Keeping Scholarly Papers Simple

Amanda Pradhani Yanwar[1], John Morris[2], Jirarat Sitthiworachart[3]

[1] Ph D Student, School of Industrial Education and Technology, King Mongkut's Institute of Technology Ladkrabang, Bangkok 10520, Thailand

[2] Associate Professor, Faculty of Engineering, Mahasarakham University, Thailand

[3] Associate Professor, School of Industrial Education and Technology, King Mongkut'"s Institute of Technology Ladkrabang, Bangkok 10520, Thailand

Correspondence: John Morris, Associate Professor, Faculty of Engineering, Mahasarakham University, Thailand.

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Abstract

Many published papers are difficult to read because their authors overuse words that are not widely understood or use new 'invented' terms that we could manage without. The first category includes many words that, although they have been used for centuries, are now uncommon and cause readers to pause and search dictionaries to continue. The second contains words that were invented to elevate the significance of claimed new approaches: they commonly exaggerate importance with prefixes like 'hyper-' and 'meta-' or adding suffixes like '-ize' or '-logy'. Whilst many of them were designed to simplify writing, a simple experiment – counting the syllables in the new vs an original simpler form using existing vocabulary – showed that most of them did not achieve any benefit and should not be used -- if you want your paper to be widely read. The use of old, but now uncommon, words is more problematical, but writers should be guided by a desire to have their papers read quickly and easily to completion – by both native and non-native speakers; they should proof-read papers with this criterion uppermost. We added a particular caution about the over-use of acronyms, which may add more confusion than the space saved. Overall, the "Keep It Simple" principle is important in academic writing: it keeps the content accessible to both native and non-native speakers.

Keywords: academic writing, technical writing, verbosity, over-complex vocabulary, simple vocabulary, invented vocabulary

1. Introduction

This paper was partly driven by the discovery of a journal entitled "Journal of Ecohumanism (Maryani et al., 2025)" which appeared in a random search of the web. Naturally, this challenged us to ask – what does ecohumanism mean? It was clearly derived from the Greek οικοσ, meaning household, commonly used in 'ecology' (the study of the environment in which we live) and humanism, from the Latin *humanus*, referring to a man, but to understand the significance of the new term, we had to resort to Google, where we discovered that it was a 2002 addition to English in Tapp's book (Tapp, 2002), where the way humans relate to their environment is discussed. Further study showed various other, not very clear, interpretations of the term (Lewis, 2012), which led us to immediately add it to our list of "Words to Throw Away" (Yanwar & Morris, 2024). In that list, we noted that English has already an enormous collection of words: the Oxford dictionary's 1989 edition, covering 20 volumes, has 291,500 entries in 21,730 pages (Simpson & Weiner, 1989). Merriam-Webster's American version claims 470,000 entries (*Merriam-Webster's Dictionary of English Usage*, 1994). These counts need to be compared with estimates of vocabularies of well-educated speakers: in the 1600s, Shakespeare was credited with ~34000 words (Spevack, 1974) and Brysbaert et al. (2016) estimated that modern 20 yr old native speakers counted 27,000 to 52,000 lemmas (uninflected root words). Thus, it is reasonable to assume that a well-read author will need a vocabulary of 30,000 or more words. Clearly, this is a massive load on our brains. Further, this load increases as new words are added, almost daily, to the vocabularies that active researchers must handle. Academic writing scholars have long emphasized that clarity, conciseness and reader engagement are key features of effective scholarly writing. Sword (2009) observed that successful academic writers present complex ideas clearly and concisely, show originality and creativity, avoid excessive jargon, and use concrete examples to engage readers. These qualities not only improve readability, but also help writers connect more effectively with their audience. However, her analysis of 100 peer-reviewed articles across six leading higher education journals revealed that very few authors consistently demonstrated these qualities, and almost none displayed all of them simultaneously. One explanation for this, as Pinker (2014) suggested, is the "curse of knowledge": writers often assume their readers have the same understanding, vocabulary and ability to fill in missing steps, which leads them to omit explanations, neglect necessary details and overuse jargon, ultimately producing writing that is difficult for others to follow. Hyland (2005) added that effective academic writing must anticipate the reader's perspective, presenting information in ways that feel familiar and contextually meaningful; comprehension depends not only on clear presentation of information, but also on the writer's ability to project a shared understanding. Similarly, Chauhan (2022) stated that effective academic writing minimizes complexity, redundancy and jargon to improve understanding. In line with these views, a key thesis of this paper is that many words in academic writing are unnecessary. Kojima and Popiel (2024) suggested removing redundant and unnecessary words

