

Noun Stacks: Why You Should Avoid It in Scientific Writing

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When we write, we want to be understood. Good writing should be clear and concise. The reader should not be left struggling to understand what they have just read. This is especially important in science, where writers often use many complex terms.



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Researchers and scientists should try to avoid using too much jargon. Jargon means technical or specialist language; however, it can also mean text that is obscure, confused, or difficult to understand. Over-use of jargon can lead to a common mistake in scientific writing: the creation of noun stacks.

What is a Noun Stack?

A noun stack, which can also be called a noun cluster or string, is when a group of nouns are used together. Usually, there is one true noun. The others might be used as adjectives; that is, they modify the noun. Here's a simple example:

polymerase chain reaction

In this example, each word on its own would be a noun. Taken together, *reaction* is actually the noun, while *polymerase* and *chain* tell us what kind of reaction it is, i.e. they modify the noun.

Why Are Noun Stacks a Problem?

Here are two more examples of noun stacks:

gene subset similarity scoring tool

stainless steel electrode impedance spectroscopy data

The first example given above, *polymerase chain reaction*, is simple. The others are far less easy to understand! This is the problem with noun stacks: their meaning is often unclear. For the reader, it can be difficult to understand which is the true noun, and which are the modifiers.

Take this sentence, [for example](#):

We used a sensitive protein function monitoring system

The “real” noun is the last one, *system*. But what does the system do? Is it a sensitive system that monitors protein function? Or could it be a system that monitors sensitive proteins? From this sentence alone, we can’t say which is the correct meaning.

A lack of clarity is the first problem with noun stacks. The second problem is that a noun stack contains too many ideas in too small a space. The reader does not have the mental space to understand what is meant.

Sometimes, a writer uses a noun stack to avoid using too many words. In this case, however, more words might actually be easier to understand. A longer sentence could be clearer and allow the reader time to understand the meaning.

Why Are Noun Stacks So Common in Science?

As you will know, science has a lot of complex words! There are many specialist terms that are only familiar to experts in a certain field. When new discoveries are made, these terms are often “squashed” together to name new methods, substances, or processes. This creates noun stacks.

Researchers are taught to conduct science. They are often not taught to write about it! As [one Professor of English says](#), “Academics seldom use one word when they can use three.” This helps to explain why so many scientific journal articles are loaded with jargon. Researchers might be so used to using jargon in their working lives that they forget others may not understand. Or they might simply be copying the style of the hundreds of journal articles they have read themselves.

[Pressure to publish](#) could also be to blame. With researchers rushing to produce papers, there is little time to spend on improving their writing. According to journal editors, sometimes the way an article is written is so bad that it is rejected by peer reviewers.

How to Avoid Noun Stacks and Improve Your Writing

Have you spotted some noun stacks in your writing? Don’t worry! There are several different ways to avoid or improve noun stacks.

First, remember that noun stacks can be good! They can help researchers express complex ideas quickly and simply. The key is to avoid using too many nouns together. Two nouns are usually ok, but four is too many; if you have three, see if you can remove one.

An easy way to avoid noun stacks is to use an abbreviation or acronym. Many common noun stacks have familiar acronyms, which are much easier for the reader to handle.

For example: *polymerase chain reaction* (PCR) or *human immunodeficiency virus* (HIV). However, try not to use too many acronyms in a single sentence or paragraph, as this could be confusing.

Another trick is to see if you can use a hyphen. For example, rather than “*data bound control table*,” try “*data-bound control table*.”

Next, think about each word in your noun stack. Could you replace it with something simpler, with the same meaning? For example, you might be able to replace “differentiation” with “difference,” or “regulations” with “rules.”

Finally, try breaking up your noun stack by re-arranging your sentence. Here’s a noun stack we saw earlier:

We used a sensitive protein function monitoring system

Instead, we could write:

We used a sensitive system to monitor protein function

Or

We used a system to monitor the function of sensitive proteins

In this case, we have ended up with “wordier” sentences, but at least the meaning is clear in each case.

Concise or Clear?

This brings us to the final challenge of noun stacks. Often, we are taught that to write well, we must be concise. How can we balance this with avoiding noun stacks?

First, try the methods mentioned above to reduce the number of noun stacks in your work, or to make the stacks smaller. Remember that you want your writing to be clear. Are you using unnecessary words? Can you remove words without losing the meaning of a sentence? You can apply this to all of your writing, not just noun stacks. For example, instead of “*a majority of*,” why not use “*most*”?

Lastly, think about who will be reading your work. Are they likely to understand what you have written? Or will it be confusing? To check, you could try reading a sentence out loud, or to a friend or colleague.

Are you looking for more advice on writing, or preparing a manuscript for submission? Enago has [all the resources you need](#)!

Do you often use noun stacks in your writing? Which other aspects of your writing would you like to improve? Let us know your thoughts and suggestions in the comments

below.

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