

9 Errors that Cause Taiwanese Research Papers to be Rejected

Steve Wallace

Introduction

- NCTU, NTHU, NCU and ITRI technical writing teacher and editor- Watched rejection
- Personally edited over 650 papers in the last 5 years.
- 86 Colleges, Universities and Research Institutes. Over 4,300 papers total
- Collected Reviewers and Editors Comments - Research researchers

The Publication Challenge

- Consider the following statistic:
- **"The chance that a typical paper of average quality will get a favorable recommendation from both referees is about 11% (= 1/9)."**
- - 1993 APS OBSERVER newsletter, a publication of the American Psychological Society.

What Causes Rejection of Taiwanese Papers?

- "The little things"
- Editor, Journal of Retailing.
- "Maybe there are some good ideas in the paper, but after a couple pages with mistakes, I just don't care"
- Demons that attack good ideas
- House model of paper preparation

English as a reason for rejection

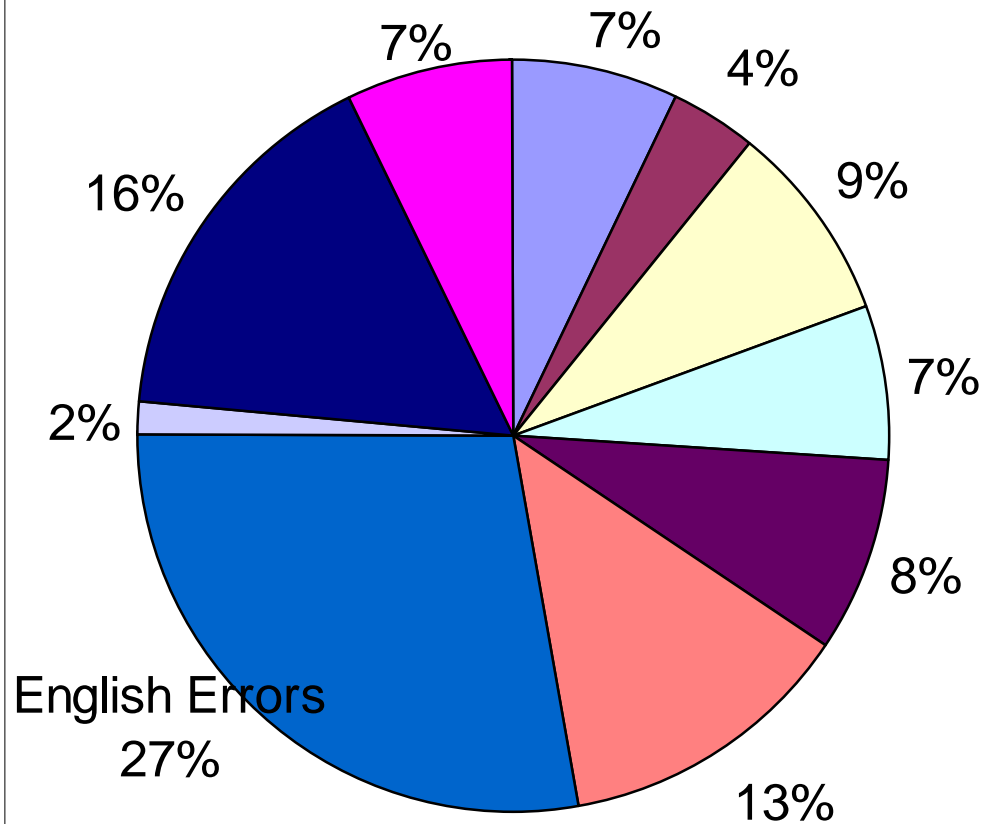
- 1) Double the number of articles submitted as ten years ago
- 2) Same number of journals
- 3) Some editors simply reject papers that are too poorly written to send for review. They have many other options

Editor's quote

- “Journal editors are very busy with too many papers submitted for their journal's limited space, sometimes they teach in addition to their editorial responsibilities. They don't have time to play English teacher and rewrite poorly written English papers. It is much more efficient to just reject them.”
- – Senior editor at publishing house