improves clarity without weakening meaning. Even in technical contexts, ideas can often be expressed effectively using existing vocabulary. Yet new terms are frequently added for reasons unrelated to clear communication – such as making writing appear more elaborate or 'trendy,' or from the belief that editors expect more technical-sounding language – which can make texts harder to understand. A further thesis is that we need to remember that, nowadays, perhaps half or more of our readers are not native speakers, but need to read papers in English. If we want to communicate our ideas effectively to them, we cannot have them jumping to their favorite translator regularly. Further, although 2025 translators tend to translate simple ideas well, they are still not perfect and will often fail miserably well confronted with a complex technical paper. The simple approach to word choice promoted here will ensure more readers fully understand the new ideas in your paper.

1.1 Verbosity versus Vocabulary

Verbosity – or simply writing too much – is a common failure in technical writing. It has long been criticized – from Hesiod (700 BC) to Polonius in Hamlet (Shakespeare, 1600) and many others: many guides for conciseness and clarity are readily available, e.g. Greene (2013). However, this paper focused on individual words that are best replaced with simpler ones. It makes only minor contributions to reduced verbosity with some examples of words that should simply be deleted entirely, e.g. 'performed.' Flesch-Kincaid metrics (McClure, 1987), which disparage both verbosity and over-complex words, where used only to measure word complexity.

This paper took examples from papers published in readily available and commonly read academic journals in the Scimago Journal & Country Rank (SJR) lists. The analysis focused on how language was used in those papers, particularly specific vocabulary choices, and how these choices shape meaning, tone and effect. Crystal (2008) explained that stylistics investigated the ways language varies in use, often with specific attention to literary style. Similarly, Leech and Short (2007) noted that style refers to the characteristic manner of using language, shaped by context, purpose, and individual choice.

This paper is divided into six sections. Section 2 deals with relatively unusual words: these are ones that a native speaker might naturally use because of familiarity with it and simply does not think it will be a problem to others. The **third**, and largest section, discusses complex words that were added to papers unnecessarily, often for reasons that unrelated to clarity or need for precise communication. These are generally multi-syllabic terms that have been invented and used by writers that expect these terms to be widely understood. **Section 4** sets out some examples of words that are genuinely 'new', without existing short replacements using simple words, are needed in modern communications and are not discouraged in this paper. Section 5 briefly discusses literary use – things that liven up our language and its literature - but are excluded from this paper. The final section summarizes and includes a plea to new technical writers to remember **all** their readers, particularly those struggling with English!

2. Words to be Avoided by Native Speakers

Many published papers suggest that their authors believed that their papers will be improved by the use of elaborate and 'grand' words: it has also been reported that some believe that editors require this. This is patently wrong: if you use simple, but correct, words in any context, readers will simply continue (but faster now!) without even noticing. Gilliver (2015) noted that plain language contributes to readability, or the ease with which a text can be read and understood. Ryba et al. (2021) found that presenting readers with accessible and engaging writing, rather than traditional academic styles, significantly improved readability, understanding and reader confidence. Similarly, Kojima and Popiel (2024) noted that clear and concise writing improved readability and benefited both authors and readers. Several organizations now actively promote 'Plain English', e.g. (Plain Canada Clair, n.d.): the Canadians even promote the concept in both official languages. In the United States, a requirement for plain English was also written into legislation (Plain Writing Act of 2010, 2010).

