

Removing the dead wood

Christine Møller

APMIS (Acta Pathologica, Microbiologica et Immunologica Scandinavica) and Medical Manuscripts, Copenhagen, Denmark

Correspondence to:

Christine Møller
Bjergagervej 17
3540 Lyngø
Denmark
+45 26 84 06 36
apmis@apmis.dk
medicalmanuscripts@gmail.com

Abstract

Authors are urged to write clearly, concisely and convincingly, but this can be difficult to achieve if they are unaware that they are using longwinded phrases, convoluted language and excessive hedging, also called “dead wood”. In this article, I provide some examples of how dead wood can be removed to improve readability. I also provide a sample exercise that readers can use to practice removing dead wood.

Authors are urged to write clearly, concisely and convincingly, but often they are uncertain how this best can be achieved. They may not immediately recognise longwinded phrases, convoluted language and excessive hedging.

Therefore, it is important to raise awareness. The first step is to recognise the problem. The second step is to do something about it. In our medical writing courses in Copenhagen¹ we zoom in on examples of redundancy and hesitancy in texts written by participants. We especially focus on how their writing can be improved by removing unnecessary words – the “dead wood”. We train participants to catch and remove the dead wood, to write plainly and simply, and to avoid excessive hedging. To reinforce the message, we use directed writing exercises where authentic sentences are reworked to tighten up the language.

Avoid hedging, imprecision and intensifiers

Beware of using too many hedging words, such as *may*, *might*, *can*, *could* and *possibly*. Instead,



decide what you want to say and say it! Also beware of using imprecise words, such as *quite*, *rather*, *fairly*, *relatively* and *somewhat*. They are usually redundant and best eliminated, as illustrated here: “This trend is [fairly] similar to trends found in the other Nordic countries.” Finally, beware of using intensifiers, such as *very*, *highly*, and *extremely*, which paradoxically may weaken the message: *absolutely essential* = *essential*; *very true* = *true*; *highly central* = *central*.

Make your writing snappier by removing pretentious and wordy language

Remove pretentious and wordy language to produce snappier writing. Below are some examples. In each case, use the simpler word whenever possible. For example, prefer *use* to *utilise* if there is no special emphasis, and avoid shifting from *use* to *utilise* and back again for no good reason. In some cases, there can be a valid difference in meaning between the two words. For example, researchers *use* a test, but *utilise* its special features.

- Utilise = use
- During the course of = during/while
- In spite of the fact that = although
- Owing to the fact that = because
- With the exception of = except for
- May possibly = may
- It is my understanding that = I understand that
- End result = result
- Higher in comparison to = higher than
- The general consensus is = the consensus is

- It is interesting to note that (omit?)

You can also make text snappier by removing some or all of the articles as in the following example.

Original: *The* clinical data, including *the* survival, age and sex of *the* patients, were collected from *the* hospital records.

Improved: Clinical data, including survival, age and sex of *the* patients, were collected from *the* hospital records.

Better: Clinical data, including survival, age and sex of patients, were collected from hospital records.

Examples of unclear, longwinded sentences

There is no shortage of material to illustrate unclear, longwinded, unconvincing writing. Here are a few examples and suggestions of how the writing can be improved.

Original: A rather somewhat unclear status

Better: An unclear status

Reason: This is called “multiple hedging”, which means using multiple terms to avoid saying anything definite. One hedge or indefinite word is enough. With “unclear”, “rather” and “somewhat” become redundant.

Original: The majority of studies ...

Better: Most studies ...

Reason: More words tire the reader, so it’s better to use shorter expressions when you can.

Original: It is absolutely necessary that the

suggested guidelines for HIV-1 should be strictly followed.

Better: The guidelines for HIV-1 should be strictly followed.

Reason: Several things can be improved to make this sentence easier for the reader. First, remove “it is” whenever you can. Second, “absolutely necessary” can be simplified to “should” or perhaps “must”. Finally, guidelines are always suggestions, so “suggested” is redundant.

Original: Alcohol use is responsible for increased illness and death worldwide.

Better: Alcohol is responsible for increased illness and death worldwide.

Reason: “Use” is redundant.

Original: The landmark analysis was performed to illustrate...

Better: The landmark analysis illustrates...

Reason: The expression “performed to” is unnecessary and makes the phrase longwinded.

Original: The objective of this study was to investigate the relationship between gene copy number and clinical outcome.

Better: We investigated the relationship between gene copy number and clinical outcome.

Reason: Using the first person (we) is acceptable and makes this sentence more direct, shorter, and therefore easier to read.

