# Editing Lab Reports

## Sentence-Level Style

Effective science writing requires concise, active, and direct sentences. To achieve this sentence-level style, avoid unnecessary words and phrases, use active voice whenever possible, put the main subject very early in the sentence, and don’t turn verbs into nouns.

## Avoid Unnecessary Words and Phrases

Remove or replace the following types of unnecessary words and phrases in your writing:

* Empty words and phrases that do not contribute substantially to the sentence meaning (e.g. “basic tenants of,” “as it has been shown”)
* Long strings of nouns (e.g. “the drug’s muscular and cardiorespiratory performance effects” would be more clearly phrased as “the drug affects muscular and cardiorespiratory performance”)
* Repetitive words or phrases (e.g. “illustrate/demonstrate,” “challenge/difficulties”)
* Adverbs (e.g. “very,” “really,” “quite,” “basically,” “generally”)

Don’t use multiple words when one will do. Try replacing the first phrase with the word that follows:

A majority of 🡪 Most

A number of 🡪 Many

Are of the same opinion 🡪 Agree

Less frequently occurring 🡪 Rare

All three of the 🡪 The three

Give rise to 🡪 Cause

Due to the fact that 🡪 Because

Have an effect on 🡪 Affect

## Use Active Voice Whenever Possible

Passive voice uses an Object-Verb-Subject (or just Object-Verb) word order whereas active voice uses a Subject-Verb-Object (or just Subject-Verb) order. Thus, passive voice obscures who or what is doing the action while active voice highlights who or what is doing the action. Keep in mind that while using passive voice is appropriate in the Materials and Methods section of your lab report, active voice may make for more direct and powerful writing in other sections of the report.

*Passive* *Active*

Mistakes were made by us. We made mistakes

The data were collected.                We collected the data.

## Use First Person if Appropriate

Many published scientific articles are co-authored and use the pronoun “we” to refer to the study’s researchers. If you are unsure whether to use “I” in your lab report, consult your professor.

## Put the Main Verb Early in the Sentence

Readers are waiting for the verb, so restructure any sentences that have content that comes between the subject and the verb. Compare the following sentences:

Original: One study of 930 adults with multiple sclerosis (MS) receiving care in one of the two managed care settings or in a free-for-service setting found that only two-thirds of adults that needed to contact a neurologist for an MS-related problem in the prior six months had done so.

Revised: One study found that, of the 930 adults with multiple sclerosis (MS) receiving care in one of two managed care settings or in a free-for-service setting, only two-thirds of adults that needed to contact a neurologist for an MS-related problem in the prior six months had done so.

## Don’t Turn Verbs into Nouns

Turning verbs into nouns (nominalizations) complicates and weakens sentences. Look for instances in which you use nominalizations and change these to verbs. Compare the following phrases in the left column to the edited version on the right.

Obtain estimates of 🡪 Estimate

Has seen an expansion in 🡪 Has expanded

Provides a methodological emphasis 🡪 Emphasizes methodology

Take an assessment of 🡪 Assess

Provide a review of 🡪 Review

Offer confirmation of 🡪 Confirm

Make a decision 🡪 Decide

Shows a peak 🡪 Peaks

## Revision and Editing

When revising and editing, ask yourself:

* Do my objectives match the assignment?
* Do I have all the necessary sections?
* Does each section contain the necessary information?
* Are all my paragraphs coherent and devoted to one main idea, or to one cluster of closely related ideas?
* Have I described my experiment in a way that will be clear and useful for my audience? Do I need to unpack jargon to increase the readability of my writing?

Revising vs. Editing

* Revising results in “global-level” changes to your thesis, content, structure, claims, etc.
* Editing results in “local-level” changes to syntax, grammar, word choice, punctuation, etc.
* Polishing your writing through editing enhances your credibility as a writer. It is very important, but it should be the last thing you do before submitting a paper.

Seek out feedback and revise.

* Ask a third party to assess the paper using the questions above.
* Other people will notice things about the paper that you will not.
* Other people will help you assess the paper in a way your reader will.
* Rewrite your report according to your self-assessment and feedback.