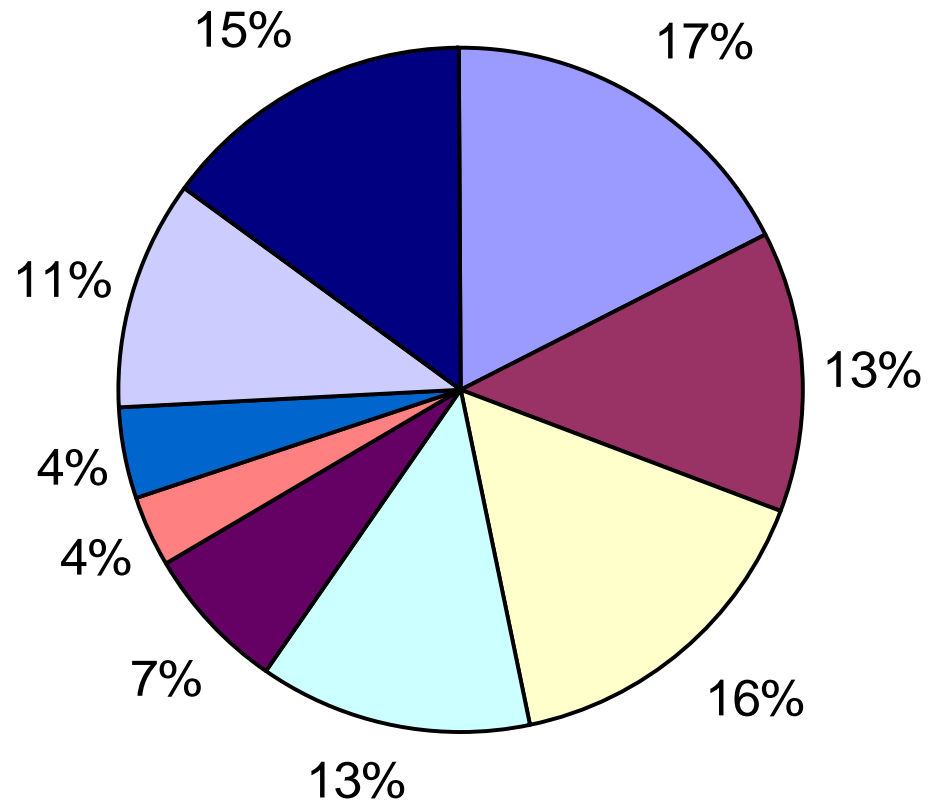
Reasons for major revision or rejection of Taiwanese journal papers

- Faulty methodology
- Inadequate references
- Poor quality supporting figures
- Outside the scope of journal
- Not enough contribution to field
- Authors did not follow manuscript instructions
- Poor writing style and use of English
- Title not representative of study
- Subject of little novel interest or not generally applicable
- Poorly written discussion



Writing Errors that Cause Revision and Rejection

- Redundancy
- Verb Tense
- Passive Voice Errors
- Weak Verbs
- Verb Agreement
- Omitting comparisons
- Clear Pronouns
- "It" and "There"
- Noun Verb issues



Passive Voice Errors

- “Generally, I think you could improve the whole paper by using more active voice sentences. It will improve the flow and allow the reader to follow your meaning.”

1st Reviewer, Journal of Hydrology

IEEE Guidelines

- "If you wish, you may write in the first person singular or plural and use the active voice. Remember to check spelling. If your native language is not English, please get a native English-speaking colleague to proofread your paper.
- **Template for Preparation of Papers for IEEE Sponsored Conferences & Symposia**
Frank Anderson, Sam B. Niles, Jr., and Theodore C. Donald, *Member, IEEE*

IEEE Software Author Guidelines

- "Use active instead of passive voice and straightforward declarative sentences."

AMA Manual of Style

recommends that:

- “In general, authors should use the active voice, except in instances in which the author is unknown or the interest focuses on what is acted upon.”
- *AMA Manual of Style: A Guide for Authors and Editors*. 10th ed. New York, NY: Oxford University

Press; 2007.