Original: A substantial amount of evidence has accumulated that...

Better: Substantial evidence has accumulated that...

Reason: “Amount of” is redundant as “substantial” obviously indicates an amount.

Original: A pale cyanotic heart musculature was visually observed distal to the ligature.

Better: A pale cyanotic heart musculature was observed distal to the ligature.

Reason: “Visually” is redundant when using the word “observed”.

Original: One possible explanation for the altered cytokine expression could be that the adenovirus infection could cause cell degeneration and death, and the products of this process might influence cytokine production in the remaining cells.

Better: One explanation for the altered cytokine expression could be that the adenovirus infection causes cell degeneration and death, and the products of this process influence cytokine production in the remaining cells.

Reason: This is another case of multiple hedges. A single hedge (“could be”) is sufficient.

An example of how to remove dead wood and improve clarity

During our courses, sentences often undergo several rewrites. Here is a sentence we worked on in class. The author went away, reflected on our suggestions, and subsequently decided to make further changes. We corresponded back and forth until we reached as far as version 4, and version 5 is actually the final published version.

Version 1 (original): Chest drains are routinely used in the post-operative setting in thoracic surgery, although their use after wedge resection by video-assisted thoracoscopic surgery (VATS) is not evidence based.

Version 2: Chest drains are used routinely after wedge resection by video-assisted thoracoscopic surgery (VATS), although such use is not evidence based.

Reason: I removed “in the post-operative setting in thoracic surgery” because it was not necessary to make the point.

Author’s comment: ‘It sounds much more fluent like that. As a spinoff I am considering changing it further.’

Version 3: Chest drains are used routinely after wedge resection by video-assisted thoracoscopic surgery (VATS), although such use is based largely on tradition and not evidence.

Author’s reason: ‘I replaced “not evidence based” with “based largely on tradition and not evidence” to be more specific.’

Author’s additional comment: ‘If I prefer, can I write “their” instead of “such” or is it too Danish?’

Version 4: Chest drains are used routinely after wedge resection by video-assisted thoracoscopic surgery (VATS), although their use is based largely on tradition and not evidence.

Reason: I replaced “such” with “their” as suggested by the author.

Version 3:² Chest drains are used routinely after wedge resection by video-assisted thoracoscopic surgery (VATS), although this practice is based largely on tradition rather than evidence.²

Author’s reason: I replaced “their use” with “this practice” to be more precise. I thought it sounded better, since it refers to the standard practice described in the beginning of the sentence.

Our concerted efforts culminated in a clearer, more concise, and more convincing sentence.

This is just one sentence. It is, however, the opening sentence of the abstract and therefore important. It gives the reader a good first impression. Meticulously checking the entire manuscript for dead wood and tightening up the language leaves the reader with a good overall impression.

Acknowledgements

Thank-you roll call: Joan Waddell, Gevene Hertz, Philip Hollingbery and Stephen Gilliver. I would also like to thank Bo Laksáfoss Holbek for kindly providing the wedge resection example.

References

1. Møller C. New medical writing course in Copenhagen: Increasing chances of publication for non-native speakers. *The Write Stuff*. 2007;16(1):8–9.
2. Laksáfoss Holbek B, Jessen Hansen H, Kehlet H, Horsleben Petersen R. Thoracoscopic pulmonary wedge resection without post-operative chest drain: an observational study. *Gen Thorac Cardiovasc Surg*. 2016;64(10):612–7.

Author information

Christine Møller BA, Dip Ed, started her career as a Liberal Studies lecturer in the UK. After moving to Denmark she taught English, both language and literature, and then worked for the British Council. Currently, she is Assistant Editor of *APMIS (Acta Pathologica, Microbiologica et Immunologica Scandinavica)*. She is also Director of Medical Manuscripts and teaches courses in medical writing.

Members of EMWA are welcome to use these examples, which are largely taken from draft texts written by PhD students. An enlightening discussion is guaranteed.

Exercise: Remove the dead wood

As well as discussing examples of redundancy in students' texts, we include short exercises where we rework verbose sentences to make them clearer and easier to read. Often, there is no ideal solution: how much participants wish to remove or change is open to discussion – and it is the discussion that is the most valuable and enlightening part of the exercise.

In the exercise, ruthlessly remove all unnecessary words and also check that you are not inadvertently repeating yourself. For example, you do not need to say something was *red in colour*, *round in shape*, etc. You also do not need to say the location was *marked with a marker*. Your work will be much improved if you omit all such forms of roundabout phraseology. Write *we studied* in preference to *we carried out a*

Answer key

Below are my suggested improvements.

