

Chapter 5

Grammatical Structures and Stylistic Strategies



5.1 Using Present Rather Than Past Tense

When your work is published, it becomes a historical document. Years, even decades, later, people can look back at what you did at that time in that place and what you learned. The present tense might sound OK to your ear as you are writing your first draft and the project is still ongoing, but after 1 or 2 years elapses before your manuscript appears in print, and another couple of years before a reader pulls it out of a MEDLINE search, the present tense will not be correct.

Editors will insist on the past tense, so from the beginning, draft your paper in the past tense. Present tense can only be used in the introduction or the discussion to report established facts, for example, “Tuberculosis is a leading cause of death among adults in low-income countries.”

Similarly, avoid using words that imply a timeliness, such as currently, recently, lately, or in the past year. When referring to conditions at the time of writing or the time of observation, specify the month and a year. In an ongoing outbreak or pandemic, when you want to share the latest time-bound data, keep updating the figures in your subsequent drafts. Just before you submit your paper to a journal, update the figures. Do the same when resubmitting after the peer review.

Examples of the error		Alternative, better options	
X	We enroll every fourth house as part of our study.	✓	We enrolled every fourth house as part of our study.
X	Data derived from the Thatta Health System Research Project are used for the study.	✓	We used data derived from the Thatta Health System Research Project for the study.
X	Currently, the total number of lab-confirmed cases has increased to 3,167 cases with 583 deaths.	✓	In June 2021, the total number of lab-confirmed cases was 3,167 cases with 583 deaths.

5.2 Failure to Use Definite and Indefinite Articles

What is an article? An article modifies a noun. English has two articles: **the** and **a/an**.

Neither Bengali, the language of Bangladesh and West Bengal, nor Urdu, the most common language spoken in Pakistan, use definite or indefinite articles. Speakers whose first language does not use articles do not have an intuitive pattern to apply to English.

The is a definite article. It is used to refer to specific or particular nouns. For example, if I say, “Let’s read **the** book,” I mean a *specific* book.

A/an are indefinite articles. Indefinite articles modify nonspecific or nonparticular nouns. For example, if I say, “Let’s read **a** book,” I mean *any* book rather than a specific book. If I say, “I would like to go see **an** art exhibit,” I don’t have a *specific* art exhibit in mind. There are many art exhibits, and we could be talking about *any* art exhibit. The indefinite article **a** is used when the next word begins with a consonant (e.g., a paper, a writer). The indefinite article **an** is used when the next word begins with a vowel (e.g., an article, an author).

A specific error commonly made by scientific writers for whom English is a second language and whose first language does not use articles is using the word “majority” without a preceding article. Whenever you use the word “majority” in your scientific writing, ensure that an article precedes it.

Examples of the error		Alternative, better options	
X	Majority of cases (83%) took advice, while very few (17%) did not consult anybody.	✓	The majority of cases (83%) took advice, while very few (17%) did not consult anybody.
X	We reviewed the hospital logbook to determine in which subdistricts majority of patients resided.	✓	We reviewed the hospital logbook to determine in which subdistricts the majority of patients resided.
X	Majority of respondents thought the new design was an improvement.	✓	A majority of respondents thought the new design was an improvement.

5.3 Excessive Use of Passive Voice

With active voice, the subject does the action of the verb.

Active voice example: *The study team administered a questionnaire.*

The study team is the subject. The subject performed the action that is administered the questionnaire.

In passive voice, the subject is acted upon. It does not actively perform the verb. The subject is passive.

Passive voice example: *A questionnaire was administered.*

The questionnaire did not do the action of the verb. The questionnaire did not administer. It was acted upon by the verb. It was administered.

In general, writing should be composed in the active voice because of the immediacy and precision conveyed when the subject of the sentence carries out the action.

Active voice is more efficient than passive voice. It takes the reader from point A to point B in a “straight line.” Active voice usually requires fewer words. It communicates who the actor was and so provides more specificity. Active voice is closer to normal conversational speech and usually reads easier and with greater clarity. In other areas of writing, for example, business writing and journalism, active voice is almost universally preferred.

Although passive voice is used in many scientific articles, especially in the methods section, active voice is increasingly common. Although some writers use passive voice to convey the appearance of an objective, fact-based discourse, not limited to or biased by individual perspectives or personal interests, its imprecisions risks conveying that the authors are unwilling to specify who took the action.

If you are willing to use the word “we,” your manuscript will be more readable. If you can communicate the same idea in active voice or in passive voice, choose active voice. Your text is likely to have more impact.

When to Use Passive Voice It is not always an error to use passive voice. Passive voice is particularly useful, even recommended, in two situations:

1. When it is more important to draw our attention to the person or thing acted upon

Correct passive example: The results of the study will be published in the next issue of the journal.

Instead of writing: *The editor of the journal will publish the results of the study in the next issue.*

2. When the actor in the situation is not important: Passive voice is especially helpful in scientific or technical writing or laboratory reports where the process or principle being described is of ultimate importance.

Correct passive example: The first coat of primer paint was applied immediately after the acid rinse.

Instead of writing: *The first author applied the first coat of primer paint immediately after the acid rinse.*

Examples of the error		Alternative, better options	
X	A non-inferiority analysis was done.	✓	We conducted a non-inferiority analysis.
X	A sample was selected.	✓	We selected a sample.
X	Questionnaires were administered to the household head.	✓	Fieldworkers administered the questionnaire to the household head.