The Journal of Trauma and Dissociation:

“Use the active voice whenever possible: We will ask authors that rely heavily on use of the passive voice to re-write manuscripts in the active voice.”

Guidelines for authors. International Society for the Study of Trauma Web site: *The Journal of Trauma & Dissociation*. <http://www.isst-d.org/jtd/journal-trauma-dissociation-info-for-authors.htm>. Accessed March 5, 2009.

Ophthalmology

- "Active voice is much preferred to passive voice, which should be used sparingly....Passive voice...does *not* relieve the author of direct responsibility for observations, opinions, or conclusions (e.g., 'The problem of blood flow was investigated...' vs. 'We investigated the problem of blood flow...')."
- Guide for authors. Elsevier Web site: *Ophthalmology: Journal of the American Academy of Ophthalmology*. http://www.elsevier.com/wps/find/journaldescription.cws_home/620418/authorinstructions. Accessed March 5, 2009.

The Journal of Neuroscience

- "Overuse of the passive voice is a common problem in writing. Although the passive has its place—for example, in the Methods section—in many instances it makes the manuscript dull by failing to identify the author's role in the research....Use direct, active-voice sentences."
- Westbrook G, Cooper L. Writing tips: Techniques for clear scientific writing and editing. The Society for Neuroscience Web site: *The Journal of Neuroscience*. <http://www.jneurosci.org>. Accessed March 5, 2009.

British Medical Journal

- "Please write in a clear, direct, and active style....Write in the active [voice] and use the first person where necessary."
- The essentials of BMJ style. BMJ Publishing Group Web site: *British Medical Journal*.

<http://resources.bmj.com/bmj/authors/bmj-house-style>. Accessed March 5, 2009.

The *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association* (APA) has similar advice:

- "Prefer the active voice....The passive voice is acceptable in expository writing and when you want to focus on the object or recipient of the action rather than on the actor."
- American Psychological Association. (2001). *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association* (5th ed.). Washington, DC: Author.

Science

- "Use active voice when suitable, particularly when necessary for correct syntax."
- <http://www.sciencemag.org/about/authors/rep/res/style.dtl>. Accessed March 4, 2009.

Behavioral Ecology

- “Active voice is preferable to the impersonal passive voice.”

- Instructions to authors. Oxford Journals Web site: *Behavioral Ecology*.

http://www.oxfordjournals.org/our_journals/beheco/for_authors/general.html. Accessed March 5, 2009.

Nature

- "Nature journals like authors to write in the active voice as experience has shown that readers find concepts and results to be conveyed more clearly if written directly."

How to write a paper: writing for a Nature journal. Nature Publishing Group Web site:
Nature. http://www.nature.com/authors/author_services/how_write.html.

Accessed March 4, 2009.

Cautions about the active voice

- When can we use the passive voice?
- In Methods sections,
- When we don't know who completed the action
- When we don't care
- Don't use the personal pronoun (I, we)
- Use Research, Study, Paper,

How would you change this sentence?

Identification of poor food, bad housing, inadequate hygiene and large families as the major causes of poverty was made by Jones (2005).

- **Jones (2005) identified poor food, bad housing, inadequate hygiene and large families as the major causes of poverty.**

How would you change
this sentence?

Consideration of whether countries work well on cross-border issues such as immigration is undertaken by Raul (2007).

- **Raul (2007) *considered* whether countries work well on cross-border issues such as immigration.**

How would you change this sentence?

- *Modification of the model was made by Johnson (2007) to reduce Color Breakup (CBU).*
- ***Johnson (2007) modified the model to reduce Color Breakup (CBU).***

How would you change this sentence?

- Statistical analysis is performed *in this study* on the influences of CBU on display quality.
- ***This study* statistically analyzes how CBU influences display quality.**

Noun to verb change corrections

- “It seems that many of your errors come from your using nouns instead of verbs. This makes your sentences longer because you need additional “meaningless” verbs to complete them.” Associate Editor, Journal of Retailing

How would you change
this sentence?

