



How do I avoid using “thing”, “it”, and other unclear words?

The “thing” is the one-eyed green monster in academic writing because if you write, “I learned many **things** in clinical practice last week” you have not told your CEF exactly what you learned. *Avoid* using “thing” in your paper.

Other words that *can* be used in academic writing, but are often unclear if not used carefully, are “**it**”, “**this**”, “**these**”, or “**those**”. These words become unclear or confusing to the reader when it is not immediately obvious what “it”, “this”, “these” or “those” represent.

There are a number of strategies to fix this unclear language:

- (1) You can add a noun (an “essential word” in this case) after the word “this” or “these”. Essential words sum up or capture the main idea from the previous sentence.

This + essential word

These + essential word

For example:

The cessation of smoking significantly improves the patient’s physical, psychological, and financial health. **These** provide the motivation towards cessation. Providing easily accessible resources on the cessation of smoking also provide motivation for the patient. **This** is the most optimal means of initiating change.

Change to:

These improvements provide the motivation towards cessation.

This approach is the most optimal means of initiating change.

Below is a list of essential words that can be used for this purpose:

advance	drawback	practice	advantage	element
problem	angle	episode	process	approach
event	program	aspect	evidence	attempt
purpose	background	experience	reason	behaviour
facet	result	category	fact	scenario
challenge	factor	shortfall	change	feature
characteristic	form	step	circumstance	issue
system	item	consequence	manner	task
course of action	method	technique	criterion	criteria

objective	tendency	occurrence	term	difficulty
phase	topic	dilemma	period	trend

Hinkel (2004).

- (2) Other times, one essential word may not be enough information for the reader. Commonly the word “this” is intended to capture a lot of information.

For example:

The patient switched to a low tar cigarette initially and extended the time between cigarettes. She expressed her desire to quit to her friends and family in an effort to get support. Moreover, the client distanced herself from environments in which smoking was common. However, **this** was not sufficient. She continued smoking for two years.

Change to:

However, **these strategies were** not sufficient.

However, **the above smoking cessation strategies were** not sufficient.

However, **her approach to quitting** was not sufficient.

- (3) If you have started the sentence with “This”, “These”, or “It”, try rearranging the sentence.

For example:

This is the reason that I took ‘Human Growth and Development’.

Change to:

I took ‘Human Growth and Development’ because I wanted to be a nurse.

‘Human Growth and Development’ is a prerequisite to enter nursing.

The reason students take ‘Human Growth and Development’ is that the course is necessary to apply for the Faculty of Nursing.

- (4) If your sentences are short, another option is to combine the sentences to eliminate the unclear word.

For example:

The cessation of smoking is not easily accomplished. **This** is particularly difficult when other family members smoke.

The cessation of smoking is not easily accomplished **which** is particularly difficult when other family members smoke.

The cessation of smoking is not easily accomplished. However, **it** is essential to improving health.

The cessation of smoking is not easily accomplished **but** is essential to improving health.

Created by Cosette Taylor, Communications/EAL Instructor for the Faculty of Nursing at the University of Manitoba, cosette_taylor@umanitoba.ca