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Continued overleaf

Peripatetic editorial notes

Writing well (7)

Wordiness alias verbosity, continued

In the March 2002 issue of the *CMJ* (1) I made some general observations on verbosity, giving several examples of this malady, and emphasised the need to be precise and to avoid superfluous words. Classifying verbosity into its commoner varieties may help to focus our attention better on them.

Adjectival verbosity

I have not seen a more succinct bit of advice on the appropriate use of adjectives and adverbs than the following paragraph, which I have quoted in my March 2002 article. It will bear repetition.

Cultivate the habit of reserving adjectives and adverbs to make your meaning more precise, and suspect those that you find yourself using to make it more emphatic (2).

Acute, real, terrible, grave and serious are perennial adjectival favourites. Nearly all crises seem to be acute, dangers real, disasters terrible, injustices grave and errors serious. Let me illustrate.

79. Looking back, the decision to operate was a serious error of judgement. (Would *fatal* or *costly* here have served better?)
80. The arrival of about one hundred victims of the bomb blast created an acute crisis in the Accident and Emergency Unit. (.... created a crisis in)
81. There was a real danger of wound infection in the Accident and Emergency Unit. (*Real* here is meaningless. Reserve *real* for contrast with *imaginary* eg. The real danger was wound infection, not a shortage of intravenous fluids.)

Vague adjectives such as considerable, appreciable and substantial are popular with some writers, but they often convey little or no sense.

82. Transporting patients to hospital was *a matter of considerable urgency*. (.... urgent).
83. Fluid replacement *was followed by an appreciable increase* of the patient's GFR (.... increased the patient's GFR by about 20%).

Adverbial verbosity

Many writers seem to suppose that adjectives such as good, bad, short, long, many, few, high, low, heavy, light, short, tall and so on are unable to stand

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on their own without being propped up by adverbs. Very, relatively, comparatively, rather, somewhat and respectively are their adverbs of choice. Often it is impossible to discern from the context how *very long* differs from *long*, *rather high* from *high*, or *somewhat heavy* from *heavy*.

Respectively and *respective* are often wrongly used or unnecessary. Sentence 84 might appear to need *respectively* to avoid confusion, for gender seems to have little to do with dress nowadays. But changing the structure as in 85 makes *respectively* superfluous and the sentence crisper.

84. Men and women wore trousers and skirts respectively.

85. Men wore trousers and women skirts.

86. Adjectives and adverbs are the twin enemies of nouns and verbs (No need for *respectively* here!)

Relatively and *comparatively* should be only used when a standard of comparison is given or implied as in 87, but one sees them used so often without such a standard. Then the adverbs are meaningless (88,89).

87. Nearly 800 candidates appeared for Part 1 of the examination, but relatively few passed it.

88. The UK has comparatively few days of sunshine. (Compared with what?)

89. We know relatively little about the functions of natriuretic peptides. (Relative to what?)

The best writers use adjectives and adverbs sparingly and allow nouns and verbs to do most of the work (3).

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