A very simple example of the use of a pompous word when a simpler one would suffice is writing 'employed' when 'used' is sufficient. Generally, 'employed' should only be used when discussing people, e.g. your assistants in a research project, because 'used' has a very bad connotation here: it would imply use improperly, whereas employed suggests they were paid for their work. Similarly, we observed 'utilized' often: although English scholars will understand that 'utilized' has a special connotation – used for some useful purpose, in most experimental papers, it is obvious from context that something is essential to the project and therefore useful, so 'used' is sufficient. Therefore, when describing the tools used in a project, 'used' is simpler and should be preferred.

In Table 1, we collected a set of words found in published papers and their simpler equivalents that could have been used in their place. Part of this list was published by us previously (Yanwar & Morris, 2024), but, since this style of abuse of the language, regrettably remains very common, we were able to add many more examples for this paper! Further, it is important to note that most of these words were contributed by the lead author of this paper – an Indonesian graduate student and English teacher, who would be considered fluent by native speakers: however, she had to resort to her dictionary to understand them.

The notes in Table 1 indicate that many of these words have been used in English for centuries and many of them will be understood with no effort by native speakers. However, there are simpler alternatives that non-native speakers will have met in high school English classes, so that they will be able to read with no delay for dictionary searches.

Table 1. Words to avoid

Complex word	Simple word	Notes – Source or etymology
acumen	intelligence	ca. 1530, from Latin acumen – a point, sting
aforementioned	previously	ca. 1580, but now restricted to legal use
alleviate	decrease	ca. early 15c. from Latin ad + levis, light
argot	jargon, dialect	1860, from jargon of Parisian thieves
array	collection	Old Frency areer prepared Modern – formal mathematical use - collection
performed	analysed analyzed	Usually simply not needed, e.g. instead of "performed an analysis," use a verb "analysed" instead
categorized	divided into x classes grouped assigned to x classes	Several simpler alternatives - most followed by an explicit statement of the number of classes
conjecture	assume	ca. late 14c
daunting	difficult	ca. 1300, old French, danter
discrepancy	difference	ca. mid 15c from "dis-" apart +
	distinction	"crepare" to rattle, crack
disparity	difference, distinction	ca. 1550
drawback	disadvantage limitation	ca. 1720
elucidate	make clear, clarify	ca. 1560, from French, élucider, make light
elude	avoid	1530, from Latin ex (out) + ludere (play)
employed utilized	used	See text
emulate	copy and improve	ca. 1580, from Latin *aemulatus*, rival
intertwined	interconnected	ca. 1300, Latin *inter* among + old Norse, *tvinna*, to double
performed	analysed analyzed	Usually not needed - instead of "performed an analysis," use a verb "analysed" instead
prevail	dominate	ca. 1400, from old French *prevaleir*, be stronger
ponder	consider	ca. mid-14c from Latin, *ponderare*, to weigh
prominence	importance	ca. 1590
sophisticated	advanced modern; up-to-date	ca. 1400 as "impure"; ca. 1500 with current meaning
sparse	few	~1727, from Latin, *sparsus*, scattered
subsumed	included in classified	ca. 1530
transgression	mistake, error	14 c., old French, *trans* = across + *gressus* = walk
unraveled	clarified, resolved	1603, from *un* + ravel from Dutch, *ravelen* = tangled
unveil	reveal	ca. 1590

Interestingly, most of the words that were found in our search for words, that are easily replaced with common words, where first reported in English several centuries ago, i.e. they cannot be described as 'modern' inventions: this distinguishes them clearly from the 'inventions' of the next section. However, they were flagged as troublesome by one of us. On the contrary, a native speaking colleague objected to the list as too prescriptive: she did not want us to discourage her from using them.

This highlights a key problem for native speakers writing for international journals: they should attempt to make papers as readable as possible by as wide an audience as possible and take care to introduce as few 'likely to be difficult' words as possible. Realistically, we cannot expect a native speaker to know which of the 30,000 + words in his or her current vocabulary will slow a reader down, but actively searching for suitable simpler synonyms will assist: Table 1 just sets out some examples. Regrettably native speaking colleagues may not be helpful here: they may pass over all the words in Table 1 (and the large collection that should be added to it!) as common and should be understood. However, Table 1 shows that a fluent, but not native speaker may be slowed down by some weak choices.

