

CONSCIOUS WRITING

3 Common Phrases That Tarnish Credibility in Medical Writing

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Credibility is integral to good science. And medical writers support the credibility of science with credible writing. They base their logic on previous findings, clearly describe the methods and results, and distinguish their interpretations from the data. In other words, they show the data and logic to strengthen credibility—and build trust with readers.

But sometimes medical writers use vague language to describe their logic and interpretations. This vague language can undermine the content and tarnish the credibility of the work and the writing.

Although vague language can take many forms in medical writing, 3 phrases stand out as the most common phrases that tarnish credibility: “little is known,” “to our knowledge,” and “first to show.”

LITTLE IS KNOWN

“Little is known” is not a very convincing argument for a few reasons. First, most topics have had many papers published on them, so we likely know a lot about a particular topic. But medical writers are often writing about work that aimed (or aims) to answer an important question, fill a gap, or solve a problem. And that question, gap, or problem is bounded by what is known about the topic. “Little is known” does a poor job of defining a specific question, gap, or problem. If you use this phrase, readers may think that you do not know the literature well or that you are overstating your case.

Second, “little is known” is often preceded or followed by more in-depth descriptions of what is known. These descriptions contradict the case for “little is known.” And these contradictions tarnish credibility.

Finally, “little is known” is not clear. A reader may wonder, “How little is little?” Is there only one paper published on the topic? Are there a dozen papers on the topic but none that answer the specific question that this work aimed to answer? Is there an extensive body of literature on the topic, and the work aimed to confirm that a new tool will validate those findings?

To craft a convincing argument, you need to define the specific question, gap, or problem that the work aimed (or aims) to fill.

Example

Avoid: Little is known about how the drug reduces cell proliferation in lung cancer.

Preferred: Although we know that the drug reduces proliferation of A549 cells, we do not know the mechanism by which the gene regulates this process.

TO OUR KNOWLEDGE

“To our knowledge” is also not a convincing statement. This statement implies that others may know certain information, but you may not be aware of it. By using “to our knowledge,” you may cast doubt in your reader’s mind about whether you really know the literature or field.

What’s worse is that “to our knowledge” suggests that you do not want to be held accountable if that information becomes known. This lack of responsibility can damage your reputation and tarnish your credibility and the credibility of the work.

To give readers confidence in the writing and the work, omit “to our knowledge” and only share known information.

Example

Avoid: To our knowledge, researchers have not uncovered how the drug reduces cell proliferation of lung cancer cells.

Preferred: Although we do not fully understand how the drug reduces cell proliferation in lung cancer, researchers have linked the drug to cell mitosis in other cancer cells.

FIRST TO SHOW

“First to show” may seem like a convincing statement. Some writers believe that this phrase highlights the novelty or significance of the work and, therefore, is persuasive. But “first to show” suggests that you know *everything* in the field—published or unpublished. This conviction is difficult to guarantee. Rather than persuade readers, “first to show” may lead readers to perceive that you are overconfident or overstating your case for novelty.

Unless you are indisputably certain that you are the first to show something, avoid using “first to show” in your writing.

Example

Avoid: We are the first to show that activation of the gene increases proliferation of A549 cells.

Preferred: We showed that activation of the gene increases proliferation of A549 cells.

TRIPLE THREAT TO CREDIBILITY

When used alone, these three phrases—“little is known,” “to our knowledge,” and “first to show”—can tarnish credibility. Yet, writers often use all three phrases in the same document. They will try to build the case for the work with “little is known,” protect their reputation with “to our knowledge,” and claim the novelty or significance of the work with “first to show.”

But when used together, these phrases can have a cumulative effect that erodes credibility in the writing and in the work.

To support credibility, avoid using all three phrases—alone or together—in your writing.

Example

Avoid: Little is known about how the drug affects plaque formation associated with Alzheimer’s disease.... To our knowledge, this study is the first to show that the drug slows plaque formation, reducing the risk of Alzheimer’s disease.

Preferred: Although the drug reduces beta-amyloid, we do not know if the drug slows plaque formation associated with Alzheimer’s disease.... In this study, we showed that the drug slows plaque formation, reducing the risk of Alzheimer’s disease.

MAKE THE CREDIBILITY SHINE

Credibility is key to building and maintaining trust in science. And the phrases you use can strengthen or tarnish that credibility and trust. But with some mindfulness and intention to the phrases you use (or omit), you can polish your writing to ensure that the credibility shines.

Author declaration and disclosures: *The author notes no commercial associations that may pose a conflict of interest related to this article.*

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