

# **Increasing clarity in research writing**

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## **Abstract**

Research articles aim to persuade readers of the validity of any conclusions made using both logical reasoning and rhetorical devices. When necessary information is hidden among non-essential elements or not explicitly stated, readers resort to their own schemas to deduce the missing information. However, when the schema of the reader and the author differ, the intended message may be distorted. The need for speculation can be alleviated or averted by increasing clarity through addressing the issues of vagueness and ambiguity. Vague expressions can be addressed by selecting more precise terminology or elaborating. Ambiguities may arise through words with multiple meanings (lexical ambiguity), syntax that on decoding can lead to two or more interpretations (structural ambiguity), and through anaphoric references that have two or more candidate antecedents (referential ambiguity). The more problematic ambiguities are the unintended ones, particularly those that result in garden-path sentences. This paper focuses on the occurrence and resolution of ambiguity in a corpus of 200 research articles submitted for internal review and language advice. The corpus was annotated for instances of ambiguity using the UAM Corpus Tool. Statistical analysis revealed numerous instances of lexical, structural and referential ambiguity. The three most frequent causes of ambiguity will be discussed in depth. Teachers of writing can harness the Pareto principle and focus on helping learners avoid succumbing to these errors. Practical advice and suggestions for activities will be given for teachers of research writing and academic writing.