time thinking about verb choice makes little sense during the drafting stages, when the manuscript undergoes major changes and even deletions. Considering verb choice later in the writing process allows writers to focus on language usage more carefully.

Several practices will help you, as a writer, to edit for verb usage. Read the manuscript and identify each verb. Then, evaluate whether each verb is the most precise choice for your meaning. Look closely at forms of the verb “to be” as well as phrasal verbs.

Once you have identified an imprecise verb, replace it with a more precise verb that clearly conveys your meaning. The same technique will prove effective for choosing whether to employ passive or active voice. Read each sentence for the use of either passive or active voice and evaluate that usage to make sure it conveys your meaning most clearly and emphasizes the most important information.

Selecting a precise verb can be difficult, especially for novice writers and multilingual writers, as this practice necessitates the writer's familiarity with a specialized vocabulary. A writer should always have a thesaurus and a dictionary at hand in order to find synonyms and search for any unfamiliar words. Moreover, writers may need to become more familiar with the discourses of the fields in which they are writing. One way to achieve this field-specific literacy is to read publications, paying attention to not only the content but also the authors' linguistic choices (including verbs) and syntax. Part of becoming an effective writer in any field is learning its vocabulary and employing it to produce clear, vibrant writing.

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Submitted: 12/17/2015

Published electronically: 1/15/2016

Conflict of Interest Disclosures: None
