Online Writing Guide for Scientific & Technical Authors

Created & Written by
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Welcome to our new online writing guide! JRRD is featuring online personal writing assistance and advice from a technical writer-editor who has had intensive training and over 20 years experience: me, Charlotte Irby.

As a writer-editor, I am an advocate for both you the author and your audience. First, I want to help you show your work in the best possible light, with a well-written article. I also believe that authors should write with their readers firmly in mind, so I work to ensure that you communicate your message to the readers clearly and accurately. A quote from Time magazine reads, “Editors are, after authors, the most important people in the literary world.” Since you (the author) are responsible for what is written and I (the writer-editor) am responsible for how it is written, I’m prepared to offer a—

- **Bimonthly writing topic.**
  - Special bimonthly topic.
  - Dos and don’ts.
  - Tips and tidbits.
- **Guest columnist.**
- **Question and answer forum** that I hope will spur in-depth discussions pertaining to all areas of writing: from conception to draft to final proof to peer review and acceptance to production to print. I suggest that you request topics through emails and I will post the lead thread. If no requests are given, I will select a topic and post it.

How does this guide differ from JRRD Guidelines for Contributors?

The **JRRD Guidelines for Contributors** ([http://www.rehab.research.va.gov/guid/guidelines.pdf](http://www.rehab.research.va.gov/guid/guidelines.pdf)) are our technical guidelines as to submitting your paper for publishing. However, with this Online Writing Guide, you can ask me to clarify some or all of the **JRRD Guidelines** and all other aspects of writing. I am really excited about this new effort to help you write better papers and hope you will come to find it an extremely useful tool. After all, your papers not only reflect the latest research but also reflect on you, the author.

This Guide is a “living” document and is continually updated. Please feel free to print it and use it for any written project, not just JRRD articles.
What topics will the Guide cover?

My work with science, medical, and technical authors has uncovered areas in which authors need help. At first, I will focus on these topic areas. However, I hope that you will use the Guide often and will suggest topics that interest you so that I can address those. Some of the topics on which I will concentrate are—

- Word usage.
- Grammar, which includes active vs. passive voice; verbs (tenses, moods, smothered); subject-verb agreement; use of first, second, third person; dangling modifiers, etc.
- Capitalization.
- Abbreviations.
- Numbers.
- Punctuation.
- Formatting.
- Equations.
- Graphics (illustrations, images, graphs, etc.).
- Tables.
- And so much more!

**Writing Topics**

**Special Bimonthly Topic: Word Usage**

You must consider many things when choosing the right word or words. For example, you must consider wordiness, trite expressions, appropriateness, jargon, idioms, spellings, words that may be confused or misused, and the list goes on. Don’t let all these potential word traps slow down your writing process. Once your first draft is done, that’s when you go back and fine-tune your words. You may find yourself revising your draft three or four times before you are satisfied with the results. In the following two lists are just a few words to look out for. The first list contains general words and the second contains a few technical words.
General Usage

As

Do not use as in clauses of reason. Use because, since, or for; e.g., I cannot give you the results because (not as) I have not completed all the tests. Do not use as for that or whether; e.g., I do not know whether (not as) I can go.

Between you and me

Not I.

Bring, take

Bring indicates motion toward the speaker. Take indicates motion away from the speaker.

Comprise, compose

Comprise means “to include, contain, consist of”; compose means “to make up.” The parts compose (make up) the whole; the whole comprises the parts; the whole is composed of (not is comprised of) the parts.

Compared with, compared to

Compared with means to analyze for similarities and differences. Compared to means to assert a likeness.

Compliment, complement

Compliment is praise or that which is given freely. Complement is something that completes.

Continual, continuous

Continual means frequent repetition, with breaks in succession. Continuous means unbroken continuity, with no breaks, without ceasing.

Data

The noun data is plural in form and is commonly followed by a plural verb in technical, scientific, and medical usage. Although in general or common usage, data in sense of information is followed by a singular verb.

Due to

Due to introduces an adjective phrase and should modify nouns. It is normally used only after some form of the verb to be (is, are, was, were, etc.), also known as linking verbs. His success is due to talent. Because of and account of introduce adverbial phrases: He quit because of ill health. (Not: He quit due to ill health.) If due to cannot be replaced by caused by, then it is not correct.