Improvement of the system is achieved by
variation of the control frequencies .

- **Varying the control frequencies
improves the system.**

How would you change
this sentence?

Enumeration of three reasons why the English language has become so important was made by Thompson (2006).

- **Thompson (2006) *enumerated* three reasons why the English language *has become* so important.**

How would you change this sentence?

A slight increase occurred in the performance rate.

- **The performance rate slightly increased.**

How would you change this sentence?

Discussion of the challenges and strategies for facilitation and promotion of ERP is performed by Smith (2007).

- **Smith (2007) discussed the challenges and strategies for facilitating and promoting ERP.**

Creating strong verbs

- “Another suggestion for your paper is to find a native editor to help you with your verb use. Strong verbs move sentences. Helping verbs often confuse the reader in your technical descriptions.” Reviewer, Journal of Technology Management

How would you change
this sentence?

Smith (2003) *asked the question as to*
whether conventional methods provide the
best environment for execution.

- **Smith (2003) *questioned* whether
conventional methods provide the
best environment for execution.**

How would you change this sentence?

- This article *made a comparison of* several scenario modeling sequences in order to ensure market competitiveness.
- This article *compared* several scenario modeling sequences to ensure market competitiveness.

How would you change
this sentence?

Rao (2008) *made use of* examples of these various techniques as evidence that innovation continues.

- Rao (2008) *used* examples of these various techniques as evidence that innovation continues.

Avoid starting sentences with the words, "It" and "There."

- Your sentences are too long, especially your methods section! Try cutting them into individual units of complete thought instead of stringing together thoughts without stopping for breath." – Reviewer, Journal of Water Resource Management

How would you change
this sentence?

It is *vital* that quantitative measures usefully supplement and extend qualitative analysis.

- **Quantitative measures must usefully supplement and extend qualitative analysis.**

How would you change
this sentence?

It is necessary that the best method to
adopt for this investigation is to
determined by the committee.

- **The committee must decide the best
method to adopt for this
investigation.**

How would you change this sentence?

It is imperative that scheduling of the work shifts be done by the section supervisor.

- **The section supervisor must schedule the work shifts.**

How would you change this sentence?

It is crucial that assessment of the control strategy be performed by the site manager.

- **The site manager must assess the control strategy.**

Use pronouns clearly (they, which, them, this, it, he, she, etc.)

- **“Line 12 on page 3 of your paper is an example of your ongoing problem using pronouns clearly. There are at least 3 different nouns “it” could refer to. You must make your pronoun references clear!” -3rd Reviewer, IEEE Transactions on Advanced Packaging**

How would you change this sentence?

- The study design significantly affected the analysis of X. This indicates that Y can be modified based on the C.
- The study design significantly affected the analysis of X. This (finding, observation, phenomenon) indicates that Y can be modified based on the C.

How would you change this sentence?

- In most previous studies, *they* do not consider the effect of X on Y.
- **Most previous studies do not consider the effect of X on Y.**

How would you change
this sentence?

In most recent studies, *they* measure X in
four different ways

- Most recent studies measure X in four
different ways .

Deleting redundancy and extra words

- “The whole paper should be shorter. I am confident that you could say everything you need to in 30% less space.” – Reviewer, IEEE Journal of Engineering Management

How would you change
this sentence?

It may be said that there are not fewer than one explanation which could explain this result.

- There are several possible explanations for this result.

How would you change this sentence?

The current study was unable, *insofar as we could determine*, to analyze these variables.

- The current study was unable to analyze these variables.

How would you change this sentence?

- It is the systems analyst who makes a determination of the question as to whether the program should be implemented.
- The systems analyst determines whether to implement the program.

How would you change this sentence?

- *It may be said that systems have the ability to incorporate types of equipment in order that the user is in a position to interact with the system.*
- Systems *can* incorporate equipment so that the user *can* interact with the system.

Two concerns as a technical writer

- Short
 - If the meaning stays the same
- Clear
 - English has shades of meaning
 - Thesaurus

Examples of redundant
phrases that can be simplified

Specific examples of redundancy

- the question as to
- **whether**

What would be a better substitute word?

