

Online Writing Guide for Scientific & Technical Authors

Created & Written

by

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Word from a JRRD Technical Writer-Editor

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.

Did you know that if a dictionary lists a word with more than one spelling, it lists it in order of preference; for example, the past participle of *travel* is spelled *traveled* and *travelled*, with *traveled* the preferred spelling.

How does this guide differ from *JRRD Guidelines for Contributors*?

The *JRRD Guidelines for Contributors* (<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!

JRRD Editorial Sources: *AMA Manual of Style: A Guide for Authors and Editors*, 10th ed; *U.S. GPO Manual of Style*, 30th ed; *The Gregg Reference Manual*, 11th ed; *The NIST Reference on Constants, Units, and Uncertainty: International System of Units (SI)*; *The Chicago Manual of Style*, 16th ed; *Citing Medicine: The NLM Style Guide for Authors, Editors, and Publishers* [Internet], 2nd ed. Available online: <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK7272/>; *Stedman's Medical Dictionary*, 28th ed; *Merriam Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*, 11th ed.

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 <i>as</i> in clauses of reason. Use <i>because</i> , <i>since</i> , or <i>for</i> ; e.g., I cannot give you the results <i>because</i> (not as) I have not completed all the tests. Do not use <i>as</i> for <i>that</i> or <i>whether</i> ; e.g., I do not know <i>whether</i> (not as) I can go.
Between you and <i>me</i>	Not I.
Bring, take	<i>Bring</i> indicates motion toward the speaker. <i>Take</i> indicates motion away from the speaker.
Comprise, compose	<i>Comprise</i> means “to include, contain, consist of”; <i>compose</i> means “to make up.” The parts <i>compose</i> (make up) the whole; the whole <i>comprises</i> the parts; the whole is <i>composed of</i> (not is comprised of) the parts.
Compared with, compared to	<i>Compared with</i> means to analyze for similarities and differences. <i>Compared to</i> means to assert a likeness.
Compliment, complement	<i>Compliment</i> is praise or that which is given freely. <i>Complement</i> is something that completes.
Continual, continuous	<i>Continual</i> means frequent repetition, with breaks in succession. <i>Continuous</i> means unbroken continuity, with no breaks, without ceasing.
Data	The noun <i>data</i> is plural in form and is commonly followed by a plural verb in technical, scientific, and medical usage. Although in general or common usage, <i>data</i> in sense of information is followed by a singular verb.
Due to	<i>Due to</i> introduces an adjective phrase and should modify nouns. It is normally used only after some form of the verb <i>to be</i> (<i>is</i> , <i>are</i> , <i>was</i> , <i>were</i> , etc.), also known as linking verbs. His success is due to talent. <i>Because of</i> and <i>account of</i> introduce adverbial phrases: He quit <i>because of</i> ill health. (Not: He quit <i>due to</i> ill health.) If <i>due to</i> cannot be replaced by <i>caused by</i> , then it is not correct.
Fewer, less	Use <i>fewer</i> with numbers or units counted individually: <i>fewer</i> meters. Use <i>less</i> with quantities of things measured

	with a total (weight, bulk, sums) or conceptually: <i>less</i> money, <i>less</i> water, <i>less</i> excited.
i.e., e.g.	Use <i>i.e.</i> when you mean <i>that is</i> or <i>in other words</i> and <i>e.g.</i> when you mean <i>for example</i> .
Insure, ensure	<i>Insure</i> is guaranteeing life or property from risk. <i>Ensure</i> is sense of making something certain.
Irregardless	Use <i>regardless</i> .
It's, its	<i>It's</i> is the contraction <i>it is</i> . <i>Its</i> is a possessive pronoun.
Per	<i>Per</i> , a Latin word, is often used to mean "by the." Whenever possible, substitute <i>a</i> or <i>an</i> ; for example, 25 miles <i>an</i> hour, 75 cents <i>a</i> liter. Do not use <i>per</i> in the sense of "according to" or "in accordance with."
Principle, principle	<i>Principle</i> means rule, the basic law, the fundamental truth, or doctrine. <i>Principal</i> means chief or major.
Use, utilize	<i>Use</i> is almost always preferred. <i>Utilize</i> specifically means "to find a profitable or practical use for," suggesting the discovery of a new use for something.

Technical Usage

Able-bodied, healthy	Use <i>nondisabled</i> .
Above-elbow	Use <i>transhumeral</i> .
Above-knee	Use <i>transfemoral</i> .
Alzheimer's disease	Use <i>Alzheimer disease</i> (<i>Stedman's Medical Dictionary</i>).
Below-elbow	Use <i>transradial</i> .
Below-knee	Use <i>transtibial</i> .
Cronbach's α	Use <i>Cronbach α</i> .
Extremity	Use <i>limb</i> (<i>Stedman's Medical Dictionary</i>).

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

vigorous. 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

Don’t Use

According to a reliable source

Acute crisis

Appear to be

As a result of

By means of

Carry out

Collaborate together

Divide up (off)

Due to the fact that

During the time that

End result

Established a new

In a number of cases

Inasmuch as

In terms of

In the majority of instances

In those areas where

Large in size

On a timely basis

On condition that

Prior to

Do Use

Reportedly

Crisis

Appear

Because

By, with

Perform, conduct

Collaborate

Divide

Because, since, hence

While

Result

Established

Some, sometimes

Since

In, of, for,

Usually

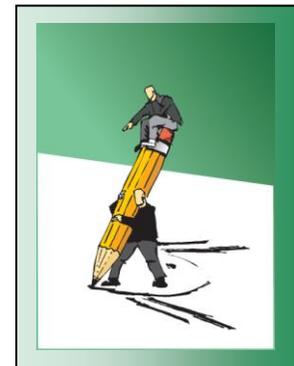
Where

Large

Fast, quickly, rapidly

If

Before



Produce an inhibitory effect on	Inhibit
Provided that	If

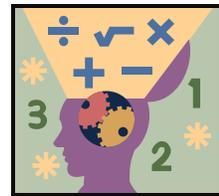
Tips and Tidbits

Abbreviations and acronyms

- ✎ Spell out 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

- ✎ Chemical symbols and units of measure should *not* be defined.
- ✎ Abbreviate when accompanied by a number; spell out when they are not.
- ✎ Spelled out unit names are lowercase (hertz, watts), even if abbreviations have uppercase (Hz, W).
- ✎ Units of measure do not need to be spelled out on first use (they are not treated like acronyms).



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.