1. **Original:** For the purpose of better understanding the disease...

Better: To better understand the disease...

Reason: "For the purpose of better understanding" is a longwinded way of saying "To better understand".

2. **Original:** So far there have been conducted three examinations.

Improved: So far there have been three examinations.

Better: So far three examinations have been conducted.

Reason: "Conducted" is redundant when coupled with "there have been". Also, it is often preferable to eliminate there is/there are/there have been, etc. from the beginning of a sentence.

3. **Original:** Breast cancer is the most common cancer among adult women.

Better: Breast cancer is the most common cancer among women

Reason: Women are always adults, so "adult" is redundant.

4. **Original:** Prompt early treatment with appropriate antimicrobial drugs improves the patient's chances of survival considerably.

Improved: Prompt treatment with appropriate antimicrobial drugs improves the patient's chances of survival considerably.

Better: Prompt treatment with antimicrobial drugs improves survival considerably.

Reason: "Prompt" is redundant when coupled with "early". Also, "the patient's chances of survival" is a longwinded way of saying "survival".

study. Longwinded introductions, such as *It is to be recognised that*, can likewise be skipped; get straight to the point. Remember: less is more!

How might you improve the following?

1. For the purpose of better understanding the disease...
2. So far there have been conducted three examinations.
3. Breast cancer is the most common cancer among adult women.
4. Prompt early treatment with appropriate antimicrobial drugs improves the patient's chance of survival considerably.
5. During the trial a monthly newsletter with trial updates was sent out and published on the trial website.
6. We found that over-expression of p53 is

Finally, "appropriate" is meaningless – are patients likely to be given inappropriate treatment?

5. **Original:** During the trial a monthly newsletter with trial updates was sent out and published on the trial website.

Better: During the trial a monthly newsletter with updates was sent out and published on the website.

Reason: "Trial" only needs to be said once; the second and third uses of "trial" are redundant.

6. **Original:** We found that over-expression of p53 is associated with shorter survival, after adjustment was performed for several potential confounding factors.

Better: We found that over-expression of p53 is associated with shorter survival, after adjustment for several potential confounding factors.

Reason: Empty verbs such as *performed*, *carried out*, etc. that have little or no meaning are best avoided.

7. **Original:** It is a well-known fact that prostaglandin E₂ plays a role in pain processing.

Improved: It is well known that prostaglandin E₂ plays a role in pain processing.

Better: Prostaglandin E₂ plays a role in pain processing.

Reason: "Fact" is redundant when you say "it is well known". But better, just state what is – you do not need to say that something is well known.

8. **Original:** Editorial concerns are highlighted with turquoise colour. Changes related to concerns of Reviewer #1 are highlighted with green colour. Changes related to concerns of Reviewer #2 are highlighted with yellow colour.

associated with shorter survival, after adjustment was performed for several potential confounding factors

7. It is a well-known fact that prostaglandin E₂ plays a role in pain processing.
8. Editorial concerns are highlighted with turquoise colour. Changes related to concerns of Reviewer #1 are highlighted with green colour. Changes related to concerns of Reviewer #2 are highlighted with yellow colour. Deleted passages are marked with red colour.
9. It seems as though it has become evident that more emphasis needs to be placed on postgraduate training.
10. Thus, AA staining might be used as a useful immunological marker for the prediction of poor prognosis in renal cell cancer.

Deleted passages are marked with red colour.

Better: Editorial concerns are highlighted in turquoise. Changes related to concerns of Reviewer #1 are highlighted in green. Changes related to concerns of Reviewer #2 are highlighted in yellow. Deleted passages are marked in red.

Reason: Turquoise, green, yellow and red *are* colours; adding "colour" is unnecessary.

9. **Original:** It seems as though it has become evident that more emphasis needs to be placed on postgraduate training.

Improved: It is evident that more emphasis needs to be placed on postgraduate training.

Better: More emphasis needs to be placed on postgraduate training.

Reason: If the author doesn't get to the point in the first five words there is a strong chance the reader will move on to something else.

10. **Original:** Thus, AA staining might be used as a useful immunological marker for the prediction of poor prognosis in renal cell cancer.

Better: Thus, AA staining might be a useful immunological marker for predicting poor prognosis in renal cell cancer.

Reason: "Used" and "useful" are redundant, and "for the prediction of" is a longwinded way of saying "for predicting"

Working through these authentic examples with the goal of removing the dead wood and tightening up the language is a proven way of achieving clearer, more concise, and more convincing writing. This is the kind of snappy writing – straightforward not longwinded; direct not convoluted – that readers appreciate.