

The Write Stuff



Policing English: Gobbledegook on trial

by Richard Clark

Whilst listening to a sports commentator how many times do we hear something such as "That was a virtually faultless performance!" Those, like me, who are pedantic about the English language will mutter that a performance is either faultless or it is not, and cannot be watered down by inserting an 'almost', 'nearly' or 'virtually'. Sadly for us this practice is now common in medical writing. I would go as far as saying that most (I've resisted writing 'almost all' or 'nearly all!') medical writers have indulged in this practice at some point. To be honest this is merely an irritation and doesn't compromise the readers' understanding of the text, and so is not really a serious offence, so maybe I should move on to more serious matters.

The main purpose of a medical writer is to communicate, so clear, concise and readable writing should be the ultimate objective in our profession. So, when we transgress and start to dress-up our prose with flowery language this is – to me at least – a serious offence. This can take many forms, but one we should particularly guard against is what I call 'Police speak'. This is analogous to a policeman giving evidence in court, who, consulting his notebook says:

Sometimes I can almost hear the rustle of the policeman's notebook

"I was proceeding in a northwesterly direction when I observed the accused in the vicinity of the King's Arms public house."

This sort of statement is far from normal spoken English, is clumsy and less understandable. Sometimes when reading an article I can almost hear the rustle of the policeman's notebook pages:

"A survey encapsulating the results of recent trials verified that the administration of paracetamol elicited an enhanced response."

My own least-favoured phrase is 'negative(ly) impact'. For example:

"The administration of aspirin negatively impacted on patient mortality."

Sometimes I wish, rather uncharitably, that writers using this phrase would experience a painful 'positive impact'!

It is probably more common for a scientist or medic than a medical writer to use Police speak, but why do they do it? Possibly to make their work sound more complicated, thus inferring that they are rather clever. Sometimes language is used to distance themselves from a distasteful act such as killing an experimental animal ("The rats were sacrificed"), maybe elevating their experiment to the status of a religious ritual and themselves as a sort of high priest of science? I can understand why this sort of language is used in methods sections of

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traditional peer-reviewed journals as it has become the accepted writing style, but we as professional medical writers should be able to communicate more effectively.

A second (and mercifully less common) form of flowery language is the use of idioms in a misplaced belief that this will make 'Police speak' more understandable, or appear more friendly and accessible. The results are even more amusing than the usual straightforward gobbledegook. For example:

"In order to be considered as part of cardiologists' armamentarium, new therapies will have to pass the acid test of a large-scale, randomised double-blind trial."

Most good medical writers wouldn't open this can of worms and use idioms – not even for all the tea in China! As the words forming an idiom together have a meaning that is different from the definitions of the individual words, idioms are particularly unsuitable for an international readership. Idioms are also rather close to cliché territory.

Find a balance between plain and flowery writing style

Please do not think that I advocate a dull and unimaginative writing style; there is always a balance to be found between plain and flowery writing styles, and this balance point will shift depending on the likely readership of the article. One final thought is that whatever I'm writing I try to ensure that people don't have to read sentences more than once to understand them, which can be quite a challenge when explaining a complex situation. Thus, we are rather like journalists in this quotation:

"Literature is the art of writing something that will be read twice; journalism what will be read once." [*Enemies of Promise*, Cyril Connolly (1938)].

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Hey it's only my opinion: new local lingo

Diana Epstein was not able to contribute her opinion to this issue
because she is flitting¹ from Germany to Scotland.
Lang may yer lum reek², Diane!

(¹ translation of Glaswegian = moving house, ² long may your chimney smoke)