One suggestion from this work is that neither your native-speaking colleagues nor professional proof-readers are your best proof-readers! You should seek the help of classmates at similar levels, carefully record anything that they could not instantly understand and seek synonyms for those words. Native speakers could also ensure that their papers reach a wider audience, by calling on foreign students, who are brave and not overawed by their professors, to similarly mark words that they did not immediately understand.

A final observation from Table 1 notes that many 'difficult' words had Latin roots (which includes French words as most are ultimately derived from Latin roots): only two words showed a Nordic root. This leads to a suggestion that those teaching English for technical writers might include some basic Latin roots in their curricula. This would enable research students to have a reasonable chance of guessing the likely meaning of an unfamiliar English word – enough to allow continued understanding of a conference presentation, when there is not time to call on Google to interpret. However, this is a topic for future research.

3. Invented Words

Technology advances rapidly and the language needs to advance too: there is a need to invent new words to handle new concepts. However, many of these 'new' words are invented for weak reasons. The worst[1] of these is the desire to elevate the novelty of an idea by wrapping it in new terms. Commonly prefixes, e.g. hyper- and meta-, are used to make an idea appear more important. Another technique adds a suffix - 'ization' (using the basic suffix, "ize" from the Greek "-izein," to make) to make even a simple step sound grander, e.g. 'alkalization' is a process to make something 'more alkaline', but any Chemistry 101 student, in any country, would probably read 'increase the pH' faster. Another 'elevating' suffix is '-logy' (derived from the Greek logos, study) and appearing, usefully, in many fundamental disciplines – 'zoology, ecology, physiology, etc.', but now applied in many minor disciplines to make them appear more significant. Some examples include 'codicology" (a very minor study of parts of books), 'eschatology' (a branch of theology dealing with death): extreme examples, include agathology (science of goodness) and neuroendocrinoimmunolgy (collected for the benefit of Scrabble players among 1280 'logy' words (Wikipedia, 2025)). However, luckily this last - 23 character! - word seems to have disappeared even from Google searches, and writers of useable papers need to rely on its simpler components! The list of over-used '-logies' included 'methodology,' which should not be used to simply describe the steps followed in an experiment – a methodology should describe a new strategy for performing experiments. In most papers, the experimental section should start with 'Methods.'

In our previous article (Yanwar & Morris, 2024), we listed prefixes used to elevate words to new statuses. This included

Table 2. Invented words

Prefix	Meaning	Notes
meta-	model or example	Now commonly (mis-)used for any list
hyper-	above or extremely	Properly used in hyperspace, but misused to make anything larger
bio-	biological or natural	Unnecessarily added to attract environmentalist
Suffix		
-ization	make	To elevate any process to a science

In that study, we hypothesized that the new, more complex word would actually make it easier for readers by reducing the time to pronounce the new word. Syllable counts, following Flesch-Kincaid metrics (McClure, 1987), were based, informally, on counting the vowel sounds in each word, counting combinations or diphthongs ('ai,' 'ea') as a single syllable, but since the 'ion' in operation is pronounced as two sounds, we counted it as two. Surprisingly, we found that, using simpler existing terms, although it increased the word count, it did not always reduce the syllable count, e.g. 'alkalization' requires six syllables, whereas 'increase the pH' requires only five! Similarly, replacing 'misinformation' (now regrettably common in political discourse) with 'misleading' also saves three syllables – six versus three. Minor variations, caused by country or dialect variations, were not considered: for this study, variations in one or two syllables were considered irrelevant, in many cases, even if more than one word was needed to replace a complex term, the syllable count varied little and it was generally easier to pronounce, especially for a writer struggling in English as a second language.

A reviewer of this paper pointed out that some of these more elaborate or complex terms actually have specific meaning and thus cannot always be replaced by the simple versions that we propose here: we note that this assertion is sometimes correct, but strongly recommend that writers check carefully to ensure that the more complex term is actually needed and would improve clarity. A classic example of this is noted earlier: very few writers, especially technical ones, were, when challenged, unable to explain why 'utilize' should be used instead of 'use'.

