



Utilize vs. Use

How do I utilize “use” . . . or use “utilize”?

Long story short: Never say “utilize” when “use” will do. And “use” will do pretty much every time.

“Utilize” comes up a lot in scientific writing, especially in journal articles. It’s an easy word to slip in when you want to sound a little smarter or more official. It’s three syllables instead of one, and you might think it has a more scientific air than plain old “use.” But bigger words are not always better. In fact, the plain language gods say the reverse is actually true. The [CDC Style Guide](#) warns **five times** to avoid “utilize” and lists it as one of its Top 10 Jargon Words.

“But ‘utilize’ just sounds more professional!” you say. But professional writing isn’t simply writing that has unnecessarily big words. Also, the first rule of professional writing, and of plain language, is to always consider your audience. Write at the appropriate reading level—especially when writing for the general public. Your fellow scientists appreciate simpler words, too. It’s true, we promise.

But wait—of course there’s an exception. There are (rare) times when “utilize” is more fitting than “use.” According to Grammarist, *utilize* “implies making the most effective use of something, often in a manner not initially intended.” You can utilize a baseball bat as a weapon, for example, or utilize a scrap of paper as a bookmark. But “use” does just fine in these examples, too. **It’s never incorrect.**

A study in the journal *Applied Cognitive Psychology* found that “a majority of undergraduates admit to deliberately increasing the complexity of their vocabulary so as to give the impression of intelligence.” That’s a bad habit that often lasts long beyond the college years. The good news is that, even if your “utilize” habit is deeply ingrained, it should be easy to break.

Unlike with active and passive voice, you don’t have to think too much about it or struggle to reorganize a sentence. **Doing a find/replace for “utilize” and “use” is one of the top things you can do to improve your writing.** It instantly makes any document more accessible and easier to read.

Remember: “Utilize” doesn’t “sound smarter”—it simply takes longer to read.

Before:

We obtained enough vaccine and utilized area healthcare providers to distribute the supply.

After:

We obtained enough vaccine and used area healthcare providers to distribute the supply.

Before:

It allowed us to find out which parts were most advantageous and then utilize an improved strategy.

After:

It allowed us to find out which parts were most advantageous and then use an improved strategy.

Resources

- [CDC Style Guide](#) (see Wordiness and Vocabulary Issues sections)
- [Is 'utilize' a word worth using?](#)