- serves the function of
- **is**

What would be a better substitute word?

- reach a conclusion
- **conclude**

What would be a better substitute word?

- put an end to
- **end**

What would be a better substitute word?

- provided that
- **if**

What would be a better substitute word?

- prior to
- **before**

What would be a better substitute word?

- subsequent to
- after

What would be a better substitute word?

- in view of the fact that
- **because, since**

What would be a better substitute word?

- in large measure
- **largely**

What would be a better substitute word?

- is in excess of
- **exceeds, surpasses**

What would be a better substitute word?

- in case

- **if**

What would be a better substitute word?

- after the conclusion of
- after

What would be a better substitute word?

- notwithstanding the fact that
- **although**

What would be a better substitute word?

- manner in which
- **how**

What would be a better substitute word?

- make inquiry regarding
- **ask about, inquire about**

What would be a better substitute word?

- it is possible that
- **may, might, could, can**

What would be a better substitute word?

- is found to be
- **is**

What would be a better substitute word?

- is capable of
- **can**

What would be a better substitute word?

- in this case
- here

What would be a better substitute word?

- in some cases
- **occasionally**

What would be a better substitute word?

- in no case
- **never**

What would be a better substitute word?

- in all cases
- **always**

What would be a better substitute word?

- in most cases
- **generally**

What would be a better substitute word?

- in many cases
- often

What would be a better substitute word?

- in close proximity to
- **near**

What would be a better substitute word?

- in a number of
- **several, many**

What would be a better substitute word?

- if conditions are such that
- **if**

What would be a better substitute word?

- happens to be
- **am/is/are**

What would be a better substitute word?

- give indication of
- **indicate/suggest**

What would be a better substitute word?

- give consideration to
- **consider**

What would be a better substitute word?

- for this reason
- **since, because**

What would be a better substitute word?

- for the reason that
- so

What would be a better substitute word?

- for the purpose of
- **for, to**

What would be a better substitute word?

- during the time that
- **while**

What would be a better substitute word?

- due to the fact that
- **because, since**

What would be a better substitute word?

- despite the fact that
- **although**

What would be a better substitute word?

- come to a conclusion
- **conclude**

What would be a better substitute word?

- by means of
- by

What would be a better substitute word?

- be deficient of
- **lack**

What would be a better substitute word?

- at this point in time
- **now**

What would be a better substitute word?

- at the present time
- **now**

What would be a better substitute word?