Here, to reinforce our thesis, that many words found in the literature are simply not needed and do not contribute to improved communication, we added more examples of "(corporate) crimes" listed in the Financial Times "Guffipedia" (Kellaway, 2016), omitting 'corporate' as these crimes are found in all disciplines. However, 'socio-' and 'eco-' as prefixes are now common and special groups were assigned to them. Examples with '-ize' (make) suffixes were common too, generally best replaced by simple direct verbs.

A general group of words with no specific prefixes or suffixes followed.

[1] We started to add 'egregious' here – until we realized that using it would just be an example of the practices we want to discourage here. 'Egregious' refers to something particularly bad, derived from the Latin e = out and grex – flock, i.e. something out of the flock or very unusual.

Table 3. Invented words to avoid

Invented word	Syl cnt	Simple English equivalent	Syl cnt	Use
“eco-“ group				
ecohumanism	5	ecology and society	7	See notes in the introduction
“socio-” group				
sociopragmatics	6	social language use	6	
sociopolitical	7	political	4	Pointless – politics and society are rarely separated
trans- group				
transnormativity		To avoid offense or political failures, writers need to choose words appropriate to the context here		
transgenderism				
-logy group				
methodology, agathology, scientology, ...	5	method	2	See notes: more than 1000 ‘-logies’ have been found in the literature
-ization group				
compatibilization	8	make molecules compatible	8	chemistry – optimal words depend on compounds
territorializing	7	organized with boundaries	8	
mediatize	4	reconcile	3	
materialize	5	make visible	4	
neuroticization	6	make neurotic	4	
General group – some random examples of thousands possible				
enantiopure	5	single enantiomer	6	chemistry
polycondensate-coated	7	polymer coated	5	chemistry
performative	4	used/effective	2/3	
counternarratives	6	opposing arguments	6	
contextualized	6	moved into context	6	contextual ca. 15 c, “improved” since 1822
functionalization	6	adding a functional group	7	even in chemical papers plain English works better
animacy	4	alive	2	linguistics - living
				biology – simply alive!
cooperativity	7	working together/ cooperation	5	

Note: Some of the substitutions suggested in this table need to be adjusted to the part of speech required by the content: this may affect the syllable count by no more than two syllables, but, in every case, pronunciation will remain easier. This table is also not a full thesaurus and other simpler forms may be more suitable, but replacing the target word will invariably improve writing: for example, our simplification of ‘contextualized’ is arguably not precise and may need expansion, e.g. “study something in a particular context” or even using the 1822 meaning ‘improved’! However, writers should be avoiding the more complex form and replacing it with, if necessary, a string of simple words.

4. Genuinely New Words

This article should not be read as a prescription to avoid new words. Technical advances justify new words, possibly daily! Further, many phenomena were driven by changes in our lives. For example, ‘fatbergs’ (Wallace et al., 2017) did not exist until population growths caused sewer systems to fail. The same paper also generated a new meaning of ‘fog’ – capitalized in their paper - but likely to become an ordinary word in the new future as the phenomena are unlikely to disappear soon.

Although this article focused on use in technical writing, including both physical and social sciences, even non-technical or political or social developments add to our language with words like ‘blog’ and ‘filibuster.’ However, proponents of new words should not be permitted to use them to make propositions more grandiose than is justified. Apart from cluttering our already large language unnecessarily, it, at best, slows, but may completely block, progress and use of the new concept, simply because busy readers did not take time to study and understand it. Thus, a ‘KEEP IT SIMPLE’ approach is needed, but the examples we presented here show that it is often ignored.

4.1 Acronyms

In some papers, the new technical terms are sufficiently long that, without acronyms, papers would become very long-winded and dull to read through endless repetitions of long complex terms. However, some writers tend to overuse them and make papers confusing to read.

