**Succinct Writing and Dealing with Jargon**

**Pre-Class Activities**

As scientists you will likely have to communicate at least some technical information to non-specific audiences, so knowing how to do this effectively is another important skill to master. In these activities, you will focus on improving the succinctness of your writing. In addition to looking at techniques and tips that will help you write clear, simple sentences, you will gain specific practice with the use of scientific jargon.

One golden tip that you should try to put into practice when editing your work is this: Read your sentences individually and ask yourself whether every single word is necessary. Often, when thinking like this, you will be able to reduce the length of your sentences and replace certain words to make things flow more smoothly.

**Questions 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5 (1 mark each, 5 marks total)**

The goal here is to make you think about every single word in your sentences, so that you write things as concisely as possible. Pay particular attention to ensuring that each sentence does not contain unnecessary words or phrases. You can often make things more concise by writing in the active voice; this will help you keep your sentences clear and concise (for more information on this, see the student resource on UBC’s website for Active and Passive Voice).

Each of the following five questions comprise a sentence (or sentences) that should be written more concisely; some could be re-written in the active voice, while others contain **unnecessary** words that could be removed.

Follow the question-specific hint to help you re-write these sentences (1 mark for each question). In all cases, you should use fewer words than in the original versions.

**Q1 (re-write in the active voice):** A new computer program has been developed by scientists that will allow companies to reduce costs and carbon emissions when they use cloud-computing facilities.

**Q2 (remove six words):** The upshot of this is that the breakthrough could cut costs in half and reduce carbon emissions by a quarter.

**Q3 (re-write in the active voice):** Previously, companies were unable to split the load between different cloud-computing servers, which was seen by computer scientists as being inefficient.

**Q4 (remove two words):** Now, by using the program ‘Stratus’, companies can split the load between servers located all around the world, which will ultimately result in more efficient use.

**Q5 (re-write the first sentence in the active voice, and remove one word from the second sentence):** It was thought by the developers that ‘Stratus’ would save considerable money. However, they were completely shocked when testing showed it could save the average company 60%.

**The Importance of Using Simple Words and Eliminating Redundant Qualifiers**

One of the greatest misconceptions in writing is the idea that you need to use intellectual-sounding words to give your work a sense of power. Your only goal should be to write something that is easily understood by whoever reads it. The best way of achieving this is to write short sentences containing words used frequently by everybody.

So, instead of ‘**elucidating** a concept to change the views of your **myopic** readers’, you should just ‘**explain** a concept to change the views of your **short-sighted** readers.’ Similarly, don’t tell your audience that your invention will have ‘universal applications across the globe’ when they already know that ‘universal’ means that something applies to every situation. Redundant qualifiers such as this should always be avoided, so, you should simply have written: ‘universal applications.’

**Question 6 (5 marks)**

Try to spot the **five** overly fancy words and/or redundant qualifiers in the paragraph below. Copy and paste the paragraph and bold these **five** words (1 mark for each correctly bolded word).

It is critically vital that researchers do not know which group of subjects receives the drug in medical trials. This is because such knowledge can cause researchers to assimilate and analyze data in a subjective way. If researchers were aware, others could then question the final results of such experiments. People would sometimes be reticent to trust the ultimate conclusions made by the researchers in these circumstances.

**Eliminating Ambiguous Words**

The goal of this activity is to highlight how important it is to eliminate ambiguous (unclear) words from your writing. A word (or phrase) is ambiguous if it could potentially mean different things to different people.

For example, the statement that ‘Male salmon grew *frighteningly* quickly’ could mean they grew much more quickly than expected, or that you were actually scared by their speed of growth. Similarly, the statement that ‘these males grew *significantly* faster than females’ is also potentially problematic because ‘significance’ means something different when it refers to a statistical comparison than when it is used to convey something noticeable; so, a scientific audience and a non-scientific audience might interpret the meaning very differently.

**Question 7 (6 marks)**

In the following short paragraph, there are **three** potentially ambiguous words. Copy and paste the paragraph and **bold** the **three** ambiguous words (3 marks). Then, copy and paste it again with edited versions of these three words. Make sure you **bold** your edits, and that they remove the ambiguity in the original paragraph (3 marks).

Many researchers working in specific science disciplines, such as genetics, have made amazing discoveries that have more useful applications in other disciplines, such as food science. For example, a recent genetic breakthrough should make it easier to see whether chocolate is as pure as the manufacturers claim. Previously, specialists estimated that up to 20% of the chocolates you see on the shelf were made using different varieties of cacao beans than was claimed. The importance of this finding is not easy to digest because it is not clear whether customers care, as long as their treats taste good. However, the new fingerprinting technique will illuminate the true origins of chocolates because scientists will be able to match protein samples to the DNA of specific cacao bean populations, and this could mean many manufacturers will face legal trouble.

**Dealing with Technical Jargon**

When we talk about ‘**technical jargon**’ we mean words, phrases, abbreviations/acronymsand/or concepts thatare only likely to make sense to someone with specialist knowledge in that field of expertise. For example, the statement that ‘Group A beetles proved to be monophagous’ would make perfect sense to ecologists or crop farmers, who know that “monophagous” means the beetles only eat one species of plant, but without specialist knowledge, you would be very confused.

There are two main ways to deal with technical jargon; you can either explain things by (**1**) using non-technical language instead, or you can (**2**) use parentheses, or commas, to explain what the jargon means. The choice between these two often comes down to circumstance.

For example, if you only need to refer to something once, you can easily use non-technical language to explain what you are trying to say. However, if you will need to refer to it again and again, it is usually smart to use parentheses or commas to explain what the problematic term means. If you do this, you can then use the originally problematic term throughout your writing in the knowledge that it will no longer be perceived as jargon to your readers.

So, if we use the ‘monophagous beetles’ as an example again, you could either write: “Group A beetles proved to only eat one plant species, so farmers can continue to grow wheat, barley…”, or, you could write: “Group A beetles proved to be monophagous (they only ate one species of plant), so farmers can continue to grow wheat, barley…”

**Questions 8 and 9 (2 marks each, 4 marks total)**

Read the statements that make up the following two questions; in each case, there is **one** piece of technical jargon that could stop non-specialist audiences from understanding what the author is trying to say (this has been **bolded** for you). For each question, your task is to re-write the sentence so as to remove the jargon. Try to write two versions of each sentence by using each of the two techniques described above (1 mark for each appropriate re-write, one using commas or parentheses, one using non-technical language). *Hint: You might need to use a search engine to understand what the jargon means yourself, before you re-write the sentences.*

**Q8:** One of the biggest environmental concerns associated with **afforested areas** is the sudden release of high concentrations of nutrients into an ecosystem following timber collection.

**Q9:** This is especially true when endangered species live in nearby **oligotrophic** rivers.

**Question 10 (5 marks)**

Choose **one** of the two journal articles below (the links to these can be accessed by clicking on each article title below, but you can also find them yourself by using a specialist search engine, such as Google scholar).

**1) Avoidance of feeding opportunities by the whelk *Buccinanops globulosum* in the presence of damaged conspecifics. (2012)**

<http://link.springer.com/article/10.1007%2Fs00227-012-2020-8>

**2) Social learning of predators by tadpoles: does food restriction alter the efficacy of tutors as information sources? (2014)**

<http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0003347213005721>

Read the **abstract** carefully and try to put the contents into your own words in a way that makes the sentences more concise (2 marks), less ambiguous (1 mark), and less jargon-heavy (1 mark). Write all this in 75 – 150 words **(**1 mark).

**\*\*\* Bring your summary to class for the in-class activity session because you will use it to work with a partner in a peer-review exercise. \*\*\***