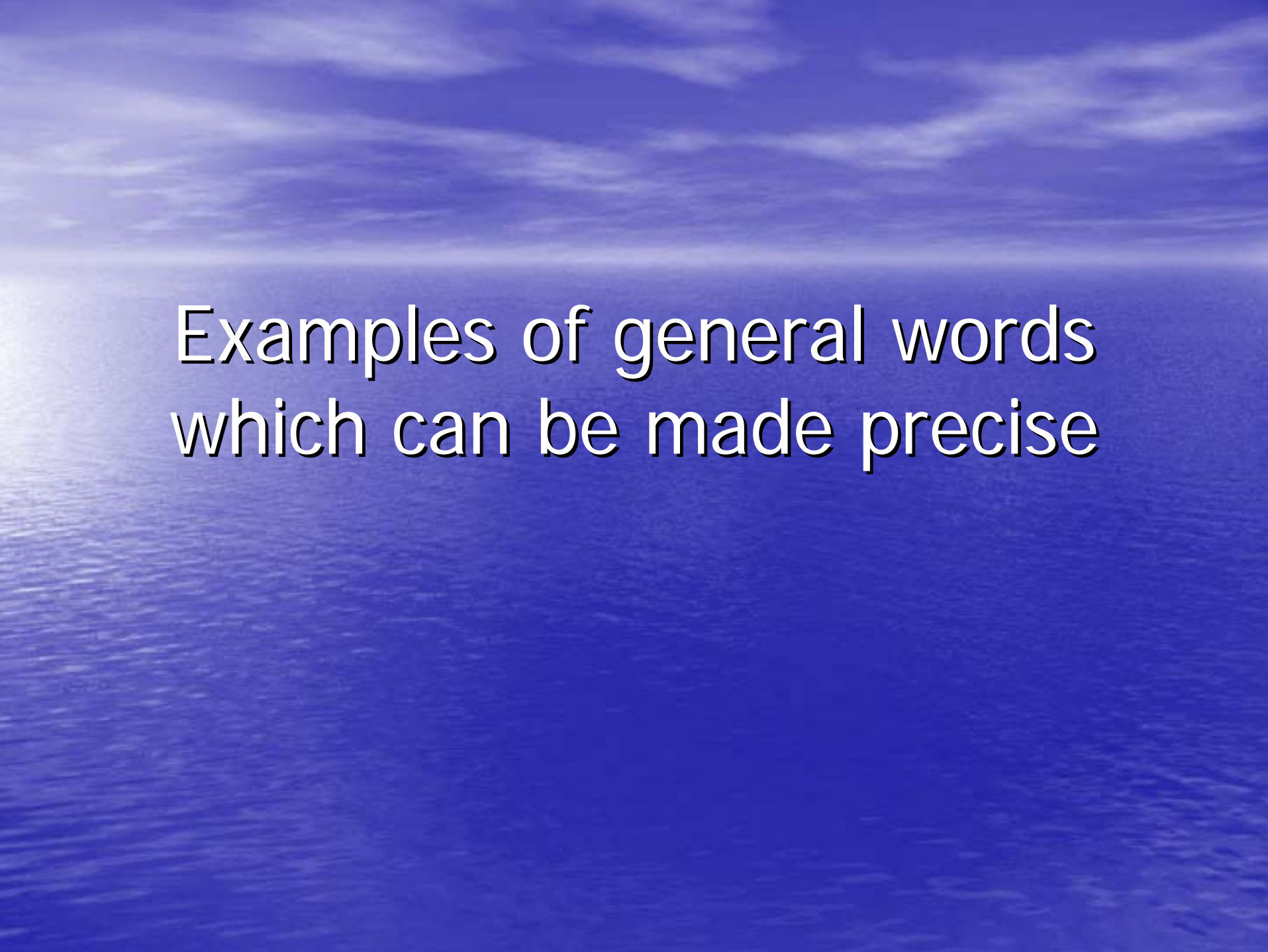
- at such time as
- **when**

What would be a better substitute word?

- ascertain the location of
- **find**

What would be a better substitute word?

- a majority of
- **most**



Examples of general words
which can be made precise

What is a more precise word?

- agree
- **correlate with, correspond to**

What is a more precise word?

- carry out
- **implement, execute, promulgate**

What is a more precise word?

- change
- **modify, adjust, alter, vary**

What is a more precise word?

- consider
- **evaluate, assess**

What is a more precise word?

- correct/incorrect
- **precise/imprecise,**
accurate/inaccurate

What is a more precise word?

- find
- **obtain, derive, attain, locate, identify**

What is a more precise word?

- help
- **assist, facilitate, guide, direct**

What is a more precise word?

- important
- **critical, crucial, essential, pertinent, relevant, significant, vital**

What is a more precise word?

- little, few
- **slightly, seldom, negligibly**

What is a more precise word?

- problem
- **obstacle, limitation, restriction, shortcoming, drawback, phenomenon**

What is a more precise word?

- *way*
- **method, means, approach, strategy**

What is a more precise word?

- figure out
- **distinguish, differentiate, discriminate, identify**

What is a more precise word?

- suitable
- **appropriate, adequate**

What is a more precise word?

- tries
- **attempts, aims, aspires**

What is a more precise word?

- usually
- **normally, typically, generally**

What is a more precise word?

- *very*
- **highly, rather, quite, extremely**

What is a more precise word?

- whole
- **complete, entire, comprehensive**

What is a more precise word?

- make clear
- **elucidate, clarify**

Verb tense change within a sentence

- “Your discussion section changes verb tense often. Sometimes you change several times within a sentence. It makes it difficult to understand what has been done and what you are still planning to do” – Reviewer, IEEE Signal Processing Letters

How would you change
this sentence?

