Writing problems in manuscripts

Part III

Lehana Thabane, PhD

October 7, 2011
Department of Anesthesia Research Group Meeting
Learning objectives

_= Writing problems about numbers_

_= Writing problems involving epidemiological terms_

_= Problems with the use of the English language_
Writing problems about numbers
Writing about numbers

• Avoid “at least 5 to 10”; use “at least 5”, since 10 is above 5.

• Avoid “range from 6 - 20”; use “vary from 6 to 20”

• Avoid the Number and its Units run-on, always use a space; drug dose exceptions.

• Avoid claiming “first paper” when no credible literature search is presented

• Drop use of “dash” between two numbers; use “,” or “;”
Writing about numbers

• Drop the “%” symbol next to numbers in a table if the heading includes it.

• Use lower case “n” for samples and upper case “N” for populations. Mostly reports are about samples, so use “n”.

• Replace “acceptable” by either “low” or “high” depending on what is appropriate.
Writing about numbers

• Insert a space between inequalities and equal sign, as well as on either side for a p value.

• Intervals such as “>5<10” should be “5 <, 10”; i.e., make all inequalities go the same way.

• Use proper short forms for units; i.e., “mg” not “mgs”. Seconds are denoted by “s”; not the plural of the unit.

• Start numbers less than 1 with “0”; i.e., “0.53” not “.53”. 
Writing about numbers

• Use “y” for “years”;
  - Some journals will take “yr” or “yrs”

• Similarly, “m” for Months”, “d” for “days”, “h” for “hours”.

• Use appropriate date format (depending on the journal)
  - Canadian: yyyy-mm-dd
  - British: dd-mm-yyyy;
  - American: mm-dd-yyyy
Writing problems about epidemiological terms
Epidemiological Terms

- Provide time frame for “Incidence”; it is the rate of conversion from non disease to disease over a time frame.

- Avoid use of “three-fold increase”. Use 3 times the baseline value.
  - Numbers > 1 increase, < 1 decrease.

- Replace “frequent” by “prevalent” or “frequency” by “prevalence”
Problems with the use of the English language
Use of the English language

- Drop “only”, it implies an unstated expectation.
- Drop “just” for the same reason.
- Drop “even” for the same reason.
- Use “fewer” for counts, “less” for amounts.
- Drop “in order” in front of “to”.
- Replace “and/or” with “or”
- Replace “failed to” by “did not”
English use

- Drop “means of” in front of “by”
- Drop “point in” in front of “time”
- Drop “way of” after “by”
- Avoid use of “obvious”, it may insult some readers!
- Make your text gender neutral; unless relevant
Avoid clutter words

• Use simple terms or words
• Avoid jargon or unnecessary words

• Examples:
  - I would appreciate your assistance
  - These graphs demonstrate that...
  - Subsequent to our meeting
  - We request that you complete the work
  - We have attempted to follow fundamental principles
  - I am frequently consulted
  - We require additional assistance
Avoid long or redundant phrases:

Examples

• “It may be expected that the prevalence of relatively mild asthma could be underestimated.”

• “The severity of this disease has been demonstrated to be associated with age.”

• “We need reliable procedures for identifying the signs and symptoms to identify patients who are at greatest risk.”

• “No clinical measures for quantifying abnormalities in the clinical setting are currently available.”
Use active voice and replace weak verbs with strong active verbs

👉 He is the author of the paper
 👍 He wrote the paper

👉 ...a position that may be of interest to you
 👍 ...a position that may interest you

👉 This causes complication in analyzing the data
 👍 This complicates the analysis
The number of subject determines the number of verb

- Use of singular verb form when it relates to the subject
  - “One of” the scientists who has ...
  - “One of” the scientists who have ...

- Use of singular verb after each, either, everyone, everybody, neither, nobody, someone

- With none use singular verb if the word means “not one” or “no one”
  - None of us is perfect
  - None of us are perfect

- Use plural verb after data
  - Data are ...
  - Data were ...
General Editing Issues

• Provide reference for terms that may be unfamiliar such as “confounding by indication”

• Replace “the same” by “similar”

• Replace “recently” by the actual date, i.e., “2006”

• Do not begin sentences with numbers; spell them out
Resources on English Writing

• Web resources
  - www.dailygrammar.com
  - http://inkspot.com: Writer’s resources on the web

• Books
Some important references

• Goldsmith CH. Writing Problems Encountered in being a Statistical Consultant for CMAJ (and how to avoid these problems in your papers!) (ppt presentation)
• Tristani C. Effective Business Writing Notes. McMaster Continuing Education (MVP Program, 2005)