

Jargon in Technical Writing



Editorial instructions for WEED TECHNOLOGY and WEED SCIENCE include the direction "Avoid the use of jargon." This statement confuses many writers, because the definition of jargon is not clear. It is impossible to consciously avoid something unless we understand what we are to avoid. Dictionary definitions of jargon include:

- a. Unintelligible or meaningless talk or writing.
- b. A simplified artificial language, usually devised to assist in communication between people who don't speak the same language.
- c. The technical terminology of specialists in a particular activity or area of knowledge.
- d. A kind of speech abounding in uncommon or unfamiliar words.
- e. Language vague in meaning and full of circumlocutions and long high-sounding words.
- f. Pretentious or unnecessarily obscure and esoteric terminology.

If something in a manuscript is unintelligible or meaningless, it must be changed and corrected. Such errors do not need a special term to identify them. This is not the "jargon to be avoided." Likewise, the jargon we are to avoid cannot be a special artificial language because we use standard English.

Every trade, profession, or group that deals in information must use appropriate, informative words. Terms such as herbicide, photosynthesis, bioassay, translocation, acid equivalent, biotype, allelopathy, metabolite, dormancy, and many others are part of the professional jargon of Weed Science. They are indispensable for effective communication concerning weeds and their control and certainly are not "jargon to be avoided."

From the many definitions of jargon, "language vague in meaning," "unnecessarily obscure and esoteric terminology," "long high-sounding words" and "uncommon and unfamiliar words" work against clear communication. These should be avoided.

Everyday speech often contains "lazy" words. These words make informal communication easier, under conditions where carelessness is overlooked. Probably when such "lazy" terms creep into our technical writing, they represent "jargon to be avoided." Examples of such jargon are

To "make application" instead of "apply herbicide,"

To "give control" instead of "control weed,"

To "measure plant kill" instead of "measure plants killed,"

"Phyto" instead of "phytoxicity" or "plant injury."

Every term in the standard useful jargon of Weed Science was once an "uncommon and unfamiliar word." The first appearance of such words probably should not be in scientific journals. During a period of introduction via oral presentations, progress reports, conference proceedings, and other temporary communications, the scientific community can decide whether the term is worth keeping or not. It is better if such words do not appear in the permanent scientific literature until they are no longer "uncommon and unfamiliar words."

An example of a word that has evolved from an unfamiliar word to an accepted, useful term in a rather short period is "chemigation." When the experimental technique became established technology, a word was needed to define it. "Chemigation" was introduced, was used by various practitioners of the new technology, and has now been accepted to mean "the application of chemicals to crops or fields in irrigation water."

Remember:

Unclear, uncommon, obscure, and vague,

Are words one should avoid;

Words that are concise and clear,

Should always be employed.

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