All studies described as using the X
procedure *are included* in the analysis.

- All studies described as using the X
procedure *were included* in the analysis.

How would you change this sentence?

X will be synthesized using the same method that was detailed for Y, using CO₂

- *X was* synthesized using the same method that was detailed for Y, using CO₂.

How would you change this sentence?

“Concentrations of these compounds show no dependence on temperature and remained at a stable level...”

- “Concentrations of these compounds showed no dependence on temperature and remained at a stable level...”.

Which tense should you use?

- Use past tense to describe methods and results
- Use present tense to describe what is known and the implications of your findings
- ***Be consistent with tense within sentences***

Omitting comparisons

- “Line 20 of page 2 should read, ‘The finance department focuses on profits more than the accounting department does.’” -1st Reviewer, Finance Review

How would you change this sentence?

- The finance department focuses on profits *more than* the accounting department.
- The finance department focuses on profits *more than* the accounting department *does*.

How would you change this sentence?

- *“The leachate fingerprint from the river was compared to the landfill.”*
- *“The leachate fingerprint from the river was compared with that from the landfill.”*

How would you change
this sentence?

Country A funds high tech innovation *more than* Country B.

- Country A funds high tech innovation *more than* Country B *does*.

How would you change
this sentence?

The device formulated in this experiment
has higher luminance.

- The device formulated in this experiment
has higher luminance *than conventional
models*.

How would you change this sentence?

“Reactions with NaO-*t*-Bu were faster.”

- “Reactions with NaO-t-Bu were faster than those with LiO-*t*-Bu.”

Remember:

- *Relative terms, such as more, higher and greater, require a reference for comparison and do not make sense alone*

Subject and verb agreement

- **“Read the submission guidelines! English should be checked first! There are many basic errors that should have been corrected throughout this paper.”** Reviewer, IEEE Transactions on Visualization and Computer Graphics

How would you change
this sentence?

“A sample was taken at three sites...”

- “Samples were taken at three sites...”

How would you change
this sentence?

This paper *seek* to address the following
questions:

- This paper *seeks* to address the following
questions:

How would you change this sentence?

However, there have been no controlled studies which *compares* differences in X and Y.

- However, there have been no controlled studies which *compare* differences in X and Y.

The Nine Taiwanese Writing Errors (60% of all errors made)

- Passive Voice Errors
- Noun-Verb Errors
- "It" and "There"
- Weak Verbs
- Omitting Comparisons
- Verb Tense
- Verb Agreement
- Redundancy
- Clear Pronouns

One more error: Criticizing References

- *“I think that the author knows his subject better than I do. I usually use his references to find a suitable reviewer”* - Associate Editor, Journal of Retailing
- Don't emphasize the importance of your paper by putting down on other papers. Your references are probably your reviewers and they are sensitive. When citing other papers avoid using negative terms.

Your research area is small.

- It is very likely that either your reference or one of his friends will be your reviewer.
- Rejected for "Poor English"

Examples of offensive citation:

- *"The deficiency of Smith's approach is..."*
- *"The problems with Smith's paper are..."*
- *"A serious weakness with Smith's argument, however, is that"*
- *"The key problem with Smith's explanation is that"*
- *"It seems that Smith's understanding of the X framework is questionable."*

A better citation would be:

- *“Smith’s model was effective in X problem, however in Y...”*
- *“The X benefit of Smith’s approach are not applicable to Y...”*

Reviewers' comments

- "I don't think you treated Smith fairly in your literature review, his insights deserve more respect."
- "You forgot to include Smith as a reference in your paper. His work is fundamental to understanding your research."

Conclusion

Handout of our talk available

- www.seminars.tw
- www.editing.tw
- **Editing** from 86 colleges and universities, domain specialized editors, understand Taiwanese English, educational comments
- Three Stage **translation** process to preserve meaning and clarity
- **Books**
- How to write and publish an academic paper in 16 weeks
- How to attend, speak or present a poster at an academic conference