There is an excellent site, www.acronymfinder.com, which lists many commonly used acronyms and their definitions. As an example, if we take a convenient, short and easily pronounced acronym – PET, we find 70 possible interpretations. So, if you use it in your paper, your reader, who may be very familiar with one of the 69 other meanings, will have to mentally switch to your meaning, perhaps many times in your paper, and be slowed down. Alternatively, although you clearly defined it at the start and used in rarely early in your paper, your reader, having forgotten your definition, may discover it later, when his or her brain has switched back to their previous, completely irrelevant, understanding of it.

Thus, a careful writer, will not use an acronym blindly and will check (a) that is necessary, (b) that it will make reading easier, (c) will not cause readers to misunderstand any part of a paper and (d) make sure the acronym is defined at first use. Checking new ones against the acronym finder is strongly recommended, as it often generates surprises. Because of this, new, short and simple acronyms are often better replaced by the full English phrase: do not expect your reader to learn a new language to understand your work.

5. Literary Use

Of course, poets, novelists and dramatists regularly ignore any ideas put forward here – following Humpty Dumpty

> "When I use a word," Humpty Dumpty said in rather a scornful tone,
>
> it means just what I choose it to mean neither more nor less.
>
> Alice through the looking glass *(Carroll, 2008)*

we allow them to break the rules and enliven our lives. Thus, very little written in this article applies to them!

Although we observed that a famous English politician, Benjamin Disraeli, mocked his political opponent, William Gladstone, describing him as:

> A sophistical rhetorician, inebriated with the exuberance of his own verbosity, and gifted with an egotistical imagination that who can at all times command an interminable and inconsistent series of arguments to malign an opponent and glorify himself. (Monypenny & Buckle, 1929)

and note that Disraeli might turn his acerbic tongue onto writers of many phrases found in recent papers too.

6. Conclusion

A key thesis of this work is simplicity is an important attribute of a good research paper. Einstein is widely quoted (although apparently slightly paraphrased) as having noted:

"Everything should be made as simple as possible, but no simpler."

Thus, the major contributions of this paper include showing that

1) papers can be made easier (and faster) to read by substituting more easily understood words,

2) many words are used simply 'for effect' – to make the paper appear grander, but not to improve comprehension and often have the opposite effect, i.e. they slow readers with no benefit,

3) many overly complex words are simply not needed,

4) acronyms must be used carefully, and

5) although simplicity has been promoted for over two thousand years now, many failures to learn these lessons, indicate that they need to be reinforced.

Thus, we showed in Section 3 on "Invented Words" how many unnecessarily long and complex words can be replaced by simpler ones to improve the transmission of your work to new readers. These words rarely enhance the propagation on new ideas – on the contrary they may damage them by leaving papers ignored by busy readers. All writers, in both scientific and humanities disciplines, should not be trying to show their mastery of English, but, rather, to be understood by a wide audience. If you believe your concept is truly novel, try to find a phrase using common words, already known to all readers, that explains it: only if this search fails, devise a new term that captures the essence of the new word. Section 2 on "Words to Avoid" is more problematic. Many of the words there have actually been part of English for centuries, although many have become rare in an evolving language, native speakers may inadvertently use them, because they best capture the intended meaning or simply because they have observed them many times already! This remains a challenge to all writers, who should follow Einstein's philosophy. The section on acronyms is related to comments on invented words and should be read as a caution – if you want your paper to be read quickly. Writers can use acronyms to make their papers more concise and academically appropriate. However, they should avoid overusing them, as excessive acronyms can confuse readers. Each acronym should be defined at its first use, and then used consistently throughout the rest of the paper. Therefore, good writers will use acronyms carefully to enhance clarity and readability, but not simply to save space.

Finally, we repeat that aspiring poets, novelists and dramatists should ignore this paper, although we encourage them to follow Disraeli and mock abuses found in technical papers.

An overriding thesis of this paper is that you should KEEP IT SIMPLE and particularly remember that many (or perhaps most) of your readers are not native English speakers: write for them!

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Authors' contributions

APY contributed the title, the literature search and Table 1. JM collected the crimes listed in Table 2 and added other historical notes. JS supervised the project and revised the final manuscript. All authors read and approved the final version of the manuscript.

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