Precision: Writing Precisely for Clarity

Precision Explained

Ambiguities in writing cause confusion and may prevent a reader from grasping crucial aspects of the methodology and synthesis.

- Would passengers please toss any rubbish they have in the bins, around the boat.
- No refunds, but we're willingly exchanged for you.
- Cree Indians were a monotonous culture until French and British settlers arrived.
- The dialectical interface between neo-Platonists and anti-disestablishment Catholics offers an algorithm for deontological thought.

Rules for Writing Precisely for Clarity

Choose word/phrases carefully

- Misspelled Word
    - The Iroquois trace decent through women.
    - The Iroquois trace descent matrilineally.
- Incorrect Methodological/Theoretical Terms
    - This paper describes the daily life of store owners.
    - This paper describes the culture scene of convenience store owners.
- Spelling/Grammar Errors
    - Do not use words with witch you are unfamiliar.

Stick with the same word/phrase

- The study... the research... the project...
- The store... the shop... the service...
- The culture scene... the microculture...

Avoid figurative language

- Quantify
    - The informant works in extreme conditions where he is constantly assaulted with a wall of sound.
    - The informant's work environment exceeds an average of 50 decibels.
- Localized Metaphors
    - The coin was as yellow as a blackbird's foot and was worth a lot of money.
    - The gold colored coin was worth ten dollars.

Choose an appropriate level of detail

- Example of an informant who works at a supermarket.
    - The informant is about forty years of age, bald, wears glasses, dresses in normal clothes, likes reading comic books, walks quickly and speaks with a British accent.
    - The informant is about forty years old and speaks with a British accent.

Quantify

- If someone dislikes interviewing they may say...
    - I conducted many interviews. (they completed three)
- Avoid the following words
    - many, few, a lot, several, high, low, short, tall, wide, etc.
- Use amounts or at least estimates
    - Fifteen, approximately fifteen, half, all, etc.

Avoid bafflegab (incomprehensible or pretentious language, especially bureaucratic jargon).

- Use the correct word, not just the bigger one.

- efficacious => effective
  - utilize => use
  - elucidate => explain
  - proximal => close
  - quidninc => a gossip
  - mundungus => refuse
  - yclept => named, called

Avoid clichés (like the plague)

- Agree to disagree => disagree
- Dead as a doornail => dead
- Last but not least => last
- Pushing the envelope => approach
- Up in the air => unknown/undecided

Do not attempt to impress

- Under the present conditions of our society, marriage practices generally demonstrate a high degree of homogeneity.
- In our culture, marriages are highly homogeneous.

Use a thesaurus, but do not violate former eight rules

- The challenge is to move beyond common means of representation of knowledge such as direct quotes of informants, summaries of their discourse, and inferences of intent and meaning...
- The challenge is to afar evolve frequent means of depiction of comprehension such as undeviating quotes of informants, summaries of their dissertation, and inferences of intent and connotation...

Precision for Clarity Exemplified

Not Precise: The osmoregulatory organ, which is located at the base of the third dorsal spine on the outer margin of the terminal papillae and functions by expelling excess sodium ions, activates only under hypertonic conditions.

Precise: Located on the outer margin of the terminal papillae at the base of the third dorsal spine, the osmoregulatory organ expels excess sodium ions under hypertonic conditions.

(Adapted from http://www.unc.edu/depts/wcweb/handouts/sciences.html & http://www.unc.edu/depts/wcweb/handouts/word_choice.html)