Fewer, less

Use fewer with numbers or units counted individually: fewer meters. Use less with quantities of things measured
with a total (weight, bulk, sums) or conceptually: less money, less water, less excited.

i.e., e.g.  
Use *i.e.* when you mean *that is* or *in other words* and *e.g.* when you mean *for example.*

Insure, ensure  
*Insure* is guaranteeing life or property from risk. *Ensure* is sense of making something certain.

Irregardless  
Use *regardless.*

It’s, its  
*It’s* is the contraction *it is.* *Its* is a possessive pronoun.

Per  
*Per*, a Latin word, is often used to mean “by the.” Whenever possible, substitute *a* or *an*; for example, 25 miles *an* hour, 75 cents *a* liter. Do not use use *per* in the sense of “according to” or “in accordance with.”

Principle, principle  
*Principle* means rule, the basic law, the fundamental truth, or doctrine. *Principal* means chief or major.

Use, utilize  
*Use* is almost always preferred. *Utilize* specifically means “to find a profitable or practical use for,” suggesting the discovery of a new use for something.

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**Technical Usage**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Able-bodied, healthy</th>
<th>Use <em>nondisabled.</em></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Above-elbow</td>
<td>Use <em>transhumeral.</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Above-knee</td>
<td>Use <em>transfemoral.</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alzheimer’s disease</td>
<td>Use <em>Alzheimer disease (Stedman’s Medical Dictionary).</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Below-elbow</td>
<td>Use <em>transradial.</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Below-knee</td>
<td>Use <em>transtibial.</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cronbach’s $\alpha$</td>
<td>Use <em>Cronbach $\alpha$.</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extremity</td>
<td>Use <em>limb (Stedman’s Medical Dictionary).</em></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Dos and Don’ts**

As I have just shown, many words have differing shades of meaning. Some are also frequently confused or misused; some are overused and should be replaced with language that is more
vigorously. Most are just simply wordy expressions. Conciseness makes your reader’s task easier. The key is compression, not omission. In particular, watch for unnecessarily wordy phrases that have become habitual in your writing. In addition, watch for redundancies—eliminating duplicate ideas compresses and sharpens the expressions.

Here is a list of wordy phrases that a careful writer should know.

### Wordy Phrases

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Don’t Use</th>
<th>Do Use</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>According to a reliable source</td>
<td>Reportedly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acute crisis</td>
<td>Crisis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appear to be</td>
<td>Appear</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>As a result of</td>
<td>Because</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>By means of</td>
<td>By, with</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carry out</td>
<td>Perform, conduct</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collaborate together</td>
<td>Collaborate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Divide up (off)</td>
<td>Divide</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Due to the fact that</td>
<td>Because, since, hence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>During the time that</td>
<td>While</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>End result</td>
<td>Result</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Established a new</td>
<td>Established</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In a number of cases</td>
<td>Some, sometimes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inasmuch as</td>
<td>Since</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In terms of</td>
<td>In, of, for,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In the majority of instances</td>
<td>Usually</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In those areas where</td>
<td>Where</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Large in size</td>
<td>Large</td>
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<tr>
<td>On a timely basis</td>
<td>Fast, quickly, rapidly</td>
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<tr>
<td>On condition that</td>
<td>If</td>
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<tr>
<td>Prior to</td>
<td>Before</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Tips and Tidbits

Abbreviations and acronyms

émon when first introduced in text, with the abbreviation or acronym in parentheses, e.g., traumatic brain injury (TBI).

If an acronym is likely to be more familiar, put the acronym first, followed by the meaning in parentheses, e.g., USB (Universal Serial Bus).

Symbols and units of measure

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Guest Columnist

Authors! I invite you to speak about your writing experiences, from the time you attended college to your current position as an author, dealing with the many publishers all over the world and the barrage of publishing policies and guidelines. What do you think about the new clinical trials registry guidelines, authorship, conflicts of interest disclaimers, funding dilemmas, etc.? Tell us how you addressed the situations or perhaps how you wish you had addressed them. They can be serious or funny. You can email your request to me at charlotte.irby@va.gov.

Question and Answer Forum

Do you have a writing pet peeve that has been bothering you for a while?

How about a dilemma that you’ve encountered that you don’t know how to address?

In this forum, you can talk or ask questions about these pet peeves and dilemmas. All readers of this Guide are invited to participate. Just remember to keep the discussion on writing issues. I hope to be able
to use what I learn from our exchanges to improve our interactions between technical writer-editors and authors, between authors and the journal, and most of all, between author and readers. This discussion forum will be much like a blog. However, you will not be able to post directly to this Guide or Web page. Instead, email me at charlotte.irby@va.gov and I will post the comments and responses.