



Avoiding Pretentious Writing

Something happens when we sit at the keyboard hoping to get published in the *New England Journal of Medicine* or the *New York Times*. We know our writing must be good, so we clear our throats, put on our metaphorical tuxedo, trot out our most obscure polysyllabic medicalese, and try to impress our readers with long sentences overflowing with pretentious pontifications.

We choose words like “operationalization,” “synergistically,” “deleterious,” “elucidate,” and “disseminate.” We dust off phrases like “paradigm shift,” “in close proximity to,” “core competency,” “build out”—words and phrases we wouldn’t normally use elsewhere.

Don’t feel bad. It’s not just scientists and civil service employees who are guilty. It’s everyone. Football referees can’t seem to call a false-start penalty without using the pretentious explanatory phrase, “Prior to the snap . . .” I guess “prior to” sounds more authoritative than “before.” Police officers can’t say the suspect “carried a pistol” without adding “on his person,” as if to clarify matters.

Simple Advice

When you write that first draft, strive to use only one- and two-syllable words. Use that thesaurus not to find words like “explicate,” but rather to find “explain.” Not “deleterious,” but “harmful.” Not “in close proximity to,” but “near.” Don’t write “leverage,” “utilize,” or “implement” when you can just write “use.”

I promise you that when you adopt this attitude, when you strive to make your writing simpler and clearer, you will make your writing better, more easily understood, and more publishable.