5.4 Improper Use of “We”

A major advantage of using active voice is that it specifies who did the action. It is important that this attribution of action be correct. A manuscript’s authors collectively write the manuscript. When the manuscript uses the word “we,” this refers to

the authors. Work that is conducted by fieldworkers or other members of the team who are not on the author line should not be attributed to the authors.

Examples of the error		Alternative, better options	
✗	We revisited households 3 and 6 months after receiving the filter to assess usage.	✓	Fieldworkers revisited households 3 and 6 months after receiving the filter to assess usage.
✗	We interviewed households at baseline and weekly from August 2005 to September 2006.	✓	Trained enumerators interviewed households at baseline and weekly from August 2005 to September 2006.

5.5 Writing from a Psychological Perspective

Science assumes that the external world, the world outside of our minds, is real. Scientific articles describe observations of this external world and attempts to integrate them into larger theoretical understanding. What interests or surprises people varies and often depends upon their personal experiences and their affection for particular hypotheses or transient fads that are quite unrelated from careful inference drawn from scientific observations. Thus, when you write emails to your family or articles for the popular press, you can include subjective considerations, for example, interests, surprises, and shock. However, when you are writing a scientific manuscript, you should focus on the ideas relevant to the issues examined in your study and the consistency of ideas and theories with available evidence.

Examples of the error		Alternative, better options	
✗	We were surprised to find that people admitted to using alcohol in a country where its use is restricted.	✓	Although alcohol sales and consumption are officially prohibited in the country, 30% of respondents reported drinking alcohol in the preceding month.
✗	The incremental cost of adding <i>Haemophilus influenzae</i> type B vaccine to the existing immunization schedules in low-income countries may not be as high as imagined.	✓	Adding <i>Haemophilus influenzae</i> type B vaccine to the existing immunization schedules in low-income countries would increase the national immunization budget by 4%.

5.6 Using Excessive Subheadings in the Discussion

For most articles presenting original research in most journals, the discussion section (unlike the methods section) is not subdivided. In standard manuscript format, a section explaining limitations and a section drawing conclusions are included in the discussion section as outlined in Appendix 6. These sections should not have a

separate header labeled “limitations,” “recommendations,” or “conclusions” unless the journal you are preparing the article for has a specific requirement for such a section.

An exception to this rule applies when a long discussion that engages two or three separate themes is easier for readers to understand if these themes are called out separately. Only use this approach if you confirm that articles published in your target journal use subheadings in the discussion.

5.7 Misplaced Modifiers

A misplaced modifier is a word or phrase that is meant to modify one object in a sentence, but its placement in the sentence implies that it modifies a different object. Sometimes, the reader can figure out what the author meant; other times, the meaning is ambiguous. Even if the reader can figure out the meaning, it is sloppy grammar that risks distracting readers.

Examples of the error	Alternative, better options
<p>X Interventions to reduce the risk of pig-related diseases can compromise the social and economic situation of pig raisers in predominately Muslim countries who may already be stigmatized.</p>	<p>✓ Interventions to reduce the risk of pig-related diseases in predominately Muslim countries can compromise the social and economic situation of pig raisers who may already be stigmatized.</p>
<p>X Then field staff selected four girls from each school for interview who had reached menarche.</p>	<p>✓ Then field staff selected four girls who had reached menarche from each school to interview.</p>
<p>X Since 2006, surveillance physicians maintained a registry of patients admitted to three Nipah surveillance hospitals meeting the encephalitis case definition: fever or history of fever with axillary temperature >38.5°C (101.3°F) with altered mental status, new onset of seizures, or new neurological deficit.</p>	<p>✓ Since 2006, surveillance physicians at the three Nipah surveillance hospitals maintained a registry of admitted patients who met the encephalitis case definition: fever or history of fever with axillary temperature >38.5°C (101.3°F) with altered mental status, new onset of seizures, or new neurological deficit.</p>

5.8 Using Nouns with Awkward Syntax in Place of Verbs

English is a flexible language. By adding a suffix, the same root word can often function as either a verb or a noun. At times, however, this flexibility generates awkward, complex constructions. Communication is optimized by succinct clear language.

Examples of the error		Alternative, better options	
X	Community members exhibited a preference for open defecation.	✓	Community members preferred defecating in the open.
X	The dominant advice for zoonotic spillover prevention is a reduction in direct physical contact with nonhuman primates.	✓	The dominant advice to prevent zoonotic spillover is to reduce direct physical contact with nonhuman primates.
X	This useless equipment represents a genuine harm to health-care facilities in low-income countries.	✓	This useless equipment harms health-care facilities in low-income countries.

5.9 Using Different Terms for the Same Object or the Same Idea

To avoid mind-numbing repetition, authors commonly vary word choice and style throughout the manuscript. Although such variation can engage readers, if it is applied to scientific terms, it risks confusing readers.

Examples of the error		Alternative, better options:	
X	Using “injuries” in one sentence, “accidents” in another sentence and “wounds” in a table.	✓	Define the term injury as “damage inflicted on the body by an external force” in the methods section. Use the term injury consistently throughout the manuscript.
X	Using “birds” in one sentence, “poultry” in another sentence and “chickens” in a table.	✓	Define the term poultry as “domesticated fowl raised for meat or eggs.” Only use the term bird or chicken if you intend a different meaning.

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