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# Oceanography

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# Words Are *Important*

BY TOM GARRISON

College profs spend a great amount of time reading and commenting on students' written work. This can be a real struggle! The precision and clarity required in science writing are often alien to first-time lab students who have been tutored by high school English teachers to include elaborate metaphors and colorful vocabulary.

Anything we commit to writing must be clear and unambiguous. In an earlier life, I was a naval officer with a specialty in communications (radio, teletype, cryptography). I quickly learned that less is more—taking words out while retaining meaning in a can't-be-misunderstood message was key. The primary objective was to use language to convey thoughts in ways that were accurate and couldn't possibly be mistaken.

Which brings me to words.

I have an irrational, personal vendetta against the word *incredible*. When my lab students use *incredible* to mean *amazing* or *astounding* in their reports or projects, I physically cut the word out of their papers, place the little slips of paper in envelopes labeled with the students' names, invite the offenders to the front of the room, have them open the envelopes as I explain the true meaning of

*incredible*, and then ask them to eat the slips of paper.<sup>1</sup> Our whole department has adopted this eccentricity. Works like a charm.

Misuse of *unbelievable* is also ugly. Like *incredible*, it implies that whatever fact that follows is (literally) not to be believed. Students don't need to clutter scientific writing with these morsels of lexicographic shrapnel.

Speaking of *literally*, while leafing through a Christmas catalog for a T-shirt maker, I stumbled upon a model wearing a shirt imprinted with: "Your misuse of 'literally' drives me figuratively up the wall." Of course, I instantly ordered enough for everybody teaching lab classes.

Now that I'm well into this rant, let's move on to the mind-numbing overuse of the word *awesome*. This may be a southern California affectation, but I'm always prepared to launch a Richter-7 stinkeye in the direction of any student who responds to a fact or demonstration with an utterance of *awesome*! This word became so pervasive around the department that we posted signs showing red circles with the crossed-out word *awesome* in the middle. We became a no-awesome zone! So refreshing—give it a try and see!

Next up: *Like* when used as an

interruption in speech. "I was all, like, excited when I, like, saw the octopus grab the car keys from the TA. It was awesome!" A smile and a raised index finger each time *like* is spoken will quickly cure a student of this annoying habit. If *awesome* is intermixed, as here, the smile can be combined with a mild stinkeye or raised eyebrow. Your choice.

OK, let's move on to unnecessary quotation marks. There is a whole website dedicated to this creative form of punctuation (<http://www.unnecessaryquotes.com>). I have seen uses like these: "The tidal current reversed direction, and the oranges began moving 'up' the channel." Or: "We again tested the 'pH' and there was no change." Or: "The SeaBird was 'out of order' so we had to titrate the samples." Sigh.

And yes, students, *a lot* is two words, and the word *dissect* is pronounced like the words *disappoint* or *disappear*, and does not start with the sound "dye."

Here's a professional one. It seems to me that we have one ocean—the *world ocean*—that is temporarily and dynamically divided into basins named for our convenience. The Pacific Ocean is one such basin. The Atlantic is another division. When I see (or hear) phrases like "the oceans" or "Earth's oceans," I cringe a bit. In my writing and script work, I

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<sup>1</sup>Of course, we back down if they balk at actually eating the paper—but the point is clear!

## UPCOMING *Oceanography* ISSUES

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try to make clear which specific area of ocean I'm discussing, or whether I'm discussing the world ocean as a whole.

Last, let's wade into the issue of plurals. Our division secretary requests "syllabi" from the faculty at the beginning of a semester. This winter I finally snapped and sent this annoying memo to everybody:

As for the proper plural, the whole syllabus-syllabi thing has gone on too long. Syllabus is derived from Greek, just as octopus and hippopotamus are, so a persnickety grammarian would prefer syllabuses just as he/she would prefer octopuses and hippopotamuses. If the etymology had been Latin, then just like alumni and foci, the answer would have been syllabi. The plural is syllabuses. Let's be the only Division that uses it properly.

Naturally, the rest of the faculty pointed and hooted at the growly old curmudgeon in the corner office. The secretary brought me a nice cookie and asked if my feet were warm enough. The dean walked briskly past my door a few times to see if I were still breathing.

Well—words *are* important. Clear writing is essential. It may be a losing battle, but The Old Guard is in the fight for a while longer!

Yarrrrrr! ☹️

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